Best-Dressed Woman

BY HELEN WELSHIMER

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CAST OF CHARACTERS
JUDITH IRVING, heroine, America's best dressed woman.
PHILIP IRVING, Judith's estranged husband.
MARTA ROGERS, Judith's rival.
BRUCE KNIGHT, author, Judith's old classmate.
MILLICENT BAYNE, Bruce's protege.

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Yesterday: Phil confesses his love for Marta. And later Judith overhears Marta tell Phil, "Didn't I tell you she only wanted—clothes!"

CHAPTER V

WITH a hurt that became a slow rhythm to which she moved, Judith went through the gestures of being a hostess Sunday morning at breakfast, pouring coffee with gay graciousness; slipping into the yellow swim suit that made her hair darker, her eyes gold-flecked; swimming across the pool again and again; presiding at the out-of-door luncheon on the flagged terrace.

Then it was 4 o'clock and everyone was piling into cars to have tea at an author's up the road. She hung back. She needed a few moments to examine this strange new experience that had come, to explain it to herself, and make ready for tomorrow and tomorrow, all the tomorrows, without Phil.

As dusk turned into darkness and the odor of wet, damp earth came up from the brook, she went out to the balcony that swung along the bedrooms. She did not know how long she had been standing there, in the shadows, when she became aware that someone was on the balcony with her.

"Did I frighten you? Bruce and I drove back a little while ago." It was Millicent. "Everyone else is being merry. I don't like laughter when I can't laugh."

The girl pulled her chair over to Judith's corner and they sat very still, not talking, not knowing that they didn't. Behind her, in her bedroom, Judith had left one small blue lamp glowing on the dressing table. Its light was dim but when a shadow crossed it, the blur was noticeable. Judith turned her head. Had Phil come back? Did he want to see her, to explain, to take her broken world and put it together with his strong, brown fingers? It wasn't Phil. It was a woman. As her head bent over, just above the blue bulb, her hair was recklessly golden. Marta! Millicent had turned, too. Together they watched. Marta picked up something, slipped it into the pocket of her white coat, and went out.

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WHEN Marta had been gone fully three minutes, Judith and Millicent stepped back into the bedroom. They turned on the saffron lights, drew the curtains, and glanced at the dressing table.

"I had nothing of any value along," Judith said. "What could she have wanted? Perhaps a clean handkerchief—" Then she remembered. Her hand went to her throat. No, she had not put on her pearls this morning. She opened a case. They were not there. She would not tell Millicent. Better to keep this quiet until Phil could take charge.

But Millicent was aware of her action. "You aren't wearing your necklace. Sure it's around?"

"In a drawer or something," Judith lied deliberately.

Millicent nodded. "I understand. I hear voices. The others are here. Come on, Judy."

Marta, yellow-haired, blue-eyed, fragile as a Botticelli angel, was standing in front of the hearth, wearing simple, silken black tonight. The men were talking to her. The women were a little bored, eager to return to town before it grew too late. The maid was announcing dinner, and the odor of a roast came through the air. For a second the two women, descending the low stairway, caught their breath. Marta was wearing a strand of pearls—a strand of pearls like the ones that Judith had worn above her turtle-necked sweater the night before.

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IT was later, much later that night, when Marta had been deposited at her own door, and Phil and Judith had driven home in awkward silence, that Judith mentioned the matter of the beads to her husband. His face was so cold that it frightened her.

"You are implying that Marta, the—the woman I love—" He flung out the words like a banner—"could do such a thing."

"Perhaps not. The beads are gone. I thought you should know."

"Marta probably wanted an aspirin tablet. She asked me for one and I told her to go up to your room—I'd left a box on the dressing table. She came down with the pill and I got her a glass of water. Knight saw me do it. So did the housekeeper. Does that satisfy you?"

"Yes, I'm sorry, but the beads could have gone too. . . ."

"Put on your hat." Even while he gave the terse command she loved him; the narrowed eyes in the lean face, the swift strides that carried him across the room and back again.

