

Daily Short Story

THE HANDICAP

PAULA looked at the sea gulls. "I shan't look at the man again," she was firm with herself. But she wanted to, the worst way. He was tall, his dark hair, grayed a little over the ears, face strong and seamed. Not a ladies' man. But a man for a woman. For one woman. What a man! Paula couldn't bear it. She looked, and found him looking.

Talking to Cousin Irene, but looking at Paula. Paula felt as if great flowers were blossoming inside of her. She looked at the sea gulls. Life seemed to be like this, that when she found such a man as this, Cousin Irene had to be sitting on a bench with him, her dark eyes vividly following every little move he made, her great eyes beseeching him for love, for life.

But, as luck would have it, Paula found herself, when they were seated at the table under the rose arbor, directly across from the man. He still talked to Cousin Irene. All the guests raised a great chatter of talking, none bothering about Paula. Paula only was filling in. Some one had sent last-minute regrets.

So Paula had a chance to notice that, for all his animated conversation, the man's eyes wandered now and then abstractedly down the green terraces to the blue lace of the Sound.

TWICE

Paula lowered her eyes hastily when he suddenly shifted his glance to her. And it was at her that he smiled, when Aunt Madge, whose smile was all for Cousin Irene, invited him to stay at the house while he had his yacht at Goldport.

"We'll give you a party, Tom," Aunt Madge offered, smiling with all her new teeth. But he refused.

Aunt Madge hid her teeth with a weight of sympathy. "Such a shame," she sighed, "that a wife can cause a man such sadness." Paula looked at the sea gulls. So he had a wife.

"It isn't that," she heard him say diffidently. "I just don't care for the fanfare any more. I'd like to come here often, if you'll let me be just one of the family." "Then," said Cousin Irene, archly, "come back for lunch tomorrow."

"I'd like to." Paula quit looking at the sea gulls. Even if he had a wife and even if Cousin Irene adored him anyway, Paula could not let him know that she wished he could be happy. He smiled back. Then Aunt Madge spoke very, very sweetly:

"PAULA, dear, I know you're anxious to get back to your lovely sewing!" And to the others. "Paula's sewing is simply divine!"

The next day at lunch time, needless to say, Aunt Madge sent no invitation to come down. Instead, she sent a dress to the sewing room to be mended at once. And Paula, stitching, had to be careful to let none of the tears fall on the soft silk.

Chaotically, her mind roamed back over the trail that had brought her to this little workroom in the great mission. It led from a demure little house in a town named Hillview, in Indiana, from a gallant and resourceful little mother, who seemed always to have a thimble on her middle finger.

"As rich as your Aunt Madge Denniston," she would say, as other people would say, "As rich as Croesus." "Mumme, tell about Aunt Madge's house at Goldport." And mother would describe marbled porticos, broad gardens, "and a ballroom almost as big as the First Methodist Church."

"Mumme, where is Goldport?" "Near a very large city, dear, named New York."

WHEN mother had influenza, and died, a telegram came from Goldport for a Paula who was 20.

"It's a great opportunity," cried the minister's wife. But Paula hesitated. If, as the message urged her to do, she closed out the little dress-making business that had been mother's and could now profitably be hers, and went to Goldport to live, "I'd have the handicap of being a poor relation in a rich home. And I'm accustomed to independence, and it's a good thing to have, even with poverty."

"But it's your father's dear half-sister who is asking you to live with her!"

Dear? Paula wondered. No help had ever come from mother from Goldport. The minister's wife had something else to say, though. "These are the only relatives you have in the world," she pointed out. "And it would certainly be improper for such a beautiful young girl as you to be living alone."

Arriving then at Goldport, Paula met luxury that amazed her. She couldn't understand how Uncle Phillip, a neatly jolly little man of 50, took the Oriental rugs and the painted ceilings as matters of course. "I say, we'll show you off at the Shellfish Club tomorrow," he said at once. And Cousin Irene, a vivid, nervous, little brunette, said, "Dad, let's give her a luncheon at the Yacht Club!" But Aunt Madge rebuked them in dove-like sadness.

"PAULA is in mourning," she said, and to Paula: "Out of sorrow for your dear mother, I'm sure you'll prefer to be left to yourself." Paula swallowed tears. Aunt Madge looked solicitous. "To avoid brooding, dear, you might like to occupy yourself with a bit of sewing."

The young girl grasped this opportunity to show her gratitude to her father's half-sister, who smiled as kindly as anybody could with a face so nearly like that of a hawk. "Tomorrow, then, dear, the butler will show you where the sewing room is. You can do a little sewing for me and Irene. And you can fill in whenever one of our guests sends last-minute regrets. I'm sure you want to make yourself useful."

"I'll be glad to help in any way I can, Aunt Madge."

So eight months passed. Then Aunt Madge arranged the great ball for her cousin Irene's birthday. And though time could not dim the memory of her mother, Paula had come out of her mourning.

