LADYFINGERS

By JACKSON GREGORY

Copyright, 1921, by Charles Scribner's Sons

"SHE squared herself." He spoke softly, as though to himself, and there were tears in his eyes. "She paid in full. And I * * * I seem escape paying at all! It is unfair!"

"You have made restitution as far as possible * * *"

"With money, yes," he admitted bitterly. "With money which you gave me."

"Robert," she admonished him, "you are young; very, very young. I haven't been so young as you are for something like a hundred years, I think. Also, you may have a liver. You go take a good long walk. See Enid just as soon as God'll let you. And, if she'll let you, bring her to dinner tonight."

This morning he made himself a sandwich, the belated twin to that memorable sandwich which he had taken adventuring with him upon a certain historic first of May, and struck out across the fields toward the foothills. And in the woods, where first he had come upon Enid Camden, he spent the long quiet hours during which he must wait to see her, lying for the most part upon his back, staring up at stirring branches and patches of blue sky.

He was going to see Enid. About this almighty fact his thoughts clung all day, sometimes wandering backward, touching upon other days with her, sometimes daring to leap forward searching out the future, but always returning to this: He was going to see Enid.

Recognizing in love the great master who has written fire into the human comedy, the boy accepted his lines eagerly; cast in the role of young yearning he was playing his part with the ardor of his nature, seeing in it, as does each one of us, a thing created for him alone. God knows the drama is older than the dust upon which the Sphinx was builded; Love knows it is eternally as new and fresh and fragrant as blossoming violets. Robert Stetheril knew that in the world were many things desirable, but nothing so to be desired as a girl.

In the beginning she had touched his leaping fancies with the physical charm of her rare beauty. He had never seen anything so beautiful. In his young poet's soul nothing stood higher than perfect loveliness.

CHAPTER XXXI

"We Have No Right!"

They met at the door of the little schoolhouse. The last of her handful of pupils had scampered down the knoll. Out in the country road they were making great clouds of dust into which they raced in barefooted merriment. Enid's back was to him as he waited; she was locking the door. He could hear her humming an old song. Then she turned, still unconscious of his nearness, her wide straw hat in one hand, her lunch basket in the other. He had never seen her quite so pretty.

She stopped and grew very still when she saw him. For a little she did not move, only the deep swelling of her breast, a little quickening of her musing eyes, a faint deepening of color in her cheeks bespeaking the emotion which his unexpected coming had aroused within her. Then she smiled quickly, the old, glad smile, though even then it seemed to his acute senses not quite its own spontaneous self, and came forward to meet him, her hand held out to him.

"Enid!" he said.

"I am glad, Robert," she answered, her self-possession far greater than his. "So glad to see you again."

She let him retain her hand, kept the smile upon her lips as he crushed her fingers in his.

Slowly their hands fell apart. Together, in silence, they turned and walked down the knoll and out into the road.

He wanted her in his arms as he had wanted her all these empty weeks. Just what it was that held him powerless to draw her into his embrace he did not know. Certainly not the fact that the scurrying urchins might see him; he had forgotten that they existed. Already a peculiar restraint had arisen between them. With so much to say they said nothing. The silence continued as the dust puffed up under their feet, not the contented silence of other days, but a stillness which was strangely disquieting.

Again and again he lifted his eyes to her face and she, feeling the look, turned to meet it squarely. He came at last to feel that she was waiting for him to speak.

"Enid," he asked her, his eyes troubled and anxious, "do you love me, dear? You haven't stopped loving me, have you?"

"I love you," she told him steadily. And, quite simply as though putting into unnecessary words the very obvious, she added, "I shall never stop loving you. You know that."

"Then, Enid, what is it, dear? I thought that we should be so happy, just to be together again. That everything was going to be all right with you and me. That we were going to make it all right."

"Isn't it?" she asked quickly, the first hint of uneasiness showing in her manner.

"You know it isn't. You must feel it. As I do. * * * Don't you, Enid?"

"Yes, I do know it, Robert."

"Then what is it?" he demanded as one who has the right to know. "You know that I love you. You say that you love me. Is there anything in all the world of worlds that can matter then?"

