

HOW MANY CARDS?

By ISABEL OSTRANDER

Author of "The Island of Intrigue," "Suspense," "Ashes to Ashes," etc. Copyright, 1921, by Robert M. McBride & Co.

SYNOPSIS
 The handsome Timothy McCarty is a former convict who has been pardoned. He is now a member of the real police force. He is a detective and is trying to get the man who was in the room with the dead man. He is a detective and is trying to get the man who was in the room with the dead man. He is a detective and is trying to get the man who was in the room with the dead man.

face of George Alexander tensed visibly as he waited for his reply, but the valet merely shrugged. "I do not know, sir." "You did not remain, then, to wait upon the table?" "As I have said, I went to Mr. Creveling at his club." "You did not return here?" "Not until ten minutes ago." The valet's tone rang out shrilly. "When you saw Mr. Creveling at his club did he mention who was to be his guest here? Did he at any time say anything which would lead you to infer the identity of this person?" "He did not, sir." Hill's tone was still firm, but for a moment his eyes shifted and then returned as inscrutable as ever to those of the inspector. "Where have you been staying since Mr. Creveling has made his home at his club?" "Here, sir." It was evident that the valet intended to render no assistance to the inquiry beyond the terse and literal replies demanded of him, but Inspector Druet persisted. "You were acting as caretaker also?" "No, sir. Two of the other servants remained here for that; the rest of the staff except Mrs. Creveling's maid were dismissed when Mrs. Creveling returned to her country and Mr. Creveling to his club." The inspector exchanged a significant glance with McCarty, who still hovered quietly in the background. "Mrs. Creveling usually left home for such protracted periods, and always dismissed practically her entire staff?" "Again there was that shade of hesitation and then the valet responded: "No, sir. The staff was usually retained at half pay when it was intended to reopen the home again within a short time, but I understand that this season Mr. and Mrs. Creveling had other plans?" "What other plans?" "Once more the valet shrugged. "I cannot say, sir, except that some mention was made of traveling. I have received no instructions for the future; I feel sure, though, that I was not to be dismissed or Mr. Creveling would have said something to me about it." "How long have you been in Mr. Creveling's employment?" "For eleven years, sir." "Inspector Druet suddenly changed the tenor of his questioning. "The butler and cook are not in the house. When did you see them here last?" "Yesterday afternoon," Frank Hill shifted his weight from one foot to the other, the first sign of nervousness which he had displayed throughout the interview save his momentary shock at the intelligence of his master's death and the manner of it. "They aren't in the house now. Do you know where they have gone?" "No, sir. There was no surprise in the valet's tone, but a sort of defiant reserve beneath the slightly ironic deference which obviously nettled the inspector. "You know, however, that they were to be absent last night? I want the story, Hill. No hedging!" "Rollins, the butler, told me that Mr. Creveling had given him and his wife a holiday, but they were to be back early this morning, to prepare for Mrs. Creveling's homecoming." "Homecoming?" repeated Inspector Druet sharply. "You said just now—" "I beg pardon, sir." The quiet voice forestalled him. "I meant to say that the house was not to be reopened again