

Today's Short Story

SPARKPLUG

By Shane O'Neill



If you are young, male and six feet two, with very definite ideas about what plan a certain young woman should make concerning her life, it comes as a rude shock to find that your ideas have been disregarded, not to say ignored.

And rude shocks of that nature are more than liable to throw you completely off balance. That's why Matt Clark made the great mistake of saying, with the he considered patient tolerance, "Now, Dot, I respect your intelligence, and all that, but on this question, you just don't know what you're talking about, honey."

Dot regarded him narrowly. She saw the aforementioned six feet two, attractively sprawled on the sofa beside her. She saw a mounting red in the well-modeled cheek cheeks, and willful purpose in the usually smiling blue eyes that stared back at her.

And what was most important, she saw that if she followed her impulse and gave in now, she would be lost forever. It would always be, "Yes, Matt," if she didn't put her foot down. And put it down she did, with a vengeance.

Her voice was sweeter than honey—purposely too sweet. "And just what did the great big strong man think he was going to do about it?"

THE mounting flush covered all Matt's face.

"Here's what I'm going to do about it. I'm not going to let you do it at all. I forbid you. If you're going to be my wife, you aren't going to work, and that's that. We might as well understand it thoroughly before we get married." He raised his hand, as she started to answer.

"Just a minute, Dot. I know the whole story. You went to night school for two years because I had to work late, and you wanted something to do. Now you want something to do with what you've learned. Why waste it? And so forth, Right?"

"Well, you'll have to waste it, offer or no offer. I'm going to have my fiancée working in a hard-boiled advertising office. It isn't the right atmosphere."

As he concluded, Matt looked satisfied with himself. It was settled now. Then the bombshell broke.

Of course, it is a little sudden, darling, but I've just discovered something. I'm not going to marry you at all. But you won't miss me. Far from it. I'm going to work at Gill and Buzzell, right in the same office with you. And, unless you greatly mistaken, the same colossal conceit that has brought us to a break, will be anything but helpful to you in your job. At least I'll have a chance to watch and see."

Her voice took on a hard edge. "And now, I think, you'd better go."

Matt had nothing to say. The red had faded and now he was white. He got his hat and without turning to look at her again, walked slowly out the door.

THE next three months were sad for both of them. Dot was quick and attractive, and she did get some lucky breaks. From the general stenography office, she graduated by the end of the second month to be Mr. Gill's secretary.

She had a real flair for the business, was conscientious, accurate and fast. And during that time she saw Matt every day, and he saw her, but never a word passed between them. Then she began to worry. It started one morning when Mr. Gill was having a talk with the copy chief, Jack Bell.

"How's young Clark getting along, Jack?" Dot's heart stopped for a second, and she pretended to be very busy with Mr. Gill's personal file.

"That's a funny thing, skipper. I was just going to talk about him. I don't know what's the matter with him. He can't seem to turn out the kind of stuff the clients will accept. And it isn't as if he didn't have the ability to do it. He just sits and mopes, and then when he does turn to the copy has no zip. When I talk to him about it he turns sulky and argumentative. I'm afraid we'll have to let him go."

The head of the agency considered for a while.

"I don't like to do that. He's good material. Tell you what, Jack, send him in to me. I'll have a talk with him. Send him right away."

AS Bell left to get Matt, Dot gathered her papers to leave the office, too. She couldn't, just couldn't sit there and listen to it. But Mr. Gill stopped her.

"Miss Hennessy, wait a while will you, please? I want you to be in this." And then, tall, miserable looking, Matt entered. "Close the door behind you, Clark," the boss said.

"Sit down, son," he continued, "and you, Miss Hennessy, take notes. Now, what seems to be the matter? Bell tells me that your work is going to pieces, and that you won't take advice. What's wrong?"

Matt's jaw was set. Called him in to humiliate him in front of her. It never occurred to him that the chief knew nothing of his romance and its break-up. Well, Gill knew what he could do.

"There's nothing the matter with me," Mr. Gill. Nothing the matter with my copy, either. If I got an even break around here there wouldn't be any trouble at all. Gill stared sharply at him. "I see, young man," he said softly, "so you don't think you're getting a square break. Well, if I did what I ought to do, I'd tell you to get your

money, and go somewhere else to find an even chance. But, I'm not going to do that. Look here. After this I'll assign your copy, and I'll check it.

"Miss Hennessy here will hand you the assignments, and you can turn the completed work over to her. Now," he added not unkindly, "get out of here, and snap out of it, son. We want you with us. Get back into good standing."

FROM that time on, Matt knocked on her office door every morning, and when his work was done always handed it over to her. He spoke very formally.

"Here's the Gilsten-T" copy Miss Hennessy, or "Have you something for me to work on, Miss Hennessy?"

