

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

A would-be thief enters the parlour of Eugene Christopher Creveling. He runs out again, instantly into the hands of a man in a top hat. He is visibly perturbed and protests "he had nothing to do with what's in there."

On the floor of a room lies a man in evening clothes, the front of whose shirt is red with blood and within touch of his head is a huge army revolver. The table is laid for two with champagne on ice, still unopened. The house is empty of human beings. Mr. Alzoupe, partner in business to the dead man and uncle to his wife, appears saying he has been summoned by telephone. Mrs. Creveling appears also, and she, too, can throw light on the affair. Mrs. Creveling insists on engaging the best detective service.

The inspector and a quarrel between Douglas Waverly and the dead man, Waverly had left the house in a rage. Mr. Alzoupe, partner in business to the Crevelings' associates, calls on Mrs. O'Rourke, tersely stating he had "come from police headquarters."

WHERE IT CONTINUES

POLICE—? A little frown had gathered between her narrow, straight brows. "Oh, I presume it is in connection with the sudden death of my friend Mr. Creveling?"

McCarthy bowed again.

"You have heard from Mrs. Creveling?"

"Yes. Her maid was sent to me with a message not an hour ago. But some time ago I can spare you a few minutes, if you are not too busy. I will be of little assistance to you. You are a detective?"

She added the question as she turned and led him past the round-eyed footman into a room, dimly drawn, and motioning for him to take a seat.

McCarthy regarded the fragile chair with some misgiving and settled his bulk gingerly upon it before he replied:

"Retired, ma'am, and it's only fair to tell you that I'm not here officially, to speak. I'm an old friend of the inspector in charge of the case and he often calls on me to help him out by sifting general information for him, when he's too busy to go after the side issues himself." McCarthy beamed dispassionately upon her. "I'm sorry to be bothering you, but the inspector wants me to see as many of the Creveling's close friends as I can locate and find out if they have any idea who would take his own life."

Mrs. O'Rourke drew a deep breath and her starry eyes widened. "I did not know that it was suicide. We—my husband and I—fancied that it was an accident of some kind. It did not occur to us—"

Her voice trailed off into silence and a faint wild-rose color appeared in the creamy whiteness of her delicate face.

"The medical examiner says that Mr. Creveling killed himself, but as a matter of fact the inspector has to look into every possibility, ma'am, especially as up to now they've found no motive for suicide and Mrs. Creveling won't say he did it himself." McCarthy explained. "Might I ask you what message she sent you?"

"It did not come directly from her, but from a mutual friend of ours who came to town to stay with her during her trouble." Mrs. O'Rourke hesitated.

"The lady nodded."

"My husband has gone to the house now to offer his services and I would have accompanied him, of course, but Mrs. Waverly is utterly prostrated and could not see me until later. It—it must be terrible for her."

McCarthy regarded the exquisite, flower-like face opposite in contemplative silence for a moment. There had been suggestion of horror in her hushed tones when she spoke of the tragedy, and only in that quick almost involuntary exclamation had real feeling been manifested, and her softly curving mouth trembled for the first time. It was evident that she was a woman of generous abundance to the bereaved, but what of her attitude toward the dead man whom she had called her friend? Beyond a well-bred air of almost perfidious regret he could discern no trace of any emotion other than a sort of shocked repugnance at the horror of his taking on.

"Mr. Creveling was an intimate friend of yours, ma'am?" McCarthy asked.

"Of my husband's," she replied quickly. "Of course, we were all in the same set and met constantly at social affairs, but I naturally saw more of her wife. Mr. Creveling was essentially a man's man; I mean in his personal affairs than any of the women in the set. It was a pity. Was it possible that there was a significance in her words to convey? She had spoken of the woman like a friend, but in his life's circle; but what of other women could it be that unsavory rumors concerning the man now dead had reached her ears?"

Under his steady scrutiny she began to fumble with her glove and he noticed that her hands were little larger than those of a child. How tiny she was, and dainty, and Lord! how pretty! He reverently his thoughts flashed back to the long ago. There was no trace of the childish treble in her low, softly vibrating tones, no suggestion of the blonde-headed baby in this well-to-do woman with the colorless, bristling hair of Ireland's highest type, or yet something of a far-off days.

Her eyes breaking the silence brought him back sharply to the problem of the moment.

"My husband will return at any moment and he will give you all the information in his power, but I am afraid he will be able to help you as little as I can. It is almost incredible that this should have come to pass. Mr. Creveling had everything to live for—a charming wife, money, friends, all that the world holds precious. It is very sad."

She made a slight gesture as if about to rise and terminate the interview, but McCarthy stayed her.

