

THE CLOWN

By MAX SALTMARSH

Chapter 44

Into The Fiery Furnace

WE CARRIED Noah More out and laid him on the scorched grass under the orange trees, and he lay there like a dead thing, eyes close, breathing hardly perceptible. Fleuriot dropped on one knee beside him, struck a match, and raised an eyelid.

He turned to Dunning. "Go then to the house, my friend, and see if you can find some brandy."

"See here, man!" said Hugo harshly. "Why all the anxiety about bringing this vermin round? Don't you realize that Miss Willis is in deadly peril, and a minute's delay may mean life or death to her?"

The man from Marseille looked up at him. "My friend," he answered gently. "This Auberge des Allouettes is probably some small unknown inn and without the help of this wretched clod we may never find it."

Dunning had been fumbling in the pocket of his white coat, and now produced a serviceable-looking flask.

I bent over Fleuriot's shoulder, holding my breath, as I watched the still putty-colored face of the man and gradually it seemed to me that a faint tinge of color spread over it. The eyes opened, staring straight upwards at the night sky and the riding moon, and suddenly there came a cough, a choking convulsion, and Noah More sat up and stared about him. He pushed the dank hair from his forehead and then suddenly gave a hoarse cry.

"They aren't here!" he gasped. "I won't be caught!"

"Steady friend," I said. "Get a grip on yourself. No one is going to hurt you." But a gesture from Fleuriot silenced me.

"There is more here than fear of the police," he murmured, and then to the vagrant: "Who is it, then, that you fear?"

The tattered object gave him a swift, sideways glance. His eyes were wild, his fingers plucked and twisted at his tattered shirt.

"I don't know," he said, scarcely above a whisper. "I can't think. My brain—there's something the matter with my brain. And then with a swift, crafty look: "And why should I tell you? If you are the police, you have nothing against me."

"You're perfectly right, Mr. Noah More," I retorted. "The police have nothing against you, but I wouldn't say as much for the Club des Sans Clubs."

He gazed at me, his jaw dropped, and his face contorted, and then suddenly he threw back his head and screamed.

"You see," I said, while Fleuriot swore softly to himself, "we know all about it, but if you help us, I guarantee that the police will look after you until all danger is past. You saw something last night in the villa of Monsieur Geiss, didn't you?"

He stared up at me with wild, terrified eyes. "I did not see, but I heard and I guessed," he muttered.

"Just so," said I. "You guessed that Geiss had killed Miss Adams, and that you taxed him with it, to get money from him before he fled."

To Grips With The Fire

HE PASSED a long, bony hand across his eyes. "I knew that it was the end of everything," he said. "The Club des Sans Clubs was finished; Geiss was on the run. When I asked him to settle up, he laughed at me and told me it was cheaper and safer for him to report me to the club as a traitor who must be exterminated. He smiled, a wry, drawn smile, and for a moment I saw a shadow of the man he must once have been. "I cannot blame him," he admitted, "for it was his life against mine. He knew I could testify that he had killed that woman, but he knew too that the club would kill first and ask questions afterwards. If once he said the word, that club—" he shuddered. "You do not know what it is!"

"Listen, man, you know where this Auberge des Allouettes is?" I asked.

He nodded. "But you will never get there," he said. "Geiss might have got through this morning, but now the place must be a red hell."

"Not half as ruddy as we'll make it when we get there," I retorted. "Come on, you've got to show us the way." With Hugo gripping him by the other arm, we half-dragged half-carried him up the steps and across the terrace, and in another minute we were packing ourselves into the Hispano.

Dunning, by virtue of his weight took the place beside Hugo, while Fleuriot and I settled ourselves in the tonneau with the bony form of Noah More wedged between us, and as we swung out of the lane and whizzed off along the highroad, I turned curiously to the vagrant.

"One thing," I said, "before life gets too full for words—do you happen to know just how Geiss got hold of Miss Willis?"

