

ALICE ADAMS

by BOOTH TARKINGTON

Second novel in the Times series by Indiana writers
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WALTER, usually sallow, had grown pale; he watched his father narrowly, and now took a sudden resolution. "Look here," he said. "When you say I'm likely to fire me because you're going to quit, you talk like the people that have to be locked up. I don't know where you get such things in your head; Lamb and Company won't know you're gone. Listen: I can stay there long as I want to. But I'll tell you what I'll do: make it worth my while and I'll hook up with your old glue factory, after all."

Adams stopped his pacing abruptly, and stared at him. "Make it worth your while?" "What do you mean?" "I got a good use for \$300 right now," Walter said. "Let me have it and I'll quit Lamb's to work for you. Don't let me have it and I swear I won't."

"Are you crazy?" "Is everybody crazy that needs \$300?"

"Yes," Adams said. "They are if they ask me for it, when I got to stretch every cent I can lay my hands on to make it look like a dollar!"

"You won't do it?" Adams burst out at him. "You little fool! If I had \$300 to throw away, I'd be the pay I expected to get you, haven't you got sense enough to see I could hire a man worth \$300 more to me than you'd be? It's a fine time to ask me for \$300, isn't it. What for? Rhinestone buckles to throw around on your 'girl friends?' Shame on you! Ask me to bribe you to help yourself and your own family!"

"I'll give you a last chance," Walter said. "Either you do what I want, or I won't do what you want. Don't ask me again after this, because—"

Adams interrupted him fiercely. "Ask you again? Don't worry about that, my boy! All I ask you is to get out of my room!"

"Look here," Walter said, quietly, and his lips curled into a distorted grin. "Look here; I expect you wouldn't give me \$300 to save my life, would you?"

"You make me sick," Adams said, in his bitterness. "Get out of here."

Walter went out, whistling; and Adams dropped into his old chair again as the door closed. "Oh, my, my," he groaned. "Oh, Lordy, Lordy! The way of the transgressor—"

CHAPTER XVI

HE MEANT his own transgression and his own way; for Walter's stubborn refusal appeared to Adams just then as one of the inexplicable but righteous besetings he must encounter in following that way. "Oh, Lordy, Lordy!" he groaned, and then, as resentment moved him—"That dang boy! Dang idiot!" Yet he knew himself for a greater idiot because he had not been able to tell Walter the truth. He could not bring himself to do it, nor even to state his case in its best terms; and that was because he felt that even in its best terms the case was a bad one.

Of all his regrets the greatest was that in a moment of vanity and tenderness, twenty-five years ago, he had told his young wife a business secret. He had wanted to show how important her husband was becoming, and how much the head of the universe, J. A. Lamb, trusted to his integrity and ability. The great man had an idea; he thought of "branching out a little," he told Adams confidentially, and there were possibilities of profit in glue.

What he wanted was a liquid glue to be put into little bottles and sold cheaply. "The kind of thing that sells itself," he said. "The kind of thing that pays its own small way as it goes along, until it has profits enough to begin advertising it right. Everybody has to use glue, and if I make mine convenient and cheap, everybody'll buy mine. But it's got to be glue that'll stick; it's got to be the best and if we find how to make it we've got to keep it a big secret, of course, or anybody can steal it from us. There was a man here last month; he knew a formula he wanted to tell me, 'sich unseen' but he was in such a hurry I got suspicious, and I found he'd managed to steal it, working for the big packers in their glue-works. We've got to find a better glue than that, anyhow. I'm going to set you and Campbell at it. You're practical, wide-awake, young feller, and Campbell's a mighty good chemist; I guess you two boys ought to make something happen."

His guess was shrewd enough. Working in a shed a little way outside the town, where their cheery employees visited them sometimes to study their mischievous stews, the two young men found what Lamb had set them to find. But Campbell was thoughtful over the discovery. "Look here," he said. "Why ain't this just about yours and mine? After all, it may be Lamb's money that's paid for the stuff we've used, but it hasn't cost much."

"But he pays us," Adams remonstrated, horrified by his companion's idea. "He paid us to do it. It belongs absolutely to him."

"Oh, I know he thinks it does," Campbell admitted, plaintively. "I suppose we've got to let him take it. It's not patentable, and he'll have to do pretty well by us when he starts his factory, because he's got to depend on us to run the making of the stuff so that the workmen can't get onto the process. You better ask him the same salary I do, and mine's going to be high."

But the high salary, thus pleasantly imagined, was never paid. Campbell died of typhoid fever, that summer, leaving Adams and his employer the only possessors of the formula, an unwritten one; and Adams, pleased to think himself more important to the great man than ever, told his wife that there could be little doubt of his being put in sole charge of the prospective glue-works. Unfortunately, the enterprise remained prospective.

Its projector had already become "inveigled into another side-line," as he told Adams. One of his sons had persuaded him to take up a "cough-lozenge," to be called the "Jalamb Balm Trochee," and the lozenge did well enough to amuse Mr. Lamb and occupy his spare time, which was really about all he had asked of the glue project. He had "all the money anybody ought to want," he said, when Adams urged him, and he could "start up this little glue side-line" at any time; the formula was safe in their two heads.

