

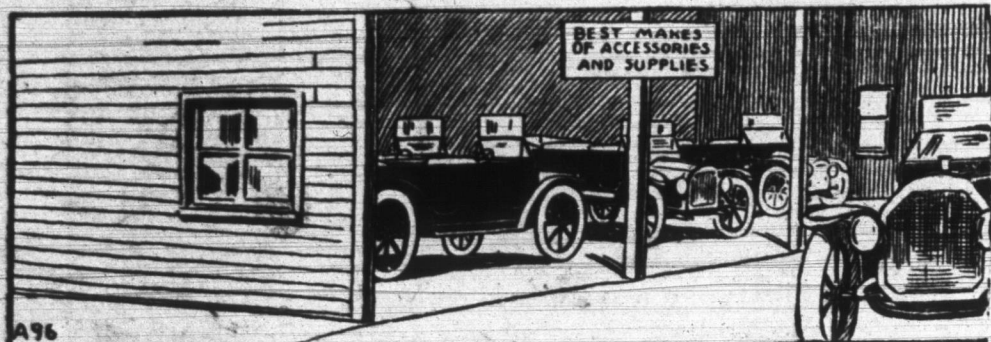
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By JANE BUNKER

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CHAPTER XV.  
An Important Ownership.

When I left her house this was my situation with Mrs. Delario—she'd given birth to the incorrigible belief that a million dollars' worth of diamonds had been presented to her by an unknown lama in Tibet; sent her through the air; glued into the toe of her slipper, and this in answer to prayer. And I had to reckon with it as a fact—a fact that yelled me off the straightforward course I'd been about to pursue and bullied me into taking devious ways.

"No!" I replied to myself ten dozen times. "The Emperor William didn't consult me about what he should do with his old diamonds; why should he expect help from me now? He's got his own machinery to work with—let him get his diamonds back himself. I'm no detective—I'm not his tool."

Billy was an hour late in reaching the house and I interrupted his petulant explanation as to why he wasn't two hours late, or three, to communicate rapidly—knowing that monsieur would be there in a minute—my decision that Mrs. Delario was to keep the diamonds and the Emperor William might twiddle his thumbs and whistle.

"You took 'em back to her?"

"Yes, and she's to keep them."

"But—what did she say?"

The elevator was rumbling, and I knew who was coming.

"But what are you going to tell monsieur?"

The bell rang—I hadn't decided what I was going to tell monsieur.

I opened the door. Standing behind Claire, his glance to me under his obsequiously lifted hat and across her head, monsieur rapidly prowled my face for the sniff of a hint that I had



Monsieur Rapidly Prowled My Face.

everything arranged and my diplomacy had been successful. Which hint I'm positive he didn't get. Claire gave a little cry on seeing me, flung herself into my arms and hid her blushes on my shoulder. I ducked my face to hers and bade my visitors enter. I carried Claire forward, leaving monsieur to dispose of his hat and coat in the hall. I presented Billy to Claire, and she shot him dead with one glance and brought him back to life with the next. At the sound of her lovely voice uttering a thrilly "How do you do?" Billy didn't know his own name—the only name he could at the moment have articulated was Claire de Ravel.

Claire forgot him as soon as he stammered out his "awfully glad to meet you," and dropped her little hand. I was the magnet of those lovely eyes! Being middle-aged and proper does sometimes have its compensations!

I motioned us to chairs. What was I to tell monsieur! Claire gave me a moment's respite by hurriedly beginning, "Papa says to tell you everything I know—"

She glanced at him and he nodded. "Yes—everything—from ze beginning."

"You remember Vevey?" I nodded and said "Yes."

"Well, papa came to see me there—while I was at school, you know—and he brought me a little box to keep for him—so big."

"What was in that little box?" I questioned.

Claire's eyes mutely appealed to her father.

Monsieur had evidently been waiting for this question and hastily interposed. "She does not know—it was my wish she should know nothing of ze contents—to sis day she does not know—"

and his whole face was filled

with appeal to Billy and me.

I granted the appeal with a jerk of my head that I hoped told him, "All right—I'll keep your secret from her," and he replied to this with, "Tres bien," and a relieved look. But that didn't mean I was through with my questions to Claire.

"What did you think was in the box?" I went on.

"Papers—very valuable papers."

"Valuable in what way? Title deeds to property, for instance? Or a will? Anything of that kind?" I wanted to know what sort of a yarn he'd told her.

"Oh, no—much more valuable than that! A cipher on tissue paper. Papa said his life depended on it—and the life of the emperor of Russia," she hastily added, and blushed and cast down her eyes.

"Ze emperor of Germany," corrected monsieur quietly.

"Yes—I forgot—I thought it was the emperor of Russia."

"It is of no consequence—continue, my child, wis ze narrative."

She seemed a little off the track and I helped her on with another question: "What were you to do with those papers?"

"I was to help papa get them to America—so they wouldn't be found. So I hid the papers while I was at school—I wore them in a little bag around my neck that papa bought for me, and it was all arranged with madame that she was to bring me to Paris when papa telegraphed. And she couldn't, you know, so you brought me."

"So that was why you were so afraid of being searched at the customs house on the frontier?"

