LADYFINGERS

By JACKSON GREGORY

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THIS STARTS THE STORY

A safe has been cracked. Ambrose, detective, and Joe Le Brun, gangster and crook, with or without evidence, plot a "frame-up" that will fasten the crime on Robert Ashe, otherwise "Ladyfingers." Polly Le Brun informs Ashe of the scheme and reveals her love for him, which he does not reciprocate. Ashe could rob a safe or picket a pocket. He was a criminal but no cadet, a thief but a gentleman. A stranger disguised to the men offers Ambrose a reward of $500 if he can produce evidence against "Ladyfingers" that will send him to prison for ten years. Polly, angered at Ashe's lack of appreciation of her love, entices into a scheme with Ambrose to get from Ashe $9,000. At a social function Mrs. Rachel Stetheril is to wear her famous diamond and Polly, little Polly Le Brun, asks Robby Ashe if he will get it for her. Ashe holds the diamond for one minute, when his hand is struck and the gem falls to the ground. He escapes amid pistol shots and Ambrose in pursuit, arriving at a large house he tells of the theft, and revealing a detective's badge obtains admission, unaware that the dancer is a grandniece of Mrs. Stetheril. He is about to get away in a borrowed auto when a muffled shot stops the man and Rachel Stetheril falls across the wheel. "Do as I tell you!" says the man to Ashe. "You are to be my secretary, and ask no questions." Evelyn Daly, niece and nephew of Mrs. Stetheril, received a bouquet of roses with a typewritten card. She is poor and when she receives a check from Mrs. Stetheril she wonders will it be for $25 or $500.

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

BUT here there was a maid; here Evelyn might ring for what other servants she liked and they would come or empty; here she might at a moment's notice have saddle horse, carriage, or automobile; the conveyance she chose would carry her like a story-book princess into Lockworth, where people nudged each other and pointed her out, and there, whatever the stores sold, she might have by casually mentioning her aunt's name. And always the baggage man handling Evelyn's trunks in the little town knew that they came from the city light and went very heavy. What he did not know, being a mere man, was that the material of the finest gowns which the young lady wore in San Francisco had been specially imported from that city, passed over a counter in Lockworth, duly charged to the account of Rachel Stetheril, packed carefully away, subsequently journeying back whence it had come, there to be made up into creations altogether befitting the Stetheril heiress.

With the warm glow of satisfaction experienced this morning by Miss Daly, all of these matters mingled their influence with that of a mysterious present. As in the case of Bobbie Ashe, she could feel that the day was still young, the morning at 11, which was every bit as good as 7, even to the letter of rhyme, and that all was as it should be in the world.

"It couldn't have been Justin——" she mused over her coffee.

"He wouldn't have thought; if he did he would have shattered the joy of everything by writing in big letters, 'Yours faithfully, Justin Haddon.' No; it wasn't Justin."

She had quite a happy, sociable time over her breakfast. True, there was no one with her in the little sun-flooded room—but the serving maid, and in her preoccupation Evelyn had not observed in what manner and through what agent her food came before her. Not none the less she was in the society of one who understood her, one who sympathized with her, one who made allowances for her shortcomings and, maybe, changed them into virtues; in short, she was upon terms of perfect intimacy with that most charming person, Miss Evelyn Daly, heiress to the Stetheril millions.

The girl in the neat white apron came and asked, "Soft-boiled eggs this morning, Miss Daly?"

And Evelyn, not to be interrupted in her soul talk with the heiress, said to the latter:

"He is mysterious! There is mystery in his eyes * * * and poetry and romance! He is like a prince in a fairy tale! And he is a friend of the chief of police; he is an amateur detective. He dabbles in crime as other men play with politics!"

The thought was delightful and from it was born a delicious little shudder, which caused the attendant Jane to close the door for fear of a draft.

On her way down through the long, spacious hallway Evelyn peeped in at the open door of Rachel Stetheril's office. Here a typewriter was clicking like mad under the fingers of Adrian Graham, the old woman's latest private secretary. Evelyn saw that here there had been no change since her last visit, wrinkled her nose at Graham's bent back and passed on. The young man with his straight, straw-colored hair, bleak looking eyes and frostbitten face had no place in the errant fancies of Evelyn Daly.

"I wonder," she asked herself as she came into the great dim music room where her gray slippers sunk deep into the rugs and where much stately furniture forgot its dignity and winked at her with the stolen light from the edges of drawn shades—"if he has ever lived any of the life which he has seen through a detective's eyes? If he, himself, has a past with mysteries in it?"

Again the little shrill, the delicious shudder at the creation of her own wild imaginings.

"I wonder," she went on, "if I really love Justin? Or * * *."

