

A BACHELOR HUSBAND

By RUBY M. AYRES

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CHAPTER I

"Oh, but we were young—and together!" SHE had always adored him. From the first moment he came to the house—an overgrown, good-looking schoolboy, and had started to bully and tease her, Marie Chester had thought him the most wonderful person in all the world. She waited on him hand and foot, she was his willing housemaid, she did not mind at all when she was in an unusual fit of eloquence, she had confided in him that she thought it was the loveliest thing she thought she had ever done, and she had even sworn almost brutally that she "talked very, anyway, and that sisters were a bully nuisance!"

He looked at her with a sort of contempt for a moment, then added: "Be- lieve me, we're not brother and sister, really!"

They were not; but these fathers had been lifelong friends, and when George Chester's wife had died—consequently—so the young man had been left an orphan, Marie promptly adopted him.

"I will do Marie good to have a brother," Miss Chester, who kept house for him, raised an objection. "She's spoiled—shockingly spoiled—and a boy of her size and general appearance would be a disgrace to the household. It's no more, for in a fortnight he had turned Marie, who was naturally rather shy and reserved, into a tomboy who climbed trees with him regardless of injury to life and limb, who rode a cob barebacked round the paddock, who did, in fact, everything he dare or dared her to do.

"Christopher is ruining her; I can do nothing with her now! She is quite a different child since he came to the house."

Marie's father chuckled. He was not a particularly refined man, and the daughter had rather embarrassed him. He was pleased to think that under Christopher's guiding hand she was what he chose to call "improving."

"De her good!" he said bluntly. "Where's the harm? They're only children."

But the climax came rather violently when one afternoon Marie fell out of the loft into the yard below, and broke her arm.

"I fell out myself!" she said with quivering lips. "I fell out all my own self."

Young Christopher, who had clambered down the ladder from the loft, broke in violently:

"She didn't! It was my fault! She made me wild, and I pushed her. I didn't think she'd be so silly to fall, though," he added, with an angry look at her. "And don't you trouble to tell her about me."

The groom said afterward that she had not shed a tear till then, but at the angry words she broke down suddenly into bitter sobbing.

She did not mind her broken arm, but she minded having offended Chris- topher. It was the greatest trouble she had ever known when—as a consequence of the accident—Christopher was sent away to a boarding school.

Hereafter she only saw him by fits and starts during the holidays, and then he seemed somehow quite different.

He took but little notice of her, and he generally brought a friend home with him from school. He was getting beyond the "boy" stage, and developing a wholesome contempt for girls as a whole!

When—later—he went to a public school, he forgot to ignore her, and took to patronizing her instead. She wasn't such a bad little thing, he told her, and next term if she liked she might knit him a tie.

Marie knitted him two—which he never wore! She would have blacked his boots for him if he had expressed the slightest wish for her to do so.

Then, later still, he went to Cam- bridge and forgot all about her. He hardly ever came home during vacation week-ends; he had so many friends, it seemed, and was in great demand among them all.

Marie could quite believe it. She was bitterly jealous of these unknown friends, and incidentally of the sisters which she was sure some of them must have!

She was still at school herself, and her soft brown hair was tied in a pig-tail with a large bow at the end.

"You must have to put your hair up if you grow so fast," Marie, Miss Chester said to her rather sadly, when at the end of one term she came home.

She was glanced at herself in the glass. She was tall and slim for her age, which was not quite seventeen, and she was entirely free from conceit she could see, which, together with her name of Marie Cheate, she had inherited from her French mother.

"Am I like mother, Auntie Madge?" she asked, and Miss Chester smiled at the answer:

"You have your mother's eyes."

Marie looked at her reflection again. "Mother was very pretty, wasn't she?" she asked, and Miss Chester said: "Yes—she was very pretty."

Marie sighed. "Of course, I can't be like her, then," she said, resignedly, and turned away.

"Presently," "Is Chris coming these holidays?" she asked.