"Yes." The word came faintly but firmly. "We have had so much time to think, Robert. And though to you and me our love seems the very greatest thing in the world, we can't forget * * *"

"What?" he challenged sharply when she hesitated.

But for the moment circumstances gave her respite from the answer. A sudden blast of a motor horn, the gleeful shouts of the children far ahead, a fine swirl of dust and a big touring car was bearing down upon them. They moved a little further to the side of the road for it to pass on. But the young woman in the rear seat had called something to her resplendently uniformed driver and the automobile stopped just abreast of them. Evelyn Bond was saying gaily.

"Robert!" she cried. "And Enid. I'm just delighted to see you, both of you! I'm simply crazy to talk with you!"

With no alternative suggesting itself they came to the car and shook hands. Evelyn's eyes were dancing, her color was perfect, her mood was one of radiant joy. She had entertained her bear aunt for luncheon, had had all troubles in a certain quarter set aside and was now on her way to Lockworth to order by telegraph a diamond necklace upon which she had set her heart during her honeymoon.

"Enid," she ran on, "you're just adorable in that dear little gown! Where did you find such a darling thing? Cousin Robert," shaking her gloved finger at him, "you deserve no end of scoldings."

"I didn't know that I had offended," he replied, the restraint of his manner passing quite unnoticed by the effusive Evelyn.

"But you have! All this time, since the night you telephoned from Piedmont to the San Francisco chief of police, you've been going about with mystery on top of mystery locked up in your breast when you knew I was just dying for a peep at them! You've got to come and see me and tell me everything. Just think of it, Enid! He's Robert Stetheril Ellis, right now as good as a millionaire a dozen times over. And he was Mr. Steele, if you please, private secretary! And Robert Ashe, expert on burglar-proof safes! And * * * Ladyfingers! Gracious! It takes one's breath away." She laughed gaily. Then, in stimulated seriousness, her eyes widened, her brows lifted, "I don't know whether to be most proud or frightened to acknowledge acquaintance with my romantic cousin."

"I didn't imagine," said Ellis quietly, "that one ever spoke of knowing a thief with pride."

"Robert!" shuddered Evelyn delightfully. "You mustn't speak like that. But I'll tell you," leaning forward confidentially, and again aiming her finger at him, "you're just the lion of the valley! There's not a woman I know who doesn't turn perfectly green with envy when I mention my Cousin Robert! For they all know that you never had a chance, really; and that you've been just perfectly splendid! You must come and see me, soon, and let me show you off. And you, too, Enid? Won't you? * * * Won't you jump in with me now? I'll run you into Lockworth in a minute and take you wherever you want to go."

"Thank you, Evelyn," Robert answered quickly. "But * * *"

"Oh, I know! I know!" cried the young matron as though she did know and could, if required, name the very date set for the wedding. "I was young once upon a time myself, you may remember! Drive on, Dutton. And be sure you come to see me real soon, both of you! Good-by, good-by."

She was on her way again in her speeding car, Robert and Enid on their way, walking in the dust. Her coming and going had been in the manner of a whirlwind leaving an unbroken quiet after it.

Through the silence which went with them he could feel the thing that he had felt from the beginning. Enid with all of her might was seeking to be as she had always been with him, seeking and failing.

"Tell me," he said at last. "What is it? You are sure that you love me? As I love you?"

She nodded. The wide brim of her hat hid her eyes from him. Her head was bent a little; there was a misty blur across her sight.

"It was what Evelyn said?" he asked slowly. "It is because I have been * * * a thief?"

She might have evaded the question for a little; she might have answered in many hesitant words instead of in one final one, but then she would not have been Enid. So she told him gently.

"Yes."

When he did not speak again she looked at him and saw that his eyes were dark with pain and that there was a dull, hot flush in his cheeks. She wanted to put her two arms about him and mother him; she wanted to slip to his breast and feel the grip of his arms about her; she wanted to cry. But she turned away and bit at her trembling lip and looked through the mist of her tears at the shimmering, sun-smitten road.

Into his breast came a flash of rebellion. He loved her; she said that she loved him. A man may fight for his life and for his love without shame.

