

# Outrageous Fortune

by Patricia Wentworth

**SYNOPSIS:** Caroline Letch returns from a fruitless day in London searching for something that will help her cousin, Jim, find out of a most unpleasant situation. She finds Patsy Ann, with whom she lives, mourning over a visit from Robert Arbuthnot. Patsy wonders, among other things, whether Robert meant to propose. And both Caroline and Patsy wonder what lay behind Robert's curious inquiries about Jim, and his suggestion that they take care not to be involved in a scandal. There is, for instance, the picture of Jim that disappeared from Miss Van Berg's room, just after the Van Berg emeralds were stolen and Miss Van Berg was shot.

## Chapter 30 FRIGHT IN THE NIGHT

TRY how she would, Caroline could see no way of getting to Hale Place before Patsy Ann and the village were in bed and asleep. People in villages have terribly sharp eyes and a superhuman faculty for putting two and two together even when they don't really exist.

As for Patsy Ann, she had got over being peeved and was affectionate, clinging and conversational to the last degree. She sat up till eleven o'clock talking about Robert. This was the main theme, but it proved to be prolific in side shoots, such as, would it be tactful to install upon new curtains and chair covers in the drawing-room—the existing ones having been installed by Robert's mother at a period when maroon plush was considered the last word in elegance.

Before falling asleep Patsy had decided on names for two children, a boy and a girl, to be called respectively Robert Lancelot and Patsy Elaine. In spite of the fact that these children were to have golden curls and eyes of forget-me-not blue. In her dreams they hovered, smiling.

Caroline passed through the village and up the drive to Hale Place in the pitch dark. There was no moon tonight; a thick haze covered the whole sky, and the air was heavy with damp, if she had not known every step of the way, she might have lost herself a dozen times.

She came round the house and felt her way through the yard to the back door. She did not mind the dark loneliness of the drive, but as she came near the house, its silence and its emptiness came to meet her. She felt cold and rather frightened.

She turned the handle of the back door and pushed it open. The darkness of the passage lay before her like the darkness of a cave. She stood on the threshold and called into the darkness softly.

"Jim—"

There wasn't any answer. What was she going to do if he didn't answer? He might be somewhere deep in the old house—he might be asleep—he might have gone away. No, he wouldn't have gone away, because he had promised.

She called again, and heard the silence smother his name. The reality dreadful thought that she might have to wander through the dark house looking for him turned her perfectly cold. There were cockroaches. There were probably mice. There might easily be spiders. It was a grim business. A furry thing might run across one's foot. One might tread on something that squelched.

SHE called once more, and no one answered her. She was a most perfect fool now to have brought a torch. There was nothing for it but to go on.

She felt her way to the kitchen, set down the basket she was carrying, and went on until her outstretched hands touched the green baize door that shut off the servants' wing. On the other side of it, she stood listening and searching the darkness.

She was in the hall, with the staircase going up on her right, and beyond it a door leading into the drawing-room. On this side two doors, one into the dining-room and the other into the library. Both of these doors were locked on the outside. She crossed the hall and tried the drawing-room door. That too was locked.

She had her foot on the bottom step of the stairs, when suddenly away above her in the darkness a door banged. There was the momentary flash of a torch, just a sharp stab of light, and then the sound of someone running.

Caroline shrank back against the wall. The distant door that had banged was wrenched open. Jim called out. The running feet came down the stair and passed her. There was a sound of panting breath.

The torch stabbed again. She made out the black outline of a man's hand and arm, and a vague something that was head and shoulders.

Then he was gone through the baize door, and with a rush of air and a swishing sound Jim had slid the banisters, jumped clear, and was after him. It all rather took her breath away. Spiders, cockroaches and mice she had been prepared for, but not a game of devil-in-the-dark.

She sat down on the stairs and waited for Jim to come back. She had to wait for what seemed like a long time. The darkness settled round her. The darkness was like a thick impenetrable curtain. The air of the house was cold and dead.

Caroline couldn't make up her mind which would be worst, to hear some terrifying sound, or to go on hearing nothing. After a little she began to think she would rather hear something—anything. The silence seemed to be stopping her ears, and the black dark pressing against her eyeballs.