"It's more than that, ma'am. I was with the inspector when he talked with Mrs. Creveling and, as I said, she won't say it that he killed himself, not even an accident. If a motive can't be proved for suicide it's apt to make a big trouble for the department and the inspector on all their friends and you don't mean that Mrs. Creveling fancies some one actually killed

her husband?" cried Mrs. O'Rourke in shocked amazement. "She must be hysterical, the blow has come so suddenly."

McCarthy shook his head.

"I've seen many a hysterical woman when I was connected with the force, ma'am, and she was far from it. I'd say Mrs. Creveling was the most level-headed one in the whole business and she took the news without the flicker of an eyelash. From the minute she heard he had been shot she set her mind on finding his possible murderer and she was so determined about it that she called in the biggest man in his line in the country, the criminologist, Wade Torhune."

"Torhune! I've heard of him, of course," Mrs. O'Rourke observed.

After a pause she added: "No one can blame her for wanting to be sure, to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that her husband was responsible for his own death when it occurred in such a dreadful, mysterious way, but if the medical examiner, as you say, has proved that it was a case of suicide she is only harrowing herself needlessly. Why should she think that any one would want to take Mr. Creveling's life?"

"For the same reason that you say the idea of his killing himself is a most incredible, as far as I can make out, ma'am; that he had no cause," McCarthy responded. "My experience before I retired, though, has taught me there's many a trouble in a man's life that no one knows anything about. However, since this is a case of suicide the sooner the inspector establishes a motive for it the quicker the thought of its being anything else will die out of Mrs. Creveling's mind and the more ready she'll be to drop an investigation that's bound to bring annoyance to a lot of innocent people. Your name and Mr. O'Rourke's being mentioned as among their best friends, the inspector sent me to ask you in confidence if Mr. Creveling had seemed to be troubled about anything lately and if he'd maybe dropped a hint as to what might have been on his mind."

"No, I couldn't say that Mr. Creveling betrayed any sign that would lead me to think he was worried much less that he contemplated suicide," Mrs. O'Rourke said slowly. "If anything, he has seemed to be in more than his usual spirits, but I have seen little of him during the latter part of the season. Mrs. Creveling has been away, frequently about town, I believe; he would be better able to answer your question—Oh, here he is now."

The front door closed with a muffled jar and strong but springy footsteps crossed the hall. The next instant the curtains at the entrance to the drawing room were thrust aside and a tall young man stood looking in upon them.

McCarthy caught his breath. If the chubby little Lady Peggy had changed almost beyond recognition, John Cavendish O'Rourke had not. The same clean-cut, freckled, sensitive face, the same thatch of brick-red hair still irrepressibly curly, the same clear gray eyes with the boyish twinkle barely subdued in them; McCarthy could with difficulty restrain the exclamation which leaped to his lips.

"Come in, John," Mrs. O'Rourke rose from her chair. "This man has been sent here by some official of the police department to make inquiries about Eugene, to learn if we know of any reason why he killed himself. I told him that you could be able to answer his questions better than I—"

"There's no answer," Mr. O'Rourke came forward frankly. "There doesn't seem to be a reason in the world why the old boy should have done himself in. But why have you come to us?"

His tone was friendly and McCarthy smiled in response.

"Well, sir, your name was given to the inspector together with the Waverlys and Fords and several more as being among Mr. Creveling's closest friends and those most likely to know if he was in any trouble. I'm not properly connected with the force, though I was once, and the inspector calls me in now and then to help him out with details he hasn't time for. I've already seen Mr. Waverly, but I thought I'd come to you before any one else."

"If you've seen Mrs. Creveling you'll know what attitude she's taken in the matter and in spite of the medical examiner's report she insists it couldn't have been suicide."

"I know," Mr. O'Rourke nodded with a quick jerk of the head, and added: "Look here, haven't I seen you before? Your face is familiar, somehow, and your voice, but I can't place you."

"You have, sir, and my lady, too, but 'tis long years gone. That's why I came to you first. All Mr. Creveling's friends are likely to be dragged in if Mrs. Creveling persists in disregarding the medical report and I wanted to save the old O'Rourke from what annoyance I could."

"The O'Rourke?" The young man's voice was suddenly husky. "No one in America has ever called me that."

"You were not the O'Rourke when I left the old country, sir," McCarthy responded quietly. "Your father was alive then. God rest his soul. Yours were just a bit of a lad with a thatch of hair like a shanty urchin who hunted and fished with me many's the time, and Lady Peggy, saving her presence, was all potatoes and curds, and for ever tumbling down."

"Oh, and you didn't tell me!" A warm, soft light glowed in Mrs. O'Rourke's eyes and she held her tiny gloved hand out impulsively. "Who are you? I ought to remember—"

"My name's McCarthy, ma'am, though 'twill mean nothing to you, you were that young."

