SUNNY DUCROW

By HENRY ST. JOHN COOPER

THIS STARTS THE STORY

Elizabeth Ann Ducrow, known as "Sunny" works in a pickle factory. She tells Bert Jackson, who works at the pickles with her, that she intends to do something better and ride in a motorcar some day. Sunny lives with her aunt, who is grumbly and improvident. Sunny and Bert are hungry for a day in the country, but lacking the funds they sing on the street for pennies, are arrested for "vagrancy" and pardoned by the magistrate. Leslie Montressor, well-known actress, impressed with Sunny's originality, brings her before Max Hemmingway, theatre manager. He sees possibilities in her and gives her a small part in a play. Bert also is given a part. Sunny makes a speech which wins for her tremendous applause, and Bert is paralyzed with stagefright, which, by the audience, is taken for natural acting, and he also wins applause. A bouquet is handed to Sunny and in the center is found a box containing a diamond pendant. Sunny tells the audience next night about the flowers and the package. There is a ring of truth in her words which reaches the heart of the audience and again she is applauded. Next morning she receives a call from a Mr. Gibbins. Mr. Gibbins is coming every morning, she explains to her aunt. "He is going to improve me." People began to know the name of Sunny Ducrow. She returns the diamond pendant to Lord Dobrington. Bert senses that Dobrington is unusually interested in Sunny and tells her so. A new study is being considered for a second play, and Hemmingway offers Sunny a more important part. Sunny stipulates for more money and gets it for herself and Bert. The arrangements for the new revue give concern to the managers and they begin to wish that the first part had been given to Sunny, and Sunny senses the condition, for she says to Bert "Bert, I got an idea at the back of my head that this revue's going to be a frost!"

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

"SHOULDN'T wonder!" Bert said bitterly. "Making me sing that blooming song about roses! What do they expect?"

"Oh, it isn't you," Sunny said; "it's Grace Blythedale. She's no good. She's nice and pretty and sweet, and I'm sorry for her. I cried like anything, Bert, when Hemmingway went for her yesterday. But, all the same, he's right; she's going to bring us all down bang; you see!"

"I wish to goodness," Bert said slowly and impressively—"Sunny, I wish to goodness I was back in the pickles."

Sunny took no notice. She never did when Bert bewailed his present lot and sighed for the smell of the vinegar.

"It'll be an awful pity, won't it?" she said. "A terrible pity! S'posing the show cracks up, Bert, what then?"

"I'll go and see Bill Wilkins and see if I can get took on again!" Bert said, with a look of hope in his eyes.

"You won't!" she said—"me neither! We're like the chap as crossed the river, Bert, and burned his bridges behind him; see!"

"He was a fool to do that, anyway! Any'ow, there's generally a job to be got," Bert said.

Sunny shared Max Hemmingway's anticipation of failure to the full. She said nothing to any one but Bert, but she knew, even out of her inexperience she knew, that Grace Blythedale was going to make a hash of the part on which the whole thing hung.

"It's a pity!" she said. "I know jolly well I could play that part. It's as easy as falling off a gate! I wasn't never a country girl, but if I couldn't make myself one, I'd eat my hat!"

For days and days past Sunny had grown to notice that old Rostheimer and she were constantly meeting. No matter what time she left, she was almost sure to run up against Rostheimer.

Twice he had asked her to go to lunch with him, and she had refused sharply. He had asked her to tea, and had obtained another refusal.

"Don't you like me, Sunny?" he asked.

"I ain't crazy about you one way or the other," she said. "Only I pay for my own lunches and teas and suppers, I do, that's all."

Today was the day of the last rehearsal. They opened the next day, and Hemmingway was in a state of nervous collapse. He dared not witness the rehearsal. Jakes had been to him, and had given him his private opinion that Grace Blythedale was a stick, and was going to ruin the whole show.

"Just as if I didn't know it!" Hemmingway shouted, giving way to a burst of bad language. "I've been a fool, a mad fool, a blind, helpless imbecile! Hang the girl and hang me—hang me most! It's my fault; a blind, helpless imbecile! I've been trying to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. And it can't be done."

"However, let's hope it'll be all right," Jakes said. "Now, if we'd tried that Ducrow girl in the part——"

"What! A beginner, a novice, a girl with less than three months——"

"She's got it in her; she's an actress to her finger-tips!