Miss Chester shook her head.

"He did not think so. He wrote that he should go to Scotland with the Knights."

Marie flushed. "I hate the Knights," she said pettishly. "She had never seen them, but on principle she hated every one and everything who took Chris- topher from her."

The following year she was sent to a finishing school in Paris, and while she was there her father died, and she was a wire came from England, which said that Marie was packed off home the following morning.

Her father's death was no great grief to her, though in a sort of way she had been fond of him. She had written to him regularly every Sun- day, and was grateful for all that she knew he had done for her, but any deep love she might have borne for him had begun to fade and end of her girlish dreams as she sat on the study cabin on the cross-Channel boat and looked out at the sea outside her chief thought was should she see Chris? Had they wired for him to come home from wherever he was?

He had left Cambridge now, she knew, but what he was doing or how he spent his time she did not know. All she was thinking of in the train from Dover was how soon she would see him, and how soon she would see him, but she had dreamed that he would meet her in the train and the wild color flew to her face as she saw him coming down the crowded platform.

He looked very tall and very much of a man, she thought, as she gave him a trembling hand to shake. She felt

herself very childish and insignificant beside his magnificence as she walked with him to the waiting car, for the house in the country had long since been given up, and George Chester had lived in London for some years before his death.

"Have you got your ticket?" Chris- topher asked, very much as he might have asked a child, and Marie fumbled in her pocket with fingers that shook.

"I nearly lost it once," she volun- teered, and Chris smiled as he answered: "Yes, that's the sort of thing you would do."

He looked down at her. "You haven't altered much," he said condescendingly. "You're still just a kid."

Marie did not answer, but her heart swelled with disappointment. She was eighteen, she knew that he was but six years older.

Years ago that six years had not seemed much of a gap, but now, looking up at him, she felt it to be an insur- mountable chasm.

He was a man and she was only a schoolgirl with short skirts and her hair down her back.

They sat opposite one another in the car, and Chris looked at her consider- ingly. "It's a long time since I saw you," he said.

"Yes, eight months," she answered readily. She could have told him the date and the month and almost the hour of the last meeting had she chosen, but somehow she did not think he would be greatly interested.

"It's rough luck—about Uncle George," he said awkwardly, and Marie nodded.

"Yes."

She wondered if he thought she ought to be crying. She would have been amazed if she could have known that he was hoping with all his heart and soul that she would not.

He changed the subject abruptly.

"Aunt Madge would have come to meet you, but there is so much to see to. She sent her love and told me to say she was sorry not to be able to come."

"I don't mind," said Marie. She would infinitely rather have been met by Chris. Her dark eyes searched his face with shy adoration.

She was quite sure there had never been anybody so good-looking as he in all the world; that there had never been eyes so blue, or with such a twinkle; that nobody had ever had such a wonderful smile or such a cheery laugh; that there was not a man in the whole of London who dressed so well or looked so splendid.

As a matter of fact, Christopher was rather a fine-looking man, and perfectly well aware of the fact. He had more friends than he knew what to do with, and they all, more or less, spelt him out.

He was generally good-tempered, and always good company. He was run after by all the women with marriage- able daughters, though, to do him jus- tice, so far he evinced very little in- terest in the opposite sex.

He looked now at Marie, and thought what a child she was! He would have been amazed could he have known that beneath her black coat her heart was beating with love for him, deep and sincere.

Faithfulness was a falling with Marie, if it can ever be called a falling. There was something doglike in her devotion that made change impossible. Her best friend at school had been un- kind to her many times, but Marie's affection had never wavered, and all the tyranny and bullying she had received from Christopher in the past had only deepened her adoration. In her eyes he was perfect.

There were many things she wanted to say to him, but she was tongue-tied and shy. It seemed all too soon that they reached home, and Chris- topher handed her over to Miss Chester.

