

By Sidney Smith

A BACHELOR HUSBAND

By RUBY M. AYRES

Author of "Richard Chatterton," Etc.
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THIS BEGINS THE STORY

Marie Chester and Christopher Marlow were raised together. She loved him; he was indifferent to her. After her death he proposed to her and she joyfully accepted him. She hears a couple of them talking in a hotel where he is staying. They go on talking. She hears a couple of them talking in a hotel where he is staying. They go on talking. She hears a couple of them talking in a hotel where he is staying. They go on talking.

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

She went with young Atkins to the billiard room and sat beside him on a high leather couch, and tried to listen while he explained the game, but it all seemed like double Dutch. The smoke of the many cigars made her eyes smart, and the subdued light made her feel that she had been deceived. She had heard that he was a first-class player, but it was difficult. Chris had taken off his coat to show more of a man in his shirt-sleeves, she thought, as he stood chalking his cue and laughing with players at his side. He never once thought that she was watching him. He was so happy and entertained by young Atkins.

And this was the first night of her honeymoon. She realized it in a pitying sort of way, as if she were counting the case of some girl. She thought, it seemed so natural, realizing that thought, and the little wife whom she was playing, and that the tall man over the other side of the room, who was engaged in his name, was her husband.

What other wife in the world had spent the first evening of her married life watching a game of billiards, she wondered? And a little helpless laugh escaped her. Young Atkins looked down quickly. "I beg your pardon. What did you say?"

"Nothing—only laughed." She hit her lip to prevent the laugh from coming again. How stupid she had been because nothing amusing had happened. Only once Chris came across to her. "Would you like some coffee?" he asked.

"No, thank you." "Do your head good," he said, but without looking at her. His eyes were watching the table the whole time, and without waiting for her to speak again he went off back to the game.

"Chris really plays a stunning good game," Atkins confided to her. "I always tell him he's a rotten player, but he isn't a rotten player at anything, really. Fine sportsman, you know." Marie nodded. She knew everything there was to know about Chris. At home she had a scrapbook, her most treasured possession, carefully pasted up with every little newspaper cutting that had ever been printed about him, from the first long jump he had won at a local school to an account of a wedding a few months back at which he had been best man.

She had whispered to Aunt Midge as they kissed good-by, to be sure to cut the announcement of their wedding from the newspapers so that she could add it to her collection, and Aunt Midge had promised. Somehow it made her feel sick now to think of it! Such a farcical wedding—no real wedding at all! No wonder they had wanted it quiet!

Though she hardly looked at the table before her she seemed to see nothing but those smooth, ivory balls, and the soft sound in the wood was their monotonous click, click!

Chris was winning, young Atkins whispered to her. Poor old Feathers was not in the running at all. He bent a little closer to her. "Have you seen Chris play tennis?" he asked. "Glad! He can serve! As good as any Wimbledon pro! I'll bet you both." "I say, what's the matter? Here, Chris!"

He called sharply across the room to Chris, but it was too late, for Marie had slipped fainting from the high leather couch.

CHAPTER III

"...the leaves were curled apart, and red as from the broken heart, and the smoke of the broken heart." The game stopped abruptly, and between them Chris and Feathers carried Marie from the room.

"It was the smoke and the heat!" Atkins kept saying in distress. He felt how pale she looked. "It was the smoke and the heat!" "It's only an ordinary faint, isn't it?" Nobody took any notice of him, or cared for him, but he kept on talking all the same. He was young and irresponsible, and he thought Marie was altogether charming. He was thankful when at last her lashes fluttered and she opened her eyes.

Feathers, who was bending over her, moved away, and Chris came forward, "Better," he asked. "It was the heat, I'll take you upstairs. It's all right, you only fainted."

All right! Years afterward he remembered the passionate look in her face, and wondered what her thoughts must have been at that moment when she was trembling on her lips were: "I wish I could have died! I would have died!"

Feathers picked up her gloves and fan, which had fallen to the floor. His face was commiserating as he looked at her.

"The room was very stuffy. It was impossible for us to let you be there, Mrs. Lawson. I am afraid it was my fault."

