Rival Adventure

CHAPTER XIV

Aline leaned back against the pillows . . .

"All right, I promise you, Miss Kirkman."

"You really mean that?"

"Cartiers don't break their word."

Lotus took a deep breath and plunged ahead.

"To begin with, my name is not Rosa Kirkman and I am not a professional entertainer."

She heard a gasp in the darkness. "What and who are you, then?"

"I can't go into that now—you must believe me."

"All right, go on."

"Stacy Corbin does not love you."

"I can't believe that."

"It's quite true, however."

Lotus repeated her conversation with Stacy on the previous day. "He also told me about his father's business deal maneuvering your family out of Belle Fleur."

"That's one reason I intend marrying Stacy," Aline said suddenly, "to get Belle Fleur back in the family."

"Isn't that rather an extreme measure?" Lotus asked gently.

"There's always divorce," Aline Cartier said, "—and settlements. If Stacy acted the way you say he intends to, I would have grounds.

"But, Aline, you don't realize what you're saying. Things might not work out that way—you might have children."

"I want children some day and I want them to have Belle Fleur."

"But—but—" Lotus floundered helplessly. She had expected tears, recriminations, even curses but not this indomitable stubbornness.

"You see, Rosa—or whatever your real name is—Belle Fleur meant just about everything to my grandfather and aunt. They had to let it go to protect their stockholders. They had put all their hopes in my brother Andrew—he was to carry on the family name and business and, of course, inherit Belle Fleur. Well, he was killed in the Pacific, so it's up to me now."

"But you're charming and attractive. There must be dozens of New Orleans boys of fine family who'd like to marry you."

"But only the Corbin own Belle Fleur."

"If I could prove to you that Stacy didn't love you, that he was only following his father's orders, that they were seeking the honorable Cartier name and its valuable connections and a place in New Orleans society, would you change your mind?"

"I suppose I'd have to."

"Well, then, at eleven o'clock tomorrow night you be in the bath-room between our rooms listening at the door. I think you'll hear something that will dissuade you from marrying Stacy Corbin."

In the morning, before Aline was up, Lotus slipped into her bathing suit and swam from the grassy slope to the anchored swimming float. Her shoulder was still tender, but she swam with graceful, distance - consuming strokes. When she reached the white - painted platform, she stretched herself full length in the sun on the diving board. A few moments later she heard the lazy splash of strong masculine arms cleaving the water.

Stacy, his tanned boby dripping, pulled himself up on the planking.

"Hi, sweet—I saw you strolling down for a dip and couldn't resist the temptation to join you."

"What about Aline—and your father?"

She laughed teasingly and rolled over on the diving board so that her figure was displayed to full advantage.

"The dickens with them!" Stacy scrowled at her.

"Tsk, tsk, that's not the right attitude. After all, you're going to marry the girl, and she is pretty, Stacy."

"Rosa, you've got more sex appeal in your little finger than she has in her whole body."

"I think you're wrong there. Aline has a sort of old-fashioned charm that Southern men probably find pretty fetching."

"Oh, no doubt of that," he agreed fairly. "She has a bunch of the local yokels clamoring for her attention. But I like something a little more warm-blooded." His eyes caressed her slim, well-built body.

"Like me, Stacy?"

"Yes, like you!"

She laughed mockingly and nodded her head toward Belle Fleur. "So sorry I can't oblige. Here comes the girls of your dreams."

None of them saw Lotus leave for the other end of the island.

She waited patiently, but Lawrence did not appear. At last, she turned to leave, when her eye fll on Lachene rounding the house and heading for her spot. She was standing in deep shadow—he had not yet seen her, nor did she want him to see her leaving this place where he had caught her twice before. The circumstances would be too suspicious.

She started to step out, to warn lawrence then suddenly she checked herself—the occupant of the pirogue was not Lawrence!

She recognized the queer, stunted, dungareeclad figure and the swarthy, bearded face as that of the helper who had been on the island from which she had escaped to Belle Fleur. He was poling agitatedly toward the edge of the lawn; even before Lachene reached him, he began to chatter in an excited Cajun patois that was unintelligible to Lotus. The two men talked for a few minutes, both gesticulating wildly, then the man in the pirogue shoved off and Lachene returned to the liouse. Lotus sighed gratefully—here was her means of getting Stacy to her room!

The French clock at the end of the hall chimed a tinkling eleven. The last musical note was followed by a light rap on Lotus' door. She opened it and Stacy's golden head was outlined against the light; her own room was in darkness.

"You're alone, Stacy?"

"Yes. Dad's down in his study and Aline's gone to bed."

