

The Second Honeymoon

By RUBY M. AYRES

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“THINGS will come all right—you see,” said Gladys wisely. She picked up Christine's frock and carefully folded it. “Give him a chance, Christine; I don't hold a brief for him, but my word it would be rotten if the Great Horatio found out the truth and cut Jimmy off with a shilling, wouldn't it?” Of course, really it would serve him right, but one can't very well tell him that. She shut the lid of the case and took the frock to her feet. “There, I think that's all. It must be nearly dinner time.”

But Christine did not move. “I wish you could come with us,” she said tremblingly. “Why can't you come with us? I shouldn't mind half so much if you were there.”

Gladys glanced at her and away again. “Now you're talking sheer rubbish,” she said lightly. “You remind me of that absurd play, ‘The Chinese Honeymoon,’ when the bride took her bridesmaids with her. She laughed; she took Christine's hand and dragged her to her feet. “You might smile a little,” she protested. “Don't let Jimmy think you're afraid of him.”

“I am afraid. I don't want to go,” suddenly she began to cry.

Gladys's kind eyes grew anxious; she stood silent for a moment. “I'm happy here,” Christine went on. “I hate London; I hate the hotels, I hate the people, I hate the noise. I wish you'd take me to your home in the country. I wish you'd take me to your home in the country. I wish you'd take me to your home in the country.”

“Don't be a baby, Chris,” she said a trifle impatiently. “It's all right for this time, anyway. What's the use of being young and as pretty as you are if you can't win the man you love?”

Christine dried her eyes, her cheeks were flushed. “But I don't want him,” she said with sudden passion. “I don't want him any more than he wants me.”

Gladys stared at her in speechless dismay. She felt as if a cold hand had been laid on her heart. She was uncertain whether to comfort her or to scold her. She hesitated for a moment and then she spoke the words that were to change the course of her life.

“I want my dinner, that's all I know,” she said.

She went downstairs without waiting for Christine. Jimmy was sitting at the table with a sort of suspicion, she thought, and she knew she was coloring here, Jimmy,” she said with sudden brusqueness. “If she comes back here again without you it will be the same time you need me for help. You've got your chance, if you can't make her want to stay with you for the rest of your natural life I want my hands of the whole affair.”

“I'll go home,” he floundered. Gladys caught his arm in friendly fashion. “No right to tell you, I suppose,” she said, lowering her voice, “but it won't be easy. I never thought she'd change so, but—well—well—” She shrugged her shoulders.

A little flame flashed into Jimmy's eyes. “Doesn't she care a hang for me now, is that it?” he asked roughly.

Gladys did not answer; she turned her face away. Jimmy put his hands on her shoulders, forcing her to look at him. “Gladys, you don't mean—not Christine?”

There was a thrill of agony in his voice. “I don't know—I can't be sure,” Gladys answered him agonizedly. “I don't know anything. It's only—only that I'm afraid of—” She hesitated, her hand on her forehead, as if she were in pain. “It's only—only that I'm afraid of—”

“Out in the hall Jimmy was standing at the foot of the stairs looking up at Christine.”

“I feel such an awful brute,” he began agitatedly. “I don't deserve that you should consider me in the least. I'll do my best, Christine.”

She seemed to avoid looking at him. She moved quickly past him and said reproachfully. “I'd much rather we did not talk about it.” She went on into the dining room without a backward glance.

Jimmy stood for a moment irresolute; he could not believe that it was Christine, the girl who had spoken to him like this. Christine, who so obviously wished to avoid him.

A sudden flame of jealousy seared his heart; he clenched his fists. Kettering—how dare he make love to another man's wife!

But he had conquered his agitation before he followed Christine. He did his best to be cheerful and amusing during dinner. He was rewarded once by Christine's pale smile and once by a moment she allowed him to raise her face to his and kiss her cheek. He felt a sense of fulfillment that had been denied him for so long. It was a sense of fulfillment that had been denied him for so long. It was a sense of fulfillment that had been denied him for so long.

But the dinner was over all too soon, and Gladys said it was time to think very severely, giving her time to feel awkward or embarrassed. She was determined to escort them to the station, she declared, conscious, perhaps, that both of them would be glad of her company; she said that she wished she could come with them all the way, but that, of course, they did not want her. And though she dared to contradict her, she would have given a great deal had she suddenly changed her mind and insisted on accompanying them to London.

