Rival Adventure

CHAPTER XV

The next afternoon Lotus had the satisfaction of watching Aline Cartier and her grand-aunt depart bag and baggage for New Orleans.

Her nerves were as taut as piano wires, and when a figure appeared in the French window leading from the gallery, she sprang up with an eager cry, thinking it was Lawrence again.

The cry died in her throat—the interloper was Curtis Corbin.

"Stacy, to put it kindly," he said sarcastically, "is inclined to be a little too trusting. He admitted to me that he had told you of my desire for him to marry Aline Cartier, and my reasons for it. It's quite possible that you repeated this to her."

Suddenly, the high, thin scream of a Negress rent the air!

"Mistah Corbin! Mistah Corbin! Fiah!"

Corbin jerked, as though being awakened roughly from a hypnotic spell. "What has happened now? Those stupid servants?"

He strode to the door, flung it open.

A trembling Negress stood there, her face almost white with panic.

"Mistah Corbin, sir, theah's a fiah in the zoo, sir. It growin' fas'."

He swore vehemently and jerked a finger at Lotus. "Come along I may need you." Then he plunged down the stairs.

One of the Negroes had connected the garden hose and was playing it on the fire through the bars and meshing of the boa's cage. It seemed to have almost no effect, and Lotus guessed that the sawdust had been well soaked with kerosene. The smoke coiling from it looked black and oily.

The sight of the stream of water appeared to throw Corbin into a frenzy. "Turn that off, you fool!" he shouted.

"You bloody fool!" Corbin swore. "Don't you realize there's a million dollars worth of stuff in there? The fire and water will ruin it if we don't get it out!"

Corbin shot him a venomous look then tossea him a revolver he surprisingly drew from a shoulder holster beneath his coat. "All right you lily-livered coward I'll get it myself. You cover the snake." He grabbed Lotus' arm. "Come on, girl, you can help."

"That God, it's safe. Well I guess that's all."

"Yes, Corbin, that is all."

The three of them spun around at the sound of the strange stern voice.

Stu Lawrence stood behind them, a revolver in each hand. He was backed up by three grim-faced members of the Federal Narcotic Squad.

Lachene and Corbin were behind her so she couldn't read their faces but Corbin's voice was cold with undisguised fury.

"You can't prove I sold any of it."

"We don't have to and anyway we knew you wouldn't lower yourself to peddling the stuff. Your type alays lets someone else do the dirty work. It never fails."

"I suppose you have that someone, too?" It was a sneer.

"Right. We bagged quite an odd assortment of characters on that other island an hour ago. The German officer wouldn't talk — he's a cool customer—but Balch squealed like a stuck pig. He spilled everything."

They were seated in the spacious old living room at Belle Fleur —Lotus, Stacy, Lawrence and a few of the FBI men.

"You see," Stacy said, "My stepfather and I never pretended any real affection for each other. I think I stuck with him because he loved my mother as much as I did. She was the one person I've ever seen him truly gentle and kind with. And he kept me around because he could use me."

"Then you knew what was going on, Corbin?"

"Yes, there's no use pretending I didn't. Balch came to Dad with this proposition from the German officer. He'd been one of those who escaped on an unsurrendered Nazi sub with millions in German gold. He wasn't a Nazi but a fanatical German and he had the idea of softening up the American people by making dope fiends of them. It was a plan to demoralize and make them easy marks for German propaganda and the next war."

"Like the scheme the Japs used in hina," Lawrence said.

A week later Lotus Ames sat on the edge of the pool in Chloe Duval's patio and absent-mindedly stroked the ears of one of Mamselle's numerous feline companions.

"Will you ever forgive me for deceiving you, Mamselle?"

Chloe nodded understandingly. "But of course, mon ami, eet ees your work, non?"

"Yes, but we did make use of you. Even that letter Valette Fondeau wrote was at the price of a lightened jail sentence."