He turned soulless, lack-luster eyes towards me. "It was easy," he answered in his toneless voice.

"There is a chambermaid in the Carlton who is a member of the club. Geiss knew that Miss Willis had been absent from the hotel all night, and he instructed this woman to wait in the corridor until she returned and tell her that, by her uncle's orders, her room had been changed to one at the back. She accepted this without question, and once she was inside the room, we seized her, gagged her, and led her down the fire-escape at the back to the lane where Geiss's car was waiting. She fought," he added, with a wan grimace, "but Geiss threatened her with a revolver and forced her to do what we wanted."

We had been running straight towards the cape, with the sea on one hand, redly illumined by the reflection from the flaming cape, and on the other quiet, dusky slopes of woodland, but now we had come into the main street of a village. Here, for the first time, we came to grips with the fire, for though the place itself was untouched it was brightly lit; every inhabitant was out in the street, talking gesticulating, or standing in frightened, silent groups, watching the rim of flame that danced along the crest of the ridge above, threatened every moment to sweep over and come crackling down through the pine trees towards us.

Death To Venture Farther

THERE were troops too, infantry of the line and Chasseurs Alpins, snorts-dressed with tin-hats, grimed to the eyes; some lying prostrate by the roadside, sleeping the sleep of utter exhaustion, others refreshed, piling into lorries to return once more to the fruitless struggle. Fleuriot called to a young lieutenant, whose red-rimmed eyes looked glazed with weariness, and after a minute's whispered conversation the lad scribbled something on a card and handed it to him. "Our passport," he explained, as we crawled forward at snail's pace, hooting our way through a mob of people. "The cape is in the hands of the military, and after Le Trayas the road will be closed—even to me, unless we have permission."

We came to Le Trayas, where the thoroughfare was a milling mob of frightened, hysterical people and where bayoneted sentries at the further end barred all egress. But the lieutenant's card was a magic token and we sailed through.

The fire might have been a hundred miles away, for the brows of the hills shut off the fiery bend, but suddenly, rounding the bend, a magnificent inferno of fire and blinding, glaring heat. A wind like the opening of an oven door struck at our faces; glowing sparks bit at our naked arms and faces, and our eyes were blinded by the fierce glare of light from a valley of sheer lava, lying directly in our path. Troops were hacking away the undergrowth, felling trees.

Straight ahead a tall fellow that I took to be an officer raised a warning hand, checking our progress.

"Out of the question," he said sharply as Fleuriot bent and whispered to him. "The valley is impassable. I can let no one through."

Fleuriot turned quickly to Noah More. "Is there any other way to the inn?" he demanded, and the scarecrow shook his head.

"There is no other way," he muttered. "It is the right-hand fork at the bottom of the valley that runs up to the hills."

Again the detective leaned out, whispering, and this time I fancied that he told something of our errand for the officer gave us a curious, commiserating look as he slowly shook his head.

"It would be death to venture farther," he said, "if not for you, messieurs, but one can only hope that the fire has not yet reached the inn if it escapes during the night by tomorrow it may be possible to get through."

Fleuriot looked at me. "You hear?" he said, but there was more inquiry than resignation in his tone, and even as he spoke, Hugo swung round; his face, illumined by the ruddy glow, showed hard and drawn and his law was set. "You others must do as you please," he said, "but for myself, I'm going through."

Fleuriot gave a short cackle of satisfaction. "You see," he murmured regretfully. "We are willing to take the risk, and the responsibility is not yours, for I am an officer of the law, in pursuit of a dangerous madman who is also a murderer, and these gentlemen are, for the moment, my assistants. I fear that, in this case, my authority overrides yours."

The other hesitated for a moment, and then his hard, smoke-grimed face broke into a smile. "I compliment your courage, messieurs," said he, "and I wish you luck!"