"She's got it in her; she's an actress to her finger-tips! She swears one day she'll play Hamlet, and I believe she will," Jakes said. "Now, if we'd tried that Ducrow girl in the part all would have been well; she's versatile, and Blythedale isn't."

"Why," Hemmingway said, "didn't you tell me this three weeks ago?"

"Never thought of it," Jakes said.

"It's too late now," Hemmingway said. "We open with Blythedale tomorrow, and it's going to be a fizzle."

"For goodness' sake don't come to rehearsal today!" Jakes said. "Don't let her see you tomorrow. You put the fear of death in her. She's ten times worse when you're about."

"I know," Hemmingway said.

Rehearsal was for four o'clock that afternoon. Sunny was perfect in her part. It was a small part, and she was vaguely disappointed and dissatisfied with it. The more she thought of the part that Grace Blythedale was making such a sorry mess of, the more convinced she was that she could play it.

"It might have been written for me," she whispered to Bert. "I'd love it! Look at her in the hay-cart scene! She might be first mourner at a funeral, mightn't she?"

Bert nodded gloomily.

"At the pickle factory one didn't have to bother about how the others done their work," he said mournfully. "I wish to goodness I was——"

"Note for Miss Ducrow," said the call-boy.

"Me?" Sunny said. She took it and opened it.

"Dear Miss Ducrow—I would be glad if you could spare me a few moments in my private room before you leave—today. I wish to speak to you. Yours sincerely,

"FELIX ROSTHEIMER."

"Oh, him!" Sunny said. "What's he want now? I told him I wouldn't go to no lunches nor teas nor suppers; he's a blooming old nuisance!"

She almost forgot, but remembered just in time as she and Bert were about to leave the theatre.

"You'll 'ave to go alone, Bert," she said. "Old Rostheimer wants me to go and see him, though goodness knows what about."

CHAPTER XVI

Sunny Is Discharged

Hemmingway's prognostications were only too thoroughly fulfilled. Grace Blythedale in the part of Marian Dobbins was an utter and absolute frost. The huge audience fidgeted on its seats; there was a chilly atmosphere in the house. Now and again it rose to Harvey Daglan's effort. Now and again it applauded Sunny in her small part. But Sunny's part was all too small to have much effect on the chill frost that had settled over everything. Only once did the audience give itself up to thorough and intense enjoyment. That was when Bert Jackson, looking the picture of abject wretchedness and trembling with nervousness, came down to the footlights and sang his song about the roses.

From the moment he stood on the stage alone the audience yelled with laughter at him; they shook their sides. Stout old ladies and gentlemen laughed till the tears rolled down their cheeks. The more they laughed the more wretchedly nervous did Bert become. He forgot his words; he appealed to the conductor.

The leading London newspapers gave Bert a quarter of a column all to himself; the rest of the production they dismissed in rather less space.

"Miss Grace Blythedale, a charming young actress, was ill-fitted with the part of Marian Dobbins," the critics reported. "We sadly missed Miss Montressor in the part. Miss Blythedale worked earnestly and did her best, but she has been wrongly cast. She has a pretty voice, and did her best with the songs that fell to her share. In the part of the errant schoolgirl, Lady Maud, Miss Sunny Ducrow was seen to advantage. She was graceful and dainty, and sang her songs with infinite charm. The audience regretted that her part was not a bigger one. Mr. Harvey Daglan made a robust and handsome hero; he was in good voice," etc.

And that was all there was to it. It was a fizzle, a frost! Thousands had been spent and would never, never come back.

Max Hemmingway would have at least one failure to his credit. Perhaps he could afford it, seeing how many successes he had made in the past. Yet it was none the less bitter for that. The second night the house was half empty, the third night it was worse still; the stalls were thinly populated. They were playing to a dead loss. The week slowly passed; every night showed a poorer and still poorer return. Only on Saturday night things looked a little brighter. When the Monday of the following week came, receipts fell to zero. There were scarcely a dozen people in the stalls, the pit was half empty, the gallery nearly deserted. There was not one person in the private boxes, and the dress circle was filled with paper.

"Und bang goes fifteen tousand!" said Rostheimer.

