Daily Complete Short Story

Powder Barge

By SHANE O'NEILL

Cast of Characters

ETHEL, who worries about the safety of her fiance.

JOHN, who works on a powder barge, handles dynamite and risks death every second he is on the job.

It was some consolation in the mornings for Ethel to see John while she was on her way to work. That was the only time except for a few hours on Sunday that she would ever see him, because John's hours were long, and he lived way over in New Jersey while she lived in Dobbs Ferry.

"Good morning, darling," she'd call, and wave from the platform of the commuter's train, as it passed around the curve where the Harlem river joins the Hudson. The conductor and regular passengers had become so used to it that they never noticed, and the only way John Doyle knew she was there was by the faith in his heart. Ethel could see him but he couldn't see her.

One morning she looked and looked, but couldn't see John on the deck of the sinister looking black and red boat that nosed its way through the swinging railroad bridge from the Hudson into the Harlem every morning at that time. It was the first time that had happened since the Titan Company dynamite boat had been making that trip toward the railway cut where the blasting was going on. Every morning he'd been on deck, there, waving at her train as it went by. Ethel was conscious of a strange sinking in her heart, and a wave of foreboding. She was glad that it was Saturday and that she'd see him the next day. She had made up her mind to something.

Always dubious about his doing it, she had allowed John to persuade her that it was really quite safe for him to act as loader and unloader on the powder barge. The frequent trips and heavy overtime made a great deal of difference, John said, and anyway there wasn't any danger. That much extra money would mean it would be just so much sooner that they'd be able to get married. Men were paid better, she knew, for assuming the risk. But she'd rather wait.

Aboard the powder barge Blast, John Doyle had no time to be thinking of the deck above him or the fact that Ethel would be expecting to see him. For two hours he had thought of nothing but the desperate problem at hand, and his white face was drawn with concentration as he braced himself against a bulkhead.

The voyage had begun normally enough. They had loaded in Bayonne, and the square wooden boxes of dynamite sticks, 60 per cent nitroglycerine, had stowed as easily as usual in the space reserved for them. They were rounding into the mouth of the Hudson, just opposite Battery Park, and John was having morning coffee with Torrens, the mate. He was telling Torrens what a swell girl he had, and why he was working double shift.

"It keeps me out of trouble, for one thing," John laughed, "and I can save money. And, of course, I make just about twice as much. My girl——"

It was then that Torrens, sensing a peculiar rumbling noise forward of the small cabin, interrupted him.

"Do you hear that, Johnny?" The mate's head was cocked to one side, and his whole manner radiated tensity.

"Hear—what?" John himself became alert. Finally it came to him. It was less a noise than something he felt, as though a part of the ship were moving independently of the rest of it. A peculiar feeling. He looked

Continued in Want' Ad Section

DESIRABLE WOMAN

by BARBARA WEBB

CHAPTER 18

The town turned out to see Deborah Allen off for the two months' rest. People came down from the mountains. Former students dropped their work for the day and gathered at the little railroad station to watch the noon train puff in and to express their hope it would soon puff back again with Miss Allen aboard. Sylvia drove Deborah down to the station, and when they saw the crowd there Deborah's eyes filled with grateful tears.

"Oh, my dear," she said, "how can I say goodby to them?"

"But you'll be back," Sylvia answered, "better than ever. Able to do more for them. Oh, Deborah, they can't be the hard-hearted people you told me about a day or so ago when they can do things like this."

Deborah nodded and stepped from the car to have her hand clasped from every side. There were gifts, flowers, a can of preserves, an ancient quilt, its colors still bright from home dyes, a dozen cumbersome useless things, but so much an expression of love and good will that Deborah took them all aboard the train, the friendly conductor, brakeman and finally the engineer himself helping in the task.

