

LADYFINGERS

By JACKSON GREGORY

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THIS STARTS THE STORY

"Ladyfingers," a thief but a gentleman with a suave manner, disinterested in the object of a frame-up that will fasten the cracking of a safe on him. The frame-up is planned by a gangster and crook who has a \$5000 bribe and a bribe of \$5000 from a lawyer anxious to get rid of Ladyfingers. He attempts a diamond robbery from the person of Rachel Stetheril, but he is foiled by Polly Le Brun who asks him to get it for her, and he escapes amid pistol shots with the detective in pursuit. He is engaged as secretary to a woman he attempted to rob, a sleek business woman with a real heart hidden under a rough exterior. Haddon, the lawyer who offered the \$5000 bribe, has a change of heart and has made inquiries of the whereabouts of a grandson. He finds the young man in the person of Ladyfingers. He reported him dead. Haddon had been paying court to Evelyn Daly, the supposed heiress. She is fickle and unsteady. He tries to force a climax by relating to her that the grandson would inherit instead of her. A large sum of money had been removed from the bank to Mrs. Stetheril's safe for one night—Haddon tells Ashe he must steal this money, give him \$10,000 and then get out of the country. But Polly Le Brun reveals to Ashe a plan to capture and steal from him the loot he steals from the safe, then to land him in the penitentiary.

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

But he had had ample time in which to consider his position from all angles and his determination was firmly made. Now there was nothing to do but wait. Wait through the hours which alternately seemed creeping and flying. He was given up Enid, but not for all time. Surely not for all time. That would be hideously impossible. He had written a letter which he would slip under her door tonight, which she would read the first thing in the morning. She was going to awake with him in her thoughts. His letter would bring sorrow, but she would understand. She would suffer, but she would forgive. She would wait. And some day, some day...

Already his clock indicated the eleventh hour of the night. The eleventh hour! His lips tightened grimly. He took up his hat and left the room. Long ago had the big house grown silent. There was no use waiting longer.

He went along the dark hall, down the carpeted stairways, silently. He came to Enid's room and stopped. Upon his knees he slipped the letter under her door. And then, his head again in his hands, he remained very still, kneeling. "I am coming back," he whispered at last. "I am coming back, some time, Enid. Good-by, Enid."

He moved on slowly, cautiously, making no sound. For a little he thought only of Enid, Enid sleeping just yonder. But swiftly his mind switched from her to the immediate, personal danger which he felt to be lurking in the darkness for him of arrest. The one thing now was to keep clear of arrest, to keep his freedom so that in the future he might be arbiter of his own fate. Haddon and Ambrose might even now be watching him. Ashe must be ready as well as he might.

He thought of other nights in dark houses, with safes to be opened and a policeman just outside. The silence and obscurity and void about him were familiar. Through a window whose shade had not been drawn he now saw that the night was clear with a moon. Yonder across the hall lay a little patch of light. He must pass through it. He passed, listening.

He was again taking his chance, and he knew it, realizing all that it meant. But, though intensified, his sensations were the old, oft-repeated sensations of the past. He was prepared to leap forward or back instantly, to throw himself to right or left, to fight it out, to seek the open by a dash through window or door. His blood was tingling but rather pleasantly now than otherwise. For the moment the emotion standing highest in his breast was one of zest. He was Ladyfingers, who had led such as Lieutenant Ambrose for many years. Ladyfingers the debonair, fearless, confident and capable.

And while he moved on noiselessly, ready for anything, there was some one quite near him, some one who also was taking her chance. Ashe himself had told her, "Sometimes it's the only way of getting the thing you want." Rachel Stetheril herself, crouching like a thief in a little alcove which looked into the study, waited.

to see Haddon confronting him (grimly). Haddon and Ambrose. And inside, he saw Rachel Stetheril as her hand fell away from the electric switch.

"You!" he muttered. "You! Haddon told you!"

Even then he realized that in her old eyes there was a look which he had never seen before. There was a yearning that was close to tears, there was a pain as of a soul in anguish. He did not understand.

He saw the two old hands twisting together.

"So you are just a thief, just a thief, after all!"

He had never heard her voice like this. It was broken and sad, a hopeless voice of a very old woman who had taken her one chance and lost.

