

# 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 and into the hands of a detective. He protests he had nothing on him, but the detective says, "With what's in your pocket?"

On the floor of a room lies a man in evening clothes, the front of his shirt crimson with blood and by his side a heavy revolver. The table is laid for two, with champagne on ice, still unopened. The house is empty of human beings. Creveling had led a wild life. He associated with the wealthy, and at one time was spoken of as "the million-a-weeker." His detective calls on the matter in her efforts to bring the murderer to justice. Alexander, partner in business to Creveling and uncle to Mrs. Creveling, objects to her activity and desires to overrule the matter. The dead man is reported to have quarreled with Douglas Waverly, who had left the house in a rage. A detective calls on the man like John O'Rourke and a bouncer like Waverly, an aristocrat such as Mrs. Creveling and a climber of Mrs. Kip's type? The answer he found among the others of their immediate circle?

It was almost 3 o'clock when, having finished his meal, McCarty hailed a taxi and drove to the apartment on Madison avenue. Mrs. Lonsdale Ford was at home and would see him. Reluctantly he dropped in the elevator the newspaper which he had purchased on leaving the luncheon and in which his interview with Joanie Ballard appeared with ardent embellishments, trusting that a copy of it had not yet reached the eyes of the lady upon whom he was calling, but his hope was a vain one. Even as an obsequious Japanese butler ushered him into the drawing room the curtains leading to the library fluttered and a slender, little woman with round, china-blue eyes and hair like spun flax fairly precipitated herself upon him.

"Oh, you're Officer McCarty, who found poor Mr. Creveling's body?" she exclaimed in a high, blubbing voice. "I've been reading about you in the paper! Please, please tell me how it happened. I tried to get Mrs. Creveling on the phone, but she wouldn't talk to me or else Stella Waverly wouldn't let her. I can't get my husband until the stock market closes and I've been just wild."

"The Crevelings are great friends of ours, ma'am."

"Of course! This is the most shocking thing!" She seemed to speak in a low, excited tone, suggesting that the shock was more exciting than deplorable. "Lonny—my husband—and Mr. Creveling have put through several deals together and they were great pals. I think Mrs. Creveling is just the sweetest thing; I've missed her horribly since she has been out of town. But did Mr. Creveling kill himself? Of course you found the pistol in his hand, the paper says, but then there was that burglar you captured. I think it was too brave of you for anything."

McCarty eyed the doll-like face before him with its insipid prettiness and his wonderment grew. "Sweet" was not a term he would have applied to the strong, self-contained Mrs. Creveling. What could there be in common between her and this shallow, empty-headed little creature?

"This is the opinion of the medical examiner that it was suicide, ma'am," he said gravely. "We're trying to find out from Mr. Creveling's friends if they know of any reason he could have for killing himself; if he seemed in trouble or low in his mind. When was the last time you or your husband saw him?"

"I think Lonny saw him only yesterday, on business. The last time we met together was on Tuesday evening, and we expected to see him last night, but he didn't appear."

"He had an engagement with you?"

Mrs. Ford bit her pouting underlip and for the merest second the round, childish, blue eyes narrowed with a shrewdly, oddly foreign and incongruous to them.

"Not with us, and it wasn't an engagement exactly. My husband and I dined and spent the evening with Mr. Cutter and they are such inseparable friends that we rather thought he might drop in."

A sudden remembrance of Douglas Waverly's testimony flashed across McCarty's mind. "The last time he admitted having seen Creveling had been on Tuesday evening also, at the house of Nicholas Cutter."

"Twice at Mr. Cutter's that you saw him on Tuesday, then, wasn't it?" he asked. "Who else was there?"

"The O'Rourkes and Mr. Douglas Waverly and Mrs. Baillie Kip," Mrs. Ford spoke haltingly and the high treble hand lowered. "Mr. Creveling seemed in the very best of spirits; he always was when he—"

"When he what, ma'am?" McCarty prompted quickly but she paused.

"The blue eyes fell and she began fiddling nervously with the many rings which covered her small fingers.

"When he'd got something that he wanted," she said, "he came in a little rush. He had a perfect craze for antiques, you know; musty old tapestries and faded rugs and books that nobody ever looked at. This time it was a rug, I think, with some queer unpronounceable name. He's been after it for months."

"I see," McCarty interrupted dryly. "Do you remember, ma'am, whether he and Mr. Waverly had much talk together that night?"

"Why, no!" The blue eyes opened wide once more. "I don't remember that they even spoke, but I wasn't paying any attention to them. I know Mr. Creveling left early, very soon after Mr. Waverly came."