His fault. Everything was his fault. He told himself bitterly, as she turned away. And yet—surely it was better to know now the true facts of her marriage than to learn them later on when it was too late.

A bachelor husband. How infinitely that was! She looked at Chris as they walked with her to the stairs. His eyes were concerned, but as he had said, she had only fainted, and a man would have cared had she been dead. He slipped a hand through her arm to steady her.

"I am afraid it was all my fault," he said. "You told me you were tired. I'm sorry, Marie Celeste."

Her lip quivered at the sound of the name called her that, and she turned away.

"I'll fetch one of the maids to look after you," he said, as they reached her room. He turned away, but she called him back.

"Chris, I want to speak to you."

He followed her into the room. A pretty room it was, the best in the hotel, and the very new silver brushes and trinkets which Aunt Midge had given her for a wedding present were laid out on the dressing table.

When she had dressed there for dinner only two hours ago she had been the happiest girl in the world, but now from her lips. Chris was looking at her anxiously. He was worried by her pallor, and sorry she had fainted, but he quite realized that there was nothing serious in a faint. Since women made it a habit, he believed, and he was anxious to get back and finish that game of billiards.

"What do you want to say to me?" he asked. "Do you do presently?" She shook her head.

"No."

She was standing by the dressing table nervously fingering a little silver box, and for a moment she could not speak, then she said in desperation: "Chris—I want to tell you I know all about our wedding!"

He echoed her words blankly. "You know all about it. You funny kid. I suppose you do. Why—"

He stopped, struck by something in her eyes.

"What do you mean, Marie Celeste?" She turned round and faced him squarely.

"I mean—I know why you married me."

"Why?" The hot blood rushed to his face. "Who told you?" he asked sharply.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Does that matter? I—just found out. And I—I wanted to tell you that it doesn't matter. I—I think it was quite right of you."

He looked rather puzzled, then he smiled.

"Oh, well—if you think it's right—"

He hesitated, and drew a step nearer to her. "Who told you, Marie?" he asked. "Aunt Midge agreed with me that there was no need for you to know."

She pushed the soft hair back from her forehead. So Aunt Midge had been willing to deceive her as well. That hurt. Somehow she had always believed in Aunt Midge.

"She managed a smile."

"What does it matter? I only thought it was better to should start by—by not having any secrets. We—we've always been good friends, haven't we?" Friends! When she looked him, "Of course!" He gave his agreement readily, and a sharp pain touched her heart. It was only friendship, then—on his side, at least. She knew how much she had longed for him to wipe out that word and substitute another.

"There was a little silence, then Chris said again: 'Marie—is there anything the matter? You look—somehow you look different!'"

He walked up to her, and laid his hands on her shoulders. "Look at me," he said. "Look at me," she said. "Now tell me what is the matter!" he demanded. "There is something you are keeping from me. I haven't known you all these years for nothing, you know, Marie Celeste."

There was a little laughing note of tenderness in his voice, and for a moment the girl smiled in his grasp.

If only she could put her arms round his neck and lay her head on his breast and tell him the truth, the whole wretched truth of what she had heard! Even if he did not love her, it would be such exquisite relief to unburden her heart to him, but she did not dare!

Chris had always hated what he called "secrets." Years ago, when they were both children, tears had been the best means whereby to win his sympathy or admiration. He liked a girl to be a "sport"; he had always been nearest to her when she could take a knock without blinking under the pain.

She remembered that now—forced herself to remember it, and nothing else, as she raised her eyes to his.

"Yes—what is it?" he urged. "Don't be afraid! It's all right, whatever it is. I promised you."

Twice her lips moved, but no words would come, and then with a rush of desperation she faltered: "It's only—it's only—"

"Just now—we had always been good friends."

"Did I?" he laughed. "I was rather under the impression that it was you who said that, but never mind. Go on!"

"Well—well—"

"Can't we go on just being good friends?—just only being good friends, I mean."

He did not answer, though it was not possible to mistake her meaning, and in the silence that followed it seemed to Marie that every hope she had cherished was crumbling away with each thudding heart beat. Then his hands fell slowly from her shoulders.

