

# West Wind Drift

By GEORGE BARR McCUTCHEON

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I AM hot, but I am not tired," replied the other. "I could dance all night, my dear, without Ruth." Did you really like the children, Ruth? "They were lovely. You have done wonders with them."

"Regular Icedora Duncan stuff," sighed Peter Snipe, drawing lazily at his pipe. "Woodland nymphs, phantom mistletoes, and the like. You are a sorceress. You change cloths into moonbeams, you turn human beings into vapors, you cast the mantle of enchantment over the midsummer night, and we see Oberon, Titania and all the rest of them disappearing on the breeze. And to think that only this afternoon I saw all of those gawky girls working in the fields, their legs the color of tan bark with mounds that looked like oatmeal-boats, their heads made of hemp—just regular kids. And you transform them tonight into charming creatures to float upon the ambient atmosphere."

"For heaven's sake, Pete, stop being so philosophical. Like a real man, interrupted Pitts. "Can't you say, 'Gee, they were great, Oger'?"

Oger's pupils had given a fairy dance on the green. To conclude the great Obosky heretofore had appeared in one of her most marvellous creations—the "Dance of the Veil." It was a sensational, never-to-be-forgotten dance that had been the talk of the continent. There was no spotlight to follow her sinuous, scintillating figure as it spun and leaped and glided about in a swirl of green, and there was no score of brass and cymbals, nor the haunting wail of flageolets, nor the tinkling of mandolins and strumming guitars to guide her bewildering feet—and yet she had never been so alluring.

When it was over, she stepped into a charmed circle of faces had vanished into the byways of the night—she came and flung herself down upon the floor, her eyes exposed to the grateful night air. Her uplifted eyes shone like the stars that looked down on them; her lips parted in a smile; her flesh glistened with the physical ecstasy that comes only with supreme lassitude.

"You never danced so beautifully in your life, Oger," said Caruso-Amorl. "And after two years, too. I cannot understand. I shall never sing again as I sang two years ago. But you—ah, you dance even better. I take courage from you. Perhaps my voice has not gone to seed as Joseph's has—poor man! Not that it had very far to go. Men are very queer things," said Ruth, with a curious sidelong glance at her husband. Then she squeezed his arm lightly and went on with a little thrill in her voice: "Good-night, Oger. Thank you for—the lesson."

"What's all this?" inquired Percival. "Nothing you would be interested in, my friend," said Oger, with a little laugh. She waved her hand airily as she moved swiftly away in the gloom.

They watched her yellow figure fade into the starlit shadows. As they turned to rejoin the others, Ruth said: "I think you might have told her how beautiful she was, dear." So much for the native phrase of woman, even when she is most content.

He raised her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss upon the soft, warm palm. It was a habit of his—and she never failed to shiver in response to the exquisite thrill. She drew a deep breath, and leaned a little closer to him.

"Look up, yonder, sweetheart," he whispered, "you see the one star in all the heavens that shines the brightest? It is the only one I see when I take a long walk in the Southern Cross. The others are dim, feeble little things preening themselves to retain the attention of the beautiful star at the foot of the cross in all that I can see. It is no use for me to look elsewhere. That star fills my vision. Its splendor fascinates me."

She waited for him to go on. Her eyes were shining, but the answer was complete. She laid her cheek against his and sighed tremulously. After a moment they turned their heads and their lips met in a long, passionate kiss.

"I should be content to stay on this dear little island forever, sweetheart," she murmured. "My whole world is here."

He stroked her hair lovingly, and was silent for a long time. Then he smiled his whimsical smile.

"It's all right for you and me, dear—but how about the future President of the United States sleeping up there in his crib?"

She smiled up into his eyes. "It's a nuisance, isn't it—having to stop and consider that we are parents as well as lovers?"

They rejoined the group on the porch. "I had a horrible dream last night," said Peter Snipe, getting up and stretching himself. "That's why I'm staying in so late tonight. I hate to go to bed."

"What was your dream, Peter?" asked Ruth.

"Do you believe in 'em?"

"Only in day-dreams."

"Well, I dreamed our little old ship was finished and had sailed at last and for our own wireless plant up there began to get messages from the sea. I dreamed I was sitting up there with the wireless when it crackled. He jumped up to see what was coming. He was getting messages from the sea. She was calling for help. Sinking fast—sinking fast—sinking fast. Over and over again—just those two words. 'Gad—it was so real, so terribly real, that the first thing I did this morning was to walk down to see if the boat was still on the stocks. She was there, a long way from being finished, and—and, by gad, I had hard work to keep from blubbering. I was so relieved."

"I will take more than a dream to knock that ship to pieces," said Percival. "When she's ready for the water, there will not be a sturdier craft afloat. Andrew Motz says she'll weather anything outside of the China sea. Don't look so distressed, Amy. Peter's a novelist. They never do anything but dream horrible things. Generally they go so far as to put them in print, and people read 'em and say they are wildly improbable—but popular. Isn't that so, Peter?"