A little tinkling laugh answered her. "I thought eet sounded much too friendly for Valette. You see, we quarrel last time we met, but she has a tempestuous nature, so I thought she might have forgotten eet. Non, I am not angry weeth you, rather am I sad at losing you. You should do something weeth that golden voice of yours, ma cherie."

"I'm afraid there won't be many opportunities to make use of it in this sort of work."

"Sh, bien, perhaps you weel be using ett to seeng lullabies, then. That young Mr. Lawrence has a look een hees eyes for you."

Lotus blushed furously. "Oh, no —I don't think he cares."

"Mon Dieu, you are blind, leetle one! Believe me, I know—"

Her eyes glittered and she waved her jeweled fingers so that her rings flashed brilliantly in the sunlight. But before she could elaborate on her theme, Susiebelle appeared in the archway and announced callers.

"Send them out here," Chloe ordered, and began preening herself and shaking Pedro's sunflower seeds off the chair cushions.

A monent later old Mr. Cartier and his granddaughter appeared. They were followed by Stu Lawrence.

Lotus gasped. The fine, austere old gentleman was one person whom she never expected to see in the house on Gallatin Street. She was even more astonished to see him bow low over Chloe's hand.

"Ah, my old friend," Chloe exclaimed with pleasue, "do sit down and take this chair in the shade— you young people, too."

Mr. Cartier caught Lotus' expression of amazement and chuckled.

"You did not think Mamselle Duval and I were acquainted, eh, my girl? Ah, yes, we've known each other for many years — too many, eh, Chloe? You see, we grew up in New Orleans and have watched it change together. I often come to this charming courtyard in the Old City to reminisce with Mamselle!"

Aline looked mildly shocked. "Grandpere, you never told me!"

He smiled enigmatically. "And why should I, my dear?"

She didn't answer and he switched his glance to Lotus. "Much as I admire Mamselle Duval, I really came her to see you. I understand you are leaving today and I must tell you of my appreciation for all you've done for the Cartier family."

"It was all a part of my work," she explained.

"Not quite . . . Aline tells me you took a personal interest that undoubtedly saved her from a grave error in judgment."

Stu Lawrence was looking from one to the other. "What's this all about?"

Aline turned her brown eyes on him. "Miss Ames tried to tell me what sort of a man Stacy was, but I wouldn't believe her. To convince me, she staged a little scene in her room with him and stationed me behind the bathroom door, so that I overheard everything. He wanted me to marry him immediately, and if it hadn't been for Miss Ames, I would have."

Stu Lawrence had crimsoned to the ears; the face he turned to Lotus was abject. "Was that the scene I interrupted?"

She almost felt sorry for him.

"It was."

"Why didn't you explain to me?"

"If I remember correctly, you wouldn't let me."

He swallowed uncomfortably. "Then I apologize most humbly."

They were now an hour out of New Orleans. The wheels had assumed a steady pace when Lotus and Stu Lawrence strolled into the club car of the Washington-bound train. They pushed through the crowd and found stools at the small bar.

"Don't tell me you're going to have a creme de menthe on a sultry day like this?" Lawrence peered at her curiously.

She laughed. "No, I'll vary my request to a mint collins. You know, I had to teach Josephus how o make one."

"I don't suppose there's ever been a request for such a feminine drink at the Cafe Duval before."

Lotus sighed reminiscently. "Funn. I'm afraid I'm going to miss the intriguing atmosphere of that place. Already I'm beginning to feel as though the whole adventure had happened in some other century."

"New Orleans sometimes has that effect on one," he agreed. "Chloe is going to miss you, I'm sure. Did she mention it?"

Oh, she was very understanding and quite tearful. I'm afraid I adly misjudged her character. There were times when I was convinced she was mixed up with those crooks. She was so mysterious about the gold-headed walking stick."

An amused twinkle lit his eyes. "Of course she was mysterious about the cane because she wanted to protect old Mr. Cartier. She must have been quite a gal in her day."

Lotus stared at her companion. For some reason not attributable to the drink before her, she felt very lighthearted. Stu Lawrence ust missed being handsome, she eflected, but there was some quality about him even more appealing han just masculine good looks, a sort of genuineness.