"But it means something to me!" O'Rourke clapped him heartily on the shoulder. "Timothy McCarthy, by all the powers! Timmie McCarthy, who knew all the deapest pools and the luckiest covers, and where the Little People danced at the turn of the moon! You came to New York to seek your fortune."

"And landed in the police force," McCarthy's face grew suddenly grave. "I'm retired now, and a landed proprietor with means of my own, but now and again when my old pals call on me I take a hand in the game once more in an unofficial way, of course. I happened along the avenue last night when the policeman on the beat discovered the body of Mr. Creveling—'tis too long a story to go into now, but 'twill be all out in the afternoon papers—and when the inspector got there he kept me on. If the motive for suicide can be established—well and good. Mr. Torhune can putter around with his microscope and his little scientific machines as long as it means him and Mrs. Creveling will authorize him, but the matter will be dropped from the records of the department. If, however, no reason for Mr. Creveling's killing himself can be found and no actual proof that he did it beyond the opinion of the medical examiner, then the inspector'll have to have everybody that knew him up on the carpet. That means notoriety for all his friends and I thought if you could give me privately a tip on why he maybe put himself out of the way I could see that you and my lady would both be left out of it."

CONTINUED TOMORROW

THE GUMPS—You Can't Go Broke Taking Something for Nothing

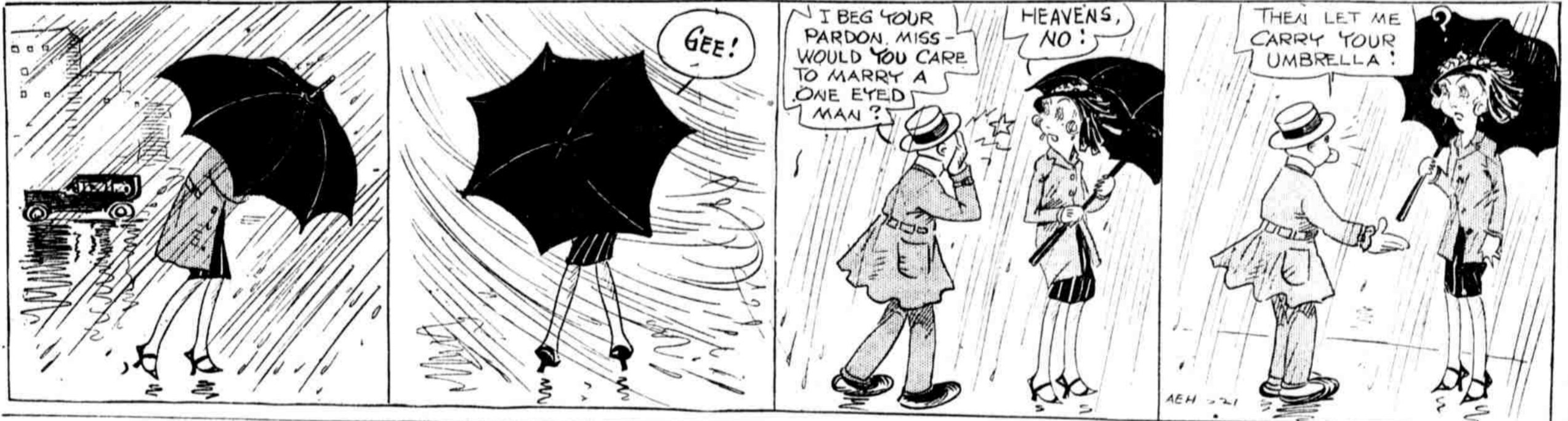
By Sidney Smith



SOMEBODY'S STENOG—April Showers

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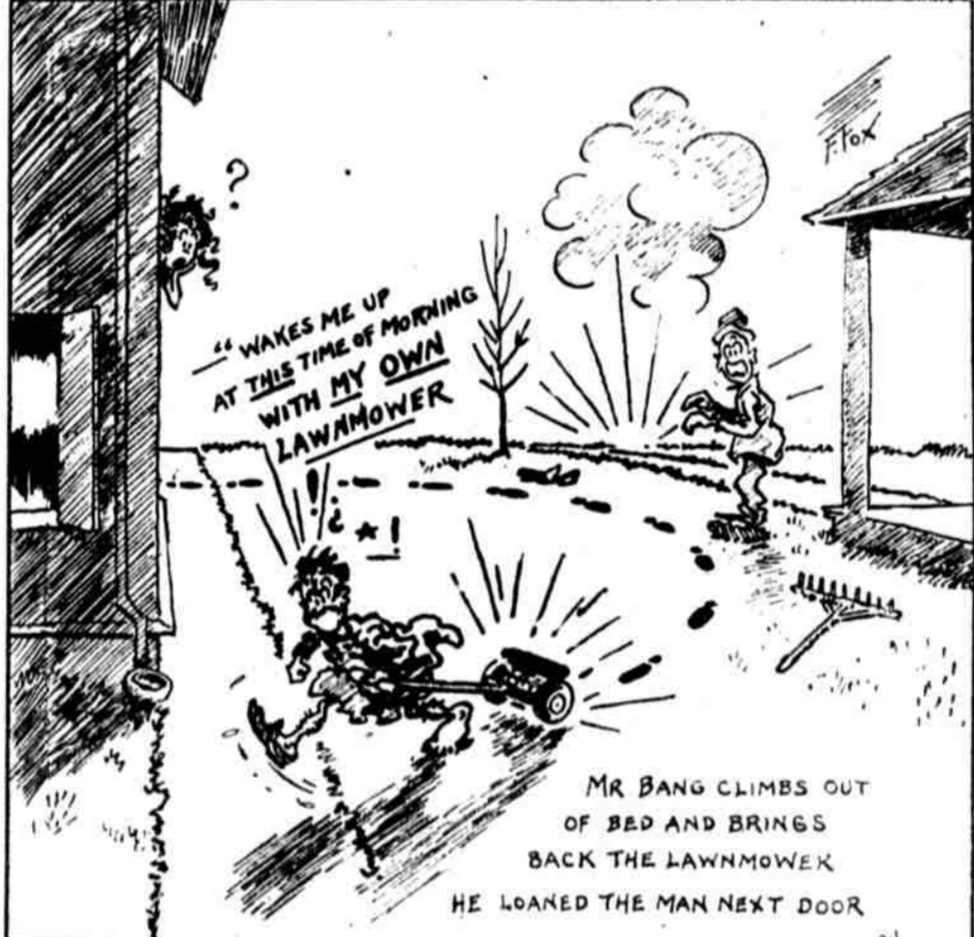
The Young Lady Across the Way

THE TERRIBLE-TEMPERED MR. BANG

By FONTAINE FOX

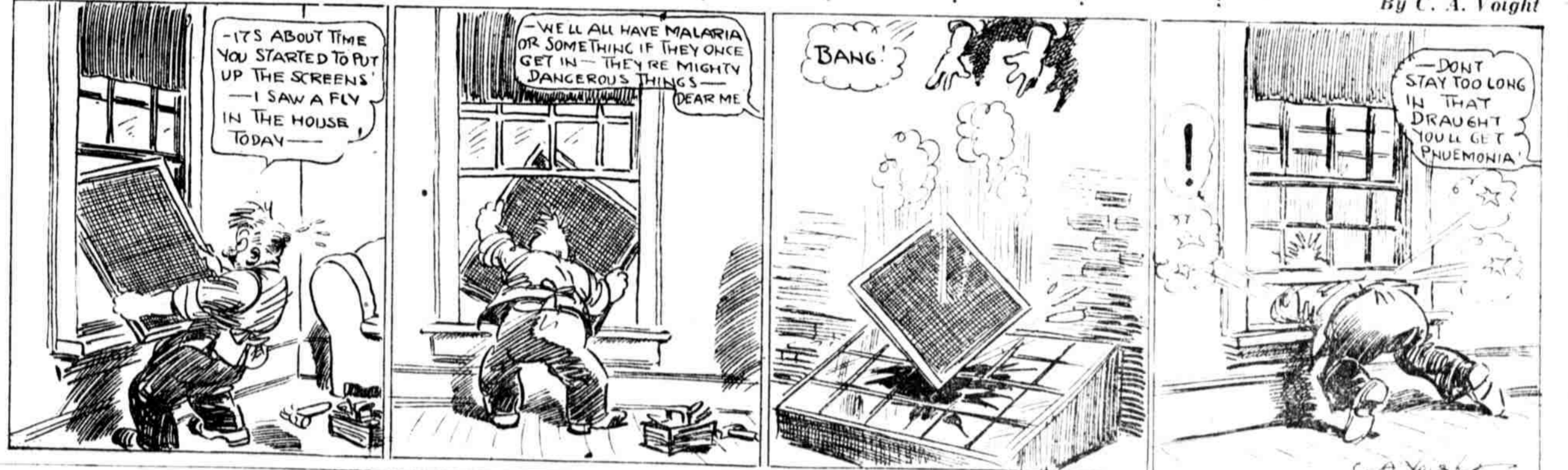
SCHOOL DAYS

By DWIG



PETEY—He Gets It in the Neck

By C. A. Voight



THE CLANCY KIDS—"The Diplomat"

By Percy L. Crosby