"Yes," he said with sudden bitterness. "I am just a thief after all. Robert Ashe at your service, Mrs. Stetheril. Ladyfingers, if you wish, just a thief." He made her one of his deep bows.

"Look at my chance," she was saying in the same lifeless monotone. "It was the only way to know if you were utterly contemptible. I can stand a bad man, but not a hypocrite."

Ashe flushed and bit his lip.

"You have been good to me..." he began quietly.

But she jerked up her head again and she smiled bitterly.

"Shut up! Talk to me about being good to you and then, the first time you get the chance, rob me!"

"Mrs. Stetheril!" he exclaimed sharply. "I did not rob you!"

"You did!" she snapped hotly. "I saw you!"

"I beg your pardon," he answered. "I did not."

"What did you take out of my safe then?"

"Nothing."

"Liar!" she flung at him. "Liar!"

"As you will," he answered coolly.

"But..."

"This man is my prisoner! Stand where you are, my gay Ladyfingers! So I've got you at last, have I?"

Ashe turned swiftly.

"So," he said briefly, "it's you, is it, Ambrose?"

Lieutenant Ambrose stepped into the room and behind him came Justin Haddon looking pale and anxious-eyed. Rachel Stetheril stared at them both with hard, unwinking eyes.

"Who's your friend, Haddon?" she demanded in an ugly voice. "And what in God's name are you up to now?"

"May I introduce him?" asked Ashe impudently. "Mrs. Stetheril, Lieutenant Richard Ambrose, distinguished in the San Francisco police and crook circles. Haddon, you are quite the cur that thought you, Ambrose, at your service."

Ambrose, his eyes gleaming, came a step forward, his right hand in his coat pocket, watchful and suspicious.

"This man," he explained to Rachel Stetheril, "is a crook. He is wanted in San Francisco for a good many things. Ever hear of Ladyfingers? Among other things he stole your diamond for you."

Rachel Stetheril went to her chair and sat down. She looked not at Haddon nor Ambrose, but at Ashe. And he, smiling, met her look steadily. But for all of his composure his heart was sick within him. To be trapped this way, to be dragged away to jail, with Enid under the same roof...

"If you hadn't lied to me," she said after a very long silence. "If you hadn't played the hypocrite..."

"I didn't lie to you," maintained Ashe stoutly. "To you I have never played the hypocrite. You have been like a mother to me and I have played square with you."

"He's got a glib tongue," grunted Ambrose. "He's got his chance to talk to the judge. You'll come along with me and not make any trouble, Ashe."

Ashe stared at him insolently.

"What is the charge?" he demanded. Ambrose laughed tolerantly.

"Standing by all your rights, eh?" he sneered. "Well, then, for the theft of Mrs. Stetheril's diamond."

"That all?" with undisturbed insolence.

"And for burglary. You see, my dear young crook, both Mr. Haddon and myself saw you crack the safe there."

Ashe laughed at him.

"You've got great eyes for seeing in the dark!" he grinned.

"Mrs. Stetheril," said Ambrose, swinging about upon her, "will you open your safe?"

"No!" She was upon her feet again, her outstretched forefinger close under Ambrose's nose. "No! I won't! And you let that boy go! I don't care the snap of your fingers what he's done. I refuse to prosecute! Hear me? You let him go!"

Ambrose's stare of astonishment was no more marked than Ashe's. Haddon began to pluck nervously at his under lip.

"Open the safe!" cried Ashe. "Open it!"

"Bluff, curse you," snarled Ambrose. "Much good it'll do you!"

"I won't open it," repeated Rachel Stetheril. "And you won't arrest that boy! Let him go, I tell you! Let him go or I'll have Carter call my servants and chuck you out of the house. Yes, and that infernal sneak Haddon with you! Do you hear me?"

"I hear you," said Ambrose stolidly. "But even you can't do a thing like that. I've got my hands on Robert Ashe and..."

"You fool!" she screamed at him. "Who is Robert Ashe? Where is Robert Ashe? This? That is Robert Stetheril Ellis. My great-grandson, if you please. And now that I've got him with God's help or the devil's, I'm going to keep him!"