She stood at the door of the railway carriage until the last minute; she sent a messenger ahead to inform Christine of her arrival. She told Christine to give her love; she kept up a running fire of chatter and chatter until the train started away, and a pompous guard told her to “stand back there!”

She gave a glance at her watch and saw the pale face and the pale face of Christine's eyes had been swallowed up in the darkness of the evening.

Then Gladys turned to walk home alone with a feeling of utter desolation. She had a heart and an undimmed smarting of tears in her eyes.

“I hope to goodness I've done the right thing in letting her go,” she thought, as she turned out on to the dark road again. “I hope—” she said aloud as she hurried into a tall man coming toward her.

“He stopped at sound of her voice; it was Kettering.”

“Miss Letring, what in the world—” he began in amazement.

“I've been seeing Jimmy off,” Gladys explained stily. “Christine and I were having a very uncomfortable time. Jimmy and Christine—they've gone off on a second honeymoon,” she added flippantly.

“Jimmy—and Christine!” he echoed her words in just the tone of voice she had dreaded and expected to hear. He turned half away, trying to read her face through the darkness, then he gave a short, angry laugh.

“I suppose you think you are protecting her from me,” he said roughly. Gladys did not answer at once, and when she spoke it was in a queer, strangled voice.

“Or perhaps I am protecting you from her?”

There was a little silence, then she moved a step from him. “Good night,” she said.

“He followed. ‘I will walk back with you,’ he strode along beside her through the darkness; he was thinking of Christine and Jimmy, speeding away to London together, and a sort of impatient indignation was such a boy. So ignorant of the way in which to love a woman like Christine; he asked an angry question.”

“Whose suggestion was this—this—?” she could not go on.

“I don't know—they agreed between themselves, I think,” Gladys was coming

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home—the Great Horatio, you know, Gladys told him, her voice, sounding a little hysterical.

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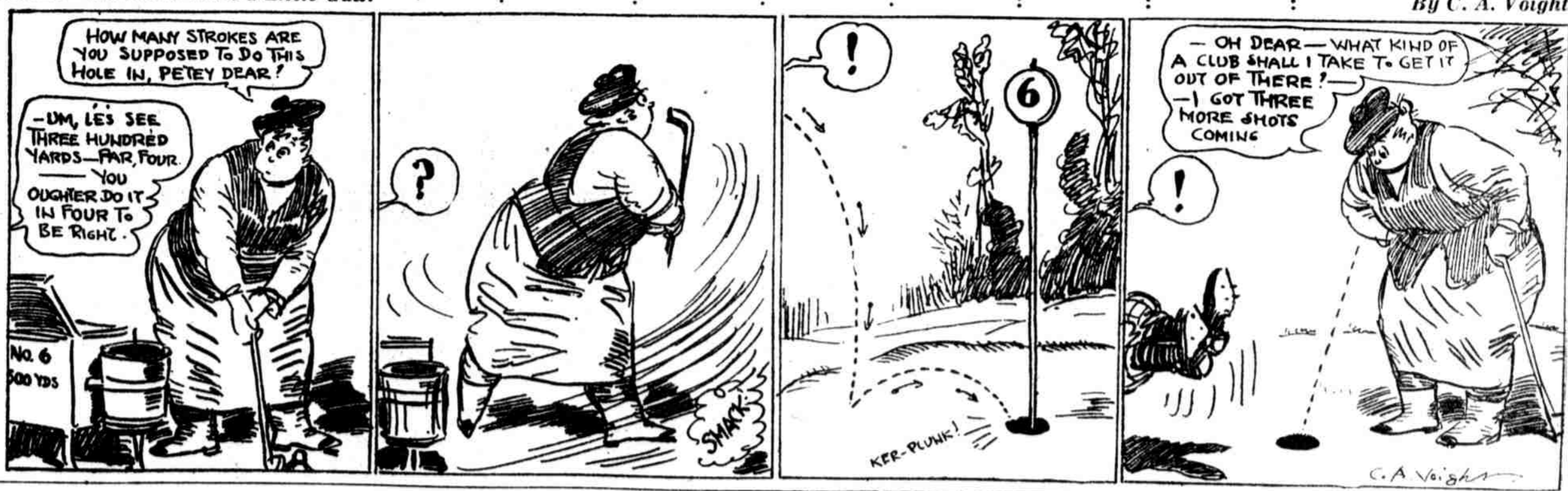
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