At a word of command from him men came running with wet cloths which we wrapped round our faces, leaving only the eyes and nostrils free, and at the last moment some inventive genius dashed up from the cottage with a water-sprayer which we bound about the radiator of the car. In an instant we were off shooting down the long, curving slope, straight into the fiery furnace below.

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Tomorrow: The Inn.

STRANGE AS IT SEEMS—By JOHN HIX

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Switches Uncovered
WICHITA, Kas. (AP)—Brazing the old Lincoln school building, workmen discovered a hidden of thirty-five switches hidden under a stairway that had been walled in when an addition was constructed 32 years ago. Miss Hazel Watkins, principal, said they were relics of the day when "lickin' and larnin'" went together.

Dogs Bite Cows
ELYRIA, O. (AP)—Biting cows about the head is the latest depredation of stray dogs in Lorain county, which gives farmers many anxious moments—and the sheriff's office much extra work. The cows have been bitten at night while tethered in pastures.

Plants Get Around
BOONE, Iowa (AP)—Boone residents are wondering where next they should look for plants. They found an ivy vine growing through the brick wall of a school room and crawling across the ceiling. Then they found a weed patch in a cornice crack on top of the city hall.

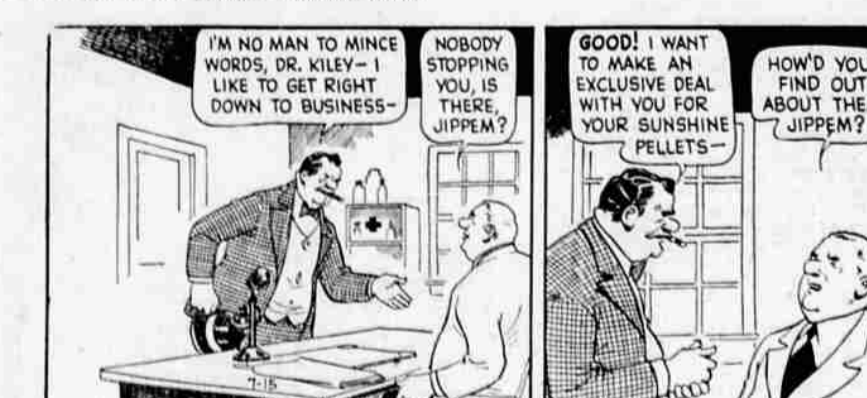
Mumps Stop Boat
MELBOURNE (AP)—Because of outbreaks of childish diseases—measles, mumps and scarlet fever—the Austrian cruisers Canberra and Sydney have cancelled visits to New Guinea, Papua and New Hebrides.

Map Up Ether
HUNTINGTON, Ind. (AP)—A truck wreck on route 24 was a headache to Sheriff A. L. Thompson. The truck contained 4,000 pounds of canned ether. Cleaning up the mess gave the sheriff several woolly hours.

TAILSPIN TOMMY—Mutual Admiration Society!