She laughed softly to herself, still mildly content with the exclusive company of an exclusive heiress, and going to the piano sent the rollicking strains of a piece of glad music into the remotest corner of the big house. In the midst of her playing she stopped abruptly to rearrange the rose in her hair. She had discovered, across the room, her own face in a mirror, looking, so she told the Heiress, like a dream girl * * * from another fairy story. Or from the same one! Or that other matters came into her mind she didn't confess even to her sympathetic confidante; but as she got up from the piano the tender tint in her cheeks had deepened. And she shook a grave finger at the fairy dream girl as she went, quite as though in warning.

She was cuddled up nicely in a monster lounging chair upon the porch reading herself, her face protected by the drooping brim of a wide Panama, a late novel hastily absorbed as far as page 90, when there came to her the sound of wheels and hoofs upon the gravel of the driveway. Magically the book disappeared—to be sure Rachel Stetheril would know nothing either of the title or the author, but the numerous full-page illustrations were most startlingly interesting—and turned a laughing sunny face up toward the awning, wintry one bent over a crooked stick.

"For all things in the world she does look just like a black witch!" said Evelyn to the heiress. "Good morning, Bettie," said Evelyn to Rachel Stetheril. "I've had the most delightful morning!"

Rachel Stetheril had come up the flight of stone steps from the garden with a sprightly alacrity which at once fascinated and amazed her great-grandniece. For while the old woman seemed to look ten years older for each year that passed, until now she was the visible personification of decrepit old age, hollow-eyed, hollow-cheeked, with a witch's nose and chin drawing ever closer each other as the mouth receded—while she looked all this if you managed to catch her an instant in repose, which was an achievement you might boast of—in action she seemed younger this morning than she had been ten years ago. The brightness of her eyes bespoke the quickness of her mind; the sharpness of her tongue was ample sign of the nimbleness of her temper; the birdlike alertness in the carriage of her head, the grim set of her long fingers about her stick, the quick step, all bespoke the woman's character.

Now she hobbled down the porch until she bent over Evelyn's chair, her hard, wise old eyes gimleting after whatever the girl might hold secretly in her mind and actually making Evelyn wonder if they saw the naughty latest thing in books under the thick cushions.

"You're a pretty thing," snapped the old woman.

"Thank you, auntie," said Evelyn, clearly pleased at such a remark from such a quarter.

"Oh, don't thank me," cut in Rachel Stetheril, tapping viciously with her stick. "She's a butterfly pretty. Long on looks and short on brains. Most likely your head's chuck full of looking-glasses and fools in breeches——Where's Haddon?"

Still Evelyn smiled, accepting her great-grandaunt as a true philosopher accepts an unpleasant change in the weather.

"I haven't seen Mr. Haddon this morning," she answered quietly.

"Morning!" grunted the old woman. "It's afternoon and time for lunch, and I told Haddon to be here at 12. If the fool doesn't know which side his bread's buttered on and who butters it for him he doesn't know much."

Evelyn peeped slyly at her watch. The little golden hands pointed at two full minutes after 12.

"Graham!" cried Mrs. Stetheril, lifting her sharp, shrill voice with such sudden vehemence that fully half a dozen servants in the house and about the grounds started anxiously. "Graham!"

"Yes, Mrs. Stetheril."

The answer in the expressionless voice of the young man with the frost-bitten face sounded ridiculously flat after the old woman's lively call. It was preceded by a cessation of the faint clicking of a distant typewriter and immediately followed by the sound of Adrian Graham's soft-footed approach.

"What do you think of this new secretary of Haddon's?" demanded Mrs. Stetheril. Of Evelyn, obviously, since not yet had Graham come out of the house.

"I * * * Why, what should I think, auntie?" She lifted her very innocent looking eyes to her aunt's. "I hardly know him, you know. He seems very nice."

"What does Haddon want a secretary for?" queried Mrs. Stetheril sharply, her eyes keen upon Evelyn's.

"Why," smiled Evelyn, "he says that he is very busy and needs some one to take a lot of the routine work off his hands. Also, he told me last night that he is writing a book, a sort of * * *."

"Book!" jeered the old woman. "Justin Haddon write a book! Is the man plumb mad?"

"I don't know, auntie," came pleasantly with Evelyn's little laugh. "He says that there is a demand for a * * * Oh, I don't quite know what it is, a sort of handbook of legal information or something of that kind. And * * *."

"When did he tell you all this?" asked her aunt, eyeing her with sharpness vaguely mingled with suspicion.

"Last night. While we were * * *."

"Humph! Last night without any warning he takes on a secretary, Justin Haddon who doesn't need one any more than I need wings, and who's as tight as a rain barrel. On top of that he's going to write a book * * * Oh. You're here, are you?"

"Yes, Mrs. Stetheril. You called * * *."

"Don't tell me what I did," she snapped at Graham who had come up so quietly that she had not heard him. "That's no reason for you to come creeping up on me like a footpad." She glared at him for an instant and then jeeringly announced, "I always did have my suspicions of a man that went slinking around in rubber soles."