"Enid," he said, "I have been a thief all of my life. I have never known anything else until these last few months. But it is different now. That is a part of the past. Can't we try to forget it? Can't we begin afresh now? Can't we build up our lives from today? My God! I love you so that no matter what you might have done, no matter what you might have been, I'd want you! That is what love means. Don't you know that, Enid? I am unworthy, but I love you so that in the future nothing will be impossible. And if you love me * * *"

"I love you, Robert. More than everything else in the world. But can't you see, dear, what is best * * * what must be * * *"

"But why? Why?" he cried passionately. "Is it that you would be ashamed * * *"

"Don't!" she said quickly. "You must know me better than that! I am not ashamed of you. I would be proud * * * proud * * * if I were not afraid * * *"

It came in a whisper. In spite of her determination her voice broke and she could no go on.

"Afraid of what? Of me, dear?"

"I said, before I knew who you were," she continued, "that I was sorry for Ladyfingers. That he had never had a chance. That you have become what you have, in spite of circumstances, that you have educated yourself, made a gentleman of yourself. * * * I am proud of you * * *"

"You are afraid * * *"

"Not of you," whispered Enid. "Not of you. Oh, Robert! Can't you see?"

He shook his head. He was not thinking of that. She would have to tell him. And, though it was not easy, she told him.

"Do you remember, on that day in the woods, how I told you that some day Ladyfingers would have to pay? The laws men make * * *"

"Listen, Enid!" he broke in eagerly. "I don't want you to be afraid that some day I'll be arrested and dragged to jail. I want you to know that, so far as has been possible, I have made restitution. Every cent I have taken in all my life I have paid back. Grandmother and I have put all those months into it. And more, we have talked with Mr. Galbraith. * * * He's the San Francisco district attorney, you know * * * and with the chief of police. There is absolutely no evidence in the world against me. They have both said that there will be no arrest since with the fight I could put up conviction would be utterly impossible. 'There is no fear of my having to pay that way unless,' and he added it bitterly, seeing that the gravity had but grown in her eyes, 'the chief was right when he said * * *'"

"What was it, Robert?"

"That old lie!" he blurted out. "He says he'll get me yet because, 'Once a crook, always a crook.' You don't believe that, do you?"

"If it were just that, Robert, I'd take my chance and thank God for it. Tell me this, Robert; tell me the truth and I will believe you: Right now, in your heart, are you any different from the man you have always been?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean * * * Forgive me dear! * * * You have called yourself a thief! Has any real change come in you? Or is it just that outside circumstances have changed? Do you look at the things you have done as wrong, utterly wrong? Tell me the truth * * *"

"Enid," he pleaded with her, "can't we forget what is past? Can't we begin over?"

"I don't think so, Robert. In his brutal way wasn't the chief of police right? Have you really changed * * * inside * * * or is it just as if it were the same Ladyfingers in a new suit of clothes?"

"If I tell you that, no matter what happens, I'll never * * *"

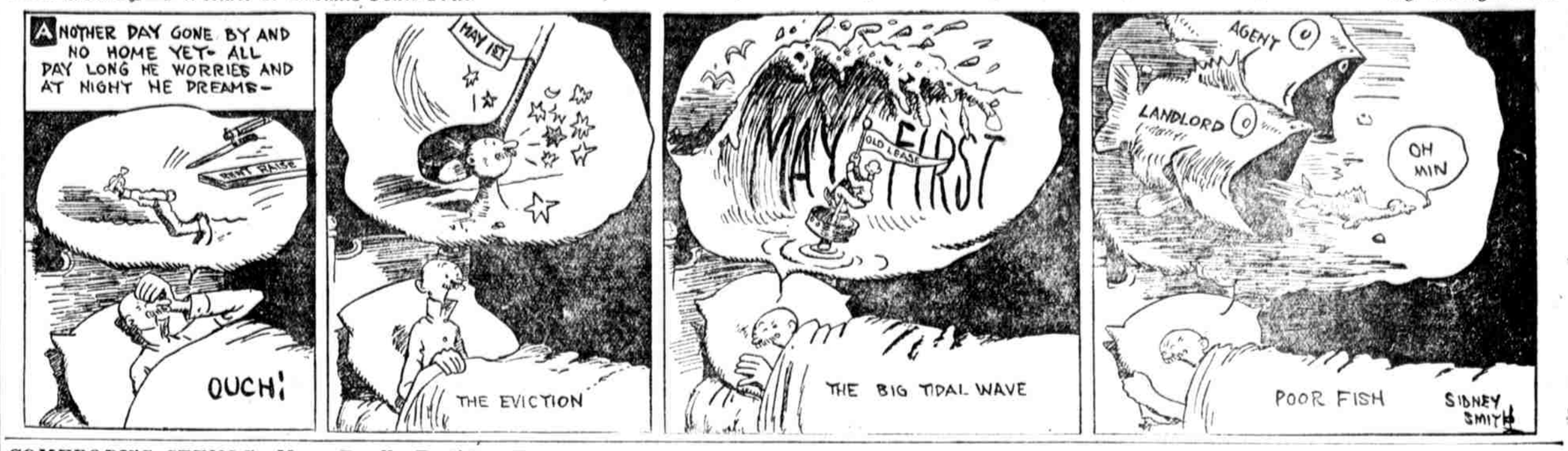
But she shook her head.

