

# The Phantom Lover

By Ruby Ayres

**THIS STARTS THE STORY**  
Micky Melrose, matrimonial catch, divers the mind of a girl he finds crying on the street from the thought of outside with which she had wrestled. Returning to his apartment, he finds his friend, Ashton, who says he is leaving town and his sweetheart at his mother's request and asks Melrose to deliver a letter to the girl. Micky discovers the girl, Esther Shepstone, to be the one he had not crying on the street. Instead of delivering the letter Ashton gave him he writes another, a kinder one, and signs Ashton's name in it. The letter comforts Esther. One day when she returns to her room she finds June Mason, another beauty in the house. There, June expresses the wish that they should be friends. She learns that June and Micky are old friends and that Micky is wealthy. Micky writes another letter in Ashton's name to Esther, promising her a week. She seeks employment through an agency and is introduced to a lady who is looking for a companion or amanuensis. "What have you done up till now," she asks Esther. "I was in the workroom at Kilders," she replied.

### AND HERE IT CONTINUES

"DIDN'T" the sharp gaze wavered a little. "And why did you leave there, may I ask?"  
"But you are not married, of course?"  
"No."  
"Nor going to be?"  
"Not for the present, but—"  
She was cut short again.

"I don't want to get used to you and for you to leave me," she was told. "And I don't want a young man constantly dangling round the house." Her voice was sharp, but not unkind, and there was a smile in her keen eyes.  
"No," said Esther. "I quite understand."

There was a little silence.  
"Well," said the owner of the locket, "do you think you would like me?"  
Esther smiled, there was something in her blunt questioning that reminded her of June Mason.  
"Yes," she said. "I think I should, but—"  
"I hate that word," she was told promptly. "I don't want there to be any 'but' in the question. You either wish to come or you do not. I will give you \$50 a year, and your keep, of course. It's too much for an inexperienced girl like you, but I think I shall rather like you. Well, what do you say?"

Esther did not know what to say. The offer was tempting enough, but she thought of June Mason and the room she was settling down so happily, and her heart sank.  
"I should like to think it over," she said, stammering. "I have a friend I should like to talk to. You either don't mind, if you will give me just a day or two."  
"Take a day by all means. I am going away myself for a few days, and I shan't want you till I come back. Write me and tell me how you decide to do. Here is my card."  
She took one from a heavy silver case and laid it on the table. Esther looked at it quizzically, then suddenly she held out her hand.  
"Good-by, Miss Shepstone. I hope I shall see you again," and the next moment she had gone.

The stiff and stately owner of the agency was smiling, well pleased.  
"You are most fortunate, Miss Shepstone," she said. "I have secured one of the best posts I have on my books. If you take my advice you will not hesitate. Make up your mind at once."  
Esther did not answer. She took up the card from the table, then she drew in her breath with a hard sound, for the name printed there was Mrs. Raymond Ashton.

Esther never knew how she got into the street. She walked along like one in a dream; her cheeks were burning hot.  
"Mrs. Raymond Ashton," Raymond's mother! The woman of whom he had spoken so often and so bitterly. The woman who had raised such a fierce objection to her marriage with Raymond. There was not much resemblance between mother and son; but there was a sort of humor in Mrs. Ashton's face which Raymond's lacked. Esther tried vainly to find some likeness between them.  
"Good afternoon," said a voice, and turning hurriedly, Esther found Micky Melrose beside her.

He looked as if he were not quite sure of his reception; but today Esther had little thoughts to occupy her which were more interesting than he was—and the smile she gave him was almost friendly.  
"Good afternoon," she said.  
"Very good," he replied. "Where are you hurrying off to?"  
"I tried to speak casually, but his heart was beating so wildly."  
"I'm just going home," Esther said. "I've been to the agency looking for a berth."  
"A berth? A room came between his eyes. What sort of a berth?" he asked quickly.

