West Wind Drift

By GEORGE BARR McCUTCHEON

Copyright, 1920, by George Barr McCutcheon

THIS STARTS THE STORY

The Doraine, a mighty ship with 750 souls aboard, sailed from a South American port in the days when sly undersea monsters of German descent prowled about the oceans. The steamer was never seen again. It became one of the mysteries of the ocean. When the steamer is twenty-four hours out at sea a stowaway is discovered. "Captain Trigger orders that he be brought before him, and presently Officer Mott appears with the stowaway in charge."

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

CAPTAIN TRIGGER beheld a well set-up young man of medium height, with freshly shaven chin and jaws, carefully brushed hair, spotless white shirt and collar, and—revealed in a quick glance—recently scrubbed hands. His brown Norfolk jacket was open, and he carried a brand new, though somewhat shapeless, panama hat in his hand. Evidently he had ceased fanning himself with it at the moment of entering the captain's presence. The keen, good-looking face was warm and moist as the result of a most violent soaping. He wore corduroy riding breeches, cavalry boots that betrayed their age in spite of a late polishing at the hands of an energetic and carefully directed bootblack, a broad leather belt from which only half an eye required to see that a holster had been detached with a becoming regard for neatness. His hair was thick and sunbleached; his eyes, dark and unafraid, met the stern gaze of the captain with directness and respect; his lips and chin were firm in repose, but they might easily be the opposite if relaxed; his skin was so tanned and wind bitten that the whites of his eyes were startlingly defined and vivid. He was not a tall man—indeed, one would have been justified in suspecting him of being taller than he really was because of the more or less deceiving erectness with which he carried himself. As a matter of fact, he was not more than 5 feet 10 or 10½.

Captain Trigger eyed him narrowly for a moment.

"What is your name?"

"A. A. Percival, sir."

"Your full name, young man. No initials." The stowaway seemed to add an inch to his height before replying.

"Algernon Adonis Percival, sir," he said, a very clear note of defiance in his voice.

The captain looked at the first officer, and the first officer, after a brief stare at the speaker, looked at the capta'n.

"It's his right name, you can bet, sir," said Mr Mott, with conviction. "Nobody would voluntarily give himself a name like that."

"You never can tell about these Americans, Mr. Mott," sa'd the captain warily. "They've got what they call a keen sense of humor, you know."

Mr. Percival smiled. His teeth were very white and even.

"I am a first and only child," he explained. "That ought to account for it, sir," he went on, a trifle defensively.

Capt. Trigger did not smile. Mr. Mott, however, looked distinctly sympathetic.

"You say you are an American—a citizen of the United States?" demanded the former.

"Yes sir. My home is in Baltimore."

"Baltimore?" repeated Mr. Mott quickly. "That's where Mr. Gray hails from, sir," he added, as a sort of apology to the capta'n for the exclamation.

The captain's gaze settled on the stowaway's spotless white shirt and collar. Then he nodded his head slowly.

"Mr. Gray is the chief engineer," he explained, with mock courtesy.

"Yes, sir, I know," responded Percival. "He comes of one of the oldest and most highly connected families in Baltimore. He informs me that his father——"

"Never mind!" snapped the captain. "We need not discuss Mr. Gray's antecedents. How old are you?"

"Thirty last Friday, sir."

"Married?"

"No, sir."

"Parents living?"

"No, sir."

"And now, what the devil do you mean by sneaking aboard this ship and hiding yourself in the—by the way, Mr. Mott, where was he hiding?"

Mr. Mott: "It doesn't seem to be quite clear as yet, sir."

Capt. Trigger: "What's that?"

Mr. Mott: "I say, it isn't quite clear. We have only his word for it. You see, he wasn't discovered until he accosted Mr. Shannon on the bridge and asked—"

Capt. Trigger: "On the bridge, Mr. Mott?"

Mr Mott: "That is to say, sir, Mr Shannon was on the bridge and he was below on the promenade deck. He asked Mr. Shannon if he was the captain of the boat."

Capt. Trigger: "He did, eh? Well?

Mr. Mott: "He was informed that you were at breakfast, sir—no one suspecting him of being a stowaway, of course—and then, it appears, he started out to look for you. That's how he fell in with the chief engineer. Mr. Gray informs me that he applied for work, admitting that he was aboard without leave, or passage, or funds—or anything else, it would seem. But, as for where he lay in hiding, there hasn't been anything definite arrived at as yet, sir. He seems to have been hiding in a rather widespread sort of way."