"I don't want to preach at you," she said softly. She even sought his hand and pressed it. "You are a good man and I love you. But * * *"

CONTINUED TOMORROW

THE GUMPS—I Wonder If Dreams Come True

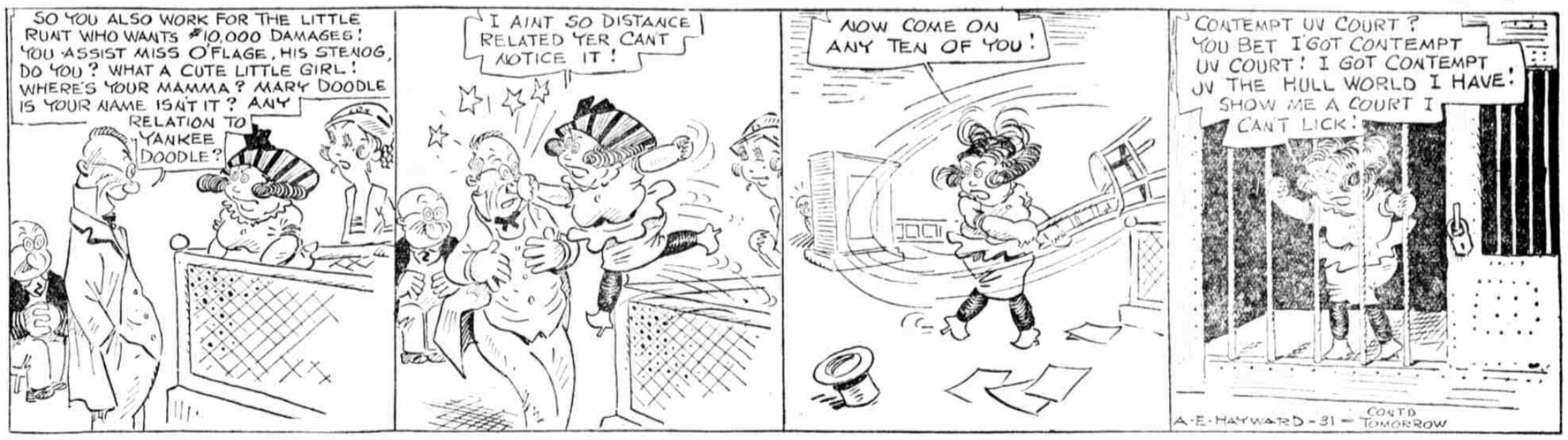
By Sidney Smith



SOMEBODY'S STENOG—Mary Doodle Testifies, Too

By Hayward

Copyright, 1921, by Public Ledger Co.