Esther laughed.  
"Well, I'm thinking of taking your advice—and going as companion to an elderly lady—not that," she added doubtfully, with sudden memory of Raymond's mother.  
"I wonder if it is likely to be any one I know. I have quite an extensive acquaintance in London."  
"But I don't suppose you will know these people any more," she added with an unconscious air of loftiness in her voice. "The name is Ashton—Mrs. Raymond Ashton."  
"Ah," he said. "Oh, yes, I know Mrs. Ashton very well. He was with her when she was young, and she was head sharply and looked up at him.  
"Just a moment a traitorous eagerness crossed her face; he could almost see the question on her lips, then she laughed.  
"Really? How funny! But, of course, as you say, you must know a great many people."  
"I have known the Ashtons for years. You will like Mrs. Ashton."  
There was a sort of quiet insinuation in the words, and Esther bit her lip.  
"And—the son?" she asked. "I think you said you knew the son."  
"Yes, I know him—he is in Paris, I believe."  
Micky was conscious of a queer tightening about his throat; it was a tremendous effort to force himself to speak lightly.  
"And shall I like him as well, do you think?" Esther asked deliberately.  
"Micky did not answer."  
"Do you like him?" she persisted.  
"Micky's restraint broke. His hands above his head for it he could not have checked the words that rushed to his lips.  
"I detest the fellow!" he said. "He's a beastly outsider."  
He dared not look at her. He held his breath, waiting for the storm to break, but if he had lost his self-control she kept her admirer's eyes on him.  
"Really," she said. Her voice was a little breathless, but quite calm. "What does a man mean when he calls another a beastly outsider?"  
Her face was quite colorless, even to the lips, and her hands were clenched in the shabbiness of the cheap little muff she carried.  
He blushing tried to make amends.  
"I ought not to have said that, just because he's not the sort of man I care about," he said, stammering. "He's quite all right—it all depends from what point of view you regard him. I hope you will forget that I said that," Miss Shepstone. It was unparliamentary.  
"It's a matter of complete indifference to me what you say about—Mr. Ashton," she told him.  
She stopped. They had been walking along together.  
"Which way are you going?" she asked.  
"Micky flushed up to the eyes; he knew this was a dilemma.  
"I was coming along to see June," he said. "I hoped you would allow me to walk along with you—if I am not intruding."  
Esther forced a smile, but her lips felt stiff.  
"Oh, but I am not going back," she

said. Her voice sounded as if it were out in ice. "So I won't detain you, good-by."  
It was nearly supper time when she got in. She paused for a moment in the hall and looked anxiously at the door. She thought she would know Micky's if she saw them there. She forgot that he might have taken them up to June's room. She turned away with a little sigh.  
The door of the room opened before she reached the landing, and June came out.  
"Well, and what success?" June asked. "You don't mean to say that the old dear at the agency really had something to offer you this time?"  
"Tell me," she said. "Do you know any people named Ashton?"  
"I know some Ashtons who live in Bryn Mawr Square," she said at last. "A mother and son. A very handsome woman she is, with white hair."  
"It must be the same Mrs. Ashton," she said eagerly. "This is her card—she gave it to me today—Mrs. Raymond Ashton."  
June glanced at the card and nodded briskly.  
"That's a widow, isn't she?" Esther said hesitatingly. "At least—she didn't say anything about a husband."  
"Yes, she's a widow, enough," June said. "And delighted to be. I should think she added blantly. 'I never knew her voice from her voice.' 'Do you know the son, too?' she asked nervously."  
June gave a queer little laugh.  
"Oh, yes, I know him. That is to say, I may 'how d'ye do' to him when I have the misfortune to bump into his shoulders."  
"Oh, I don't know—it's hard to explain—he's never done me any harm, but he's a queer fellow, and he's a bit of an insinuator, and Raymond Ashton is one of the people I hate," she smoothed a crease in the skirt of her frock. "It's such a—such an awful outsider," she added, unconsciously choosing the word Micky Melrose had used not half an hour ago.  
Esther sat very stiff. Twice she tried to speak, but no words would come. She knew that it was unfair to June to sit there and allow her to go on talking about Raymond, but something in her heart seemed to have set a seal on her lips.  
"He's that insufferable kind of creature who thinks himself irretrievable," June went on. "Micky has often told me the way he brags about his social conquests. Conquests indeed! What are they but a few poor ignorant girls hoodwinked by his handsome face and smooth tongue? Dozens of girls he's had, my dear, literally dozens! Only the other day some one told me that Mrs. Ashton had to threaten to cut him off with a shilling if he didn't give up some little person he was supposed to be going to marry! I don't know how true it is, mind you, but that's the sort of man he is—I've no time for him at all, and I finished vigorously."  
She went away shutting the door quietly, and Esther hid her face in her hands.  
She hardly knew why she was crying, she only knew that she was utterly miserable.  
She took up what she had written and read it through again—how could any one, reading it, doubt that he loved her?  
She kissed the signature passionately; nobody in all the world counted but one.  
When she had finished writing she looked at the head of the paper on which she had written for the address, and then she saw a postscript scribbled in a corner which she had not noticed before.  
"Don't write to me here—I shall have left this hotel by the time you get my letter. I will write again as soon as possible."  
It was like a door with iron bars being closed in her face; she could not write after all. She could have no relief for all her longing and unhappiness, she must just wait and wait, eating her very heart out, till he wrote again.  
She tore up what she had written and threw it into the fire.  
She went back to June's couch and curled up among the many pillows. Life was so hard, so disappointing; it gave so little of all that one desired; the tears fell again and presently she cried herself to sleep.  
June came back on tiptoe; she stole across the room and looked at Esther, then she went back to the hearthrug to keep Charlie company.  
The fire had died down and she replenished it as quietly as she could, putting a knob on at a time with her fingers.