Poor Dot. She answered in the same spirit, when all the while she wanted to put her arms around him and mother his wounded pride. But she kept telling herself that it was for his own good. Her own good, too.

It didn't take Dot long to spot the weak point in his copy. The ideas were there, and a certain sharpness that characterizes the touch of a good copywriter! But lack of interest showed. The spark was missing.

It was as if he were telling the readers about a product very cautiously, to be sure, and in proper detail, but definitely as if he didn't care in the slightest whether or not they believed him. And then she did something.

"I'll keep my fingers crossed on this," she said to herself. Dot changed the copy. Here, there, a word, now the structure of a paragraph. Just enough to make the difference between a colorless statement of fact, and a good advertisement.

As she turned the completed ads over to the chief she said, "I've retyped this, Mr. Gill. Nothing more."

Then one day Gill called Matt in again. "Been reading your stuff, Clark. A lot better. Big improvement. Keep it up."

"THANK you, sir. I'm glad you like it better," Matt looked surprised and slightly pleased. She hadn't seen the ghost of a smile on his face before for months.

And it had an effect. His next 10 ads needed no change. The technique was there, and the spirit was well. They completed the campaign, and when the prints were pasted into the sample book for final presentation to the client, the boss called for Matt again.

"Well, son, here's the job. I'm going to let you take these down for an O. K. Better look them over," Matt slowly thumbed through, and as he did, the familiar crimson rose in his face.

Dot shifted nervously in her chair. Oh, if only he didn't get obstinate now, and tell Mr. Gill the truth. Because, after all, his last 10, the 10 that were completely his, were much better even than the ones she had fixed for him. Gill stood up.

"I've got to catch a train. Take them down, Clark, when you've finished looking them over." He left the office.

Matt looked at her steadily, and there was shame and anger in his eyes. He hadn't reached the final 10 yet.

"So you had to butt in, did you? Well, that's just dandy. I was just about ready to apologize. Now I don't care if we never see each other again."

A weight seemed to settle on her heart, and she went through the rest of the day listlessly, and at 5 o'clock went home to the little apartment which was one of the things Matt had disapproved of.

He thought she should stay at home and commute. But her parents had let her take it, and take it she had.

SHE didn't know why she left the door open. Usually she locked it behind her when she got home. But as she was getting something together for a meal in her tiny kitchenette—a meal she didn't care whether she ate or not, she was aware of some one's presence in the living room.

"Well," she said, "where did you come from?"

"I don't know what to say, Dot. Except this. When I got down to the client's, I was ready to crawl back to apologize. Then we looked the campaign over, and he liked it—but he liked the final 10 ads best. And I saw you hadn't changed them. That made me realize what you really had done for me—after the way I'd acted."

He paused, and she saw something in his eyes, that made the lump in her throat melt, and drew her, somehow, closer to him.

Matt cleared his throat. "And so, I just had to come here and tell you, Dot, tell you I know what you've done for me, and tell you how sorry I am. I suppose it's too late, but I felt that I could do that much anyway." He stepped, and moved his feet nervously.

"Tell me, Matt, what are you going to do about it?" There was brave, tender laughter in her voice and eyes. Matt needed nothing more. There was a haven for him in Dot's small, but capable arms, and he sought it.

Later—"and if you want to keep on working, it's fine with me. I've learned my lesson."

But the answer came. "No, I don't have to any more. Matt, I'll just be Matt Clark's spark plug."

THE END.

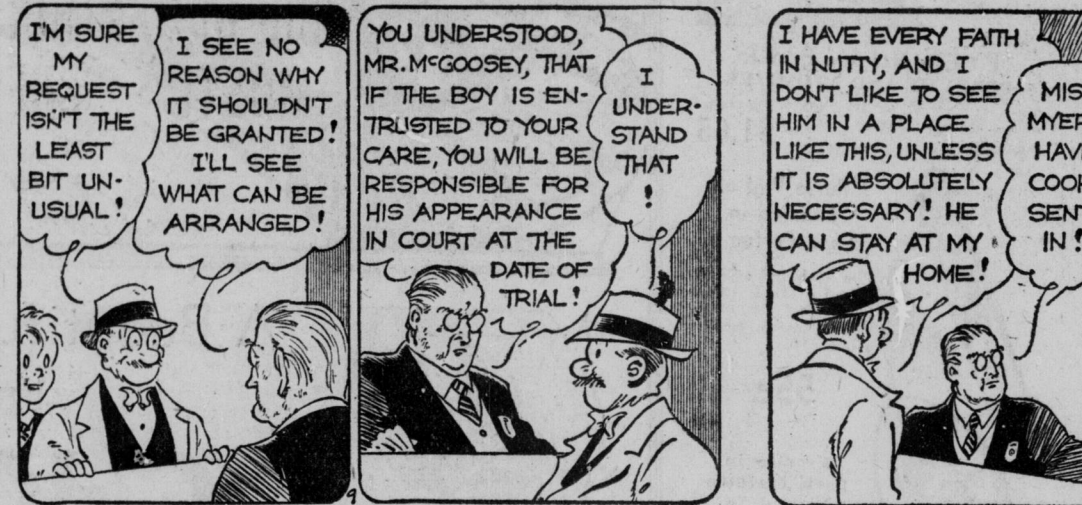
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OUR BOARDING HOUSE

