

LADYFINGERS

By JACKSON GREGORY

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THIS STARTS THE STORY

"Ladyfingers," a thief but a gentleman with a sunny, merry disposition, is the object of a frame-up that will justify the cracking of a safe on the wall and send him to prison. The frame-up is planned by a gangster named Haddon, the leader of a wide and crooked crew of 50,000 from a notorious and a bride of 5000 from a lawyer who is anxious to get rid of her. He attempts a diamond robbery from the person of Mrs. Stetheril, because Polly Le Brun asks him to get it for her, and he escapes with pistol shots with the detective in pursuit. The gem had been knocked from his hand and fallen to the ground. He is afterward engaged as a rook, a shrewd business woman with a real heart hidden away in a rough exterior. Haddon, the lawyer who offered the 50000 bribe, has charge of the legal affairs of this woman, Mrs. Stetheril, and it is into this office that Ronnie and Edie Hadden enter as protégés of his mistress. Haddon threatens Ashe with exposure if he refuses to rob the county bank which holds Mrs. Stetheril's money. Mrs. Stetheril engages Bond, a bank cashier, as gardener, after withdrawing her money from the bank, and the very next morning she reminds him there can be no laughing.

"You know what I mean," interrupted the lawyer. "And, if there are days when I am dreadfully busy, you know why, whose future I always have in mind."

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"Are you going to marry me, Evelyn?" he demanded bluntly. "Or are you not?"

"Oh!" said Evelyn, drawing a little back, her voice uncertain. Soon or late she had known it must come to this, but she had always let the time for adjustment lie beyond the mist of tomorrow. She hated to talk in the direct fashion Haddon was insisting upon; without circumlocution her spirit was without wings. At the moment she detested the man.

"Oh!" said much of an answer, he reminded her dryly.

"Why do you come to me this way?" she cried irritably. "Why do you talk to me like this?"

"Because I want to know. I want to know if you have changed your mind."

"What if I have?" swiftly, watching him curiously, "Would you be very angry, Justin? Do you care very much?"

Instinctively she was seeking to retrieve the situation from its horrid warmth of fact and steep it in the warm days of light love-making. But again he was unresponsive.

"Certainly I have the right to know what you plan to do. Will you answer me?"

"You are in a perfectly nasty mood!" she said, pettishly. "I am going in, Mr. Haddon."

"In the moment," he informed her equitably. "When I get my answer."

"Then no!" she cried angrily. "No and no and no! There, you have it! You are hateful and I never want to see you again. Now will you let me go?"

"No," he told her quietly. "Not yet. And may I suggest that you don't speak quite so loudly? You may change your mind again, you may not want what you say overheard. Just a lawyer's advice, Miss Daly."

"Let me go," she cried hotly.

"Do you know," he asked evenly, though his cheeks had flushed, "what a contract is?"

"Some day, when I need to know," she retorted, "I'll have a lawyer of my own to attend to such matters for me. And it won't be you."

"There are verbal contracts as well as written," he went on. "They are quite as binding. You promised to marry me. There are witnesses that such an agreement had been entered into. It can be broken only with the consent of both contracting parties. That is the law, Miss Daly."

"Law! What do I care about the law? Do you think you can make me marry you?"

"Yes, I think I can. I have a very excellent case; I shall make it my business to have an excellent case. I shall bring a damage suit if you force my hand. It will get from the courts into the papers."

"You brute!" she flung at him breathlessly. "You great, unthinkable brute!"

"But not unthinking," Haddon told her harshly. "Never that. Not even when, in the glamour of the thing, you allowed yourself to commit certain little indiscretions which, very innocent, of course, will look quite the opposite when the newspapers air them and gain the little secret trip with me last spring."

"Oh!" cried Evelyn, terrified.

"Don't misjudge me, Evelyn," Haddon went on hurriedly a bit gently. "I am only trying to show you."

"I hate you," Her cheeks had blanched, her hands looked both white and cold. "And I know what you will do. You will go to auntie and try to make her make me marry you. And in the end you will make her pay you a lot of money to keep your mouth shut."

Haddon laughed, an ugly, irritable laugh of strained nerves.

"Your aunt has \$15,000,000," he said in his old bluff.

"Do you think I'd be satisfied with a few miserable thousands when it all should come to you, the whole fifteen millions?"

Evelyn, amazed, moistened her lips and looked at him incredulously.

"You mean that you are going to marry me and right away. It is the best thing for you; it is the best thing for me. I love you. You love me as much as you'll ever love anybody."

"I will never marry you," she told him with spirit. She had seen Bond looking toward her innocently.

For a little Haddon stood regarding her frowningly, his lips compressed tightly. When he did not speak she looked up swiftly, hoping to see a weakening of his attitude. But she saw rather that while he had hesitated the hesitation had been brief and that his former stern determination had come back into his eyes.

