

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 Feathers were raised together, and when her father died they inherited the house she loved her; he because he liked her, didn't love anybody else, and could use the money the arrangement she learned the truth and tells him he may live the life of a Bachelor Husband. Her husband, Chris, a friend of her husband, Chris, softened by Marie's breakdown, tries to console her, but in vain, and she confides her intention of living his own life. Marie on returning home is addressed not at Chris' marriage, but at her realization that she has lost Mrs. Heriot's power to sway him. Home life is not the radiant happiness Marie had expected, and Marie cuts out her heart in silence. She feels that she never will show interest in her when he suggests mounting a trip to Ireland while he goes to St. Andrews for golf with his boon companions. He goes off gaily for his trip, leaving her disconsolate. She meets young Atkins, who cheers her by taking her to the theatre. He asks her anxiously when they will go again.

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

"When you like—I can go on Saturday if you care about it." He pulled a long face. "Saturday? Why, that's another three days." "Well, we can't go every day," she protested, laughing. "Besides, don't you have to work?" "Yes, I'm in the gov'nor's office, but he's away today, so I took French leave."

"What will he say?" "He won't know, and I don't care if he does; it's been worth it." He was silent for a moment, then broke out again: "My gov'nor's an old pig, you know; he's worth pots of money, but he won't do a thing for me. I hate an indoor job; I wanted to go to sea, but no! He drove me into his beastly office, and I loathe it."

"What a shame!" "Yes, but with his old light-headedness, I don't see why we're bound to have fathers," he submitted coolly. "Well—we'll go to another theatre on Saturday," Marie consoled him. "Saturday is a half-day holiday for everybody, isn't it?" "Yes!—that Saturday, then."

He wrung her hand so hard at parting that her fingers felt quite dead for some seconds afterward, but she had really enjoyed herself, and looked after young Atkins gratefully as he strode off down the street. "There's a letter from Chris," Miss Chester said, as Marie entered the room. Her quick eyes noticed the color that rushed to her niece's cheeks, never there on the marble-hall floor.

Marie took the envelope upstairs to read. She sat down on the side of the bed and broke open the envelope with trembling hands. She had not heard from him now for three days; she considered if this was to say that he was coming home. "Dear Marie Celeste—Hope you are well—I have had no letters from you since the end of last week. The weather has changed a bit up here, and we have had some rain. Feathers sent you a box of leather this morning; I don't suppose you'll care much for it, but he insisted on sending it. By the way, a curious thing happened yesterday. We were at the third hole, and there were some girls on the green in front of us. One of them had lost a ball and I found it, so we talked, and who do you think she turned out to be? Why, your friend, Dorothy Wheeler. It's a coincidence, isn't it? You never told me she was such a fine player. I've got a match with her this afternoon. She has a good time. I hope you are having a good time. I've got a brown coffee since I came up here—being out-of-doors all day, I suppose. Its the way, if you look in my room you'll find a lot of new golf balls. You might send them to me. I will write again soon—Yours affectionately, CHRIS."

So he had met Dorothy Wheeler after all. Marie Celeste sat there with Chris' happy letter in her hand. "He's up there in Scotland, quite happy and contented, and she's here!" Her eyes fell again to his hurried scribble. "Feathers sent you a box of Kind, ugly Feathers! He, at least, had not forgotten her."

During the days that followed Marie suffered tortures of jealousy, and her over-imagined imagination exaggerated things. She began to sleep badly, and a dead look grew in her brown eyes. That at last even Miss Chester was moved to reprimand gently. "My dear, I am afraid that nice boy is getting a little too fond of you?" "Is he?" Marie laughed. "He's only a boy," she said carelessly. "Chris Chester looked pained. "Boys love me as well as grown men," she said gently. "More, sometimes," Marie answered. "But she knew that Miss Chester was a different light in young Atkins' eyes, and a strange quality in his voice when ever he spoke to her. Sometimes she was sorry—sometimes she told her self that she did not care? Why should she be the only one to suffer?"

