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IDLE RAINBOW

By Phoebe Sheldon

XII
Rufus and Lindsay scrambled down the frozen wood road hand in hand so that Lindsay wouldn't fall or catch her foot in a hidden root. They were breathless and laughing when they came to the fields, and walked more slowly as Lindsay looked back at the thick green woods and asked, "How big is that, anyway?" "It's deep and wider than you'd believe," the Alexanders across the hill lost one of their prize cows in there and we never found her again although we looked for days. "We never even found her skeleton," Lindsay shivered. "I never dreamed there could be a place like that so near New York."

"There wasn't so much of it in the beginning although some parts of the farm have never been cut over. But the last of the Haydens were discouraged with the rocks and the angle of the slope and let it grow up to trees. That's where I do most of my experimenting with the needle bright."

"Rufe, have we time to see the nursery before breakfast?"

Rufe looked at her with astonishment. "You mean you want to see the nursery?"

"Yes, you know just how much you think I'd like to show it to you."

"Why no, Rufe, I really would."

"Well, come then. The air in the greenhouses, one set at right angles and adjoining the other, was warm and sweet smelling. A kind of warm, moist, sun-baked air, and the rows of dirt boxes filled with tiny blotches of green which would some day become Norway spruces and white pines and hemlocks."

Rufus took her down the aisles of the greenhouses into the "Insectary" where eggs, caterpillars and cocoons were all isolated in muslin cages.

"Aren't you even a little bit creepy?" asked Rufus.

"No, I think it's fascinating. I wish you'd tell me more about it."

"I will when I can't look out this window and see Nettie Raymond in the kitchen and her sausage sizzles. There's just one more thing, and then we'll go. This is where I do my real work," he said with a loving glance around. "It used to be a woodshed."

"It looks a little like a laboratory with that desk piled with papers," to notice the one discarded spool of thread.

"I don't wonder that you like it. I think I could work here myself in front of that window."

Rufus took her by the hand and his muddy shoes swung back and forth. He turned the cap in his hands round and round. "Sometimes I wonder if it's worth it. If it's worth all the back-breaking struggle. Sometimes I think it's useless. It doesn't produce a thing except trouble and taxes. But it just seems to me I can't let it go. I'd be breaking faith with all that grim lot of Haydens who scrimped and saved and put every ounce of themselves into the land. And I feel if I let one piece go I'd be letting it crumble around the edges."

"I'm not so sure, Rufe."

He took her by the hand as he jumped down. "I've got one more exhibit before they wanted the spring piped to the house. Before that the water was carried, finally the Haydens got around to it, but look—here's the end of the pipe, ten feet from the kitchen door!"

"But why?"

"If they had brought it all the way into the kitchen it would have taken quite a lot more pipe, quite a few feet more than the mile or so they had to lay from the spring."

"Thirty, weren't they?"

"Thirty and four. Look, Johnny Raymond's just coming out to ring the bell for us."

It was a short walk from the greenhouses to the side door. Long sharp-bladed axes were covered with thick frost and lay flat on the frozen yellow ground. In the driveway, the frozen impressions of horse hoofs, the track of a tire, in which were small pools of water frozen to thin bubbles of ice. As they entered the kitchen door Nettie was glowing with red eyes and sending out a savory smell of burning birch wood. Johnny came through the side door from the dining room with a tray of dirty dishes.

"It's late," said Rufus.

"Oh, dear! And I'm so hungry."

The others were already at the table as they went through into the dining room.

"I didn't expect to find you up so soon," Rufus smiled at Julia.

Julia pulled her quilted bathrobe a little closer. "Did you have a good walk?"

Lindsay thought suddenly that Julia's lipstick was too red for morning. She was suddenly conscious of the fish on her own cheek whipped in by the cold morning air. She pushed back a lock of hair and wondered if she looked terrible and if she ought to go upstairs and powder her nose.

"Oh, Rufe," said Julia, "there was a mouse in my room last night. It kept me awake all night jumping in and out of the waste basket and rustling the tissue paper until I thought I'd go crazy. I won't sleep there tonight unless you find his hole and plug it up."

"I'm sorry," said Rufus gently.

"Panicles," said Toby, "and not Aunt Demina's either. Sausages, biscuits and honey and apple sauce, Golly!"

"Johnny," said Julia, "you've forgotten my egg. Two whites and a half. And I wanted my orange cut up. Not juice."

"Yes, Miss Julia," said Johnny as he took away the glass of orange juice.

"I suppose," said Julia with a sigh, "you've heard all about the scientific feeding of lazy and undernourished trees. All about the Haydon Tree Food which is to trees what cod liver oil is to humans."

Lindsay left her color on her cheeks. "No, Rufe, you didn't tell me that."

"Really," said Julia, "then he omitted the most important part of his lecture. What did you have found to talk about if it wasn't the nursery business?"

Rufus smiled, but his voice had

an edge. "That's scarcely a recommendation for brilliant conversation, Julia, especially when you have known me as long as you have."

Lindsay thought, "She didn't like it because I went walking with Rufe. And she doesn't like me either."

Julia flipped the small end neatly off her egg.

"She would be able to do that," thought Lindsay. "I never could without getting myself covered with egg yolk from top to toe."

Poppy sighed. "I don't see how in the world I can ever eat another thing."

Rufus laughed. "After you've been hiking or skating or horseback riding I'd like to face you with one of Newie's dinners and see your reaction. By the way do you want to skate or ride? Speaking of riding, here comes John Alexander."

Lindsay looked out of the window and saw a man on a horse coming clattering down the hill and up to the low porch at the side door. Rufus went to the door and called to him.

"Come in and have a cup of coffee."

A lean young man in riding breeches jumped down from his horse.