"Is it a habit of Mr. Cutter's to entertain so much in his own house?"

Mrs. Ford stared at him and opened her lips to reply when there came the sound of a key grating in the lock of the hall door, and with a glad little cry she sprang up and rushed from the room. McCarty heard the door open and also a muffled exclamation—"Oh, Lonny!"—and then a man's voice rasped out hoarsely:

"You've heard, Nellie? You know? We're done for, girl! Done for!"

### AND HERE IT CONTINUES

MISS FROST'S head, with its elaborate puffs, bobbed indignantly at an indignant flush mottled her face. "I had never realized before how thin you've become; how utterly common she is!" I can assure you, Mr. McCarty, that I have never been so insulted; among other remarks which I shall not repeat, she said that she was not a child and was tired of my eternal spying; that I was an interfering old busybody; she actually dared to insinuate that I was a sort of society grafter, an object of charity, after all that I have done for her! I was simply stunned, and when I pulled myself together in indignation of my own accord my immediate departure from her house she forestalled me by demanding that I leave at once. She actually dismissed me! Gave me notice, as though I were a servant. Words cannot describe my humiliation, but if I can build social reputations I can also demolish them! Mrs. Baillie will not find a door open to her here days from now!"

"Hold on a bit, ma'am!" McCarty checked the outraged flow of words. She got in a temper just because you asked her to believe at her exercise about her arm?"

"Well, no," the lady conceded. "I was disgusted at the insult to my intelligence and let her know what I had on my mind. I think I also mentioned other reasons to which I had taken silent objection and perhaps I expressed my opinion as to being used as a cloak for ideas which I did not understand, but our interview terminated. I did at once and came to the woman's strict justice to her manner was other than most circumspect when she was under my eye; she was popular and had several admirers, but there was no suspicion of a love affair."

"I did not know what to think of these nocturnal excursions of hers, but could not believe that there was anything actually disreputable about them, and, servants talk and such things get out; I was afraid, as I say, of scandalous rumors and gossip, but I never thought of anything criminal! What is Mr. McCarty? I have told you all I know and I am at your mercy! Tell me what hideous notoriety I must prepare myself to undergo!"

"None, I hope, ma'am," he replied. "You said she was recklessly extravagant at times; what did she spend her money on?"

"Rare jewels, more furs than she could possibly wear and antique rugs and objects of art which she was too ignorant to appreciate. She bought as if she were a millionaire, seemingly for the mere pleasure of spending money."

"That necklace that she wore out at night and did not have on when she came back—"

McCarty began. "That was one instance of her extravagance," Miss Frost interrupted. "She has another set of rubies, as well as all kinds of other things, very possible occasions, yet she must have these because they were reputed to have been made for the czar and suggested out of Russia after the revolution. Twenty thousand she paid Van Trinken for the set and the very next week she was unable to meet her husband's bill!"

"How would you describe that necklace, ma'am?"

"A five-skin scarf of imperial black Russian rubies," replied Miss Frost promptly. "The private seal of the czar was stamped on the small gold clasp which fastened it together underneath of the skins at the throat."

"There was a pause and then McCarty asked:

"Who were Mrs. Kip's admirers? Do you say she had several?"

Miss Frost raised her hands in protest. "I really couldn't think of mentioning names. It would mean social suicide for me to drag into the notoriety of a police investigation in connection with this woman any of the prominent families whose friendship I enjoy, especially as I do not know what she has done with the money she received. I could never be able to obtain another set!"

"But this is just confidential, between me and you," McCarty smiled. "I know all about the Waverly, the O'Rourkes and Crevelings, but as far as I can make out Cutter is the only one in their immediate set."

"Mr. Cutter has been attentive to Mrs. Kip, but not more so than to many other attractive widow or divorcees," Miss Frost observed. "No debutante ever interested him, although he could be a splendid catch. One of my failures was an attempt to bring about a marriage between him and Wendolyn Rossmore. I managed to get her in to dinner with him three times in succession and you would never have known the trouble I took to drill her into that girl! Sports with a hor's d'oeuvres, are with the soup and the Maitre d'hotel with the entrée, and with the roast—but all for nothing. He is the most difficult man to please, but stuck doggedly to his duty. About the gentlemen who paid attention to Mrs. Kip, who were the ones, Miss Frost?"

"Well, if you must know, Falesdon, Jr., and Harry Palladin and one of them was serious and I am compelled to say that she did not incur a rebuff. Although I lived in the same house with her we were never upon an intimate footing and I could not induce her to discuss her past, but I gathered that widowed was rather a relief for her, she assured me more than once 'Well, never marry again.'"