"Looks like it. There's only one thing to do; close up the shutters," Hemmingway said. "Cut our losses, pull down the curtain, and stop the whole thing. We've got the new thing, 'Are You There?' to fall back on. We can rush it through and get it inside three weeks. Well?"

"Fire ahead!" Rostheimer said. "You know best!"

They were in Hemmingway's office.

"I'm going to risk it!" Hemmingway said.

"Risk what?"

"That Ducrow girl. I believe she can do it. I'm going to give her the part of Betty Barker in 'Are You There?'"

"Soh!" Rostheimer muttered. "Soh! She is very young and very inexberienced."

"She'll do it. I've got faith in that girl."

"I haven't," said Rostheimer. "It's all cheek; id's not dalent. Anyhow send for her."

Hemmingway rang his bell.

"Tell Miss Ducrow to come here right away," he said.

Five minutes later Sunny tapped at the door and came in.

"Miss Ducrow," Hemmingway said, "I'm going to let you into a secret. We shall be taking this thing off immediately."

"I thought you would," said Sunny. "It's gone flat."

"Anyhow it's coming off. We're going to put a new thing, I have here, into rehearsal at once. It's called 'Are You There?' The leading lady's part is a soft one. She's a telephone operator, who happens on a secret concerning an aristocratic family. She decides to make the most of it, and forces herself into society. I needn't go into the whole thing now. What I want to know is—" He paused; he looked at Sunny; her eyes were sparkling. She knew what was coming. Rostheimer, sitting in the shadows beside the window, she had not seen. "I want to know if you will take the script and look through it, and let me know tomorrow if you think you are up to the part. It's your chance—the big chance for you. If you let me down, you let yourself down. I don't know that I'm not rather a fool to risk it. I could get Molly Deschamps; she's a practiced and experienced actress. That part would be sa e with her; but I rather fancy you could do it!"

"Vaid a bit!" Rostheimer said.

Sunny started.

"Vait a bit, Max!" He rose and came forward.

"I've lost pretty heavily on dis ting," he said. "I've lost tousands. I'm not going to run der risk of losing more on der next broduction!" He paused; he stared at Sunny. "I'm sorry for Miss Ducrow's disabbointment," he said; "but I can't see her in dis part. She can't do it. She hasn't enough experience. I want dat part to go to Miss Deschamps. I'm sorry, of course!" There was a baleful look in his eyes as they rested on Sunny's face.

"This is where you get your own back," she said quietly.

Hemmingway looked from one to the other.

"I don't quite understand!" he said.

"No, I don't suppose you do, nor ever will," Sunny said. "Only he don't mean me to have the part."

Rostheimer nodded.

"Not only I don'd mean you to haf dat part, Miss Ducrow, but I fancy you don'd bring dis theatre any luck!"

"You don't mean to say"—Hemmingway paused—"that you want her to go?"

"Dat's it; I wand her to go!" Rostheimer said. "I got an idea she is a Jonah in dis theatre. See?" He rubbed his hands and smiled at Sunny. "Der best ting is you look for anoder shop, Miss Ducrow!" he said.

Hemmingway looked red with anger.

"Look here!" he said, in a low voice. He took Rostheimer by the arm and led him to the window. For some moments he talked quickly and angrily. Rostheimer shook his head.

"Whose money is it, eh?" he asked. "Mine, ain'd it? Very goot. I haf my own vay, or nod anoder penny do I lene dis place. Are you going to do mitout me, Max? I don't tink so. Very well, I haf my way!"

He turned to Sunny.

"Miss Ducrow," he said, "we take off 'Look Out There!' in three weeks' time. Our contract mit you den ceases. You will den kindly look for anoder place in anoder theatre!" He smiled at her.

It was his revenge because she had refused to marry him.

CHAPTER XVII

New Plans

It was a blow—a knock-out blow—all the worse because so unexpected. But the confident smile never left Sunny's face.

"Sunny, you've got to hold your head up and keep smiling!" she muttered. "It's no good howling. There ain't any roads without hills. I've just come to the first hill, that's all, and I'm going to climb to the top all right!"

She laughed aloud, partly to cheer herself, partly so that others should not guess that there was anything wrong.

Bert looked at her. He said nothing. He knew Sunny; he could read her as an open book. It was the only thing Bert could do with certainty.