with the staff this season. In a corner of speaking, it is never stated when the caretakers are here, and some one is always left in charge. I understood that Mrs. Creveling was to return this morning with her maid for a few days of preparation before starting upon her journey with Mr. Creveling. The butler and cook, I suppose, the maid—and myself could, of course, have given sufficient service if no entertaining were contemplated." The inspector meditated for a moment. "Why did Mr. Creveling give the butler and cook a holiday yesterday, of all times, when he intended to receive some one here for supper last night?" "I am not sure, sir. I was not asked finally. Supposing the meal were to be supplied from a caterer's?" "No, sir. I do not require the services of the butler to wait upon the table?" "As though he realized the slip he had made the valet's eyes sought those of Creveling's late partner, but Mr. Alexander avoided them studiously. "I can't say, sir." Hill responded at length. "Mr. Creveling told me nothing beyond my own instructions—" "Was it usual for your employer during his wife's absence to clear all the servants out of the house in order to entertain here?" At the question and its implication Hill's color changed, but his eyes once more met those of the inspector levelly. "I do not know that Mr. Creveling ever did that, sir; I mean, purposely. He frequently had one or more gentlemen here to supper when Mrs. Creveling was away. Sometimes the butler waited upon them, sometimes I did. I think he gave Rollins and his wife a holiday before I asked permission to leave the night to myself on this occasion." Inspector Druet avoided the issue of the valet's own movements during the hours which had passed since Hill had asked. "Did Mr. Creveling ever entertain ladies on these occasions?" "Having Mrs. Creveling's absence?" There was a note of shocked incredulity in the servant's tones as if he could scarcely believe that he had understood the question. "Indeed, no, sir! They were strictly stag suppers." "Who were the gentlemen Mr. Creveling entertained here, then?" the inspector continued. "What were their names?" "Rollins can tell you that better than I can, sir," Hill temporized. He usually waited upon them. It was only occasionally that I took his place and then the gentlemen were sometimes strangers to me, business acquaintances of Mr. Creveling." "You don't know the name of a single gentleman who ever had supper here with Mr. Creveling alone?" The inspector's tone had sharpened. "I can't say, sir. A few of them. They were all personal friends of long standing, though I did know Mr. O'Rourke has been here once or twice, and Mr. Waverly and Mr. Cutter. I can't recall them all at the moment, sir." McCarty, unable to contain himself longer, coughed with a deliberate ostentation, and after a quick glance at him the inspector nodded. "Now show the man whose body was found here, Mr. Alexander?" He added the last as the butler started forward nervously. "There are a few more questions I wish to ask you. Wait here, please." Mr. Alexander sank back with an air of hopeless dejection. "I know nothing, as I told you in the beginning, which could help you in any way, and this abjectly I repeat. I have been an impeccable clerk to me. When my news arrives I must meet her with the news of her fragile becoming and assume control of the situation as the head of the family, and I cannot do so without an opportunity to pull myself together, to—bear up under my own natural grief—" "Mr. Alexander," said the inspector, "you were struck upon a gong and the