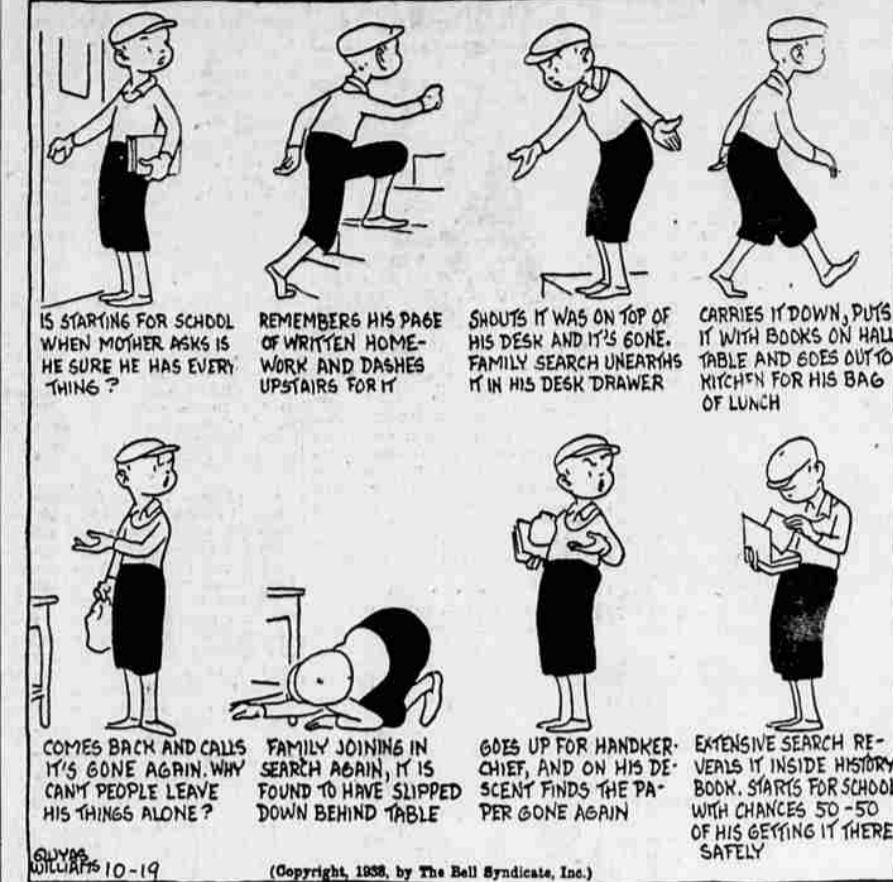
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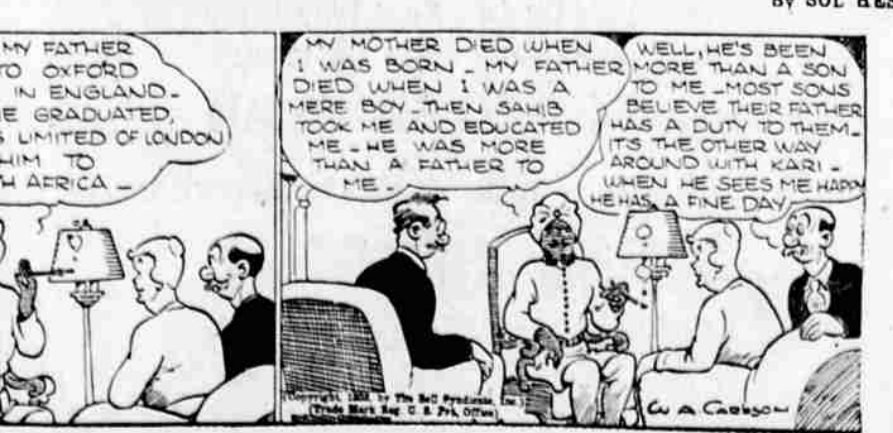
By HAL FORREST



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FILM STAR PARTIES JUST LIKE OTHERS

HOLLYWOOD (UP)—Most people imagine that the parties held in Hollywood are lavish affairs that would do credit to a Roman emperor. What a disappointment it would be if they attended a film colony party and found the same parlor games being played that are played in the average American city.

The lads and lassies of moviedom gather at parties to chat, talk shop and have a good time. Someone usually plays the piano, and someone else sings and everybody eats.

Occasionally an Impromptu Quartet or Chorus starts a song, and they hit just as many wrong notes as any similar party group. But everyone has a good time.

An outsider, of course, would be interested in the film celebrities and how they have a good time together. But to the celebrities, the party is not any different from a party in Hoboken or Springfield.

Just Sunning Himself
TOPEKA, Kas. (AP)—There is this notation in the police blotter: "Drunk reported on sidewalk at Second and Kansas avenue." In the column headed "Disposal of Case" is this remark: "It wasn't a drunk, just an Indian sunning on the sidewalk, excepting under the sunny sky is just an old Indian custom."