Pinocchio in America

By ANGELO PATRI

CHAPTER XII.

The Reason of All His Troubles

Fortunately for Pinocchio there was plenty of water in the well. He rose to the surface promptly and climbed up on a mossy rock.

"Dear me. This water is very cold. Still, everything has its advantages. I am safe here. The water will wash off the egg I took by mistake. I can sit on this stone and drip myself dry until it is safe to climb out.

"It was a good ride. If only it had lasted longer. Well, as I said before, all things, good and bad, come to an end sometime. I always come out all right, whatever happens."

The little woodenhead actually smiled at his own cleverness as he sat on a cold stone, dripping water from the end of his nose, fingers, and toes.

He heard the hunters gather about the car; heard them search it; heard them beat the bushes to find him; heard them drive away breathing dark threats of what they would do to him if they found him.

"Let me lay my hands on him and he will never steal another car."

"He will go to jail for this."

"It is a wonder he didn't kill somebody."

"Thief, rascal. I'll make him wish he had not broken my eggs. I'll tell him that."

Pinocchio, in the dark depths of the well, heard all this and trembled. His eyes grew round and solemn. Those people were very angry about something. It would be well to keep out of their way. He would do that. He would wait under the well. He would find another car and

What was that? Was it? No. It couldn't be. Most certainly, yes, it was. It was the head of the Watchful Rooster, rolling red eyes, hooked beak, scraggly, swallowing neck that peered from behind the wet rocks.

Pinocchio stirred uneasily. If that old gentleman was about, this adventure might not end so pleasantly. Better climb out and take to the road.

The stone was getting very hard and cold. After all, sitting on the edge of a slippery rock in the depths of an old well, dripping water from the end of your nose, has its limits. Something had to be done.

It was very still in the well. There was no sound save the chink, chink, of the water as it dripped off the shivering little figure to the water below.

Worse than all, there was no food in the well. A drink is all very well, but who wants to drink a whole well full? Pinocchio licked a bit of egg off his sticky finger and sighed. People often starved to death in old wells. Who wants to starve to death? He would climb out at once and risk being caught. Anything would be better than this.

He remembered with a sob the good meals at the school. Always, for breakfast, there was a big bowl of cereal and milk, nice and hot, that tasted so good on chilly mornings like these. And there was usually an egg or two.

On Sundays there was sure to be prunes—those you got every day—but with them oranges or bananas as a treat. With the eggs there was bacon, nice, crispy brown and gold bacon. Wonderful.

To be sure, there were too many prunes and too few oranges and bananas but heaven is not on earth, and what would you? Certainly, the school was better than this. He would climb out at any cost. A tear ran down the length of his nose. He shook it off and listened it fell with a "chink" into the water that lapped the sides of his feet.

"I will climb out, whatever happens," said he. "Star of my life, shine down on me," and he turned and began climbing toward the light above him.

But climbing up was not so easy as falling down. The stones were covered with wet moss, which made them very slippery. Each time Pinocchio tried to plant his foot, it slipped and he skinned another part of his shins.

His knees were raw. His poor nose was so battered that it looked like a very old, very ripe red pepper. Twice he fell into the water, and twice he crawled out again. It was all very sad.

"I see I am to be punished for my badness. I have been a bad puppet, and now I am to suffer with what patience I can. Even if I starve and drown I must not complain. But before I die I will try once again, and very carefully."

Once more he prepared to mount the slippery stones.

"Kr-k-k-chick."

Pinocchio wheeled about, caught himself just in time to save another duckling, and sat down hard on a stone.

"Your forgot again, didn't you?"

"Yes, Your Excellency."

"You forgot that two and two always make four?"

"No, I learned that, Your Excellency, but what good did it do?" I can say it in my sleep. "Two and two are four. But it is no charm. Two and two make four. Always four. Yet here I am in the bottom of a well."

"True. But you never learned what was behind the answer. That is why you are here. That is why you have skinned your knees and your knuckles and the end of your nose. That is the reason of all your troubles. You never think what is going to come of your two and two. Never try to get behind them."

"Please, Excellency, what is before and behind my troubles? I will do anything, even the hardest lesson, if you will help me out of this well."

"I will tell you, but it won't do you much good. You have to find your own answers. Behind this trip to the well lies gluttony, disobedience, theft, selfishness. Just as sure as two and two are four, you will go down into the depths and be drowned unless you mend your ways," 'your ways,' and the Watchful Rooster scratched his red comb and waggled his head.

Pinocchio trembled a little bit. He hung his head. When he looked up again the Watchful Rooster was gone, and only the chink, chink, chink of the dripping water broke the silence.

Then someone said "Hullo, down there. What's the trouble down there? Come up out of that. What do you mean by spoiling the water in my well?"

Startled by this unexpected hail, Pinocchio stopped weeping and looked toward the rim of the well. He saw the sharp eyes of an old farmer peering down at him.

"Please, I don't want to be in your well. I fell in and I can't get out. Good angel, whoever you are, help me."

"What's this? Who are you, anyway? You can't stay in the well and spoil the water. Out you come."

The farmer lowered a bucket, and Pinocchio needed no invitation to climb in. He closed his eyes, felt a strong upward tug, and there he was standing on firm earth once more, the blessed sunshine flooding his chilled body.

"Let's have a look at you. Who—what are you? Pinocchio, you say? Well, you'll come in handy. I'm in need of a scarecrow. You'll do very well to frighten the crows out of the cornfield."

Sticking Pinocchio into the bucket, the farmer carried him home.

"Here, Mother. Look what I found in the well."

"In the well? How did it get there?"

"I never asked him. He fell in, he says. But won't he make a fine scarecrow?" and he pulled Pinocchio out of the bucket and set him upon a chair.

Pinocchio jumped down, knelt at the woman's feet and kissed her hand.