"Poppy Cartwright, Lindsay Abbott and Tom Tobin, this is John Alexander."

John came in. He greeted Julia like an old friend.

"How about a treasure hunt to-night at our house? The clues ready and Gwen and Terry want you all to come."

BE FAIR

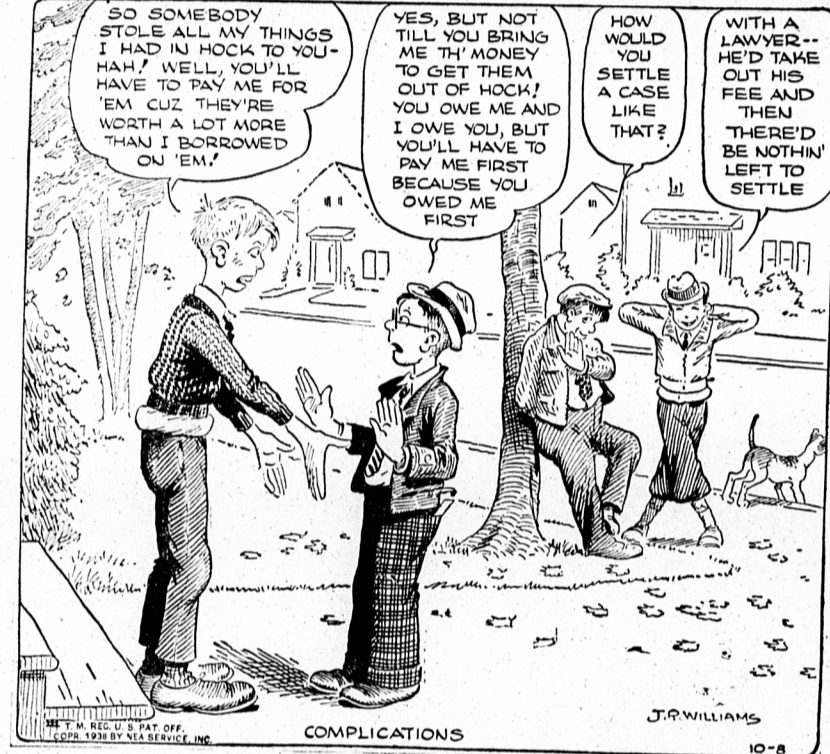
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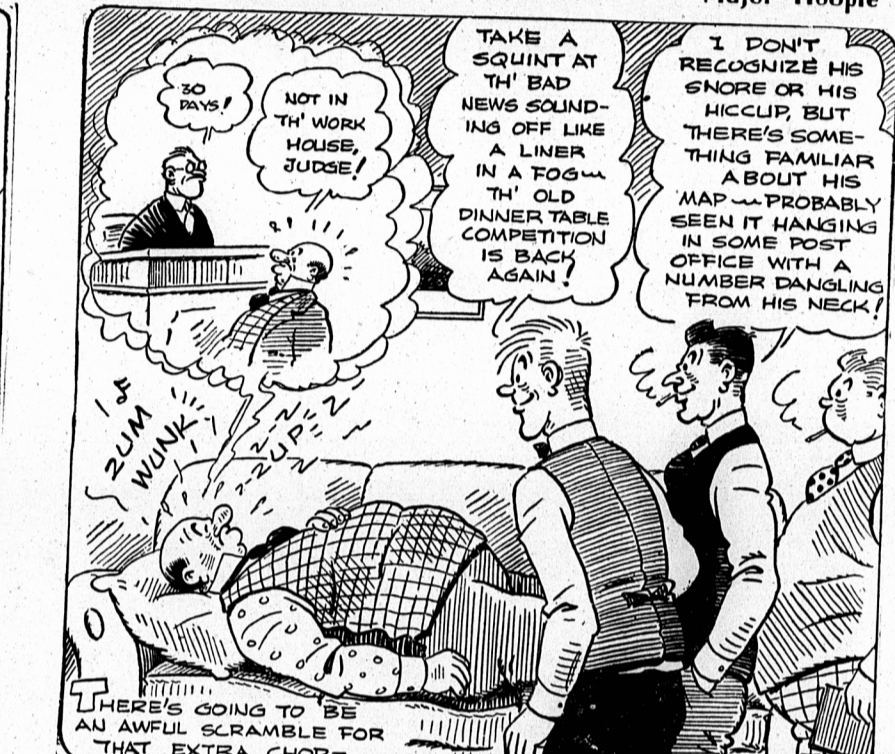
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By J. R. Williams



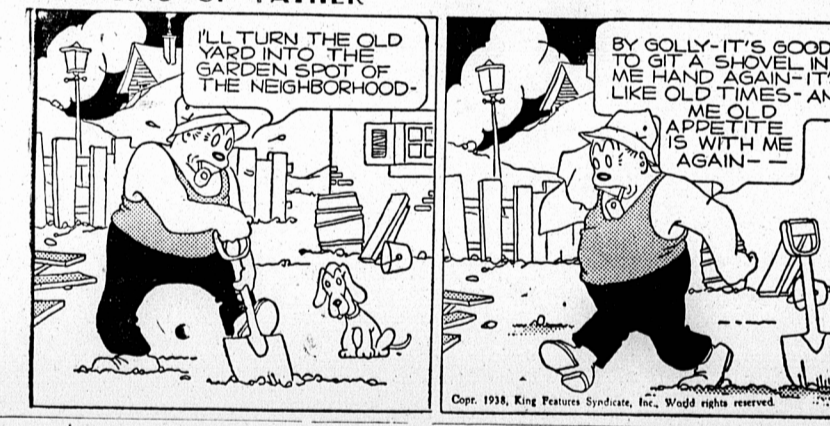
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