"Evelyn," he said slowly, "I have something else to say to you. Something which may change the whole of your future life. Something that is going to be a shock to you. I am telling you because I believe that, under your feigning, there is a deal of hard, common sense. If I am mistaken . . . He threw out his hands and let them fall lax at his sides.

Even at a tense moment like this Evelyn's lively curiosity responded.

"What is it?" she asked.

But now Haddon no longer chose the shortest path to the thing he had to say; now he and Evelyn changed roles, she direct in her inquiry, he circuitous in his reply.

"Evelyn," he said, "the greatest thing in the world . . . do you know what it is? It is one of your sentimental moods you'd say, it is love, and you'd know that you were not telling the truth. The greatest thing in the world is happiness. Maybe some poor, half-witted fool get it through love. But you and I and people like us, sensible people, get it just one way, by buying it, by paying for it. We get it with money. That brings whatever we want, power, clothes, things, luxuries, everything. If your aunt decides to leave you fourteen or fifteen millions you'll have everything in the world you want, won't you?"

"Money is not everything," said Evelyn with something of the grand air, quite ready to make light of a thing which she considered as already as good as her own.

"With those millions," went on Haddon, "you can have your city house and your country house, your yachts on eastern lakes and rivers, your place in society, your cars, your dresses, your diamonds, your servants by the score. You have perhaps thought of these things more than once? Have you ever thought of what life would be like if you didn't get those millions?"

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

FOR at close range a little of Huxter's assurance had left him. Bond's was neither a kind nor yet a humorous eye just now.

"You go to the devil, Huxter," said Bond shortly.

"That'll be Mrs. Stetheril, sir," stated Huxter.

"I will tell her if you got obnoxious," I'd get my head took off if I didn't."

"Go then," said Bond furiously. But so soon as the words came he thought better of the matter. After he had gone this far there was no sense in spilling everything. She won't be here, he said more pleasantly. "He slyly dropped a penny piece to the ground and pushed it toward the head gardener with his foot. "Stick that in your pocket and get out of sight for a while. The five-dollar piece winked up at Huxter slyly, tempting the soul of him. Bond turned away; Huxter caught up the gold and retreated across the grounds, muttering to himself as he went.

Bond was an astute young man who had formed early in life the excellent habit of keeping his eyes open and his mouth shut. He had a great deal of time to spare, and he was not a man to waste it. He had gone this far there was no sense in spilling everything. She won't be here, he said more pleasantly. "He slyly dropped a penny piece to the ground and pushed it toward the head gardener with his foot. "Stick that in your pocket and get out of sight for a while. The five-dollar piece winked up at Huxter slyly, tempting the soul of him. Bond turned away; Huxter caught up the gold and retreated across the grounds, muttering to himself as he went.

"You've got a good thing here. Good wages and easy work."

"I'm not complaining," admitted Huxter with a wink.

"I should think not," said Bond dryly. "You manage to put something in the savings bank, haven't you, Huxter?"

"Two hundred and forty dollars," said Huxter with an air.

"Ah. And it draws 4 per cent. Hm. You'll never get rich at that rate, Huxter. Come and let me see the bank some time. I can arrange it so that you can get 8 per cent. That's just double, Huxter."

"Would it be safe like sir?" asked Huxter, impressed.

"Absolutely. And maybe . . . Let me see. Maybe I could let you in on a little private deal which would double your money in six months. I'm innocent."

"I don't like to gamble, sir."

"I'm a banker, not a poker player!" said Bond sternly. "When I say a thing is safe it is just as good as the gold in your pocket."

"Thank you, sir," said Huxter, his eyes eager. "When could I get my money down on it, so to speak?"

"To speak you can get your money down on it tomorrow if you'll come to me at the bank. And . . . Oh, there's something else. I have just been talking with Miss Daly and she tells me that some of the old money has been annoying her. Huxter, it must stop."

"Annoying her?" said Huxter quickly, his big hand balling up into a grimy fist. "Let me at him, sir."

"No, Huxter. I'm innocent."

"He looked at Huxter innocently. He had been in the head gardener's cabin, and had seen an old typewriter there."

"Just keep your eye out for the fellow," he said carelessly. "Miss Daly wants to know who he is so that she can speak to her aunt and have him dismissed. I'll give you another \$10 if you'll find out and let me know."

Huxter's answer was unintelligible. Bond went happily for his hoe.

"Tonight," he apostrophized no visible person in the sunlit gardens, "you are going to find out on your table the biggest bunch of roses you ever saw!"

And he continued to smile as he thought of how he might square the game with Buel Stetheril, if fate were kind and Evelyn kinder.

