

HIS SECOND WIFE

By ERNEST POOLE

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"NOT very attractive," she grimly thought. "This has got to be done by brains, my dear."

In a moment she heard Joe's key in the door. She heard him taking off his coat as she then coming slowly into the room. With an effort she turned and looked at him. His face appeared even more tense and gray than it had two days before; the nerves seemed quivering under the skin. And she felt a pang of pity.

"He wasn't to blame for the way he acted it was his wretched nerves," she thought. "He'll have a breakdown after this."

"Well, Ethel!" "Oh, Joe, I'm so glad you're here. All at once she felt herself change. She thought of one quick anxious look, in a low eager voice she said: "No not going to do much of myself. I want to love you, Joe, and I can see you still love me. We need each other. And if we can just be people now—and you can only believe in me—"

"God knows I want to, Ethel!" His tone was low, but so sharp and tense that she drew suddenly closer. He turned from her and sank into a chair, with his hands for a moment pressed to his eyes. "I'm sick of this—I'm not suffering, Joe! I want to fight hard and I want you to help me. Don't you see, my dear—not her husband. Don't you see?"

She had been eagerly leaning toward him. Joe was staring into the fire; the look in his eyes had frightened her. She made her haste to be through. "What is it?" she asked. "Don't you believe what I've told you, Joe?"

"Yes," he said, "I believe all that. I believe a good deal more than that. There was a little silence, and then suddenly he reached for her hand, held it tight and smiled into a face that was a twitching sort of way. "I haven't been quite so blind as you think. I've seen a good deal of what you were doing. But—"

"I know this job of mine clear through—way back to those drama spoke of. I've had some hard mean tasks about it—intellectually—and that's my only excuse for acting like a damn fool either. She—dead or—of—Amy."

"Joe!" Ethel whispered. Tears came in her eyes. "He went steadily on. "She had some points—points you'll never know. There were things we couldn't talk about now. But you've made me see things, too. I don't think she'll be in the way any more—I think we'll be able to speak of her."

"Of course," he said. "I want to, dear!" Ethel's voice was shaking. "Not now. With an effort he rose. "There's something else to worry about. You don't quite know me yet, you see. You don't know my mind. She had risen, too, and caught his arm. "You're not well, Joe! You're white as a sheet!"

"I'm not a little. Something wrong in here, I guess. He pressed wrong in here I guess. He pressed his hand to the base of his brain and scowled as though it hurt him. Nothing serious, probably. But before it goes too far, I want you to know that when I get well I'm going to have a try at all that—the work you spoke of. I'm going to try—but I may be too late. I may be older than you think. The tone of his voice was sharp and strained.

"I don't know," he said. "The doctor may. About him—that's another point. It's a nerve specialist we need! Telephone your doctor and have him send one here tonight. I'm sorry, Ethel—damnable!"

But the weeks dragged by, and at last she felt he was coming back to sanity. With his partner, then, she aspired to take Joe over to Paris in April, to stay for a year if he would agree. And as part of the conspiracy, Ethel had several meetings with Nourse and Sally Crothers, in the hope of bringing Sally's husband into the firm to take care of the business. The war was far from easy. For Crothers naturally held back; he did not care to commit himself until he knew that Joe would agree. And whether Joe would agree or not was by no means certain. Watching him as his health came back, Ethel wondered how he would be when he returned to the office. How much of what he had said to her the first night of his illness, had come into a mind keyed up? How much of his promise would he remember? Men sick and men well are in separate worlds. She could not speak of it to Joe, for the doctor had forbidden it.

At the end of another month, however, Joe was up and about again; and soon, in spite of the doctor's instructions, he was back at his office hard at work. This of course looked ominous. What was he doing? She could not discover. For his partner, over the telephone, seemed to be in the best of health. It seemed to her the last degree. I thought he believed he could handle Joe all by himself. She thought in annoyance. At last she sent for him one day and gave him quite a piece of her mind; and although not fully successful, she at least made him acquiesce in the plan and Sally had concocted for the little gathering to take place one night the following week.

It was nearly 7 o'clock upon the evening in question; and in her room, at her dressing table Ethel was completing her toilet. They were going to dine with the Crothers, and Joe was nervous about it.

"Come on, Ethel, hurry up!" "Yes, love, I'm almost ready now. Are you sure the car is at the door?" "It's been there nearly half an hour!" "That's good. Just a minute more."

As he eagerly lit a cigarette, she looked in the glass at him and smiled. "How he dreads it, poor dear," she was thinking as he strode into the living room, "meeting Sally and all his old friends. He dreads it. He dreads it. I dread it myself. What am I going to say to them all? And suppose they don't care for me in the least? Well, it will soon be over. Presently Joe popped in at the door.

"(CONTINUED TOMORROW)

"ALIX is the bravest, cleanest, sweetest heroine seen in many moons."

"LIFE meant to her a joyous thing of the moment."

"LOVE came to her and she accepted it as one of the pleasant things life has in store."

"TRAGEDY glorified her love and made it the one thing worth while."

"SISTERS is a wonderful story told beautifully by Kathleen Norris, and it will begin on this page on MONDAY, JUNE 21"

"CAN'T YOU LET ME READ IN PEACE?"

"WHY, I AIN'T DOIN' NOTHIN' POP!"

"WELL—LISTEN TO THIS—'BRIGHT AND WILLING TO WORK—FOUR DOLLARS A WEEK!'"

"HERE'S A GOOD ONE—'BOY WANTED TO HELP IN PROGR. NOT AFRAID OF HARD WORK—HOURS 8:30 AM. TO 7:30 PM. YOU COULD EARN ENOUGH THIS SUMM. TO BUY ALL OUR SCHOOL BOOKS FOR NEXT WINTER—'"

"NOW—MAYBE I CAN READ!"