She walked over to stand between the French windows and the locked bathroom door; a faint rustle told her that Aline was behind it. Stacy closed the door into the hall and followed her.

"What was it you wanted to see me about, sweet?"

She reached up and took the lapels of his coat in her fingers. She was wearing a lacy, beribboned negligee that Chloe had put in her suitcase; a heavy Parisian perfume still clung to it. "Stacy, I'm afraid. I saw one of those men form the island this afternoon—he came in a pirogue and was talking to Lachene."

His hands came up and tightened on hers. "Stop worrying about them, Rosa — I told you I'd take care of you."

"But what would he be doing here?"

"I don't know, but I'll find out, if it will make you happy."

She swayed toward him. "You're o good to me, Stacy."

His hands went around her slim waist now, pulling her toward him. "You're attractive, Rosa!"

She felt a sense of urgency. She must get him to talk, to expose himself and his father for what they were. Aline might not be too patient.

"Stacy, are you going to marry Aline?"

"I don't know. I thought I had her about talked into it, but she's been pretty evasive all day." His tone was satisfactorily disinterested.

"You don't love her, do you?"

"Of course not! I've already told on that."

"Then, why—I simply don't understand."

"Rosa, are you going to make me repeat all that? Dad wants the social position, prestige and business connections that the Cartier name can give us. I think he's got ideas about dabbling in the bagasse business, too."

"You mean the Cartier's new enterprise?"

"Sure. The old man ought to kick off some day soon, and Aline wouldn't know anything about the business. Dad thinks it would be pretty nice if he could manage things for her." He chuckled sarcastically. "Dad's a pretty far-sighted guy, isn't he?"

"He certainly seems to be."

Surely Aline had heard enough to be convinced. Lotus had made Stacy convict himself with his own words—getting rid of him was going to be another proposition. His fingers began playing with the velvet bow at the low V of her negligee.

"Why are we standing here wasting words about Aline?" he demanded querulously. "I'd much rather be holding you in my arms."

"Please, Stacy, I'm not in the mood for romance tonight."

A face was thrust around the edge of the French window. The eyes seemed to gleam wickedly; it was dark, but not so dark that she couldn't recognize the sardonic expression of Stu Lawrence!

Immediately, Stacy sensed the difference in her embrace. "Now what's wrong?" he asked petulantly.

She withdrew from his arms. "I'm sure I heard your father calling."

"Oh, rot!! You're making it up to get rid of me."

"No, no, I'm not."

As if to confirm her lie Curtis Corbin's voice, urgent and tinged with annoyance, drifted up the stairs.

"The devil!" Stacy muttered. "He never lets up for a minute. I'll be right back, Rosa."

STORY GALLEY 3

"Not tonight, Stacy—I'm tired."

A moment later, Stu Lawrence slipped from the balcony. Silhouetted against the white colonnades and the star light, he looked unusually tall.

"My apologies for breaking up such an inspiring love scene," he whispered crisply. "That was not my intention, I assure you."

"That was not a love scene," she protested.

His teeth flashed in a cynical grin. "You owe me no explanations—I'm not concerned with your love life."

"I think you're being deliberately nasty. You're not being fair about this at all; please let me explain."

His fists clenched and relaxed. "I really haven't time to listen to it now. I just came to warn you to try to get the Cartiers to go home tomorrow. Things are about to start popping and I don't want them here when they do."

"Did you find out something?"

"Many things. Among them, that no taxidermist in New Orleans had the job of stuffing that snake, so it looks as though the dope came in the boa's skin, with the live snake as a protective decoy. It would take forever to search this place for the stuff, so we've got to precipitate something that will make Corbin himself reveal its hiding place—it must be worth almost a million dollars."

(To be continued)

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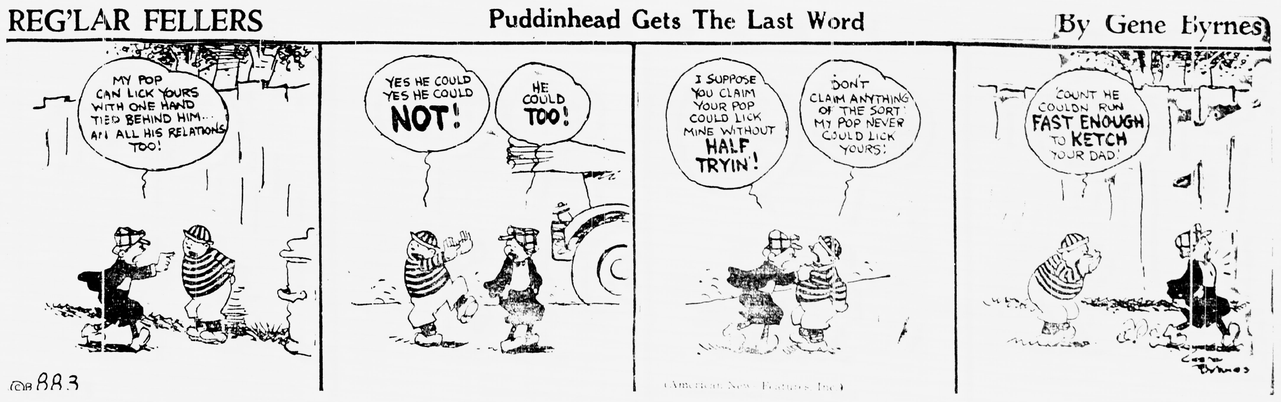