"You may remember, Mrs. Stetheril," he began with an assumption of dignity very unsuccessfully done under her hard eyes, a dignity which seemed actually pale, colorless, as though it were a thing he kept in the dark cellar of his being and now had dragged out into the sunlight, "that you, yourself, suggested * * *."

"Shut up!" she cried out at him, jerking up her great stick as though she would strike him with it. "Shut up! * * * What have you done about this Bond affair?"

"The Bond affair?" he asked stiffly, conscious of Evelyn's interested observation and being, after all, human. "May I ask what particular bond affair?"

"Oh, you dunce!" she clacked at him. "What particular bond affair! The Bond affair, Bond. Capital B. B-o-n-d. Bond! It's a man's name. A man might be named Bramble or Spinach, I suppose, if he wanted to. Some men ought to be named Tom Fool. I'm talking about Arnold Bond, a man, cashier of the Lockworth National Bank."

It all came down upon poor Adrian Graham in an avalanche of hurtling, heated words, and though he got his mouth open and kept it open until she was done no words came from it immediately. His face was red, and one less implacable than the Black Witch herself must have felt sorry for him.

"I telephoned Mr. Bond this morning, as per your instructions," he at last got out. "He said that unfortunately nothing had been done yet. I urged him to give the matter his early attention. * * *."

"Early attention!" sneered Rachel Stetheril. "And I'm to wait like a simpering schoolgirl upon his pleasure and convenience, am I? You—you—you're fired!" she ended blantly.

"Really, Mrs. Stetheril," he began weakly, "I fail to see * * *."

"So does a bat!" she cut him short. "That's one reason you're fired. Now, don't stand there gasping. Pack your traps and get!"

"That's one fool the less getting under my feet," she grunted less to Evelyn than to herself as Graham turned and went swiftly and noiselessly back into the house. "And now what's Haddon doing? Drat the man."

"They're coming!" cried Evelyn.

And in a moment they had swung into the driveway and drawn up in front of the house, Haddon and Ashe. They came quickly up the steps, Justin Haddon slightly in advance, his eye bright and eager, a little flush in his usually sallow cheeks. Behind him, more leisurely, came Robert Ashe, his hat already in hand as he caught sight of Evelyn and Mrs. Stetheril, his eyes going swiftly from the sour face bent over the cane to the smiling one lifted expectantly.

(CONTINUED TOMORROW)

THE GUMPS—Man, Know Thyself

By Sidney Smith

SOMEBODY'S STENOG—A Victim of the Crime Wave

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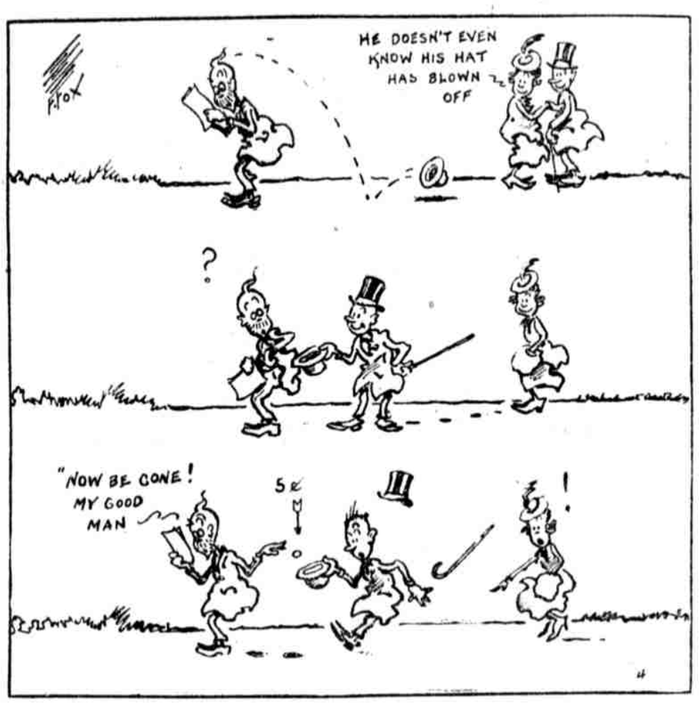
By Hayward

The Young Lady Across the Way

The young lady across the way says the woolen goods they sell now are half shoddy and our farmers ought to raise a better grade of sheep.

