

The Winds of the World

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CHAPTER I

Don't mind where he gazed, and he turned toward the window. The faint, wistful smile on his face was the only sign of life in his eyes. He was still nearly a mile to walk to the Acacia Terrace, but pennies were scarce and her luck had been out. He had inquired for a taxi, but the driver had asked to see her ticket and he had refused her suspiciously that if he wanted to go she must pay again. Sometimes she managed to get a halfpenny ride for a penny, but three times on Sunday and a fine Sunday afternoon and all the buses were full. "Oh, my friends—come and see a dip in Jordan!" the fervid Salvationist exhorted a handful of stragglers. "Come and wash off the foul sins of sin and be like unto an inner child!"

Jill looked at him interestedly; she was a step nearer to the half-hearted little congregation grouped about the Salvationist.

She did not want to go home yet; something in the fresh coolness of the evening breeze made her feel that the world was hers. She had a sudden impulse to go to the Acacia Terrace, to see the soft air beating on her face, to see the light in the eyes of the ugly, badly furnished room where Don would be eagerly waiting for her. The Salvationist's words came back to her. "Come and wash off the foul sins of sin and be like unto an inner child!"

She drew back with a little apology, her eyes fixed indifferently to the man's face; then she went on her way in them—her gaze wandered over his tall, immaculately groomed figure interestedly.

"I beg your pardon," she said again. "The man raised his hat carelessly. "Please don't apologize. It was my fault—I was so engrossed in our friend's face that I didn't see you."

He smiled faintly as he spoke; not at her, she knew—but at the memory of the Salvationist's fervid words.

Jill stood irresolute—she hardly knew why; but the man's eyes had wandered away from her disinterestedly, and she moved on again.

She crossed to the other side of the road, and stopped; she glanced back at the tall man rather than at the Salvationist. He was still standing quite on the edge of the little crowd, listening with rather bored interest to what was being said.

He was a strange contrast to the men and women around him, with his smartly cut coat and gray spats, and the soft Hamburg hat worn at a rather jaunty angle. An eyeglass dangled against his waistcoat; the stump of a cigar was stuck in a corner of his mouth; as Jill looked at him, he turned and walked away down the road; he stooped a little as he walked, as if it were too much of an effort to hold himself erect.

Jill turned then, and walked on in the opposite direction; the raucous voice of the Salvationist followed her as she went—repeating his favorite phrase: "Come and 'ave a dip in Jordan!"

There were not many people about; the afternoon sun had changed to gray twilight; the wind had grown colder. Jill quickened her steps; at any rate there would be a fire at No. 6 Acacia Terrace, even if the room was ugly, and the window looked out on to backyards and clothes lines.

She turned from the troublesome sea of the world, into the quiet peace of the harbor.

The world haunted her as she walked quickly along; she had lived all her life in a troubled sea; she had known the stagnant security of harbor—where nothing ever happened; where the boat of one's existence rocked across the same old sea of monotony day after day, and where it was always being pulled up by the end of its short mooring.

She had dreamed so much of life as it must be beyond the narrow confines of her own existence; realized what a wonderful feeling it must be to have the winds of the world blowing on one's face instead of just the stifling air of Acacia Terrace; it seemed somehow a body chosen analogy on the part of the fervid Salvationist to exhort one to turn from the sea to the safety of the harbor.

She wondered what the man with the eyeglass had thought about it and why he had stopped for a moment on the edge of the crowd to listen, even as she had done.

It was not often one saw such a well-dressed man in that neighborhood; in a strange imagination she followed him out of the ugly suburban street, and pictured the life to which he was returning; a life that would surely seem all the more desirable and wonderful for contrast with those few unaccustomed moments spent on the edge of the crowd gathered about that harmonium.

She stifled a little sigh as she turned round by the green railings that led to Acacia Terrace; she wondered how many more thousand times she would have seen him—if she would still be doing so, and gray, and the desires of youth had passed her by.

No. 6 was the first house on the right hand side past the green railings; Jill quickened her steps now; she ran up the narrow path which led to the front door, and let herself into the house.

The small passage was dark, and she felt stuffily of lobbies and cheap linoleum; somewhere at the back of the passage a shrill voice was singing undisturbed, and Jill gave a little shiver of distaste, and went on up the stairs.

She paused for a moment at the dark stairs, now landing to light a lamp hanging from a bare nail in the wall; some one called to her from the front room— "Is that you, Jill?"

"Yes, dear . . . are you very hungry? Do you want your tea?"

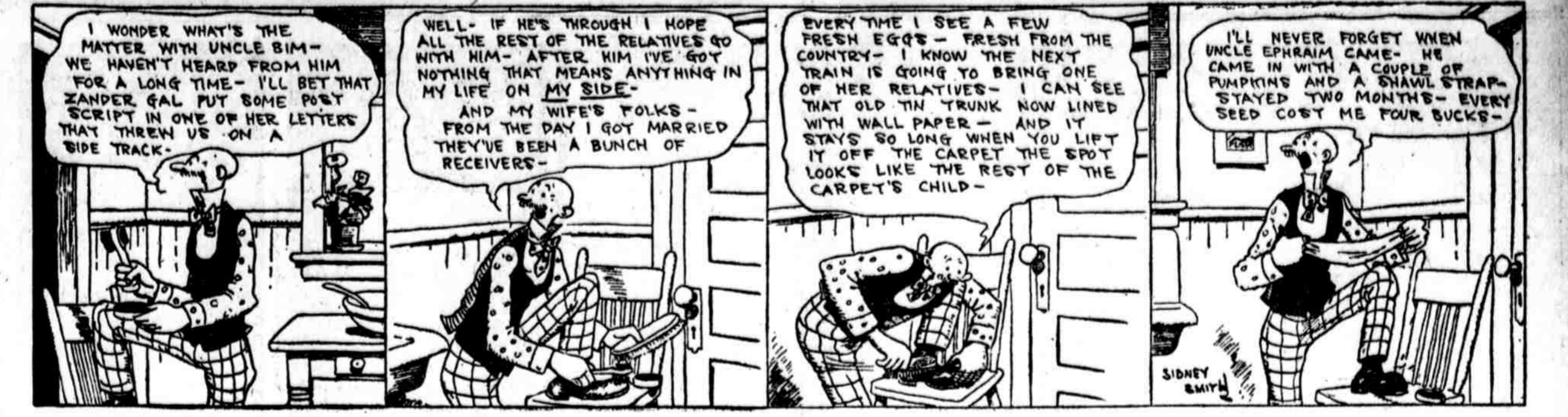
She pushed open the door, and entered, shutting it again behind her. The room was small, and two; the grayness like a watchful eye; Jill went across to it, and stirred the coals into a blaze.

"Don't Kathy home yet?"

"No," the rather sullen

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