CHAPTER XXII

Haddon's Grip Tightens

Justin Haddon, seeking Evelyn Daly, saw her and hid taking earnestly and ultimately down by the creek. He went back to the steps and waited for her. He showed no evidence of impatience, which he tossed away as he witnessed her pretty farewells to the banker. Before Bond had found Huxter at the rear of the house Haddon was at Evelyn's side.

She nodded at him brightly. Haddon frowned. For she had smiled at him precisely as she had been smiling at the shopkeepers, at the sweep of rolling landscape, at the clear sky. And she was passing on when he detained her by saying briefly:

"Will you give me a word, Evelyn?"

"Two, if you like," she told him brightly. "Maybe three if you are real nice."

He did not rise to her mood, did not seek to nor pretend to. He stood nearly before her in the path, looking at her steadily.

"Evelyn," he said, "we don't seem to see a great deal of each other lately, do we?"

Evelyn flashed her eyes at him, lifted her shoulders. She sensed a little passage at arms which in no way alarmed her. Such emotional frays were the breath in her nostrils, the food in her veins.

"Don't we?" she countered coolly. "It seems to me, Justin, that we see each other at lunch and at dinner, in the afternoon and in the evenings. . . . Of course, there are times when you are so dreadfully busy. . . ."

"You know what I mean," interrupted the lawyer. "And, if there are days when I am dreadfully busy, you know why, whose future I always have in mind."

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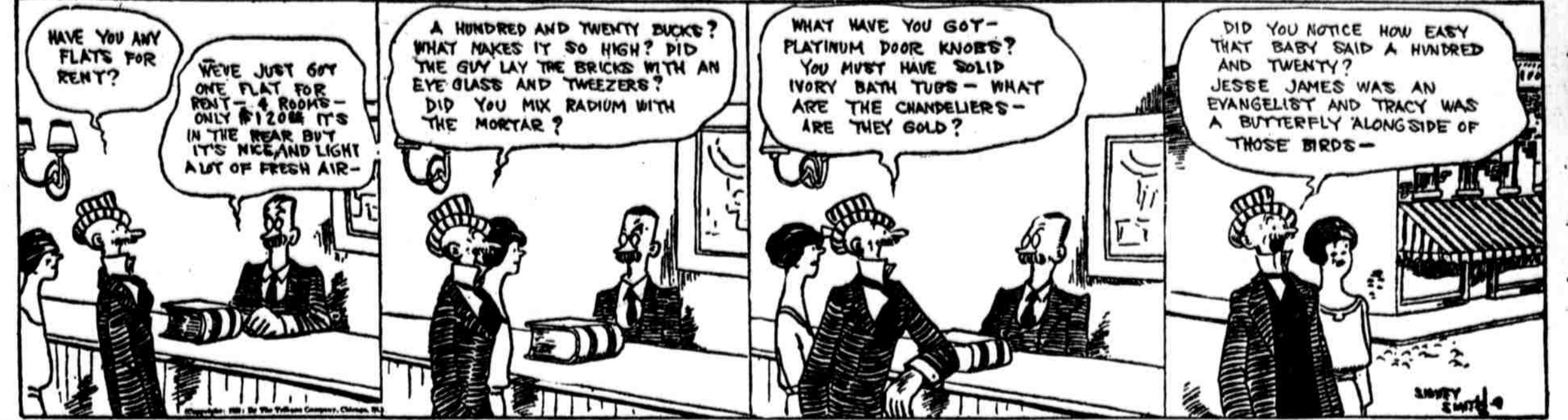
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THE GUMPS—The Hunt Is On

By Sidney Smith



SOMEBODY'S STENOGRAPHER—What's on Her Mind?