Miss Chester took Marie upstairs and kissed her and made much of her. She took it for granted that the girl was broken-hearted at the death of her father. She was a sweet, old-fashioned woman who always took it for granted that people would do the right thing, and she thought it was the right thing for any daughter to grieve at the loss of a parent.

"You grow so fast," she said, as she said every time the girl came home. "You will have to put your hair up."

Marie turned eagerly. "Oh, auntie! Tonight, may I?"

Miss Chester did not think it would matter, and so presently a very self-conscious little figure in black crept downstairs through the silent house and into the dining room, where Chris- topher was waiting impatiently for his dinner.

He turned quickly as Marie and her aunt entered. He was a man who had been kept waiting a moment, though if it pleased him he broke appointments without the slightest hesitation.

Conversation was intermittent during dinner. Naturally there was a gloom over the house, and it was only as they were leaving the table that Miss Chester said, smiling faintly: "Do you notice that Marie has grown up, Chris?"

"Grown up!" he echoed. He looked at Marie's flushing face.

"She has put her hair up," said Miss Chester.

Christopher looked away indifferently. "Oh, has she? I didn't notice."

The tears started to Marie's eyes. She felt like a disappointed child.

CHAPTER II

"All men kill the thing they love. By all that is heard. The coward does it with a kiss. . . ."

There followed a terribly dull week, during which Marie hardly went out. Miss Chester believed in seven days' unbroken mourning, and she kept the girl to it rigorously.

Christopher came and went. He seemed very busy, and was constantly shut up in the library with men whom Miss Chester said were "lawyers."

"There are a great many things to settle, you know," she told Marie. "Your father has large properties and much money to leave."

Marie said, "Oh, had he?" and lost interest. As yet money had not much significance for her, but she watched the lawyer's library door with anxious eyes. "Would it never open?"

It was quite late that evening before she saw Chris again, and then he came into the drawing room, where she was trying to read and trying not to listen for his step, and, crossing to where she sat, stood looking down at her.

It was getting dark—the June evening was drawing to a close—and she could not see his face very distinctly, though she felt in some curious way that there was a different note in his voice when he spoke to her.

"How old are you, Marie?"

She looked up at him. Surely he ought to know her age when they had grown up together? But as he answered at once: "I was eighteen last May."

"And a kid for your age, too," he said abruptly.

She closed her book, a faint sense of hurt dignity in her heart.

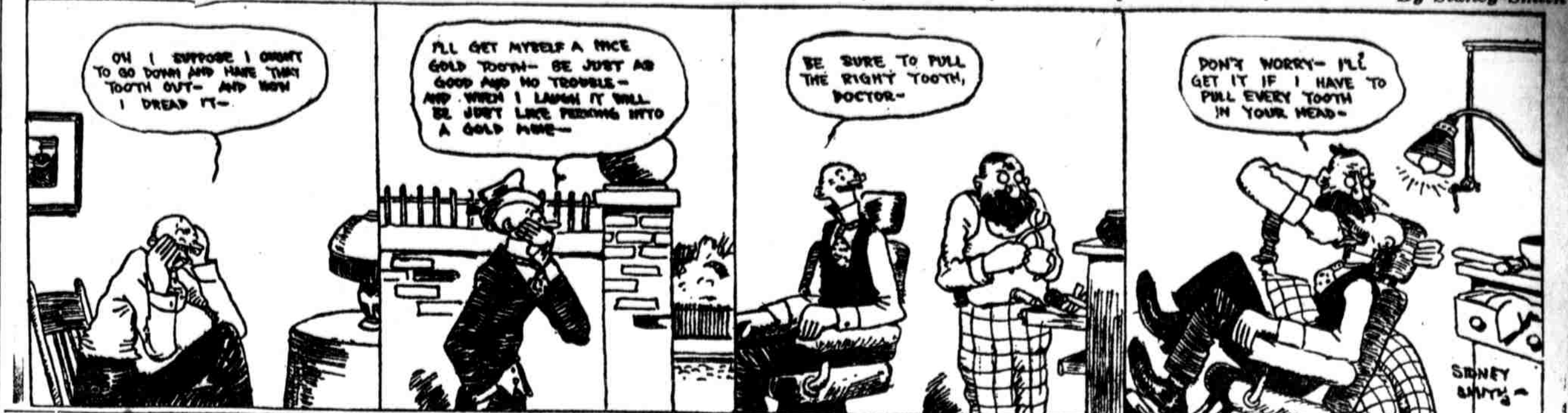
"I knew a girl who was married at eighteen," she said.