Mr. Percival, amiably: "Permit me to explain, Capt. Tr'gger. You see, I have been obliged to change staterooms three times. Naturally, that might be expected to create some little confusion in my mind. I began in the second cabin. Much to my surprise and chagrin I found, too late, that the stateroom I had chosen—at random, I may say—was merely in the state of being prepared for a lady and gentleman who had asked to be transferred from a less desirable one. I had some difficulty in getting out of it without attracting attention. I don't know what I should have done if the steward hadn't informed them that he could not move their steamer trunk until morning. There wouldn't have been room for both of us under the lower, sir. If the gentleman had been alone I shouldn't have minded in the least remaining under his berth, but he——"

Capt. Trigger: "How did you happen to get into that room, young man? The doors are never unlocked when the rooms are unoccupied."

Mr. Percival: "You are mistaken, sir. I found at least three stateroom doors unlocked that night, and my search was by no means extensive."

Capt. Trigger: "This is most extraordinary, Mr. Mott—if true."

Mr. Mott: "It shall be looked into, sir."

Capt. Trigger: "Go on, young man."

Mr. Percival: "I tried another room in the second cabin, but had to abandon it also. It had no regular occupant—it was No. 22, I remember — but along about midnight two men opened the door with a key and came in. They were stewards. I gathered that they were getting the room ready for some one else, so when they departed, very quietly, sir—I sneaked out and decided to try for accommodations in the first cabin. I—"

Mr. Mott: "Did you say stewards?"

Mr. Percival: "That's what I took them to be."

Capt. Trigger: "You are either lying, young man, or plumb crazy."

Mr. Percival, with dignity: "The latter is quite possible, captain—but not the former. I managed quite easily to get from the second cabin to the first. You'd be surprised to know how simple it was. Running without lights as you do, sir, simplified things tremendously. I found a very sick and dejected Jewish gentleman trying to die in the least exposed corner of the promenade deck. At least he said he didn't want to live. I offered to put him to bed and to sit up with him all night if it would make him feel a little less like passing away. He lurched at the chance. I accompanied him to his stateroom, and so got a few much needed hours of repose, despite his groans. I also ate his breakfast for him. Skirmishing around this morning I found there were no unoccupied rooms in the first cabin, so I decided that we were far enough from land for me to reveal myself to the officer of the day—if that's what you call 'em on board ship—with a very honest and laudable desire to work my passage home. I can only add, captain, that I am ready and willing to do anything from swabbing floors on the upper deck to passing coal at the bottom of the ship."

Capt. Trigger stared hard at the young man, a puzzled expression in his eyes.

"You appear to be a gentleman," he said at last. "Why are you on board this ship as a stowaway? Don't you know that I can put you in irons, confine you in the brig, and put you ashore at the first port of call?"

"Certainly, sir. That's just what I am trying to avoid. As a gentleman, I am prepared to do everything in my power to relieve you of what must seem a most painful official duty."

Mr. Mott smiled. The captain stiffened perceptibly.

"How did you come aboard this ship?" he demanded.

"As a coal passer, sir. Day before yesterday, when you were getting in the last lot of coal. I had a single $5 gold piece in my pocket. It did the trick. With that seemingly insignificant remnant of a comfortable little fortune I induced one of the native coal carriers—a Portuguese nobleman, I shall always call him—to part with his trousers, shirt and hat. I slipped 'em on over my own clothes, stuffed my boots and socks inside my shirt, picked up his basket of coal, and walked aboard. It isn't necessary, I suppose, to state that my career as a dock hand ceased with that solitary basket of coal, or that having once put foot board the Doraine I was in a position to book myself as a passenger."

"Well, I'm damned," said Capt. Trigger. "Some one shall pay for this carelessness, Mr. Mott. I've never heard of anything so cool. What did you say your name is, young man?"

"A. A. Percival, sir."

"Ah—ahem! I see. Will it offend you, A. A., if I make so bold as to inquire why the devil you neglected to book your passage in the regular way, as any gentleman from Baltimore might have been expected to do, and where is your passport, your certificate of health, your purse, and your discharge from prison?"

Mr. Percival spread out his hands in a gesture of complete surrender.