"I'm Pinocchio. The naughty naughty Pinocchio who ran away from his good father in Italy. I came to America in search of adventure and liberty, and I meet only with misfortune. I am drowned and starving. Save me. Save me, and when I come into my fortune I will richly repay you."

"The poor little thing. I will give it some warm milk and some bread and butter. And I'll give it a good scrubbing, too."

"No, no, no. Feed him, if you like, but no washing, no dressing up. You'd spoil him. I want him to scare crows. He's fine just as he is."

Pinocchio swallowed his pride with the bread and milk. He made no sign of rebellion when the farmer tucked him under his arm and strode across the fields with him.

"Now, then, young fellow. Your stomach is full of my bread and milk. I'll give you a chance to earn them. Keep the crows out of this field. When you see one coming, just give him a look and flap yours arms. To make sure you don't lose your way again, I'll tie you," and taking a bit of string from his pocket he tied Pinocchio fast to a stake in the middle of a wide cornfield.

All day the scarecrow stood flapping his long arms at the crows who gave him one glance and then flew to the top of the highest tree, cawing in great astonishment and alarm.

Every few minutes a donkey grazing near by put his head over the fence and he-hawed at the funniest thing he had ever seen in all his life on the farm, a marionette keeping the crows off the corn. He had a mean laugh, and he sent it echoing through the hills so that the world might hear and come to see.

Pinocchio pretended not to hear. What else could he do?

Nor was the donkey the worst. Whenever Pinocchio slackened the flappings, the tufted, scraggly head with the rolling red eyes and hooked beak of the Watchful Rooster appeared over the top of the stone wall, and a Kik, kik, kik, Kr-ko would set him flapping harder than ever.

Every fifteen minutes or so the voice would call, "Kik, kik, kar-oo You can never buy wisdom abroad if there is none at home. Now, what's behind that, my lad?"

"Two and two," Pinocchio cried in spite of himself.

"Kik, kik, karoo-oo-oo. Remember. Two and two," said the Rooster.

Then things would go on as before, the crows cawing, the donkey hee-hawing, and Pinocchio flapping bravely to save the farmer's corn.

(Continued Monday).

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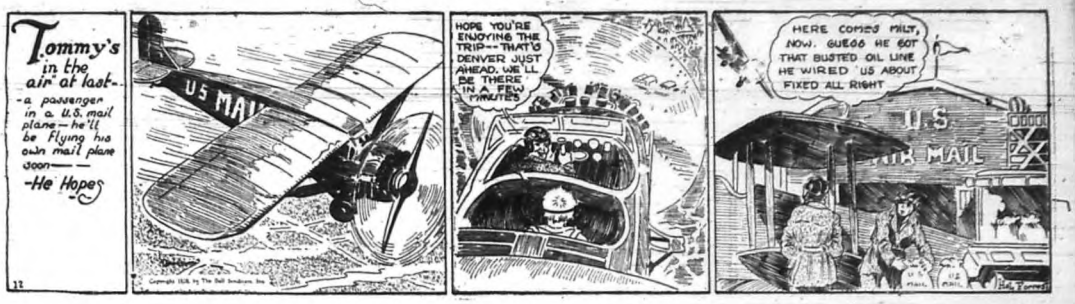

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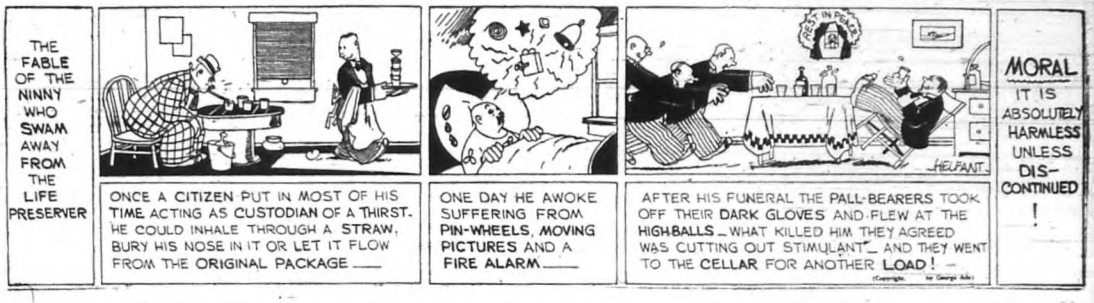

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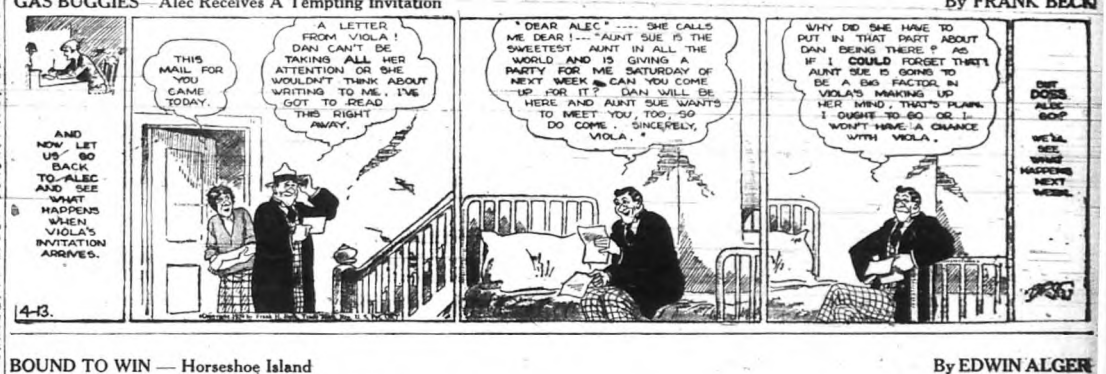

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