"ALIX is the bravest, cleanest, sweetest heroine seen in many moons."

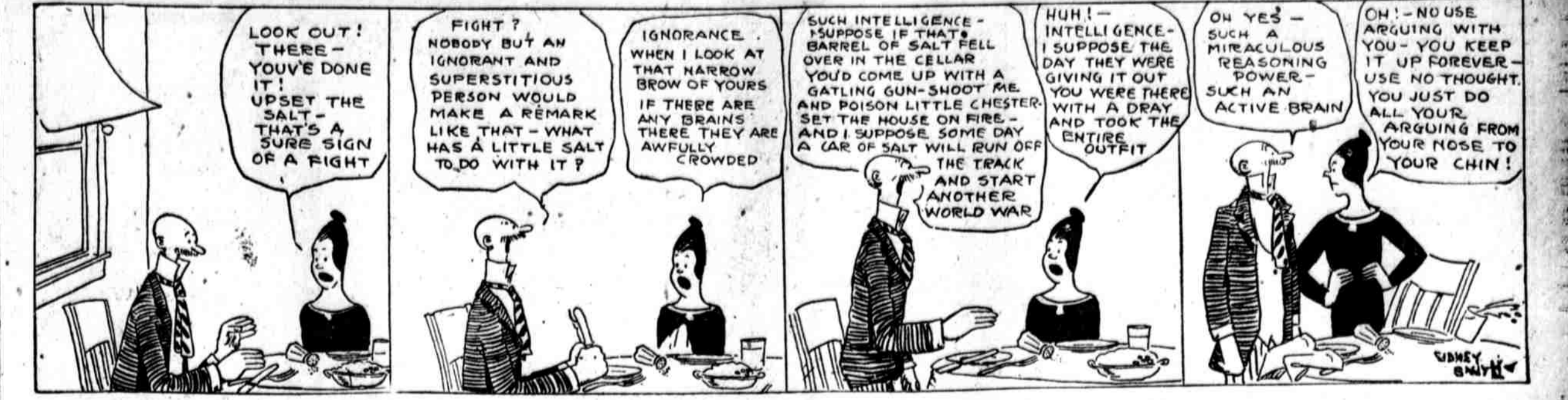
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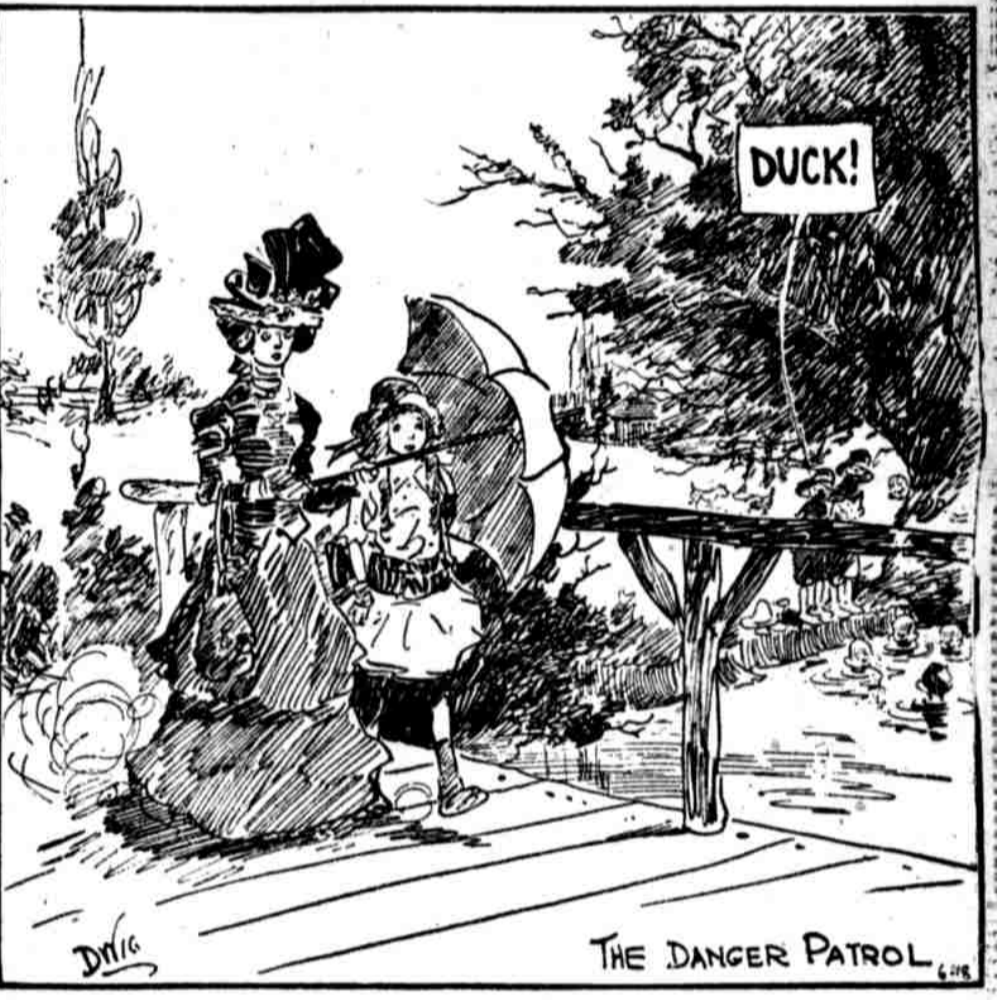
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