CHAPTER IX  
"Micky Melrose is coming directly," June said tartly. "If you don't want to see him you'd better go. I know you hate him."  
Esther turned away. She took off the apron she had borrowed from June and hurried to the door.  
"I'm a pig," she apologized humbly. "Please stay. Why don't you box my ears when I speak to you like this?" She dragged Esther back to the fire. "I'm still because you've made up your mind to leave me. Our friendship does not mean anything to you."  
"There's Micky—he'll want to know why I've been crying. Amuse him for five minutes, there's an angel, and I'll come back."  
A smiling Lydia shoved Micky into the room. Lydia liked Micky; he was always courteous, and he had been generous with his tips on each occasion that he had visited the house.  
Micky looked a little embarrassed when he saw Esther. He glanced quickly round the room. "June . . ."

"She's coming in a moment," Esther explained. "Won't you sit down?"  
Micky sat on the arm of the big chair; he was cold; he leaned forward, rubbing his hands vigorously. Esther watched him critically.  
"She had told June that she did not consider him in the least good looking, but now the thought crossed her mind that this had not been quite a fair thing."  
He was tall and well made, and he had brown hair that grew well about his temples, and waved slightly where it parted.  
His nose was nothing particular and slightly crooked, and his eyes were nondescript in color, but kind and so kind; Esther remembered it was the first thing she had noticed about him the night they met.  
He looked up.  
"Well," he said, "have you found another berth yet?"  
"I'm going to Mrs. Ashton's," Esther said.  
"She was amazed at the sudden change in his face; a look of furious anger flashed into his eyes; he rose to his feet.  
"You're not serious?" he said quietly.  
Esther laughed, she felt painfully nervous without knowing why.  
"Serious? Indeed I am!" she answered. "Mr. Melrose, what are you doing?"  
Micky had caught her hands. Jealousy was driving him with whips of fire—jealousy of this phantom lover whom he himself had created.  
(CONTINUED TOMORROW)

The young lady across the way says that anyway there's less promiscuous drinking than there used to be and she doesn't suppose it's quite so bad for one when taken straight.