"Am I going to go on calling you Mr. Lawrence, Mr. Lawrence?"

Removing his cigarette, he emitted a good-natured laugh. "Since we're rivals and equals in detecting, now, I wish you'd call me Stu, Lotus."

"That's the first time you've alled me that. Didn't think you knew it."

"By the way, Lotus, do you live up to your name?"

She looked up at him and his expression was full of significance. "I'm not sure what you mean?"

"I seem to recall an old Hindu saying: "He who tastes of the heart of Lotus must return to taste again.' His tone was half serious, half bantering. "Is it true?"

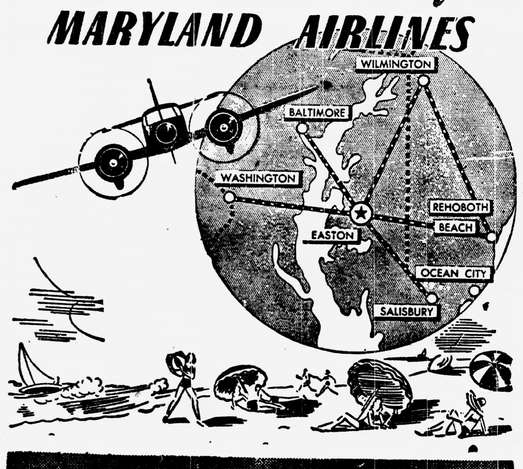
"That's something you'll have to find out for yourself, Stu."

"Then here's to the success of our next adventure!"

THE END.