With Major Hoople



FRECKLES AND HIS FRIENDS—



WASHINGTON TUBBS II



ALLEY OOP



BOOTS AND HER BUDDIES

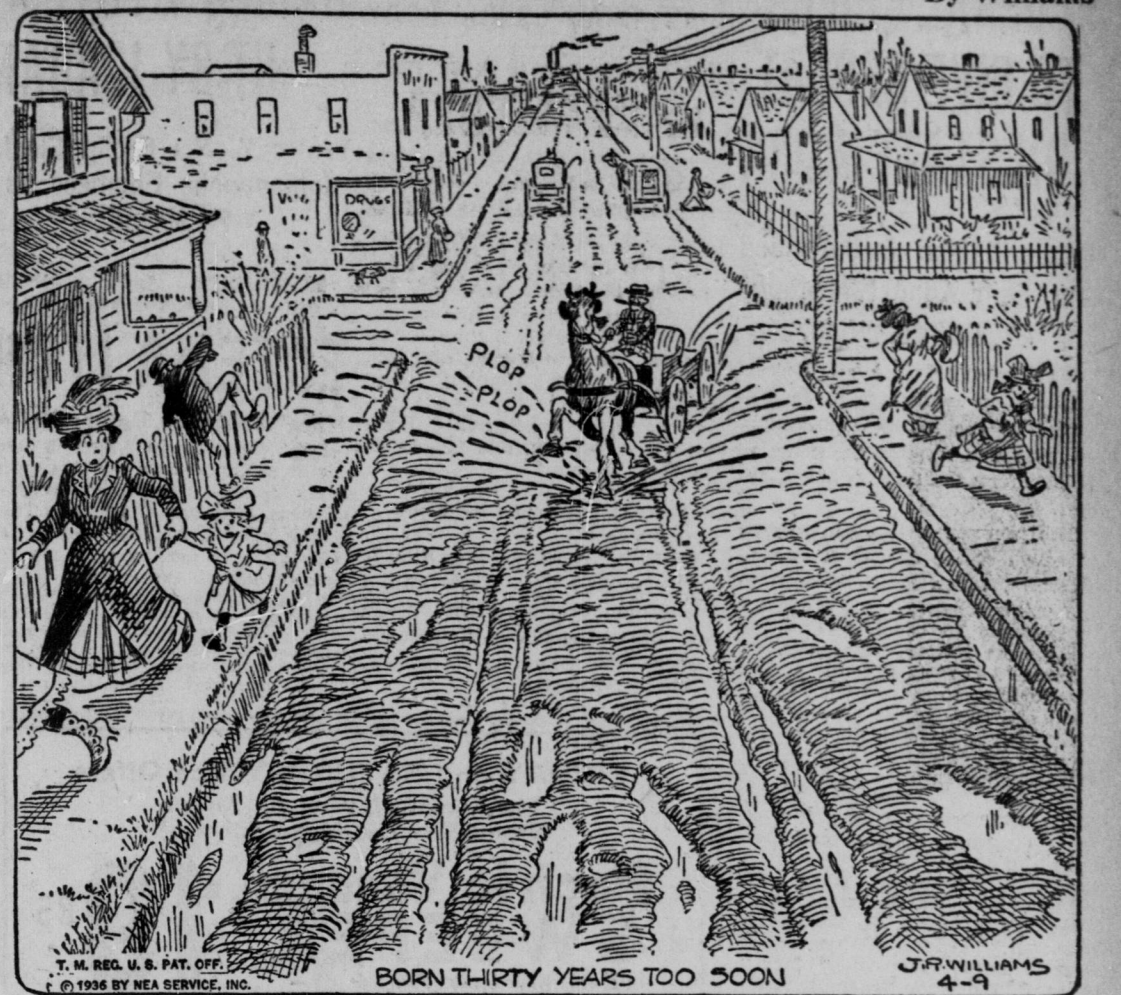


THE TARZAN TWINS



OUT OUR WAY

—By Williams



—By Blosser



—By Crane



—By Hamlin



—By Martin



—By Edgar Rice Burroughs



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