"Would you be interested in my story, Capt. Trigger? It is brief but edifying. When I arrived in town, the evening before you were to sail, I had a wallet well filled with gold, currency, and so forth. I had traveled nearly 2000 miles—from the foothills of the Andes, to be more definite—and I had my papers, my concession contract, and a clear right of way so to speak. My personal belongings were supposed to have arrived in town on the train with me. A couple of cowhide trunks, in fact. Well, they didn't arrive. I don't know what became of them. I had no time to investigate. This was the last boat I could get for two or three weeks that would land me in the U. S. A. I put up at the Alcazar Grand for the night. It was then too late to secure passage, but I fully intended to do so the first thing in the morning. There was a concert and dance at the hotel that night, and I went in to look on for a while. I ran across a friend, an engineer who was on the job with me up in the hills a few months ago. He is also an American, a chap from Providence, Rhode Island. Connected with the consular service now. He was with a small party of Americans—am I boring you?"

"No, no—get on with it," urged Capt. Trigger.

"Several of them were sailing on this ship, and they were having a little farewell party. That, however, has nothing to do with the case. I left them at midnight and went up to my room. Now comes the part you will not believe. During the night—I sleep very soundly—some one entered my room, rifled my pockets, and got away with everything I possessed except my clothes and the $5 gold piece I have carried ever since I left home—as a lucky coin, you know. He——"

"How did he happen to overlook your lucky coin?" inquired the captain sarcastically.

"Because it couldn't be a lucky coin if I carried it in my purse. No coin is ever lucky that gets into my purse, captain. I always kept it tightly sewed up in the band of my trousers, safe from the influence of evil companions. I did not discover the loss until morning. It was then too late to do anything, as you were sailing at 8. My Providence friend was not available. I knew no one else. But I was determined to sail on the Doraine. That's the story, sir, in brief. I say to you if I wasn't justified in doing the best I could under the circumstances."

Capt. Trigger was not as fierce as he looked. He could not keep the twinkle out of his eye.

"We will see about that," he managed to say with commendable gruffness. "Assuming that your story is true, why are you in such a tremendous hurry to reach the United States? Skipping out for some reason, eh?"

"Well," said the young man slowly, "you see, news is a long time getting out into the wilderness where I've been located for a couple of years. We knew, of course, that there was a war on, but we didn't know how it was progressing. Down here in this part of the world we have a war every two or three months, and we've got so used to having 'em over with in a week or two that we just naturally don't pay much attention to them. We don't even care who wins. But a couple of months ago we got word up there that the United States had finally got into it with everybody under the sun, and that the Germans were bound to win if we didn't get a couple of million men across in pretty short order. I'm thirty years old, captain, strong and healthy, and I'm a good American. That's why I want to get home. I've told you the truth about being robbed. I don't mind losing the money—only a couple of thousand pesos, you know—but if you chuck me off at the next port of call, Capt. Trigger, I'll curse you to my dying day. I'm willing to work, I'm willing to be put in irons, I'm willing to get along on bread and water, but you've just got to land me in the United States. You are an Englishman. I suppose you've got relatives over in France fighting the Germans. Maybe you've had some one killed who is dear to you."

"My youngest son was killed in Flanders," said the captain simply.

"I am sorry, sir. Well, for every Englishman and every Frenchman who has died over there, my country ought to supply some one to take his place. I expect to be one of those men, captain. I have no other excuse for coming aboard your ship as a stowaway."

The captain stil eyed him narrowly.

"I believe you are honest, young man. If I am deceived in you I shall never trust the eyes of another man as long as I live. Sit down, Mr. Percival. I shall put you to work, never fear, but in the meantime I am very much interested in what you were doing up in the hills. You will oblige me by going as fully as possible into all the details. I shall not pass judgment on you until I've heard all of your story."

Algernon Adonis Percival, civil and mining engineer, Cornell, had gone through certain rather harsh stages of development in the mines of Montana and later in the perilous districts of northern Mexico. A year or two prior to the breaking out of the great world war, he was sent to South America to replace the general superintendent of a new copper mining enterprise in a remote section of the Andes on the Bolivian side of the mountains. Here he was in charge of the heterogeneous horde of miners, laborers, structural workers, and assayists who were engaged in the development and extension of the vast concession controlled by his company.

His description of the camp or town in which this motley assemblage dwelt from one year's end to the other, far from civilization, was illuminating to the two seafaring men. It must be confessed, however, that a sound reluctance to swallow the tale without the proverbial grain of salt caused them to watch closely for the slightest sign that might reveal to them the always to be expected and seldom successful duplicity so common in those harrowing days when all men were objects of suspicion. From time to time they glanced inquiringly at each other, but the stranger's story was so straightforward, so lacking in personal exploitation, so free from unnecessary detail, that they were finally convinced that he was all that he represented himself to be and that they had nothing to fear from him.