By Hayward

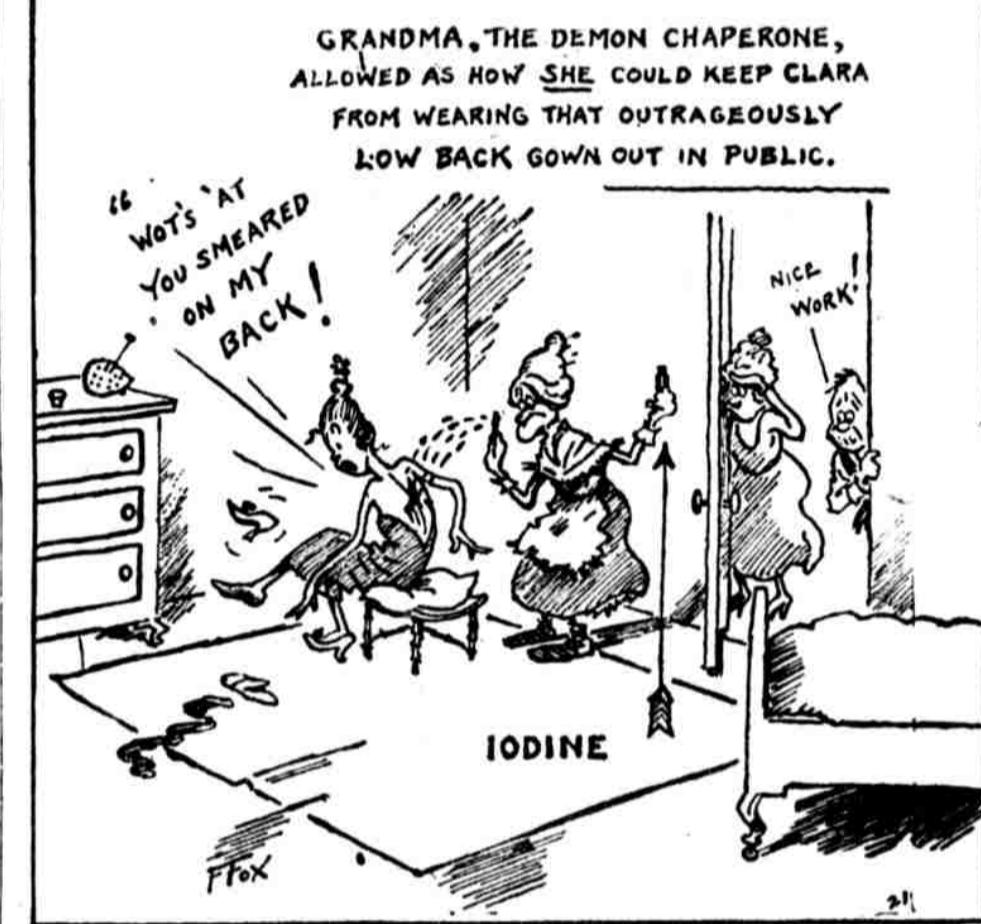


The Young Lady Across the Way

When the Commands and Entreaties of Mother and Dad Had Failed—By Fontaine Fox

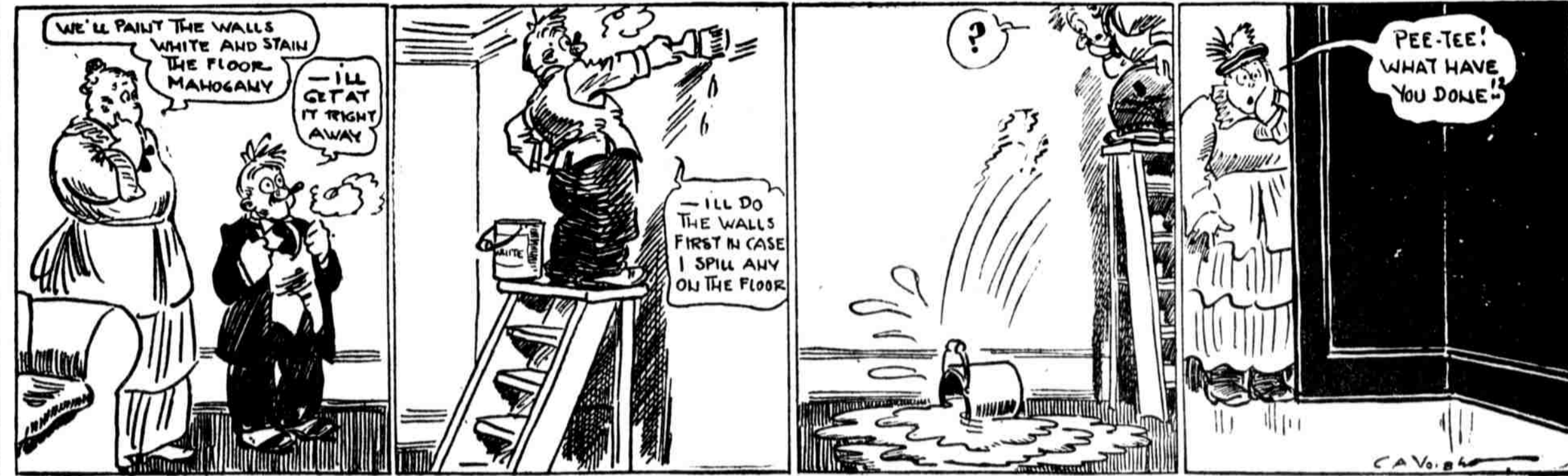
SCHOOL DAYS

By DWIG



PETEY—He Did No More Than a Day's Work

By C. A. Voight



THE CLANCY KIDS—Give Him a Chance, Mrs. Clancy—Gi ve Him a Chance

By Percy L. Crosby



(CONTINUED TO MORROW)