"You mean—that you don't care for me?"

She almost cried out at the tone of his voice. That he tried to make it properly hurt and amazed, she knew, but her heart told her that his one great emotion was an overwhelming relief. That he had no intention of even paying her the compliment of discussion.

Her lips felt like ice as she answered him in a whisper. "No—"

And the silence came again before Chris said constrainedly: "Very well—it shall be as you wish—of course."

He waited a moment, but she did not speak, and he turned to the door. "Good-night, Marie Celeste."

"Good-night."

The door opened, and after a moment she heard it shut again softly, and the sound of his footsteps dying away down the corridor.

That nobody should know, that nobody should ever guess, was the feverish thought in Marie's brain as she lay awake through the long night, listening to the sound of the waves on the shore, and trying to make some sort of plans for the future.

To behave as if nothing were the matter, as if she were quite happy. An impossible task, it seemed, and yet she meant to do it. She would not further alienate Chris by scenes and tears.

If he did not care for her she would not let him think that it was her fault. Surely, if she were brave and turned a smiling face to a world that had suddenly grown so empty something good would come out of it all. Some small reward would creep out of the blackness that enveloped her.

Though she knew it was unjust in her heart she laid all the trouble at Feathers' door—"Feathers," as Chris and young Atkins called him. She thought of his ugly, kindly face as she lay there in the darkness, and silently hated him more than she could be able to like him, she would never be able to forgive him. But for him and his carelessly spoken words and the fact that she had her face in the pillow, and for the first time the tears came. What was the use of blaming him when the blame was not his? How could he help it that Chris did not love her? What was it to do with him if Chris had seen fit to marry her in order to get her father's money?

It was fate, that was all.

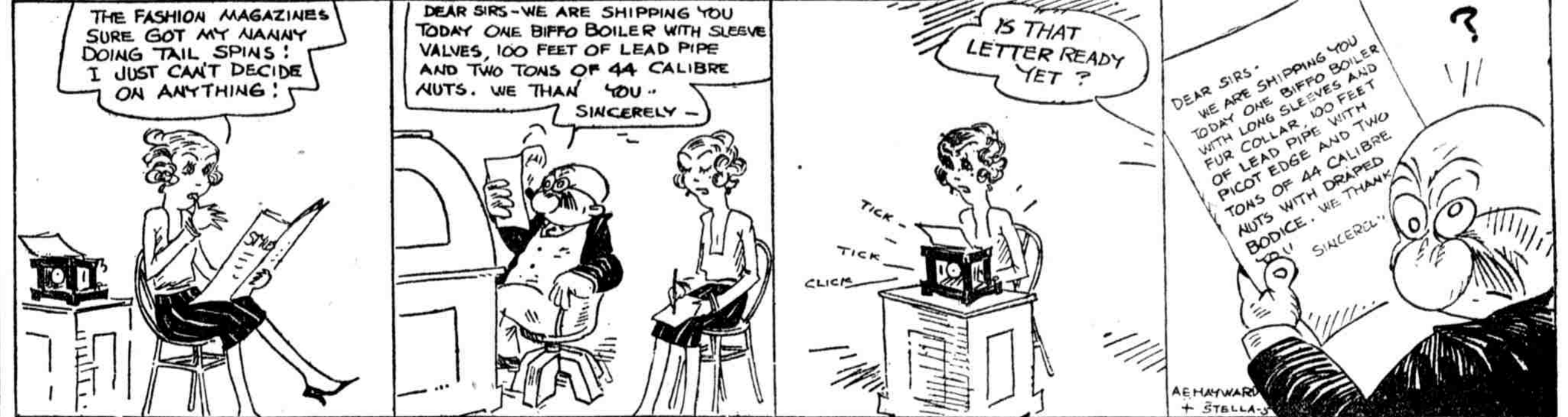
It hurt unbearably to think that Aunt Midge had known all the time. Marie clenched her hands as she recalled the old lady's whispered good-by: "God bless you and make you very happy!"