Christopher laughed. "I can't imagine you married, all the same," he said. "Why not? I don't see why not," she objected, offendedly.

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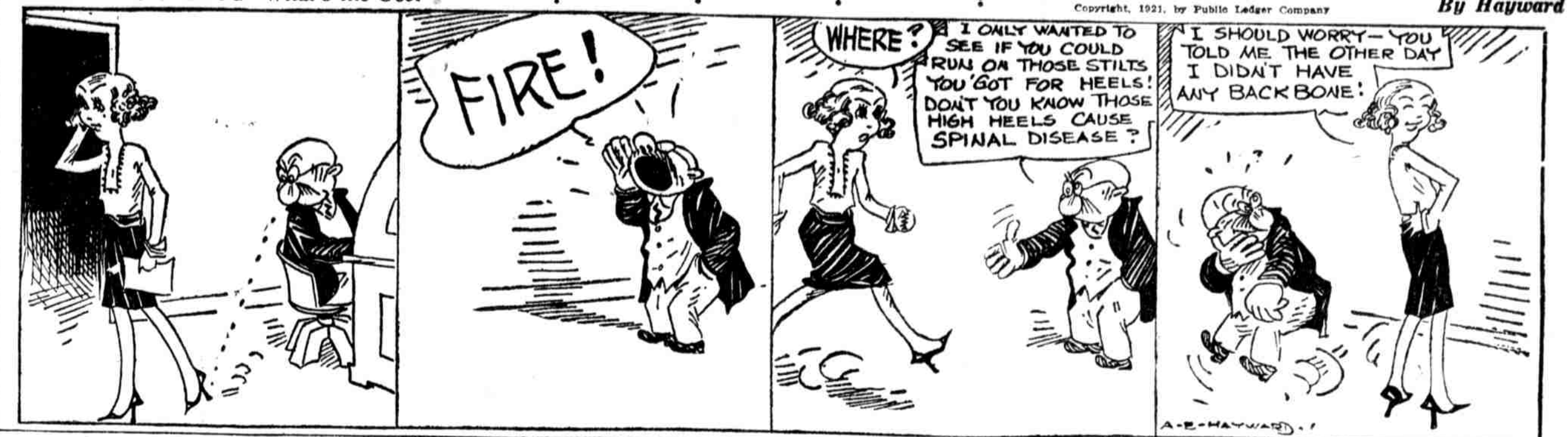
THE GUMPS—Taking No Chances