"McCarty rose. "I'll be detaining you any longer now, shall I give you away, Mrs. Kip?"

"Be all right as far as we know, but the reasons for wanting to look her over and make sure. Good day to you, ma'am."

Leaving the agitated social sponsor,

### CHAPTER X

As THE significance of the harsh, despairing cry penetrated his mind McCarty half rose from his chair in the Ford's gaudy drawing room and then sank back into it again, for the woman's voice rose sharply.

"The shrill tones ceased in a gurgle as though a hand had been laid suddenly over her lips and a low muffled reply came to her, in which the only distinct words that came to McCarty's ears were 'foundered little fool!'"

Some question evidently followed to which she replied in a sibilant whisper and then a tall, lanky man with hair thinning at the temples and eager, harassed, brown eyes strode into the room.

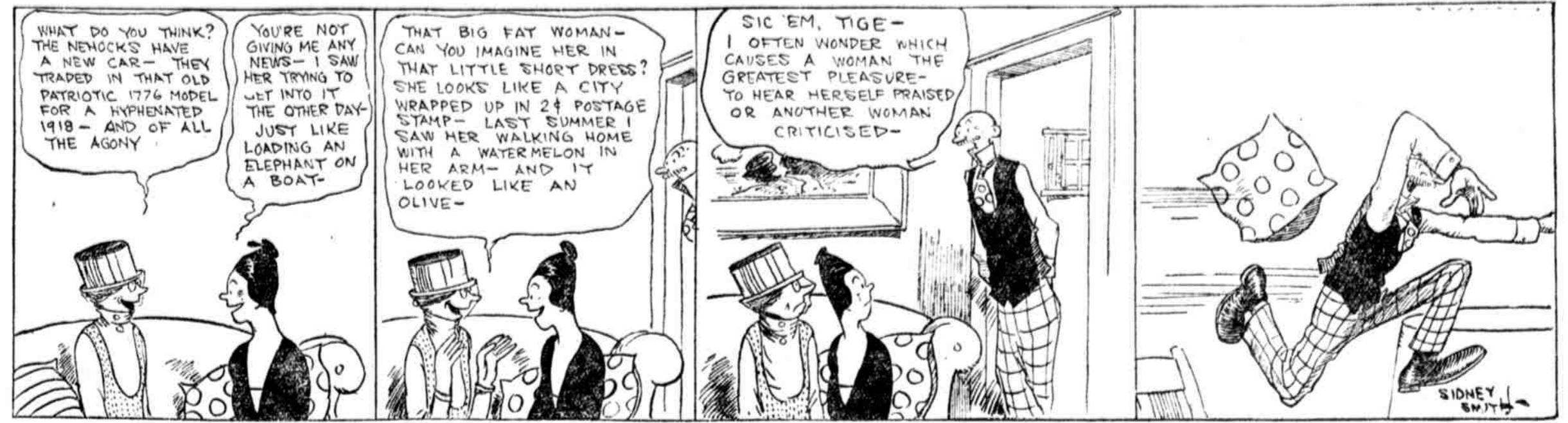
"What do you want?" he demanded. "What are you doing here?"

"I've been sent by the inspector in charge of the investigation into Eugene Creveling's death, sir," responded McCarty, rising.