"I want you to save me at least one dance," twinkled Uncle Phil one morning, Paula having been summoned to the library to repair

a tiny hole in the rug. On her knees, working, she smiled spirit-edly. "You shall have two dances, Uncle Phil!" she said.

AUNT MADGE smiled from a comfortable armchair. "But what have you to wear to the ball, Paula? All the others wear handsome gowns and jewels. I'm sure you wouldn't want to be a wall-flower, would you, dear?"

Uncle Phil looked annoyed. "Oh, Madge, buy her a gown, why don't you!" Aunt Madge only smiled. She held the purse strings, not Uncle Phil.

Now an inconspicuous feature of that famous ballroom was a high, narrow balcony at one end, useful at times for the arrangement of decorations. On this night a screen of smile and great yellow carysanthemums covered it entirely. No one saw a pair of wistful blue eyes peering through this foliage.

From here Paula, her hair that was like sun-ripened honey lost in the shadow, glimpsed the gowns, the jewels, the flowers. From here, and wearing no party dress but her little sewing apron, Paula heard the music.

It is not surprising that the next day she ran away. She had no money. So she walked, carrying a small but heavy handbag. She walked three miles to the ferry.

AUNT MADGE had arrived in one of her cars. "For this is the way you repay me for what I've done for you! You ungrateful little snip! Do you want the family dragged in newspaper headlines? Did you imagine that I, with as much money as I have, could be outwitted by a penniless little housewife like you?"

"And now I'm 30," thought Paula, stitching Aunt Madge's dress that needed mending. She wiped tears with the back of one slender hand. Noting the time, she supposed that now they would be sitting down at the table, bringing their cocktails with them. "How, perhaps, the crabflakes were being served. Finally the liqueurs. She was sure of it when the butler came into the sewing room door."

"Miss Paula, Mr. Denniston desires you to bring a needle and some dark thread down to the terrace at once." Paula did not hurry. Aunt Madge, very likely, had ripped her stocking. But on the terrace, it was not Aunt Madge who was in trouble. Cousin Irene, laughing, said, "Tom tore his sleeve, and he wanted to know if we had anybody in the house who could mend it at once."

PAULA blushed. The man not only had not left, but was smiling directly at her and holding out a blue serge sleeve with an ell-tear near the cuff. Did he want her to sew it while he had the coat on? She thought of his wife. But her heart would not behave anyway. Aunt Madge, however, was smiling benignly.

"Take your coat off, Tom dear, so she can mend it."

But Tom Steadley could smile, too. "Take me into the library, Miss Paula," he directed, "where I can take off my coat."

She had a giddy feeling that none of this was real, more so when, in the library, he did not take off his coat. A kind of embarrassment came over him. With constraint, his usual ease made astonishing, he gazed out of a farther window while he talked. And his remark seemed strangely irrelevant.

"It would be fun, wouldn't it, to head for the Mediterranean Sea by way of the Bahamas, the South American coast, then Africa, Tennessee, all that."

NOW silence grew between them, not difficult, but like a magic spell, and because she would not break this enchantment she would not speak. But fingering the spool of dark thread in the pocket of her sewing apron, she wondered why he had wanted to speak with her alone.

Possibly he needed her advice. Possibly he wanted to ask Uncle Phil on a cruise, but without Aunt Madge, and didn't know how to go about it. Tom Steadley, however, made the matter plain.

A glance smote her from far-seeing eyes. He reddened, but, "I," he said, "never beat about the bush when I see what I want." He came to the point at once. "Can you," he asked abruptly, "sail with me next week?"

"I?" She trembled so violently, and it was from sheer joy, that she dropped the spool and it rolled noisily under the table. But then, in a small voice cold with pain: "It's not kind of you, Mr. Steadley, to make a joke of me."

NOT kind, and even insupportably cruel that after these years of her loneliness this should be offered, this only. How could the man have the impudence to look hurt?

"Why did you say that?" he demanded. It was difficult to answer what he must already know. "How can I sail with you," she faltered out, "when I have not been invited by your wife?" She turned away, hiding tears.

But when he spoke again, the tears were like the dew that catches the first rays of the sun. "My wife," he said, "ran away with another man. She divorced me nearly a year ago."

On the terrace, Aunt Madge was not smiling. "Irene, you're in love with Tom Steadley and for a year I've been trying to marry you to him. Will you tell me why you tore his sleeve with that salad fork. You thought I'd see. But I did."