"Where are we going?"

"To Marta's. You are going to see with your own eyes that she doesn't have your pearls."

"MARTA dear," Phil said in a lowered, softened tone as they entered Marta's sitting room a few minutes later. "There's been a misunderstanding. It's all my fault. I shouldn't have deceived Judith—"

"But you didn't want to hurt her, my darling," the woman answered.

"Yes, yes of course. But it wasn't that only. It was cowardice on my part. I was afraid to get myself involved, to take the blame. Marta, will you tell Judith where you got the pearls you wore tonight?"

"Why of course. You gave them to me, Phil."

"You did?" Was it a cover-up he was framing for Marta? Or was it the truth? Judith could not tell.

"Yes. I gave them to her, at the time I made you a gift. I bought two pairs. I have the receipt at home. Judith, Marta did not need to take your pearls. Probably you lost them somewhere."

Maybe Marta was innocent after all. Doubtless these were her own beads. Judith was too tired and stunned to care now. Better to apologize and get all of this out of her mind, her heart, forever.

"I'm sorry I misunderstood, Marta. I'm going now."

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BACK in their apartment Phil showed her the check for the two strings of pearls, shamefaced now, and she nodded. "I'm sorry, Phil. I'm a suspicious creature. I never used to be that way. Isn't circumstantial evidence damning?"

He seemed relieved that her poise had returned.

"Phil, I'll leave for Reno tomorrow night. Let's settle things swiftly."

Surprise, relief, refusal mingled in his eyes. When he spoke he said: "You want to leave?"

She nodded. "Will you see about a reservation on the midnight plane? I'll pack and arrange things tomorrow."

In her own room, an hour later, a deep blue dressing gown over her white shoulders, the black hair tousled into the curls that she usually restrained, she decided to call Anne and tell her she was going away to Reno, to end things swiftly. The telephone rang softly before she could dial. She picked up the receiver.

"Yes?"

"Judith? This is Marta. I wanted to tell you how sorry I am that I'm making you so unhappy. Maybe I'd better just—run away. . . ."

(To Be Continued)

It is possible to spell potato as "ghoughphtheightteau" by gh equaling p as in hiccough, ough is o as in dough, phth is the t in phthisis, eight as the a in neighbor, tte the t in gazette, and eau the o in beau.

The word "dime" used by Americans in speaking of a 10-cent piece is derived from the Latin word "decima," meaning a tenth.

About 15 months are required to season the wood used in the ordinary process of making matches.