Strangely enough, it was Bert who had made the one brilliant success of the piece, and no one was more surprised than Bert himself. He could not realise it; he could not believe it. The moment he came on the stage, nervous and ill at ease and awkward, the audience began to laugh. When he, confused, and forgetting both the words and melody of his song, came down to the footlights and cast appealing, anxious glances to the musical conductor, the audience laughed louder still. When he sang the first line in a low, melancholy voice, and then halted at a loss and appealed to the conductor for a cue for the second line, the audience was in fits of laughter.

It was less what he did than the way he did it. The look of utter misery never for a moment lightened by a smile on his face; the wretched, melancholy, hang-dog expression, the slouch, the air of complete misery and the wondering, astonished looks that he gave the audience made them laugh till the tears rolled down their faces. It was the height of genius. He was an actor in ten thousand, they said; but they did not know Bert.

Night after night it was the same. Hemmingway, in spite of bad business, raised Bert's salary a pound a week, and would have made him sign a contract, but Bert would not.

"I ain't going to stay play-acting long," he said. "I shall get a job bymee by in the pickles again. It's no use me signing no contracts."

So he did not.

Tonight he and Sunny walked home together.

Sunny was unusually silent.

Well?" Bert asked.

"Not particularly," Sunny said.

"I thought you wasn't; but that isn't what I mean. What's wrong?"

"Oh, the sack," Sunny said.

(CONTINUED TOMORROW)

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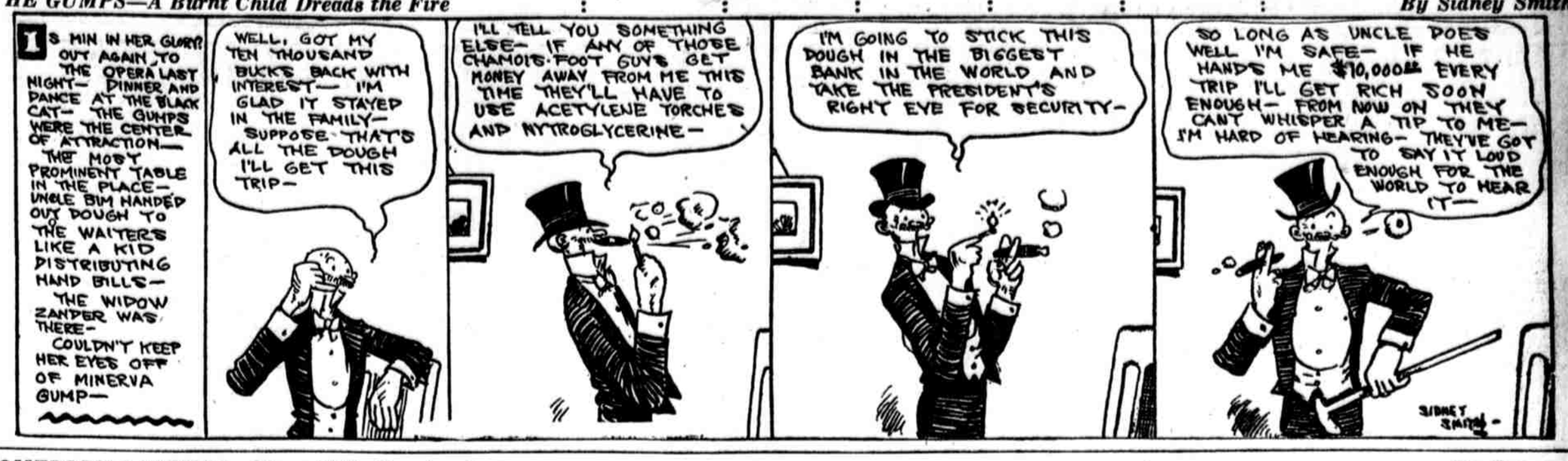
THE GUMPS—A Burnt Child Dreads the Fire