THE ABSENT-MINDED PROFESSOR

By FONTAINE FOX

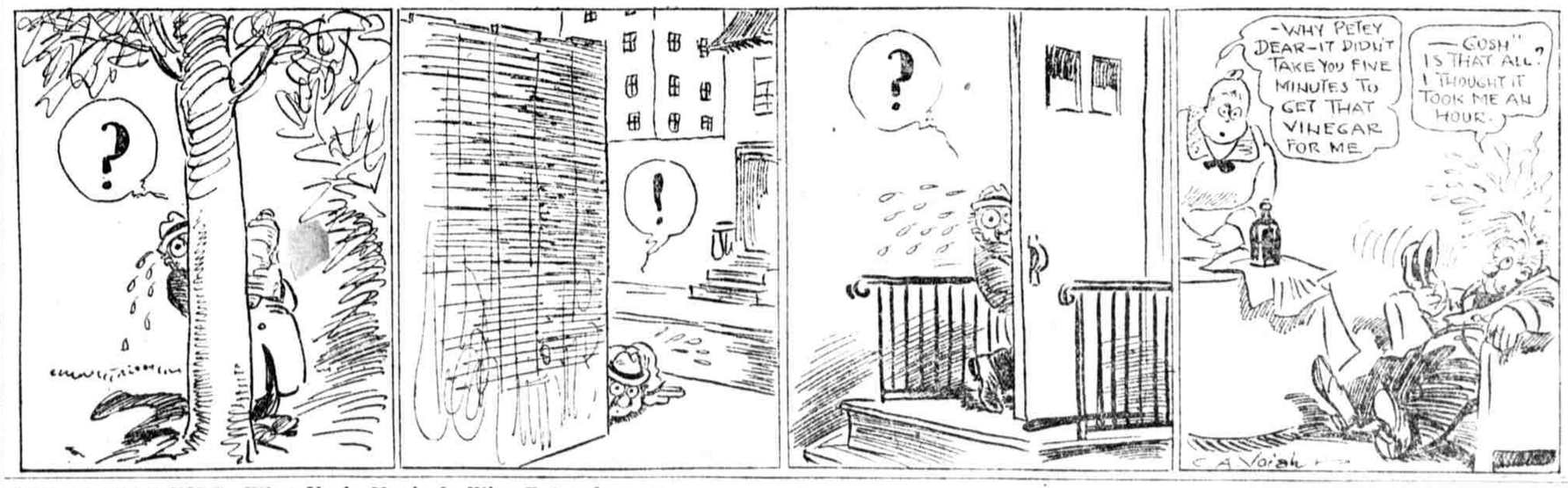


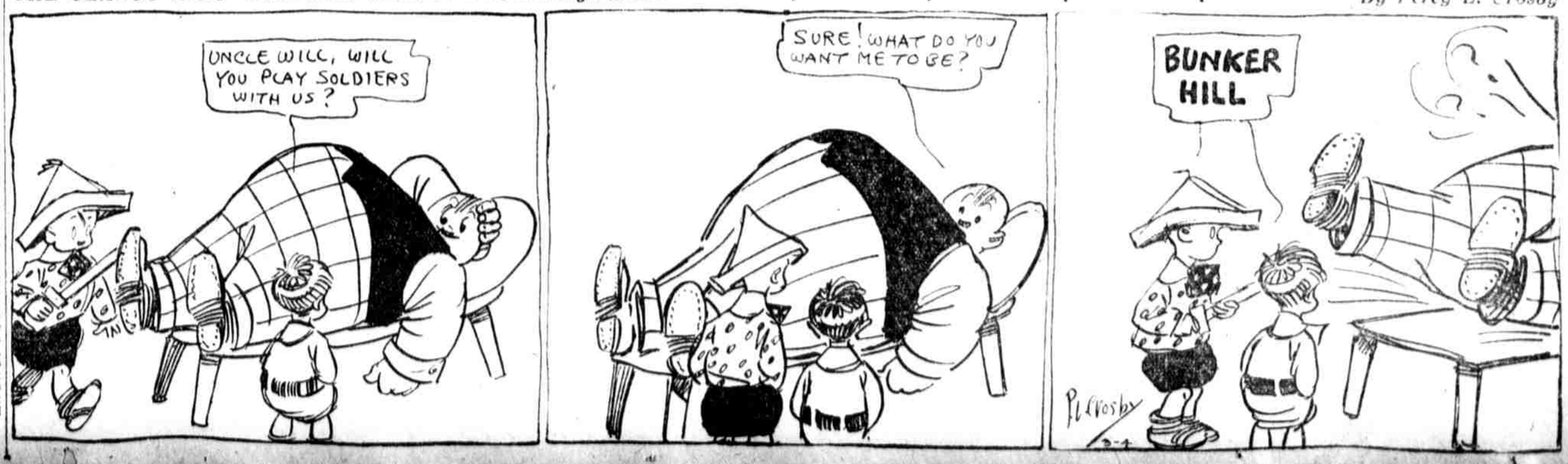
SCHOOL DAYS

By DWIG

PETEY—A Dreadful Undertaking These Days

By C. A. Voight



THE CLANCY KIDS—What Uncle Needs Is Wire Entanglements

By Percy L. Crosby