"If we didn't give them a happy ending, they would refuse to recognize us the next time they saw us on a boat-seller's counter," said Peter. "Well, I guess I'll be on my way. I've got a busy day tomorrow, setting up the Trigger Island Pioneer—and as I belong to that almost extinct species known as a bachelor, I am forced to be my own alarm clock. Going my way, Abel!"

"Good night," Ruth said. "Landover, give the Lieutenant Governor a good smack for me—and tell him he is still in my will."

"Emph!" grunted Pitts. "I'd like to know who you've got to leave the little beggar. Your letter of credit?"

"Certainly not," replied Landover. "Something worth while, Pitty, my boy. I am making it now. It's going to be a hobby-horse, if I live long enough to finish it. Good-night, Perce. Night, everybody."

When the last of the company had departed, Ruth and Percival stood for a long time in silence, listening to the far-off thrumming of a Spanish guitar, their tranquil gaze fixed on the murky shadow that marked the line of trees along the shore, her head resting lightly against his shoulder, his arm about her waist.

"What are you thinking of, dear?" she asked at last.

"Peter's dream," he replied. "It has put an idea into my head. The day that ship sails out to sea with her courageous little crew, I shall start laying the keel for another just like her."

"Nonsense! You're just making a noise," she said, a deep, solemn note in her voice. "I understand, Perce."

They went into the house. Later they stole tiptoe to the side of the crib where she slept the sturdy, snoring babe. The two middle fingers of a chubby hand were in his mouth. With one hand Percival shaded the pith candle he had brought from the kitchen. She leaned over and gently touched the smooth, warm cheek.

"I can't believe he is real, Perce," she said.

"He isn't," whispered he. "He is something out of a fairy story. Nothing as wonderful as he is can possibly be real."

THE END.

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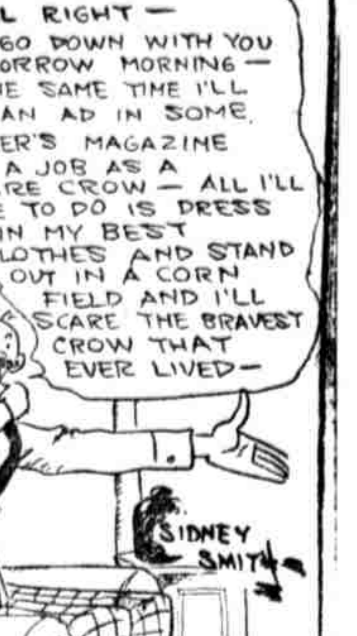
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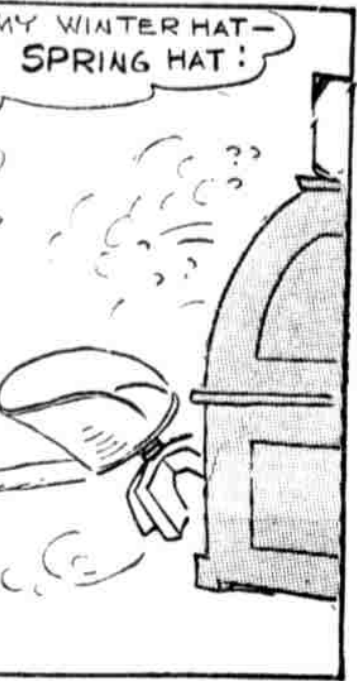
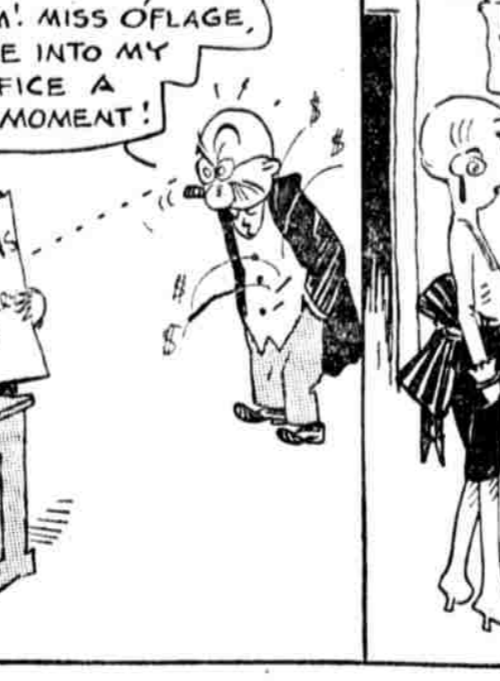
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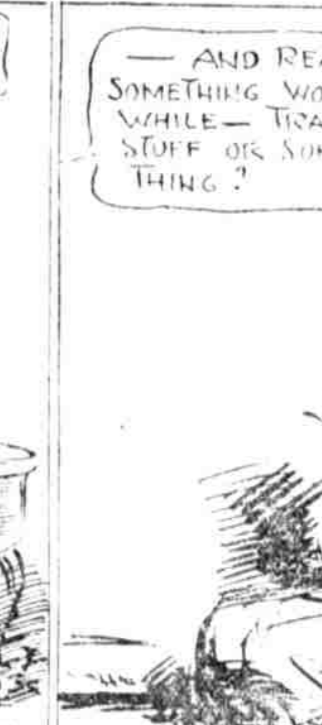
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