"Yes. Papa told me they might—and if they found the papers he would be handed over to the government. But they didn't find them!" She smiled in childish delight. "I got them to Paris with you all right, and then I ran on ahead and told papa and said how kind you'd been, and I said you were just going to America, and he said the governess he'd engaged had been taken sick and couldn't go to America, but the Russian spies were after him and he was afraid he'd be killed, and perhaps you would take me with you."

Billy glared at monsieur. Monsieur answered him with a shrug as much as to say, "Well, what would you?" Claire went on, "And then papa asked you to let me go with you, and you—you—couldn't!"

She was too exquisitely polite to remind me of that stern, uncompromising refusal.

"Well, papa found Mrs. Delario, and it was all right."

"And now, Claire, what was precisely the plan about that little box? What were you to do with it?"

She blushed and grew so embarrassed she could hardly go on, but her father helped her by telling her, "Conceal nothing, my child—you have done only what your father has commanded you to." Thus encouraged, she confessed, "I was to put it in your slipper—if you had one you weren't wearing, because you know you told papa that your baggage wasn't examined—your cousin was an inspector, or something like that. And if I couldn't get it into your baggage I must put it in one of Mrs. Delario's slippers—"

"I remember now!" I suddenly exclaimed. "That time I caught you in my cabin—at my suitcase—you were trying to do it then?"

Tears came to her eyes.

"Yes," she almost whispered. "I was going to put it in one of your slippers—I found you had a pair just like Mrs. Delario's."

"Oh!" I said. And at this, monsieur interposed, "It was my plan—ze slipper—if one could be found not worn on ze steamer."

Billy charged monsieur's confession to a private account that was growing large. Personally I felt I liked the man the better for it—I read it as the effort to shield the girl and minimize her part in the affair. And in that I was right; Billy looked at it differently. "Concealed cuss!" he later confided. "Wanted to take the whole credit to himself."

"Oui, madame," monsieur went on, and all the while I felt him searching my face for a sign of what I had accomplished with Mrs. Delario. "Nothing can be safer—I argue—than a fancy slipper. It is not worn on ze steamer in ze cold of winter, and madame have so assure me zat her baggage, because of her so good cousin, is pass without difficulty. And who would accuse madame of—he gave me a knowing look and finished ambiguously—"of to smuggle zeze valuable papers zat do not concern her? Ah, no—it would be incredible without to see zem—and we have take care zat zey are not seen! And to accomplish sis we have put zem where zey are almost but not quite seen. I have explain all sis to Claire and she have understand parfaitement. Oui."

The smugness with which he delivered himself of this was really amusing, and I couldn't help a smile, which encouraged him to add—at the same time looking piercingly at me—with a deprecating shrug:

"And just at ze moment of beautiful completion madame carries off one of zeze slippers—we know not which."

All of us laughed and the tension that had been quite plainly felt in our little company broke.

Claire went on to tell us how, in Antwerp, she had occupied a room communicating with Mrs. Delario's the day before they sailed, and how papa had taken Mrs. Delario out to see the great Rubens in the cathedral and she—Claire—pleading a headache, had remained behind and had gone through Mrs. Delario's things so she could tell her father what there was they could

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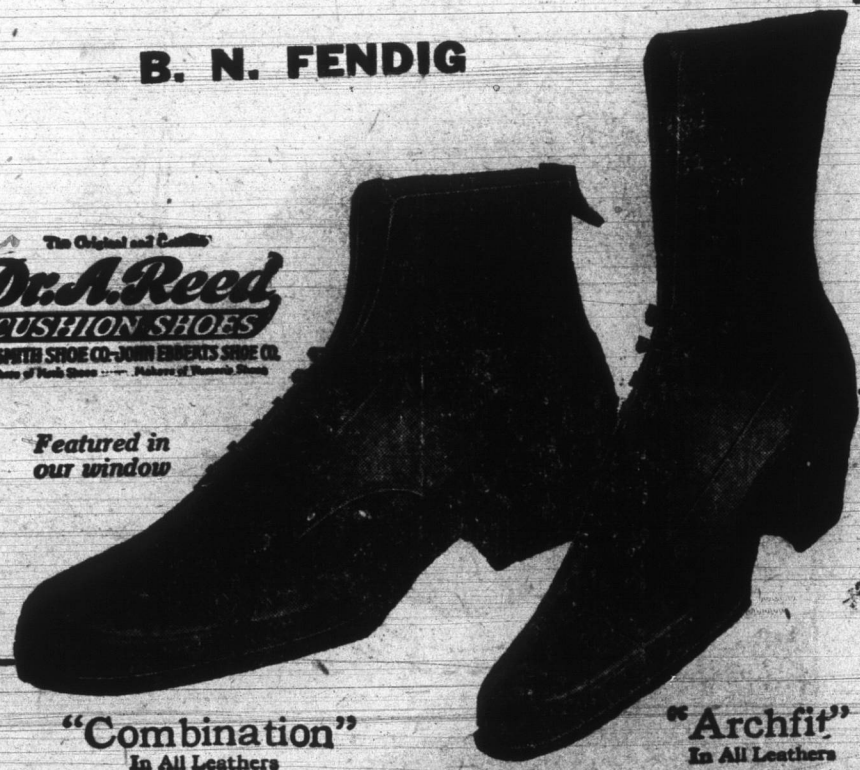
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use; and discovered the suppers and had taken them to her room and shown them to her father that night, and he said they "would do admirably," and she had got them back while Mrs. Delario was asleep.

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