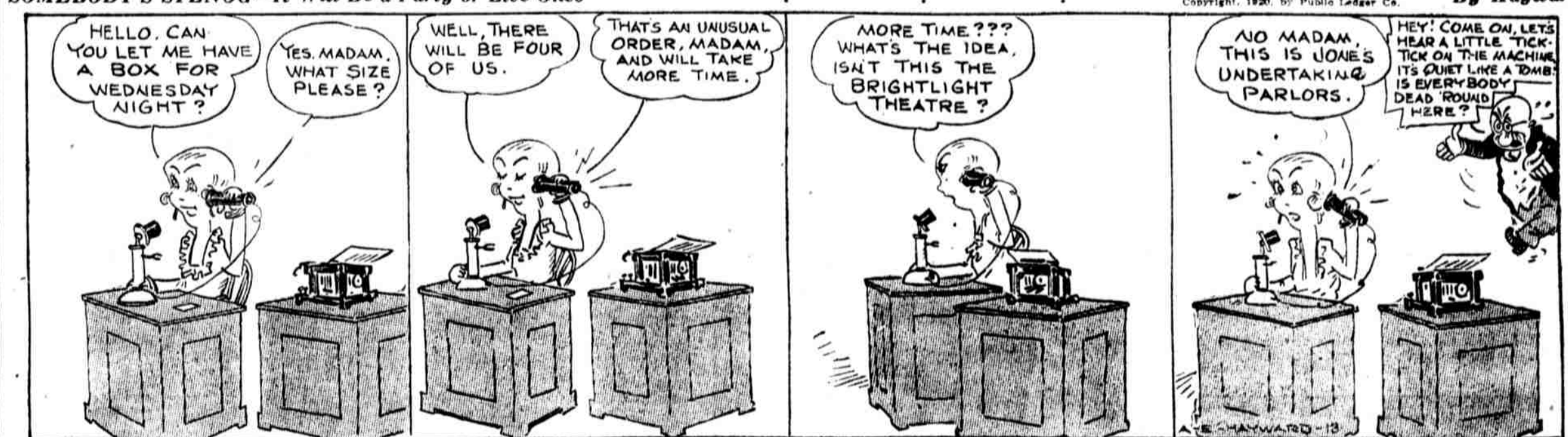
## THE GUMPS—Just Hinting, Not Asking

By Sidney Smith



## SOMEBODY'S STENOG—It Will Be a Party of Live Ones

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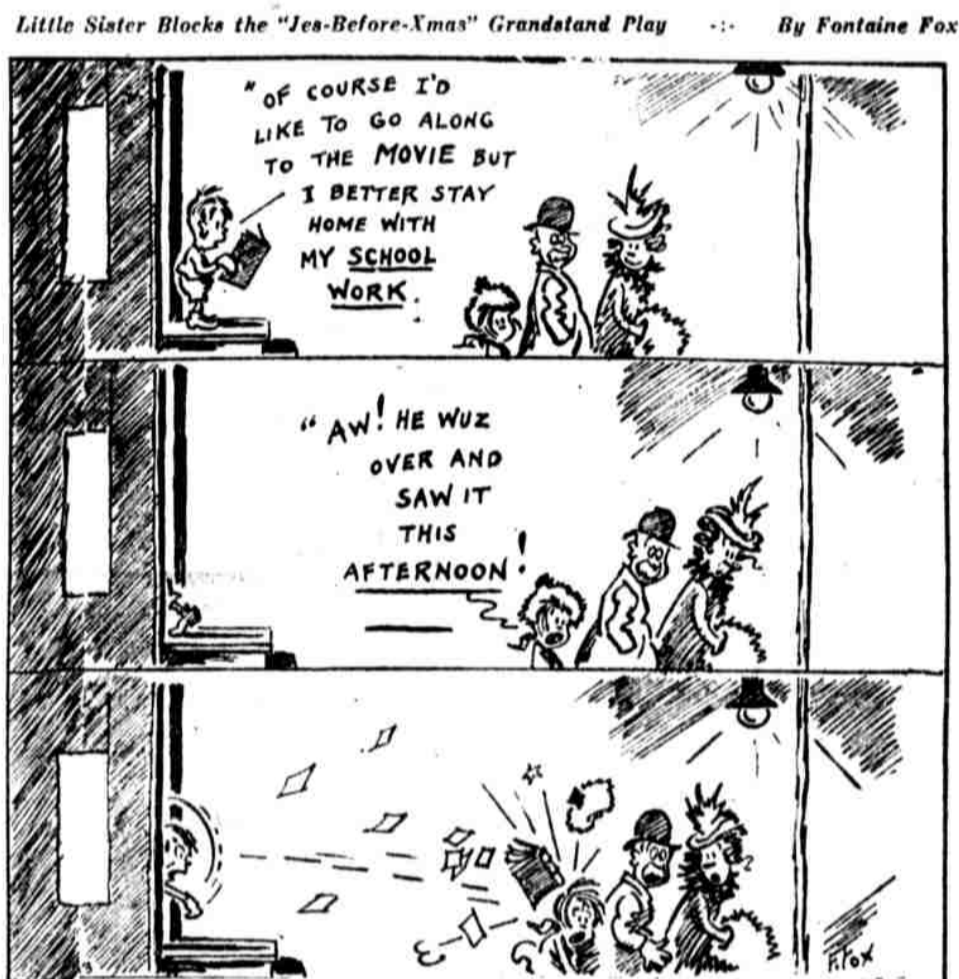
## The Young Lady Across the Way