### CONTINUED TOMORROW

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By Sidney Smith



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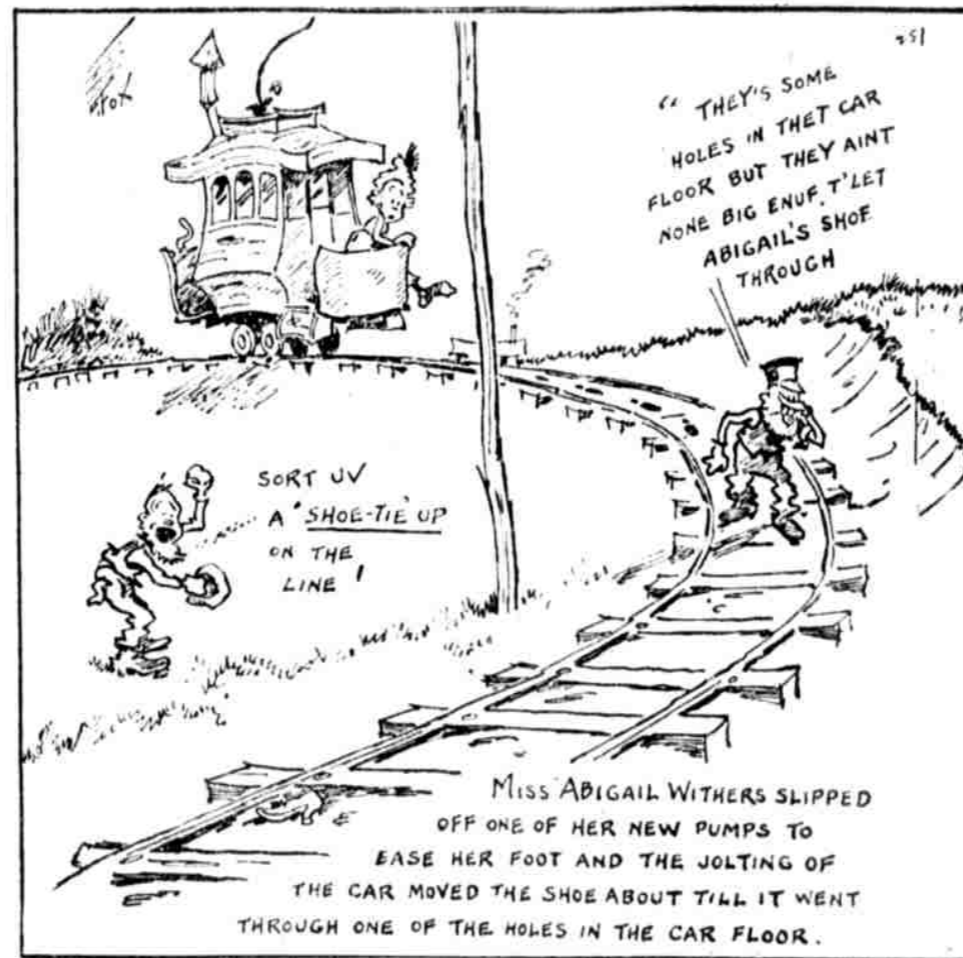
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## THE TOONERVILLE TROLLEY

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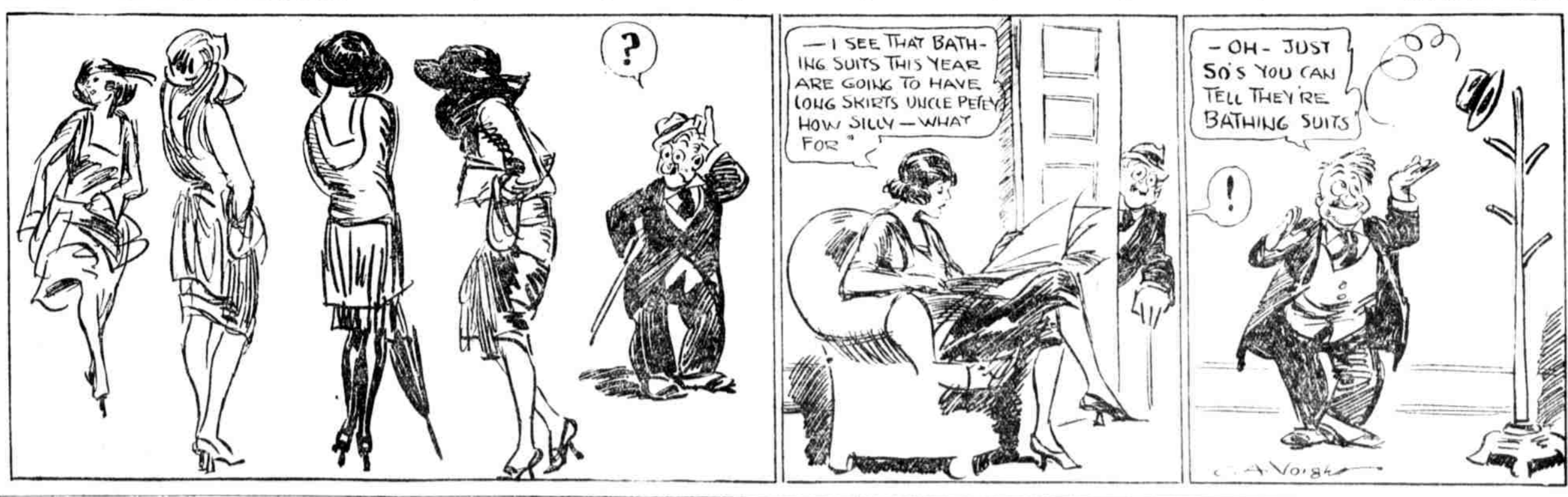
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