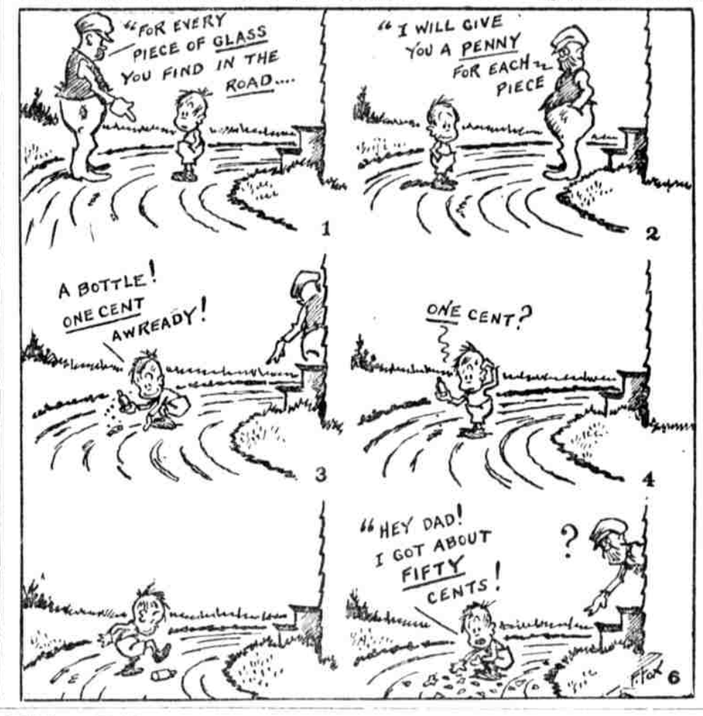


The Young Lady Across the Way

The young lady across the way says she saw in the paper about one concern that hadn't passed a dividend in twenty-three years and the stockholders must be getting tired waiting.

WORTH MORE BROKEN THAN IT WAS WHOLE

By FONTAINE FOX

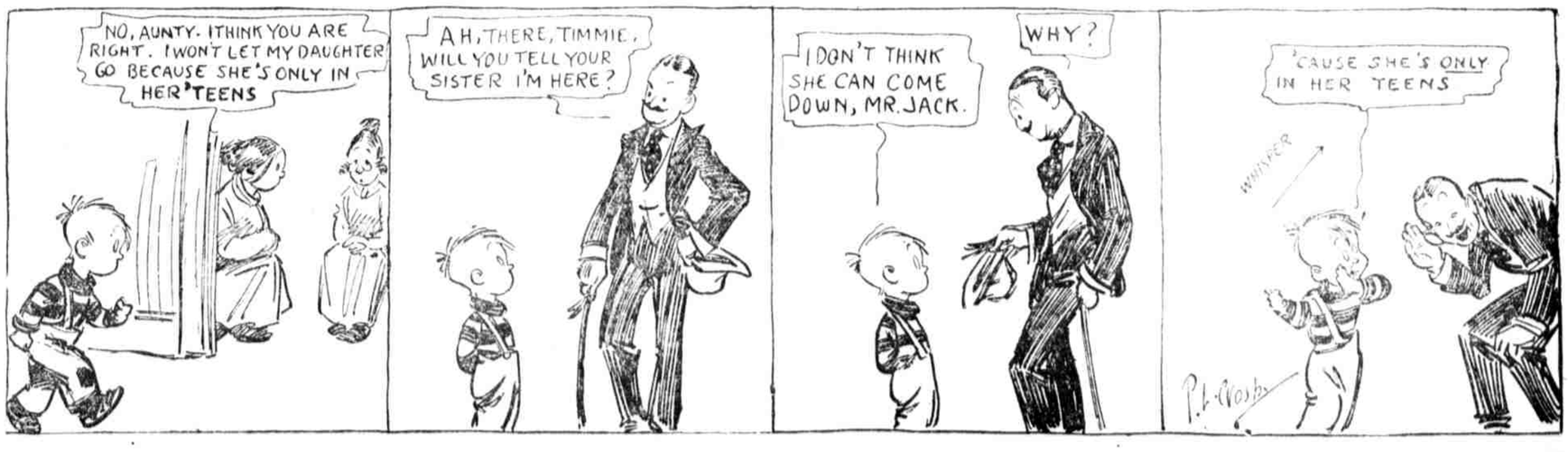


SCHOOL DAYS

By DWIG

PETEY—It Looked Like a Million Dollars

By C. A. Voight

THE CLANCY KIDS—It's Only a "Teeny" Thing, But—

By Percy L. Crosby