At last the train moved out. Deborah stood on the rear platform waving, calling her goodbyes until it passed out of sight around a bend. Sylvia found her own eyes full of tears. It had been so simple and spontaneous a demonstration of affection thta she felt suddenly she loved all Hilltown and everything about it. She looked around the crowd, milling and talking now, rather inclined to make the afternoon for a holiday, since they were gathered there in the village.

Mrs. Rollman stood talking to Banker Fitch. Sylvia smiled at them and Mrs. Rollman came over. "You needn't worry about a thing, Mrs. Shannon," she said to Sylvia. "I'm chairman of the Hilltown committee for the school, you know, and we'll see that nothing happens to our dear Miss Allen's project while she is away."

"But what could happen?" Sylvia asked, a little bewildered.

The wind was taken from Mrs. Rollman's sails of self importance by this innocent question and she searched for an answer that would hurt. "I simply meant," she said loudly and with great dignity, "that we should protect the school's interests. The house you are occupying for example is school property, and I should not feel we could permit you to make any further radical changes without Miss Allen's personal approval."

Ross Hunter had overheard question and answer. He strolled to Sylvia's side and said, "Really, I think what Mrs. Shannon has done is quite delightful. You should go to see it, Mrs. Rollman."

"Yes," said Sylvia eagerly, wishing to placate this terrible woman if she could. "Do come. I want to have a big at-home some time soon, but I'd love you to make a personal inspection before that, Mrs. Rollman."

"I shall call in good time," said Mrs. Rollman majestically, "especially now that I find my good friend, Captain Hunter, has gone over to the enemy."

"Enemy?" Sylvia exclaimed, then smiled. "You make me feel rather awful, Mrs. Rollman. I love Hilltown, you know, even in the brief time I've been here."

Mrs. Rollman had the grace to flush a little. "I'm sure I used too strong a word," she admitted, "but I dearly loved my old friend, Mrs. Begbie, and I know she would be grieved if she knew what had been done to the house she furnished and decorated with such care."

"The rooms really are much lighter now," said Banker Fitch judiciously, "and quite stylish, I thought, when I saw them. Mrs. Sheehan has used elegant taste."

Mrs. Rollman gave him a poisonous look. "Well," she said with a final bow to Sylvia, "I shall call very soon to see for myself. After all, the place is still school property."

"Whew," said a voice at Sylvia's elbow,? and she looked around to see Tommy Whitman standing there. "Hadn't I better gather up some of the feathers that have flown in that skirmish? The old war horse sure snorted, didn't she?"

Sylvia laughed. "Oh, I don't mind. After all, she's a right to her own ideas."

"When are we going to get a look at this modernistic mansion?" Tommy went on. "Do we have to wait for the party? My buddies and I have been on the point of running in for weeks now, but we've been busy, and we knew you were, so we just haven't made it."

"Come this afetrnoon," Sylvia said cordially. "Could you?"

"We've work up the mountain until 4. Cap's going in another direction to inspect a fire tower, so I think we could knock off on time this afternoon. Can we all five come?"

"I'd love to have you, and don't bother to go home and change. Just come in boots and shirts as you work and I'll have some food for you and you can do an inspection of my home."

"We'll be there," Tommy promised.

The crowd was melting away now. Ross Hunter had left ahead of Mrs. Rollman. Sylvia strolled back to her car and drove home. She consulted with Melly and by the time the five rangers presented themselves a little after 4:30, there was a noble pile of sandwiches for them and a cake of Melly's baking that for a miracle had come out of the oven light and toothsome.

Sylvia let them into the house herself and took them to the drawing room.

"Gee," said Michael Frost, "this is some room. Makes my body feel about three sizes too large."

"It needn't," said Sylvia laughing. "This room was made to be lived in, not for company."

She took them through the house and they exclaimed at everything. "Makes me think of home," said Bill Upton. "My folks have a place in Westchester and my mother's nuts about interior decoration just like you are. And by the way, Mrs. Shannon, I've kept wanting to tell you that I get the queerest feeling every time I see you that I've seen you someplace before. Did you ever live in Westchester?"