At intervals Adams would seek opportunity to speak of "the little glue side-line" to the patron, and to suggest that the years were passing; but Lamb, putting other hobbies, had lost interest. "Oh, I'll start it up some day, maybe. If I don't, I may turn it over to my heirs; it's always an asset, worth something or other, of course. We'll probably take it up some day, though, you and I."

The sun persistently declined to rise on that day, and, as time went on, Adams saw that his rather timid urgings bored his employer, and he ceased to bring up the subject. Lamb apparently forgot all about glue, but Adams discovered that unfortunately there was some one else who remembered it.

"It's really yours," she argued, that painful day when for the first time she suggested his using his knowledge for the benefit of himself and his family. "Mr. Campbell might have had a right to part of it, but he died and didn't leave any kin, so it belongs to you."

"Suppose J. A. Lamb hired me to saw some wood," Adams said. "Would the sticks belong to me?" "He hasn't got any right to take your invention and bury it," she protested. "What good is it doing him if he doesn't do anything with it? What good is it doing anybody? None in the world! And what harm would it do him if you went ahead and did this for yourself and for your children? None in the world! And what could he do to you if he was old pig enough to get angry with you for doing it? He couldn't do a single thing, and you've admitted he couldn't, yourself. So what's your reason for depriving your children and your wife of the benefits you know you could give 'em?"

"Nothing but decency," he answered; and she had her reply ready for that. It seemed to him that, strive as he would, he could not reach her mind with even the plainest language; while everything that she said to him, with such vehemence, sounded like so much obstinate gibberish. Over and over he pressed her with the same illustration, on the point of ownership, though he thought he was varying it.

"Suppose he hired me to build him a house; would that be my house?" "He didn't hire you to build him a house. You and Campbell invented—"

"Look here; suppose you give a cook a soup-bone and some vegetables, and pay her to make you a soup; has she got a right to take and sell it? You know better!"

"I know one thing; if that old man tried to keep your own invention from you he's no better than a robber!" They never found any point of contact in all their passionate discussions of this ethical question; and the question was no more settled between them, now that Adams had succumbed, than it had ever been. But at least the wrangling about it was over; they were grave together, almost silent, and an uneasiness prevailed with her as much as with him.

He had already been out of the house, to walk about the small green yard, and on Monday afternoon he went for a taxicab and went downtown, but kept a long way from the "wholesale section," where stood the formidable old oblong pile of Lamb & Co. He arranged for the sale of the bonds he had laid away, and for placing a mortgage upon his house, and on his way home, after 5 o'clock, he went to see an old friend, a man whose term of service with Lamb & Co. was even a little longer than his own.

This veteran, returned from the day's work, was sitting in front of the apartment house where he lived, but when the cab stopped at the curb he rose and came forward, offering a jocular greeting. "Well, well, Virgil Adams! I always thought you had a sporty streak in you. Travel in your own hired private automobile nowadays, do you? Panperin' yourself, 'cause you're still layin' off sick, I expect."

"Oh, I'm well enough again, Charley Lohr," Adams said, as he got out and shook hands. Then, telling the driver to wait, he took his friend's arm, walked to the bench with him, and sat down. "I been practically well for some time," he said. "I'm fixin' to get into harness again."

"Bein' sick has certainly produced a change of heart in you," his friend laughed. "You're the last man I ever expected to see blowin' yourself—or anybody else—to a taxicab! For that matter, I never heard of you bein' in any kind of a cab, 'less'n it might be when you been pall-bearer for somebody. What's come over you?"

"Well, I got to turn over a new leaf, and that's a fact," Adams said. "I got a lot to do, and the only way to accomplish it, it's got to be done soon, or I won't have anything to live on while I'm doing it."

"What you talkin' about? What you got to do except to get strong enough to come back to the old place?"

"Well—" Adams paused, then coughed, and said slowly, "Fact, Charley Lohr, I been thinkin' likely I wouldn't come back."

"What! What you talkin' about?" "No," said Adams. "I been thinking I might likely kind of branch out on my own account."

"Well, I'll be doggoned!" Old Charley Lohr was amazed; he ruffled up his gray moustache with thumb and forefinger, leaving his mouth open beneath, like a dark cave under a tangled wintry thicket. "Why, that's the doggonedest thing I ever heard," he said. "I already am the oldest inhabitant down there, but if you go, there won't be anybody else of the old generation at all. What on earth you thinkin' of goin' into?"

"Well," said Adams, "I rather you didn't mention it till I get started—of course anybody'll know what it is by then—but I have been kind of planning to put a liquid glue on the market."

His friend, still ruffling the gray moustache upward, stared at him in frowning perplexity. "Glue?" he said.

"Yes, I been sort of mulling over the idea of taking up something like that."

"Handlin' it for some firm, you mean?"

"No, Miting it. Sort of a glue-

works likely."

Lohr continued to frown. "Let me think," he said. "Didn't the ole man have some such idea once, himself?"