CONTINUED TO MORROW

THE GUMPS—A Sprig of the Family Tree



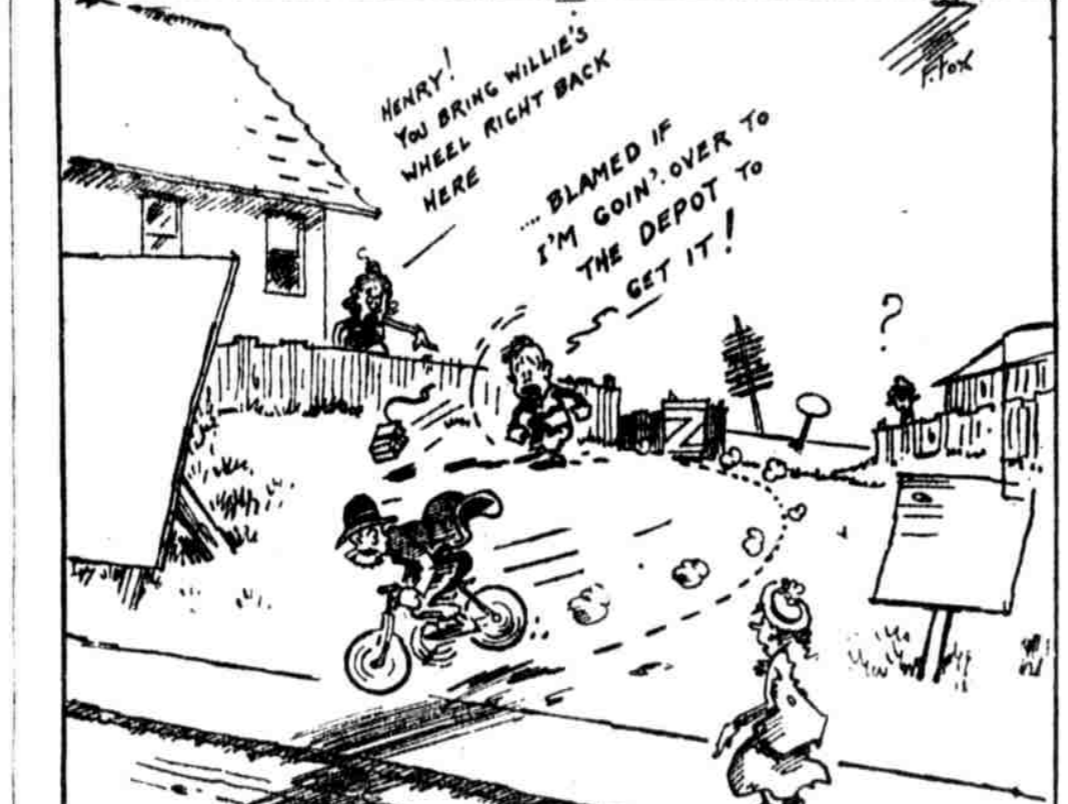
SOMEBODY'S STENOG—Shimmying Brain Cells



The Young Lady Across the Way



FAMILY STUFF



SCHOOL DAYS

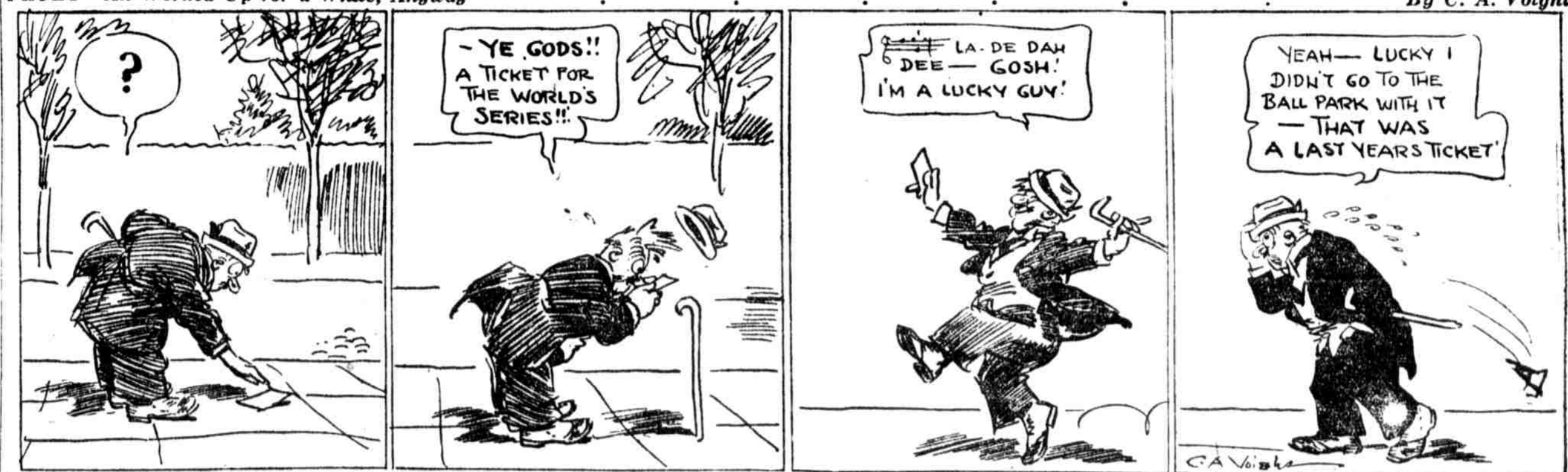


The young lady across the way says she's reading the Bible from cover to cover and is thinking of tackling the Pentateuch or the Apocalypse next.