"No," said Sylvia steadily, guessing that he had seen her in some Ike Bell show, since he lived so near New York. "I've never lived in Westchester."

She spoke in a tone that checked any further questions, and at that moment Melly came in with the largest teapot on a big tray that held sandwiches, cake, olives, salted nuts, choice fruit from the hamper Sylvia had sent weekly from the city, and a big box of chocolates.

"What a feed," said Jack Harris with devout appreciation, but Sylvia saw him glance also at the teapot with something of disappointment in his look.

"How very stupid of me," she said. "You'd rather have cocktails than tea, wouldn't you?"

"Well, not too many cocktails, but I'm not much of a tea drinker myself," Ted Alwyn remarked judiciously.

"You start on the sandwiches and tea if you want it," Sylvia directed, "And I'll get the shaker and the makings and you can mix your own. I'm not much of a drinker, so all the stuff will have to be opened. I haven't touched it since I brought it out from the city."

They had a lot of fun over it. They wolfed sandwiches like any group of healthy hungry young men. They lifted their glasses to Sylvia and she was carried back in memory to countless such occasions when admiring boys had stood around her, lifting their glasses, saying, "Here's to crime," casually with their lips, saying, "You're the loveliest thing I ever saw," earnestly with their eyes.

Jack was shaking the second round, the men were lounging easily, laughing and talking with mouthful exuberance when a scared Melly stood in the drawing room doorway. "Please ma'am," said Melly, "Mrs. Rollman's calling to see you."

Without the flicker of an eyelash Sylvia took charge of the situation. She said to Melly, "Make fresh tea my dear, and bring another cocktail glass." She went into the hall her hands outstretched and said to her guest, "Mrs. Rollman it's lovely of you to come so soon. You know these boys, I think. I've just been shoing them my house."

She led the astounded and disapproving Mrs. Rollman across the room and placed her in the most comfortable chair. She sat beside her and said, "I've sent for fresh tea and a glass. Would you like a martini? Mr. Harris makes excellent ones, the boys say."

"I suppose you wouldn't know," said Mrs. Rollman leaning heavily on the last word.

"No," Sylvia smiled, "I happen not to like martinis, or for that matter cocktails of any kind. Like every honest woman, I take my whisky clear, and you might pour me two fingers of that bourbon, Tommy."

Tommy, looking very scared, obeyed and Sylvia sat sipping the amber stuff and making talk, drawing the boys into it, identifying Mrs. Rollman as one of the revelers in a manner that made that lady squirm helplessly. She was no match in social wiles for Sylvia. Melly came with fresh tea and Mrs. Rollman accepted some. She also ate a good many sandwiches and had a liberal helping of cake. Mrs. Rollman thoroughly enjoyed food at someone else's expense, though it was said in the village she kept so thin because she couldn't bear to part with money enough to set a good table.

"A cigaret?" Sylvia inquired, holding out a little silver box to Mrs. Rollman. "Jack, I think that's enough cocktails for today. You said you wanted some but not too many. I don't want you reeling over to Mrs. Bickley's, and Captain Hunter charging in here to tell me I've corrupted all his bright young men."

Mrs. Rollman found her voice at the same instant she motioned the cigaret box away. "I am opposed to the use of tobacco and strong drink in every form," said Mrs. Rollman. "They are habits that lead straight to the depths of depravity. I never permitted Judge Rollman to touch tobacco, and as for strong drink . . ." she lifted her hands.

Continued Tomorrow

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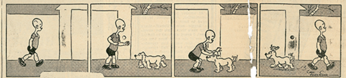
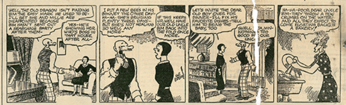


THE GUMPS — *Min's Not So Dumb* — By Gus Edson



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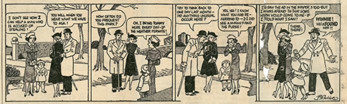

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