By Sidney Smith



SOMEBODY'S STENOG—It's a Little Beauty, Anyway

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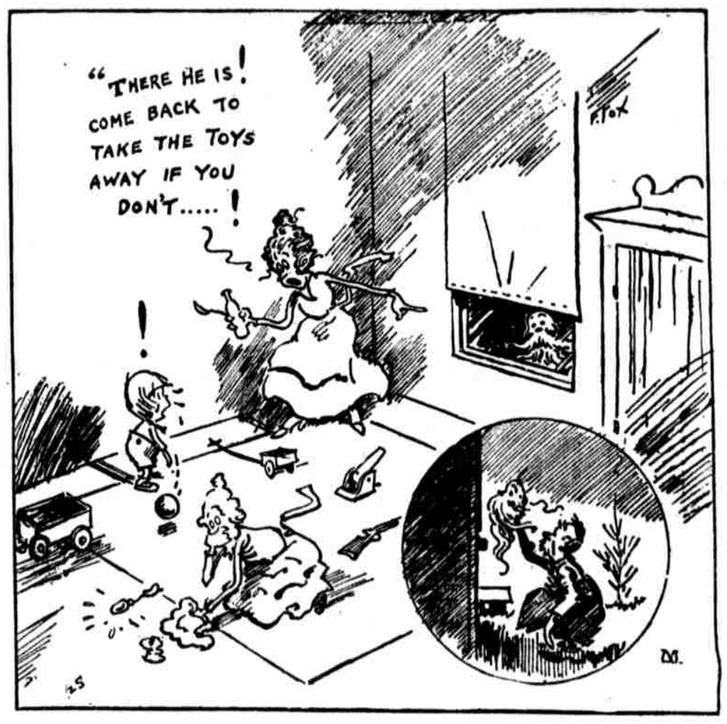
By Hayward

The Young Lady Across the Way

We asked the young lady across the way if she didn't have too many white corpuscles and she said on the other hand they had so much trouble getting a laundress regularly that she was going to get a lot more.