Adams leaned forward, rubbing his knees, and he coughed again before he spoke. "Well, yes. Fact is, he did. That is to say, a mighty long while ago he did."

"I remember," said Lohr. "He never said anything about it that I know of; but seems to me I recollect we had a sort of rumor around the place how you and that man—le see, wasn't his name Campbell, that died of typhoid fever? Yes, that was it, Campbell. Didn't the ole man have you and Campbell workin' sort of private on some glue proposition or other?"

"Yes, he did," Adams nodded. "I found out a good deal about glue, then, too."

"Been workin' on it since, I suppose?"

"Yes. Kept it in my mind and studied out new things about it."

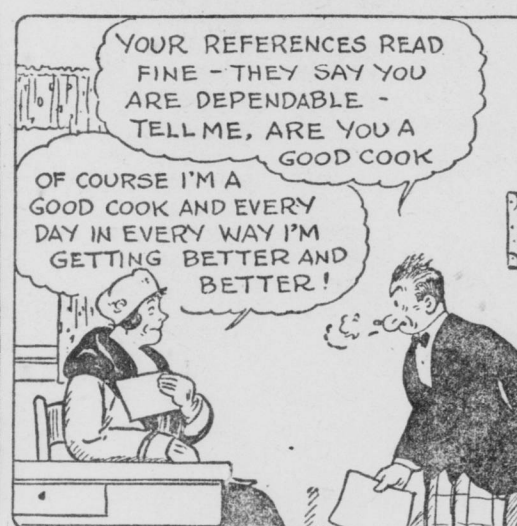
Lohr looked serious. "Well, but see here," he said. "I hope it ain't anything the ole man'll think might infringe on whatever he had you doin' for him. You know how he is; broad-minded, liberal, free-handed man as walks the earth, and if he thought he owed you a cent he'd sell his right hand for a pork chop to pay it, if that was the only way; but if he got the idea anybody was tryin' to get the better of him, he'd sell both his hands, if he had to, to keep 'em from doin' it. Yes, at 80, he would! Not that I mean I think you might be tryin' to get the better of him, Virg. You're a mighty close ole codger, but such a thing ain't in you. What I mean: I hope there ain't any chance for the ole man to think you might be—"

"Oh, no," Adams interrupted. "A matter of fact, I don't believe he'll ever think about it at all, and if he did he wouldn't have any real right to feel offended at me; the process I'm going to use is one I expect to change and improve a lot different from the one Campbell and I worked on for him."

"Well, that's good," said Lohr. "Of course you know what you're up to; you're ole enough, God knows!" He laughed ruefully. "My, but it will seem funny to me—down there with you gone! I expect you and I both been gettin' to be pretty much dead-wood in the place, the way the young fellows look at it, and the only one that'd miss either of us would be the other one! Have you told the ole man yet?"

"Well—" Adams spoke laboriously. "No, No, I haven't. I thought—well, that's what I wanted to see you about." (To Be Continued.)

DOINGS OF THE DUFFS—



OUT OUR WAY—By WILLIAMS



THEM DAYS IS GONE FOREVER—



THE OLD HOME TOWN—By STANLEY



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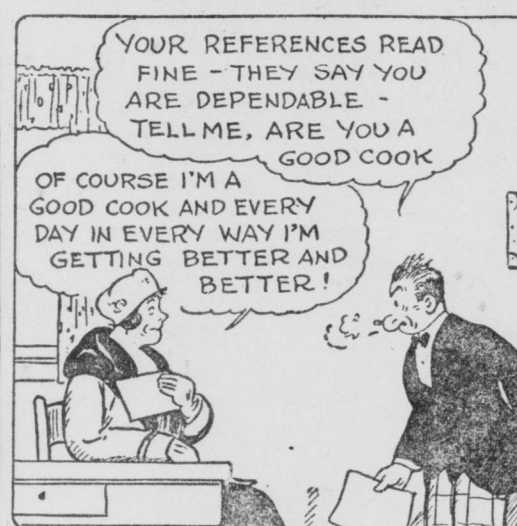
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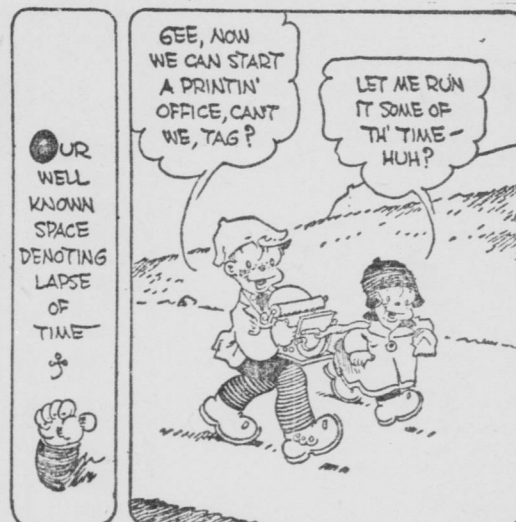
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Another Prospect

—By ALLMAN



FRECKLES AND HIS FRIENDS—By BLOSSER



Manhandle This On Your Marimba

—By AL POSEN



OUR BOARDING HOUSE—By AHERN