"He can't love me—really," she told herself truthfully, when conscience spoke. "He has always known I am going to fall in love with a married woman, and she would shed bitter tears as she thought of the three her marriage had been and how much she had lost for some one to love her—not a boy, whose she could look up, a man who would see could look up, a man who might as possible for her tired feet. When the temptation came to her to write and ask Chris to come home. He knew that Miss Chester was wonderful about it all and worrying silently. After all, she was his wife, and it was his duty to be with her. So Marie arranged sometimes, knowing all the time that she would rather die than ask any unwillingly."

The log box of leather had arrived from Feathers, and as Marie buried her face in it and closed her eyes she seemed to breathe the lava steam once and feel the soft, springy turf beneath her feet. Oh, to be there with Chris!—to pass the long hours of the falling summer days with him and be happy!

She wrote a little note to Feathers and thanked him. "It was kind of you to think of me. I have never been to Scotland, but the smell of the heather seemed to show it to me as plainly as if I could really see it. You have never found any white heather, I suppose? If you do, please send me a little piece for luck."

She had no real belief in luck—it had long since passed her by, she was sure—but a day or so later a tiny parcel arrived containing a little bunch of white heather, smelling strongly of cigarettes—for a cigarette box had been the only one Feathers could find in which to pack it.

He had got up with the dawn the day after her note reached him and searched the country for miles to find the thing for which she had asked him.

Marie slept with it under her pillow and carried it in her frock by day; a sort of shyness prevented her from showing it to Miss Chester, though once she asked her about it.

"Aunt Midge, are you superstitious?" Miss Chester looked up and smiled. "I used to be years ago, but I've admitted. 'I used to bow to every wind I met and refuse to sit down thirteen at a table.'"

"Is that all?" Marie asked. "Well, I once wore a piece of white heather round my neck night and day for two years," she said after a moment. "It was given to me by the man I should have married if he had lived. But the white heather brought me no luck, for he was drowned at sea when he was on his way home for our wedding."

Marie's face hardened a little. "There is no such thing as luck," she said.

"I know a better word for it," Miss Chester answered gently. "I mean fate. I think each one of us has his or her fate mapped out, and that it always happens for the best, though we may not think so."

There was a little silence. "I wonder," Marie said sadly. "But she still wore the white heather."

CHAPTER XII

"When two friends meet in adverse hour, 'Tis like a sunbeam through a shower. A watery ray an instant seen, And darkly closing clouds between."

Marie was alone at home one afternoon when young Atkins called.

It was Sunday, and Miss Chester had motored out into the country to see a friend who was sick.

Perhaps young Atkins knew this, for at any rate there was a look of determination about him as he walked into the drawing room, where Marie was pretending to read and trying to prevent herself from writing to Chris.

A moment ago she had been feeling desperately lonely, and longing for some one to come in, but a queer sort of fear came to her as she looked into young Atkins' eyes.

He was rather pale, and this afternoon the boyishness seemed to have been wiped out of his face by an older, graver look.

"Won't you have some tea?" she asked him. "I've had none for you."

No, he had no time for tea. He sat down only to get up again immediately and walk restlessly about the room.

Marie watched him nervously. "Shall we go for a walk?" she asked with sudden inspiration. "I have not been out all day. Do let us go for a walk."

He hardly seemed to hear. He had taken up a cigarette case belonging to Chris, and was opening and shutting it with nervous aimlessness.

Suddenly he asked abruptly: "When is Chris coming home?"

Marie caught her breath sharply. "I was never good at riddles," she said in a hard voice.

There was a moment's silence, then he flung the cigarette case down, and turning, came over to where she stood, and caught her in his arms—such strong young arms they were, which there was no resisting.

"I love you," he said desperately. "I think I've always loved you, and I can't bear it any longer. If Chris will marry you for me, what did he want to marry you for? It was cheating some other poor devil out of Paradise."

Marie—I know you think I'm only a boy, but I'd die for you this minute if I would make you happy; I'd—oh, my darling, don't cry."

Marie had made no attempt to free herself from his grasp. She was standing a foot or two from the door, her head averted, and his arms were thrusting slowly down her cheeks.

She put up her hand to brush them away, when she heard the distress in his voice. "I'm all right—oh, please, if you wouldn't!" For he had caught her hand and was kissing it passionately.