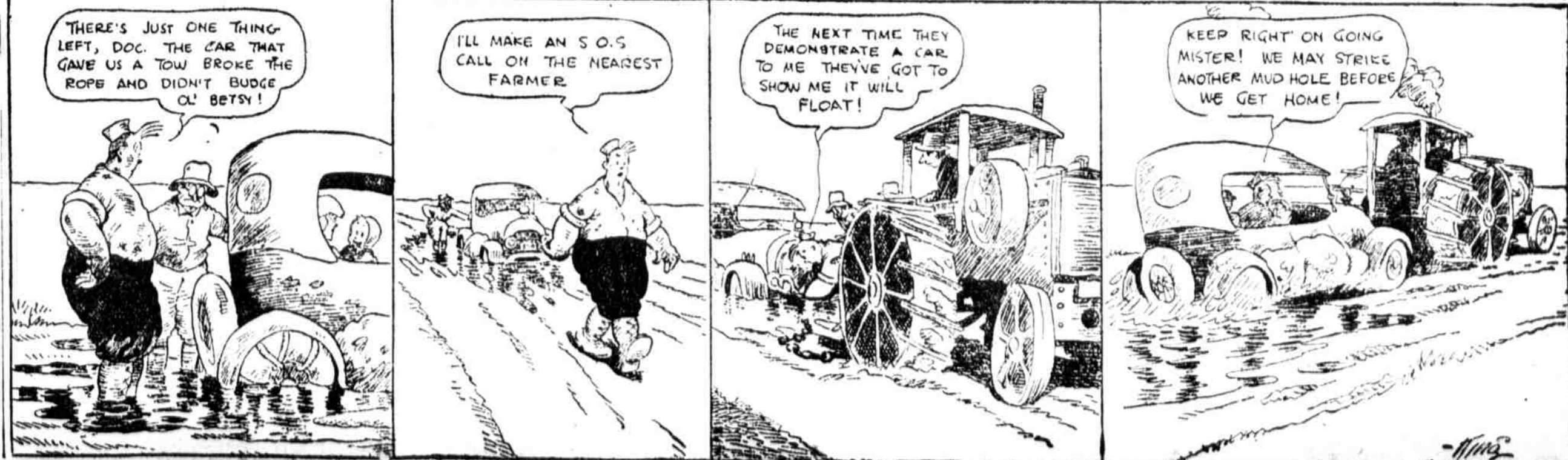
THE ONLY WAY DAD COULD POSSIBLY MAKE HIS TRAIN WAS TO COMMANDEER THE WHEEL THAT WILLIE RIDES TO SCHOOL.

When the evening shadows fall...

PETEY—All Worked Up for a While, Anyway



GASOLINE ALLEY—Last Aid



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