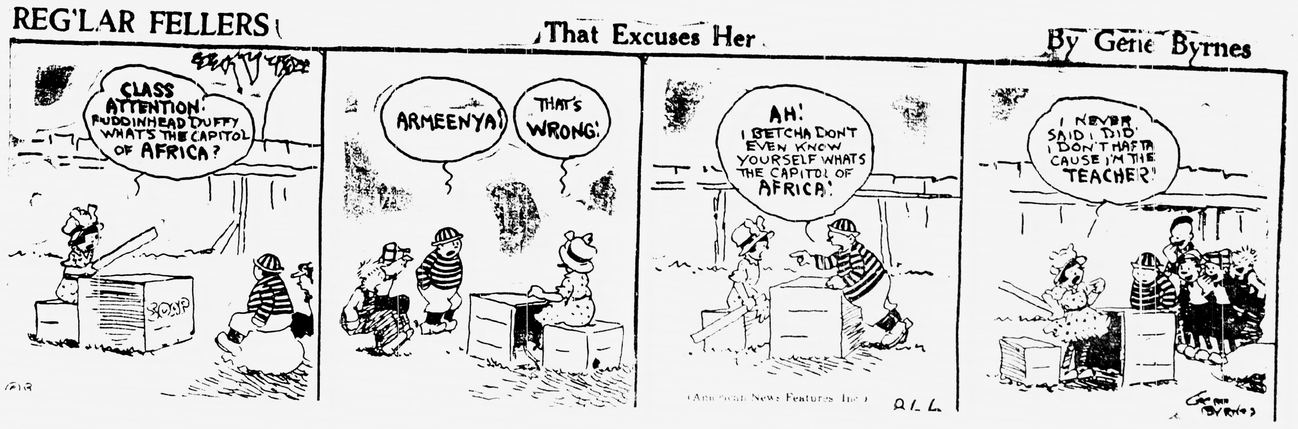
THE WORLD'S Safest INVESTMENT
WAR BONDS

Save Time... Fly
MARYLAND AIRLINES

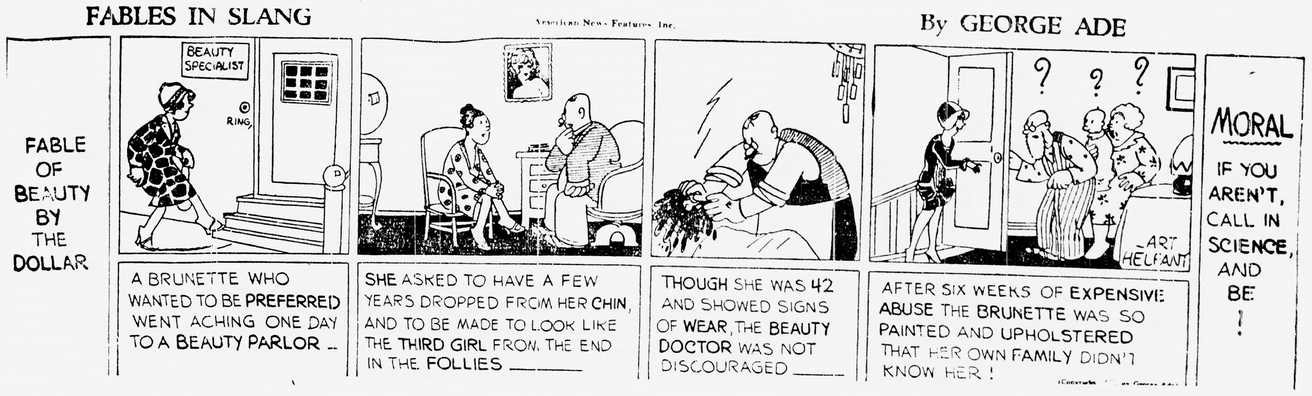


FOR INFORMATION—CALL GLEBE 1500

REG'LAR FELLERS — That Excuses Her — By Gene Byrnes



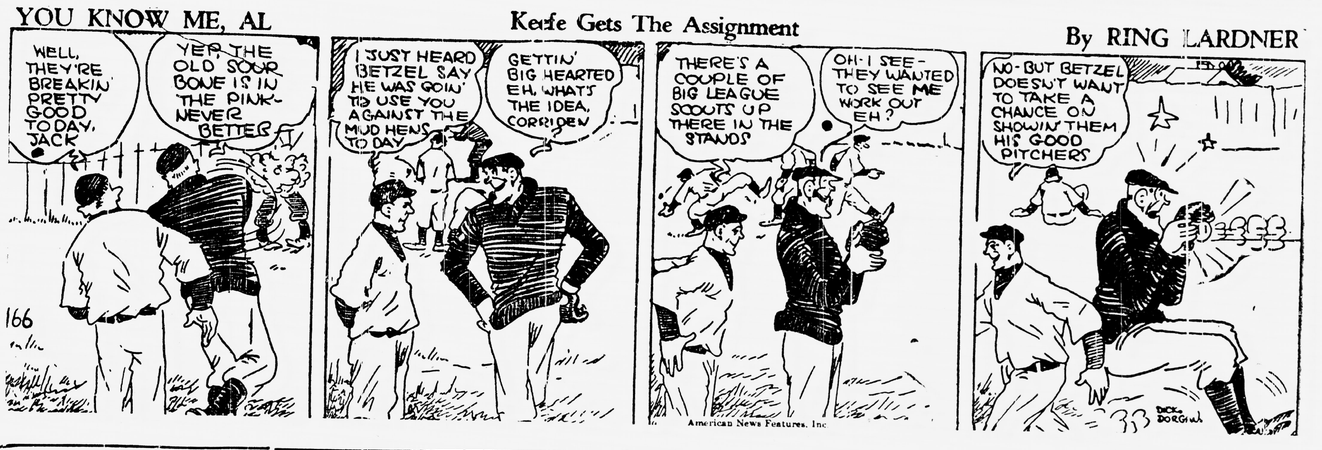
FABLES IN SLANG — By GEORGE ADE



CARTOON FOLLIES — By RUBE GOLDBERG

GENTLEMEN PREFER BLONDES — In London, Too! — By ANITA LOOS

YOU KNOW ME, AL — Kerfe Gets The Assignment — By RING LARDNER



THE CLANCY KIDS — The Obiquitous Chippy Boyd. — By PERCY L. CROSBY