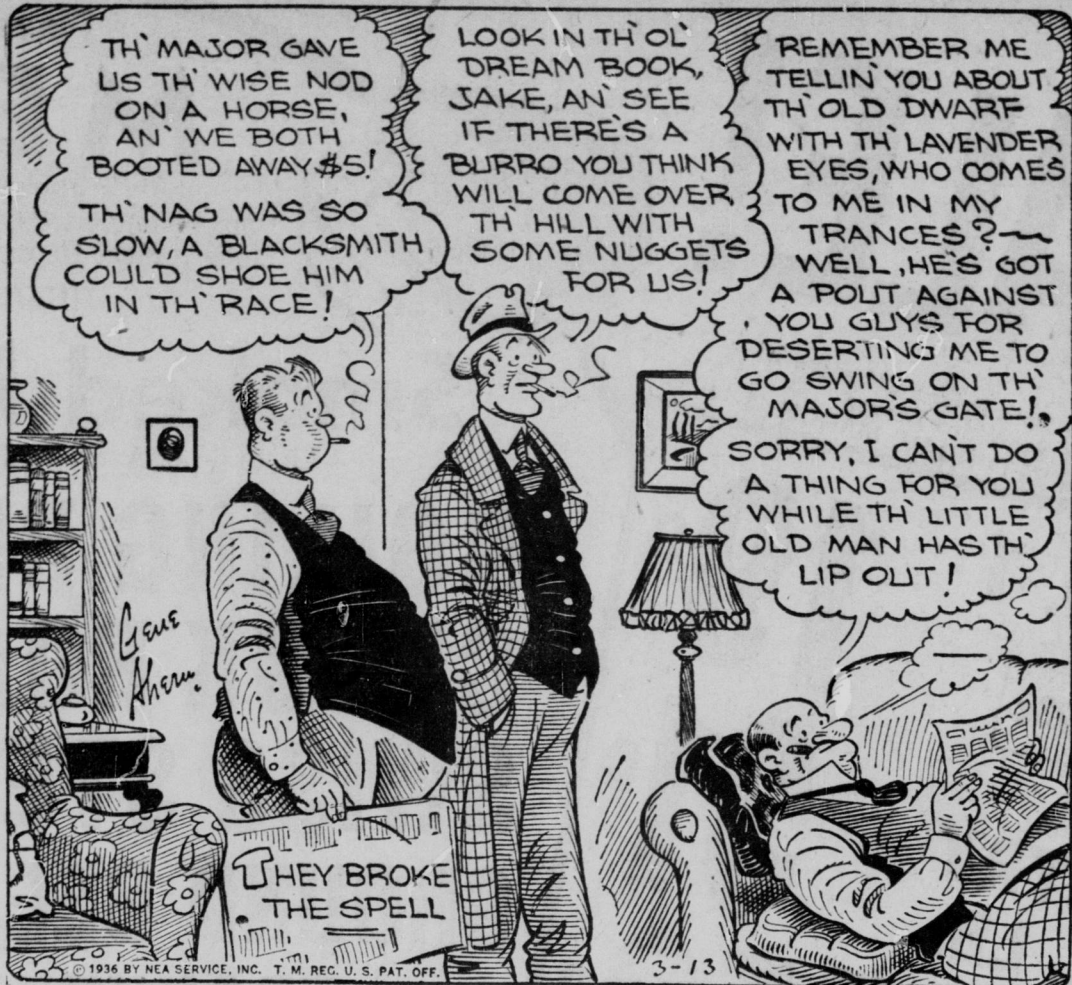
Irene gave a mule shrug, and then: "Tom is not a nervous man, but after you told him, Mother, that Paula had not cared to come down for lunch today, I saw him trying to tear a button off his coat. I thought I knew why."

Her father looked at her, and with reverence: "You have greatness in you, Irene," he said.

THE END.

OUR BOARDING HOUSE

—By Ahern



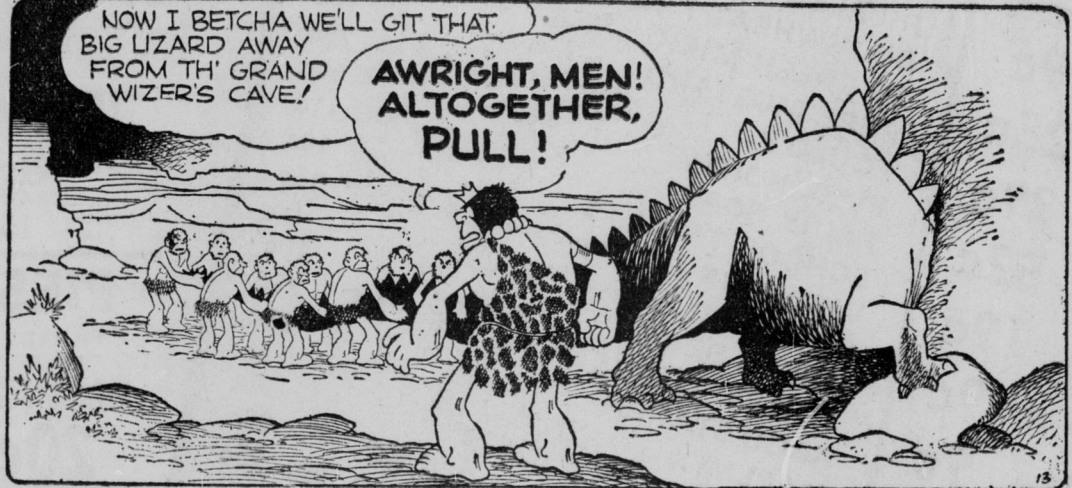
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