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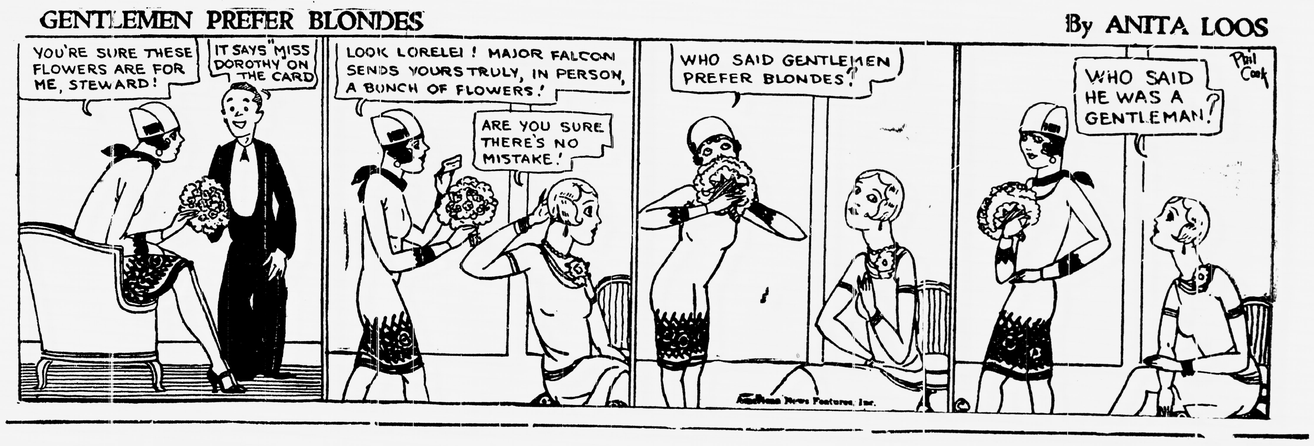

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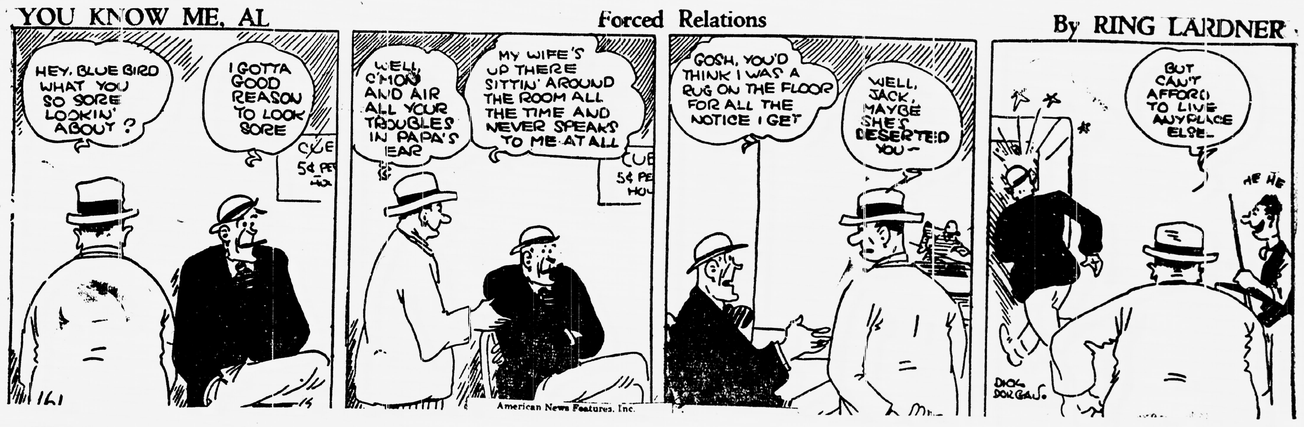

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