By Sidney Smith



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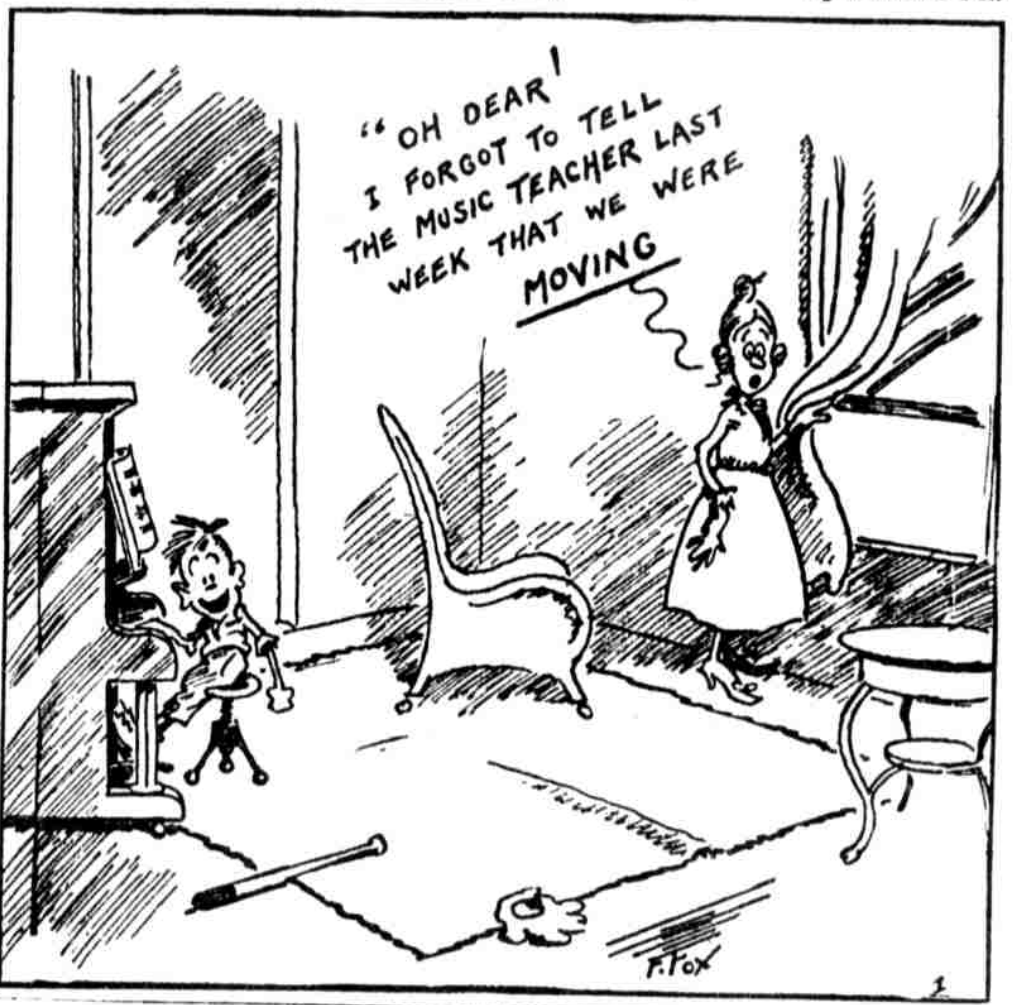
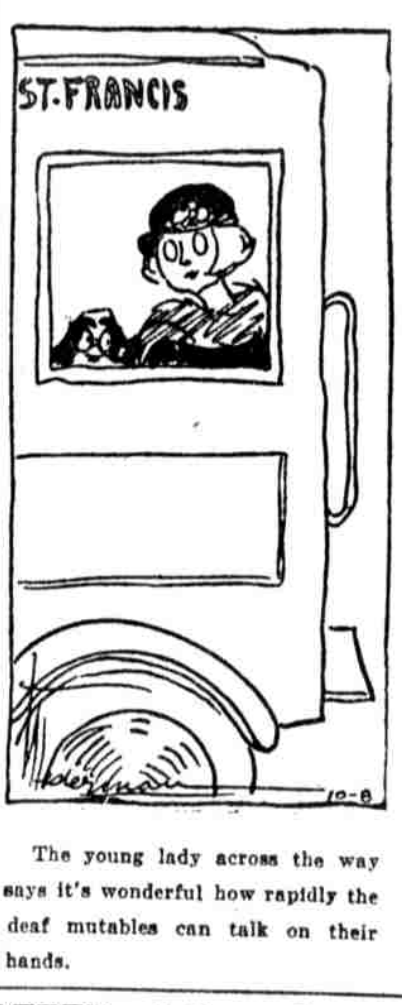
The Young Lady Across the Way

Takes an Earthquake to Keep the Teacher Away

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PETEY—A Queer Case

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GASOLINE ALLEY—Trying to Kid Walt

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