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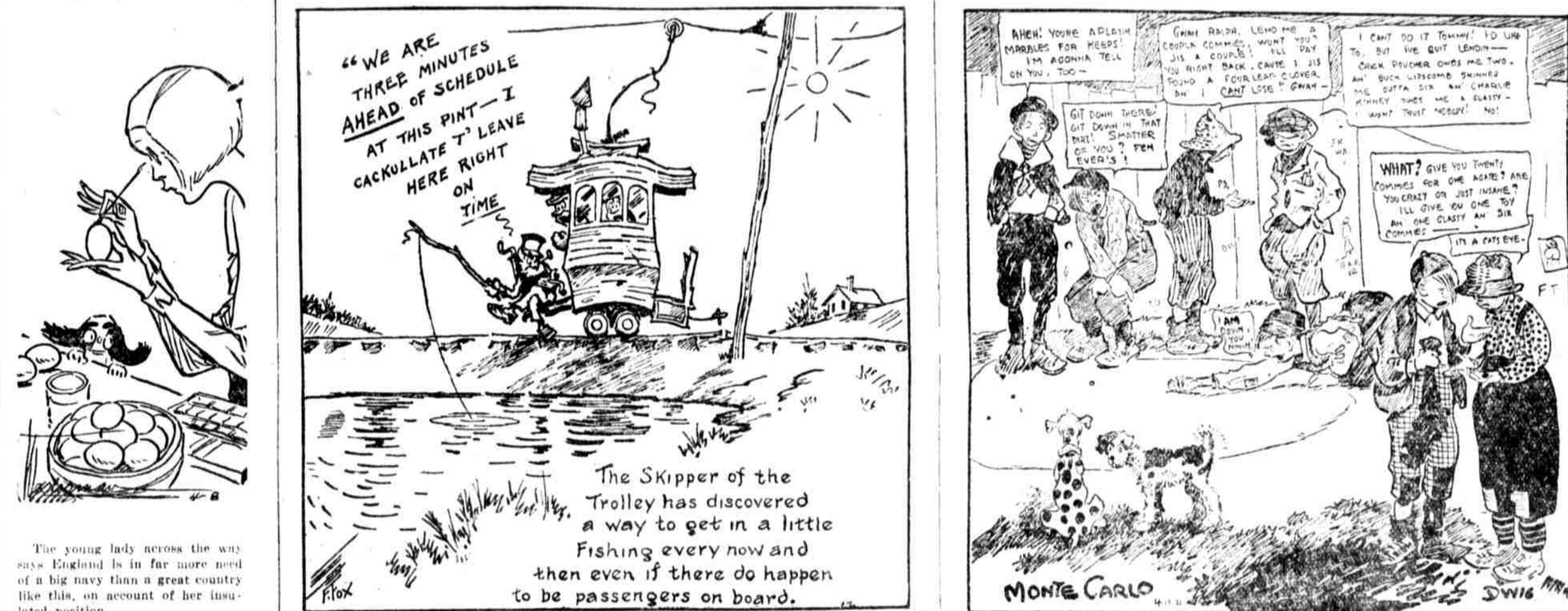
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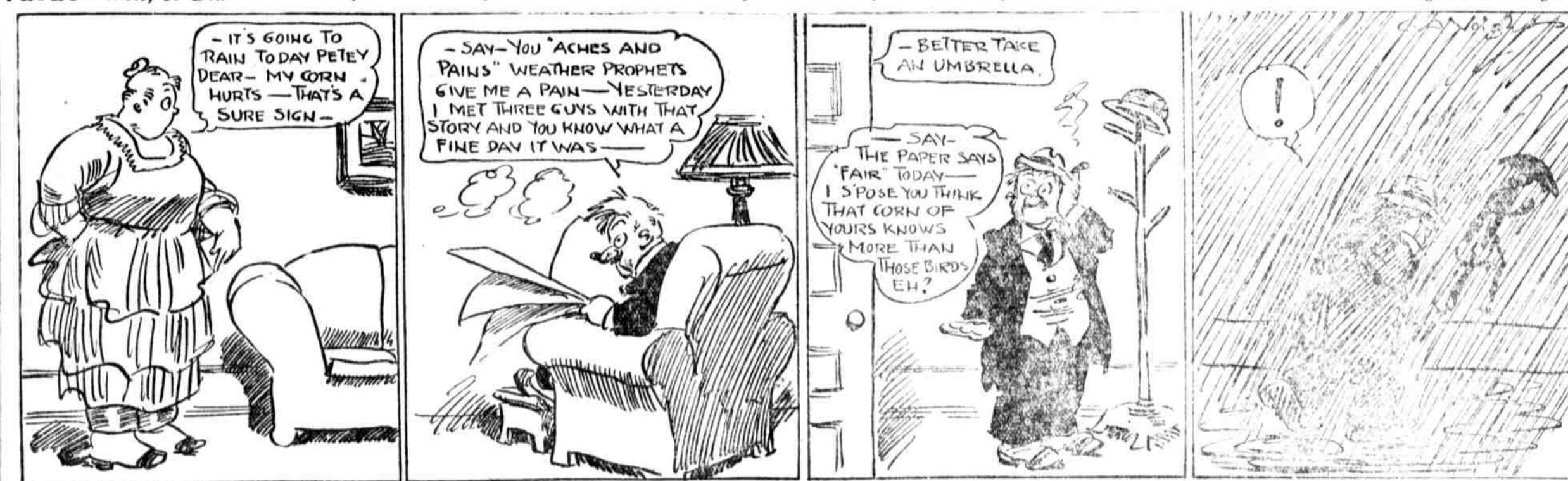
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