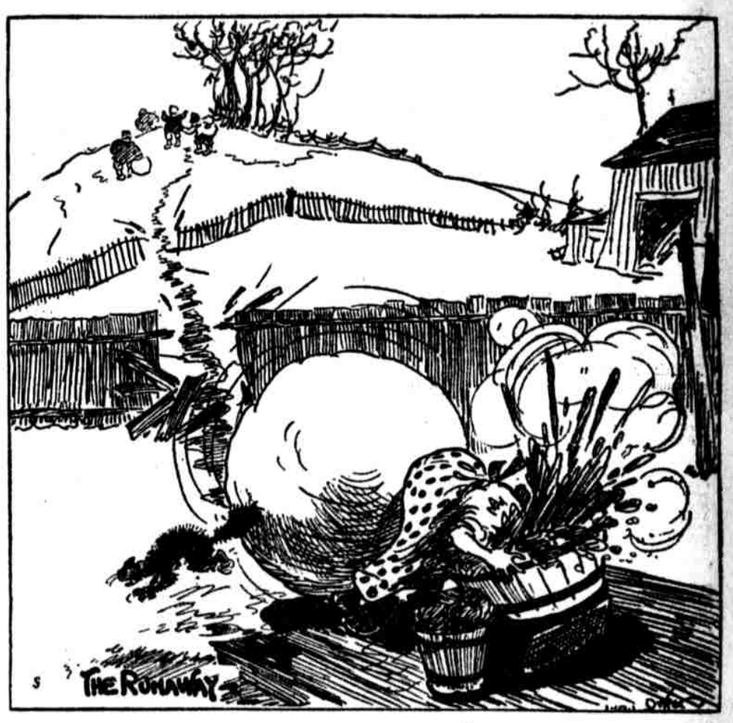
SANTA AS A HANGOVER

By FONTAINE FOX



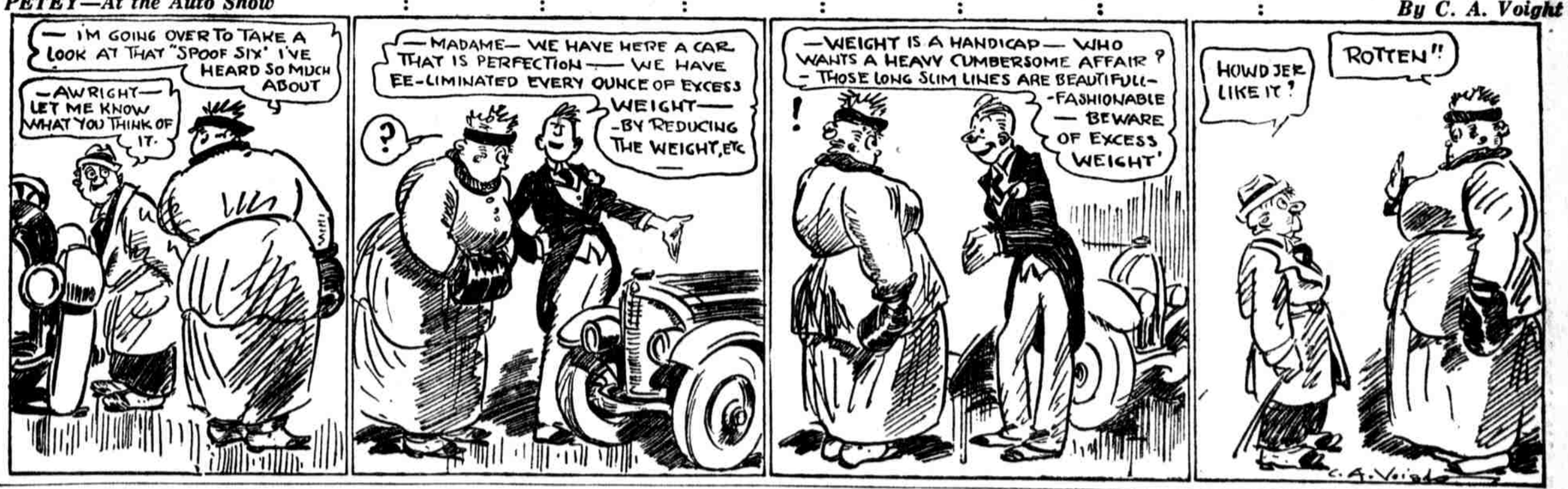
SCHOOL DAYS

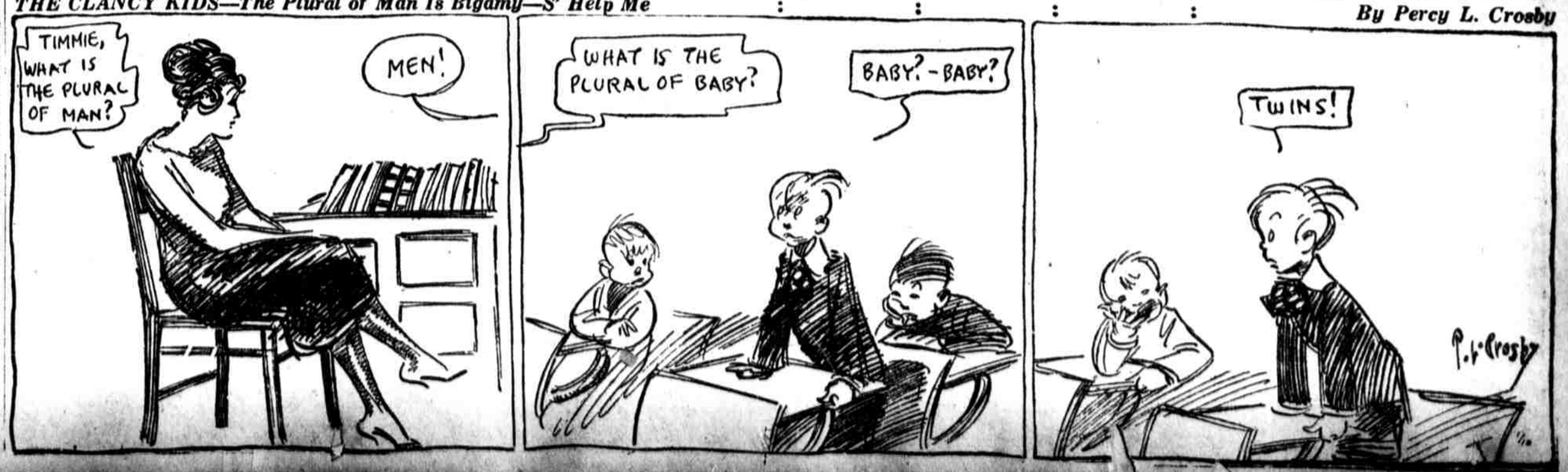
By DWIG



PETEY—At the Auto Show

By C. A. Voight



THE CLANCY KIDS—The Plural of Man Is Bigamy—S' Help Me

By Percy L. Crosby