Then after a long time she heard Jim coming back—footsteps in the passage and the swing of the baize door. Then he was crossing the hall, walking quickly and firmly like a man who knows his way. He was actually passing her before she stood up and said:

"Jim—"

He started "Caroline!" came from less than a yard away. Then his hand touched her face, and she gave an odd little cry. It was like a game of devil-in-the-dark.

"CAROLINE! Where did you spring from?"

She caught him by the arm, holding him tight.

"Why didn't you wait for me? It's the horriest thing I've ever done in my life, coming into an empty, pitchy house like this."

"It wasn't empty," said Jim a little grimly.

"That made it worse." Her voice reached tragic depths. "I sort of strung myself up to bear spiders and cockroaches and things, but I didn't bargain for people plunging down the stairs at me in the dark."

"Were you there?"

"I was here—and he nearly knocked me down," declared Caroline quite untruthfully.

Jim spoke quickly.

"You didn't see him when he put the torch on?"

"Only his hand, Jim—who was it?"

"I wish I knew. Look here, come upstairs—we needn't talk in the dark—I've found some candles."

"I've brought you some—and things to eat. The basket's in the kitchen."

He brought it, and came back through the hall and up the stairs. Jim put his arm round her at the top and guided her along the right-hand corridor; then to the left, two steps down, a little way along, and three steps up. A door stood open.

Jim let go of Caroline, struck a match, and lighted a candle in a tall white candlestick. The light fell yellow and soft upon a queer room paneled with oak. It had five tall, narrow windows and a deep alcove which contained an old four-post bed with a heavy valance of blue damask. The windows were shuttered and had curtains of the same damask as the bed hangings. The fireplace was on the right of the door. It had a deep brick hearth. On the shelf above it stood the candle.

Jim shut the door.

"Come and sit down. I've locked the back door, so we shan't have any more visitors."

There were no chairs in the room. They sat side by side on the bed and looked at one another.

Moonlight can only show a ghostly image. It is like memory; it seeps into aching for reality. In the candle light Caroline looked warm, and soft, and young. Her eyes were bright and her cheeks like damask roses. Jim could have kissed her for being so sweetly alive. She began to speak with a rush of words.

"Who was he? Why did he come? Tell me all about it."

"He came in through the back door. I'd left it open for you, and I'd gone down to the kitchen to wait for you. Well, I heard the door, and of course I thought it was you, but before I had time to call out he switched on his torch and the light just caught his hand. I got back behind the kitchen door in a hurry, and he went on down the passage and into the hall."

Monday, the maze deepens around Jim and Caroline.

# DUCK SHOOTING GOOD IN STREET

PORT ANGELES, Wash., Oct. 26.—(AP)—Even if you've seen it rain "cats and dogs," you haven't seen anything yet.

At Forks, 60 miles west of Port Angeles, it has poured "Mallards and canvasbacks"—in other words, ducks. A pea soup fog lay within eight feet of the ground. A big flock of ducks, evidently flying low to escape the fog, started winging their way through the main street of the town. Merchants and business men started a shotgun bombardment, many times shooting blind at the ducks which could be heard a few feet overhead.

After about 100 rounds of ammunition had been turned loose, 39 Mallards and canvasbacks were scattered along the street.

First Methodist Ladies' Aid Rummage Sale, Nov. 3 and 4.

# WAGES SHOWING SLIGHT INCREASE

WASHINGTON, Oct. 26.—(AP)—A 3-cent increase is reported by the labor department in September's average hourly earnings of workers in 423,000 manufacturing and non-manufacturing industries.

The wages ran 51.4 cents an hour while the hours per week dropped from 38.6 to 36.1. Secretary Perkins attributes both changes to NEA.

"The changes in wage rates do not necessarily represent an increase in average weekly earnings of workers, but they do represent shorter hours with no pay out and added jobs by the thousands," Secretary Perkins explains.