Ambrose looked at her with sagging jaw. Ladyfingers the great-grandson of Rachel Stetheril of the Stetheril millions? From her he stared at Haddon, whose pallor had deepened.

As for Bobbie Ashe, for a moment he was stupefied. And then quick, hot tears sprang into his eyes. To him it was so simple, so futile, so pathetic. The old woman meant to save him even now, and so...

But was the thing so futile after all? If she meant to save him, why then what was impossible? And not yet had she opened the safe! It was incredible, but...

"Mrs. Stetheril," he cried out to her impetuously. "I give you my word that I have not taken a thing from your safe. Open it!"

She turned upon him slowly and for a long time stood looking deep into his eyes, the muscles of her wrinkled old face working pitifully.

"If you are telling me the truth...

Continued Monday

THE GUMPS—It's the Clothes That Make the Man

By Sidney Smith



SOMEBODY'S STENOG—Cam Knocks Their Eye Out

By Hayward



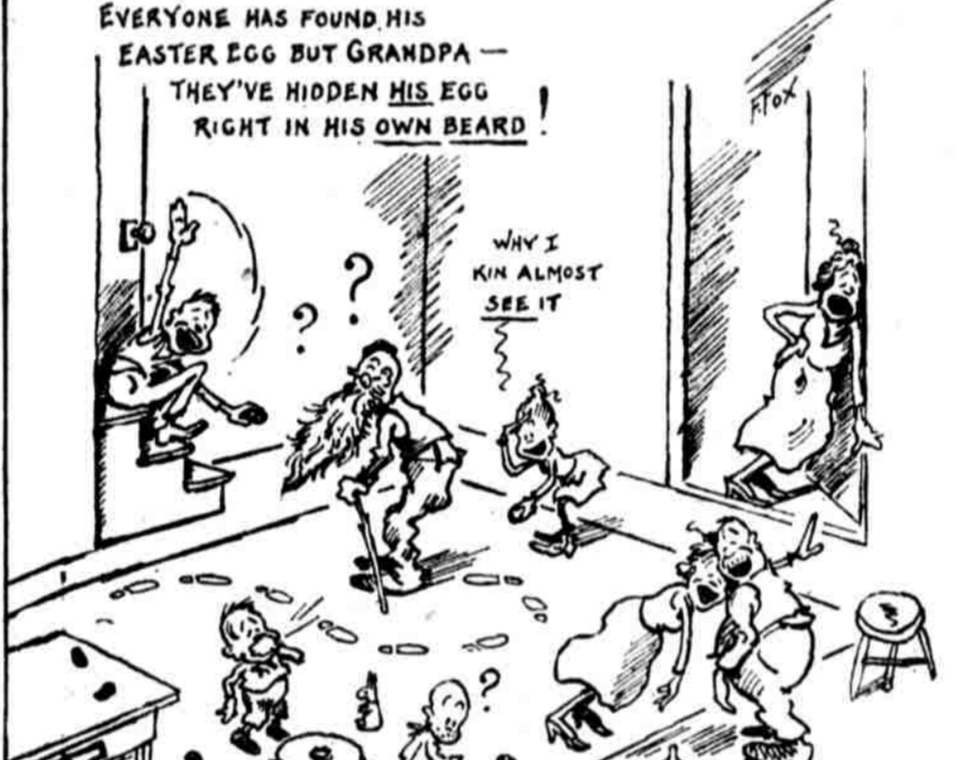
The Young Lady Across the Way

THE FAMILY EASTER EGG HUNT

By FONTAINE FOX

SCHOOL DAYS

By DWIG



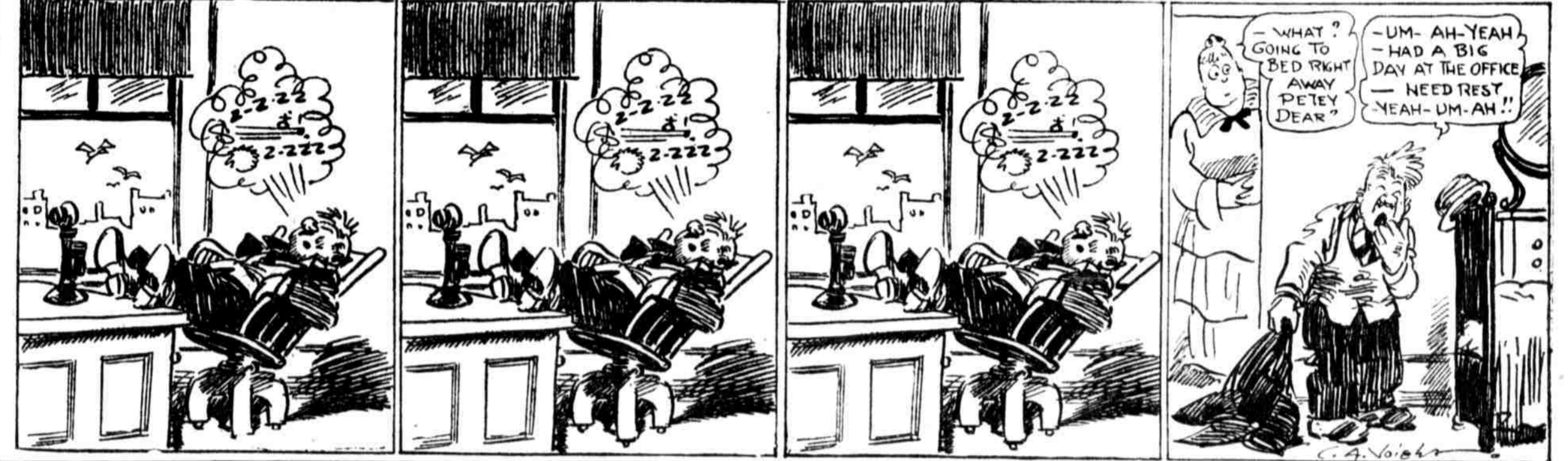
The young lady across the way says can't the church bear itself and exert its influence among the young men of the future from canonization?

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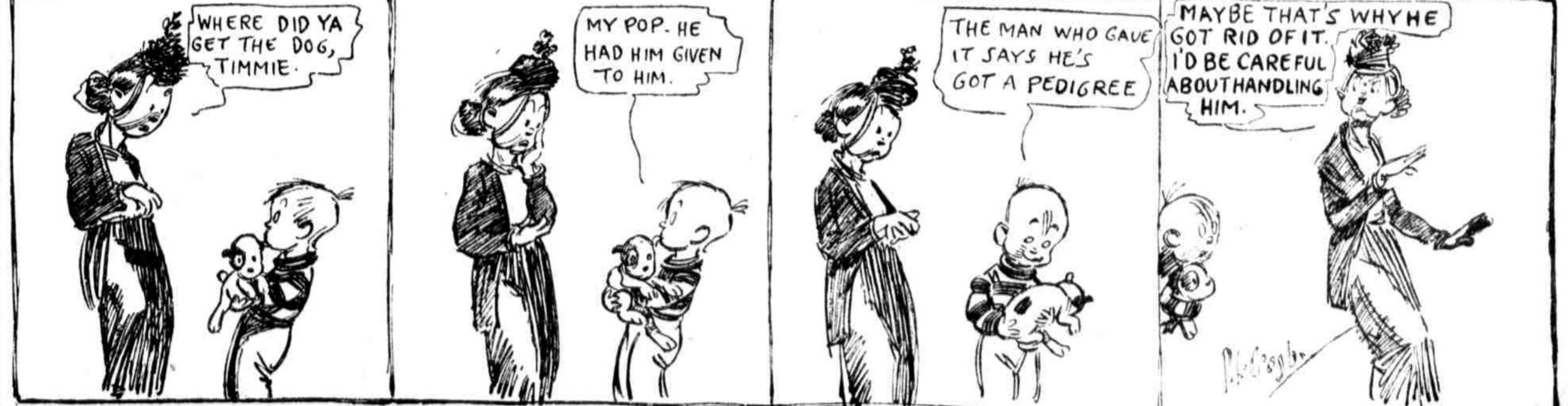
PETEY—The Spring Sleeping Sickness

By C. A. Voight



THE CLANCY KIDS—Once a Leopard Had One and He Broke Out in Spots

By Percy L. Crosby



Continued Monday