

SERIAL STORY

HIS CHRISTMAS CAROL

BY ADELAIDE HAZELTINE

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CHAPTER I

ON the wide main floor far below Carol Fairfield could hear a steady click of cash registers and that peculiar melody played by the shuffle of hundreds of feet. The smell of gift perfumes mingled with the odor of burning tapers. The hum of voices rose and fell in an orchestra of sound.

It was Christmas at Dearborn's, The People's Store. But in the balcony office which had housed the management for fifty golden years there was only a breathlessness, a hush.

Carol said, "Is he—oh, Bill!" The red-coated figure straightened up, pushed white rayon whiskers impatiently from his face, leaving the body of Santa Claus grotesquely draped about the person of Bill Reece.

"Yes, Carol, he's dead!" She pressed her hands against her mouth to suppress a choking gasp. She must not make a scene. As his secretary, Carol knew Andrew Dearborn would expect business to go on. Business as usual. He wouldn't want even the end of his full and kindly life to interrupt the gaiety of Christmas shoppers.

"Dearborn's is for the people," he so often told her. "All the people, Carol. Customer and employee alike. Not run merely to take their money. But to serve their welfare. Where, efficiency experts to the contrary, sentiment plays a part."

And for fifty years he had made it so. This policy had built Dearborn's from a small one-story building to the great emporium of activity it was this December morning. Mr. Dearborn had made money, yes. Incidentally. Above all he had served his public.

The store had been his inspiration in life. It would be his monument in death.

"What shall we do?" Carol whispered huskily. Her blue eyes were widened in distress. The pale oval of her face framed by a shining halo of brown hair was lovely even in grief. One small, manicured hand swept over her forehead and smoothed the soft, already perfect pompadour.

Bill put his arm around her shoulders, urged her to sit down. "Take it easy, Carol. I'll phone the doctor."

She heard him dial the number and speak quickly, very softly. Then he came back to her side. "He was a swell boss, Carol," he said as they gazed at the motionless grayed head.

She reached for Bill's hand. Big, good Bill. How calm he was! He had thought of Mr. Dearborn almost as a father, yet he controlled his shock. That was his way. Never excited. Matter of fact. Assistant in the display department when he wasn't playing Santa Claus. President of the employees' store organization. He was her sort. She liked him. Sometimes she was tempted to believe that liking was enough. But her heart rebelled. She wanted love. The kind that was a shining thing. The kind—she was miserable when she thought of it—the kind she cherished for Andy Dearborn, playboy son of the man who lay here dead.

The doctor came then, busied himself with Mr. Dearborn's still form. When he looked up his eyes told them what Carol already knew. Andrew Dearborn had died of an acute heart attack. He had known he would. Four months ago this very doctor warned him to expect it any day.

"Is his son in town?" the doctor asked.

Luckily, Carol knew he was sailing the Dearborn yacht in the southern seas. Perhaps right now lying in the warm tropical sun with Linda Julian. Linda with her sleek, smooth beauty and her cool, calculating eyes. After his money, everyone said. It didn't seem to matter to Andy. She liked to play and so did he. They made a perfect pair.

"Better try to locate him," the doctor was saying. "There's no one else."

worshiped power. He had always wanted more of both than Mr. Dearborn gave him. He was unannouncedly disliked.

He grunted a greeting to Carol and Bill, finished signing some letters before he sat back and waited.

BILL cleared his throat. Carol sat forward in her chair. "We've come to tell you," Bill began, finding it difficult to express himself. "Mr. Herrick, we want to tell you Mr. Dearborn has had a heart attack."

"He has?" Mr. Herrick snapped. "Didn't know he ever had them. Can't you get a doctor? Do the two of you have to sit there staring at me just because the old man's had a heart attack?"

"We got—a doctor," Carol managed to say with a calmness which his temper had provoked. "Bill's trying to tell you Mr. Dearborn is dead!"

"Dead?" Mr. Herrick glared at her. "My God!" he muttered and sat upright. "Why didn't you say so?"

"He died in his office. A few minutes ago. We didn't let it be known. It might cause confusion. He wouldn't have wanted that. Her voice rose and hung suspended. "They've taken him away."

"Who was with him?" Mr. Herrick asked.

"Bill was talking to him."

"Yes," Bill said. "We were laughing about what a youngster said to me. Mr. Dearborn told me to keep them believing in Santa, to play my part even with the boys who tried to kid me. Suddenly his voice broke off. He died—right there."

A look of undisguised anticipation began to spread over Mr. Herrick's face. "Well, I guess I'm in charge until the son gets here. Have you notified him, Carol?"

"No. The doctor asked me to."

"Cable him to return at once."

"I will." She and Bill left the office together. "Mr. Herrick seems to relish the idea," Bill said grimly. "I suppose he'll have his own way until Andy comes."

"I'd hate to have to work for him very long."

"So would I. So would everybody. He's been bad enough with Mr. Dearborn to hold him down."

In a moment, Bill asked, "Carol, do you remember Mr. Dearborn had me witness a will for him?"

"Yes."

"What do you imagine was in it?"

"Didn't Mr. Dearborn let you read it?" she evaded.

"No. He asked the doctor and me to sign it but he didn't let us read it. I suppose it all goes to Andy. What do you think, Carol?"

"I don't know, Bill."

But she did know. The terms of the will were burned upon her memory. She had typed it and taken it to Mr. Dearborn and his lawyer, Mr. Benson.

"Do you want to make it that strong?" cautious Mr. Benson had asked when he read it.

"Yes, I do," Mr. Dearborn had replied. "The people trust Dearborn's and I won't have that trust betrayed. Not even by my own son!"

(To Be Continued)

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OUT OUR WAY

By J. R. Williams



RED RYDER



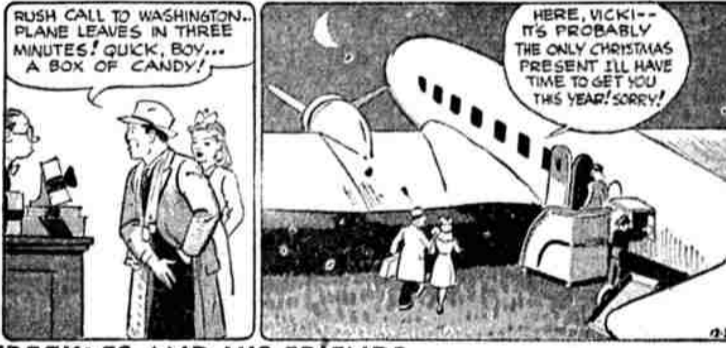
LITTLE ORPHAN ANNIE



BOOTS AND HER BUDDIES



WASH TUBS



FRECKLES AND HIS FRIENDS



ALLEY OOP



OUR BOARDING HOUSE, with Major Hoople



By Fred Harman



By Martin



By Crane



By Blosser



By V. T. Hamlin



Crossword puzzle grid with clues and answers.