## Little Sister Blocks the "Yes-Before-Xmas" Grandstand Play

By Fontaine Fox

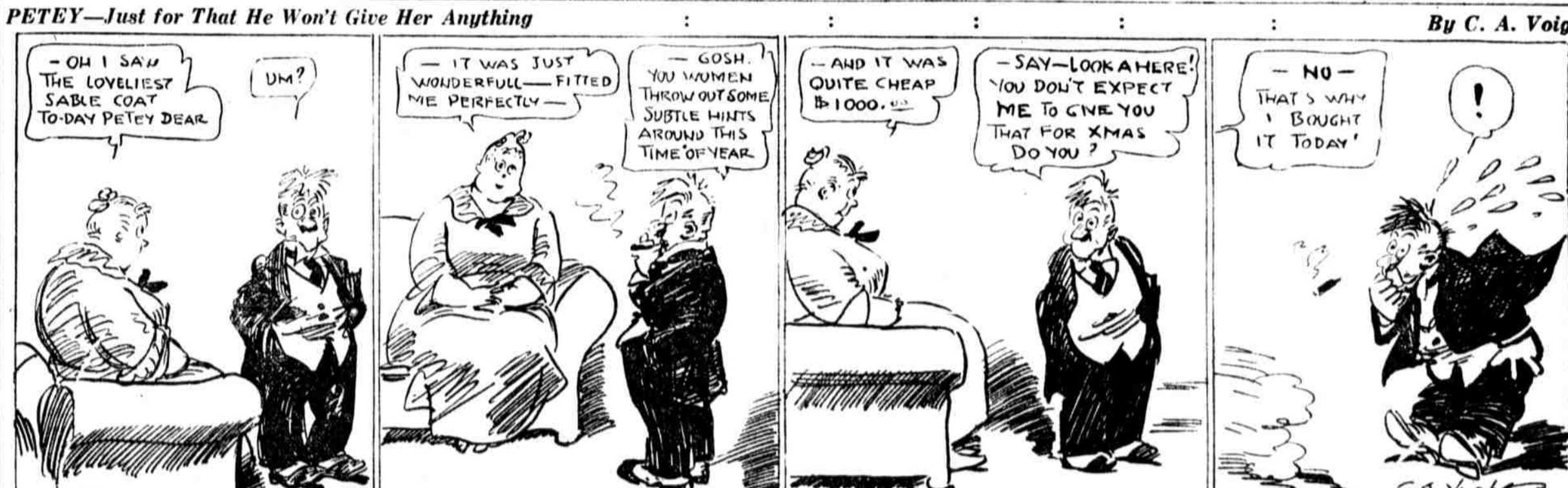
## SCHOOL DAYS

By DWIG



## PETEY—Just for That He Won't Give Her Anything

By C. A. Voight



## THE CLANCY KIDS—A Tale of the Hills

By Percy L. Crosby