(CONTINUED TOMORROW

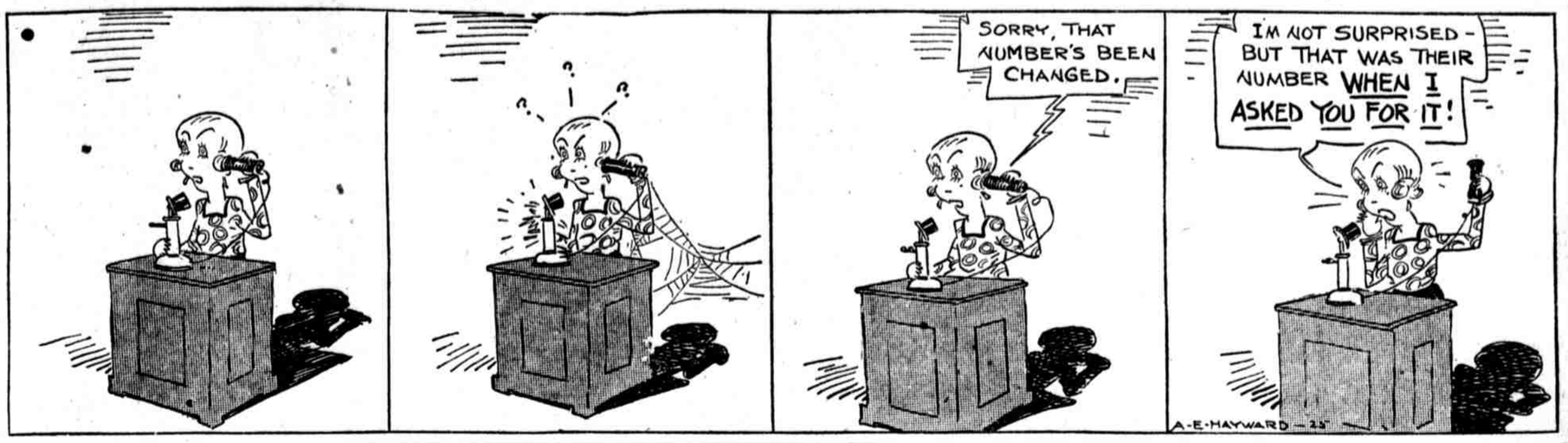
THE GUMPS—A Close Call

By Sidney Smith

SOMEBODY'S STENOG—Time Does Make Changes!

Copyright, 1920, by Public Ledger Co.

By Hayward

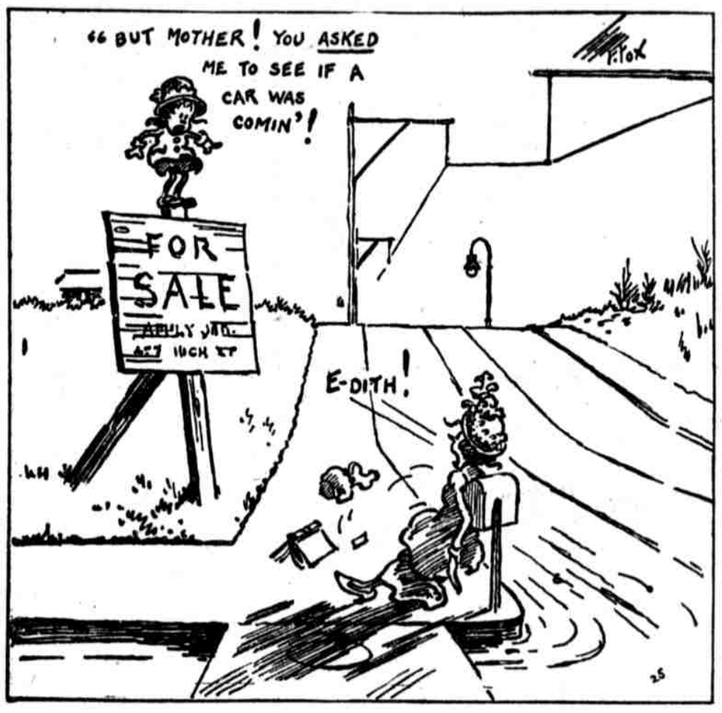


The Young Lady Across the Way

The young lady across the way says she likes to see the winning candidate elected by a plurality instead of a mere majority.

TOMBOY TAYLOR

By FONTAINE FOX



SCHOOL DAYS

By DWIG

PETEY—He Trimmed, Too

By C. A. Voight

"CAP" STUBBS—The Mystery of the Candy Box

By Edwina