FLAPPER FANNY By Sylvia

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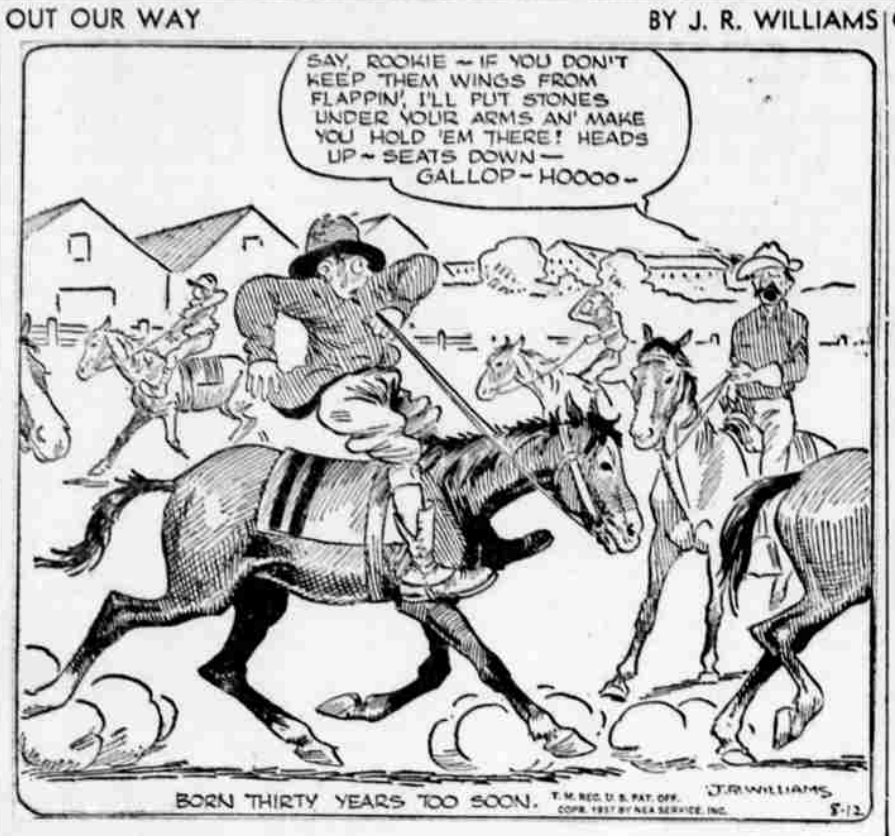
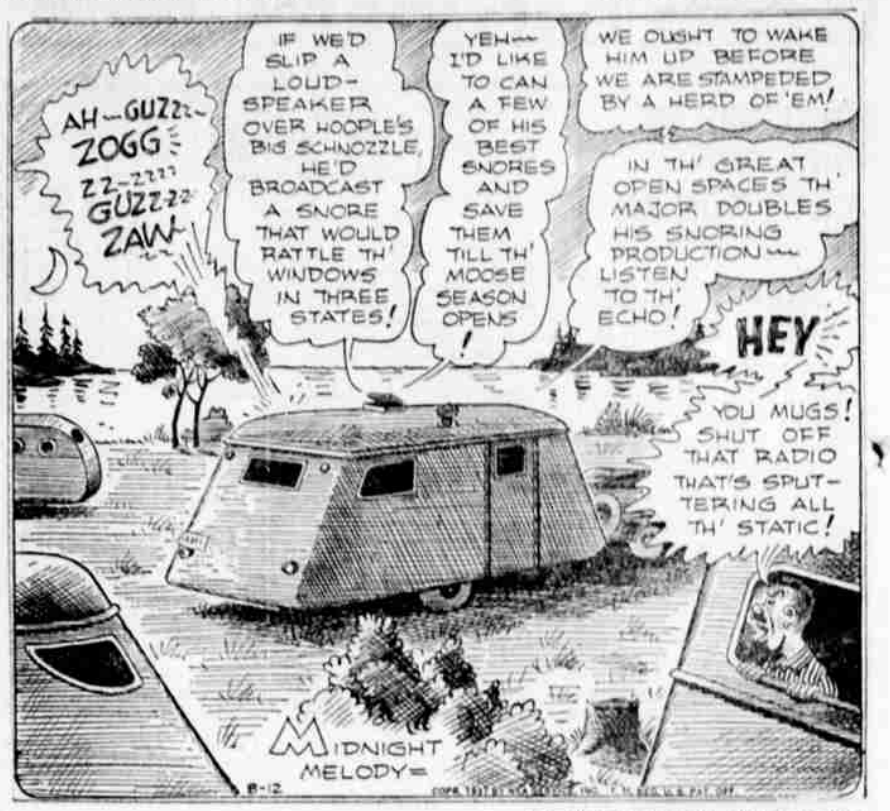
"Happy birthday, Sally. It isn't polite to tell you how much it cost, but if you wanta exchange it, you can go as high as forty cents."

OUT OUR WAY BY J. R. WILLIAMS



OUR BOARDING HOUSE With MAJOR HOOPLE



MYRA NORTH, SPECIAL NURSE BY THOMPSON AND COLL

LITTLE ORPHAN ANNIE BY HAROLD GRAY

FRECKLES AND HIS FRIENDS BY BLOSSER

WASH TUBBS BY CRANE

BOOTS AND HER BUDDIES BY MARTIN