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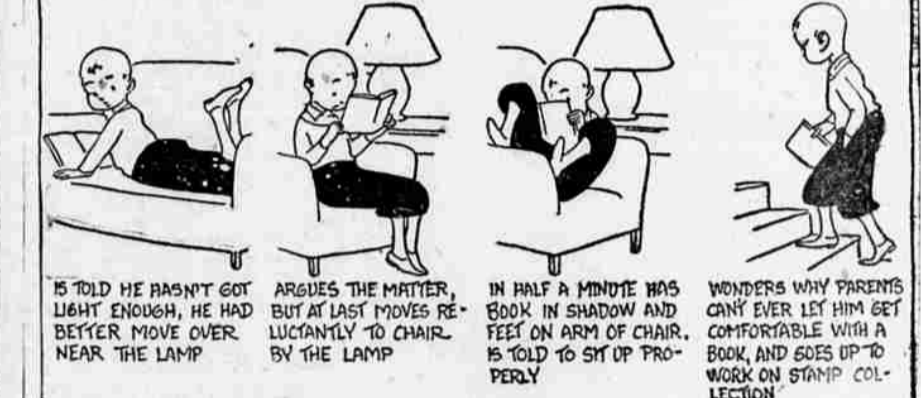
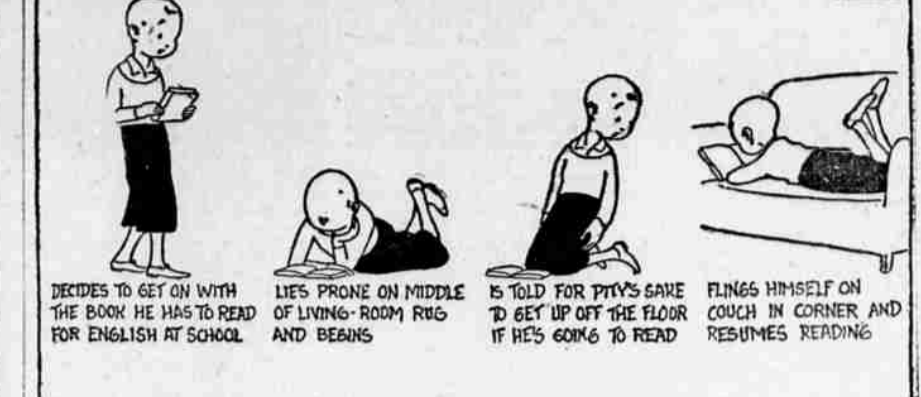
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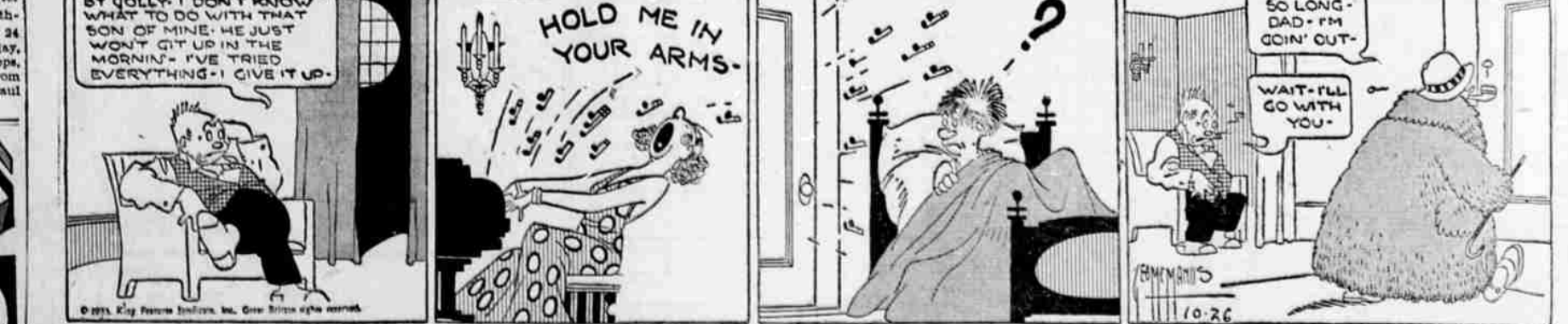
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