He went on pleading, praying, imploring, in his boy's voice; for he was very sincere, and he had suffered more for her sake and the neglect which he knew she was receiving from Chris than from the hopelessness of his own cause.

He would make her so happy, he said; they would go away together abroad some where. He hadn't got any money—at least, only a little—but he'd work like the very devil if he had her to work for.

She put her hand over his lips then to silence him. "Tommy, dear, don't!"

His name was not Tommy, but every body had called him Tommy for so long because it seemed to go naturally with his surname that now he had almost forgotten what he had really been christened. But it sounded sweet from Marie's lips, and he kissed passionately the little hand that would have silenced his pleading.

"I love you—I love you!" he said again.

She shook her head. She knew that she ought to have been angry with him, but there was something very comforting to her sore heart in this boy's love.

"It's no good, Tommy," she said gently, "and you know it isn't. Even if I cared for you—and I don't, not in that way—a very real boy, and I think with a very real burst of emotion, she added: "We were such good friends, and now you've gone and spoiled it all."

"I couldn't help it—it had to come—and I'm glad. I've never felt like a friend to you. I thought you knew it, but if you want me to I'll go on being your friend all my life," he added in consequence.

Her tears came again at that, and Tommy got out his handkerchief—a nice, soft one which he had faintly scented for the occasion—and wiped her eyes for her, and reproached himself, and comforted her all in a breath, and did not look up and smile again.

"And now we've been thoroughly foolish," she said with a little sob, "please be a dear, and take me for a walk."

"It hasn't been foolishness," he answered, with a new manliness that surprised her and made her feel a little ashamed. "I love you, and I shall always love you, but if you only want me for a friend, well, that's all there is to be said."

She took his hand and held it hard for a moment. "You're a kind boy, Tommy."

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THE GUMPS—Old King Cole Is an Expensive Old Soul



SOMEbody'S STENOG—Two Minds With Different Thoughts



THE YOUNG LADY ACROSS THE WAY



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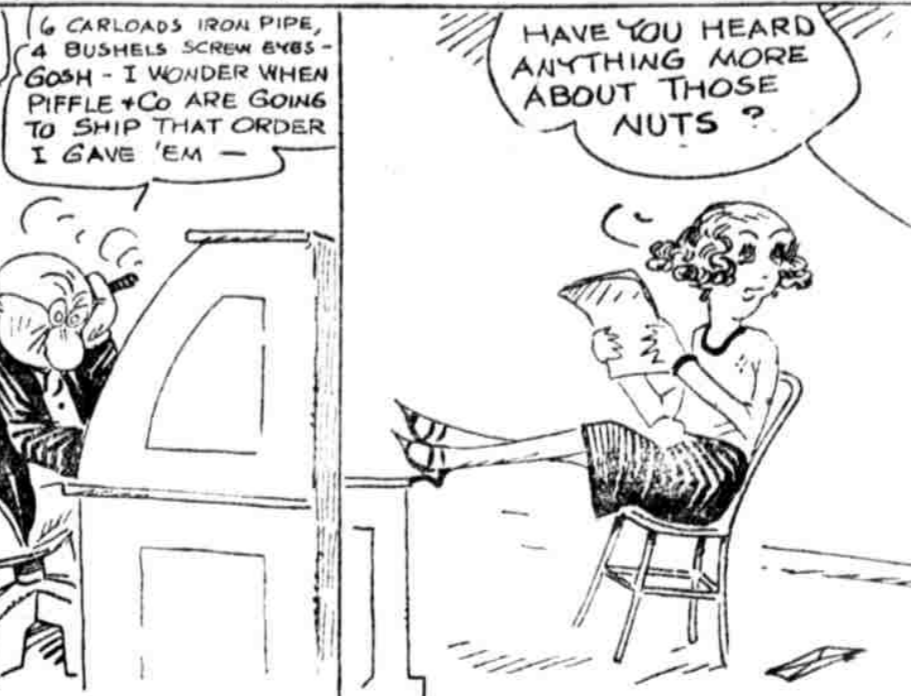
GASOLINE ALLEY—Live and Learn



SOMEbody'S STENOG—Two Minds With Different Thoughts



THE YOUNG LADY ACROSS THE WAY



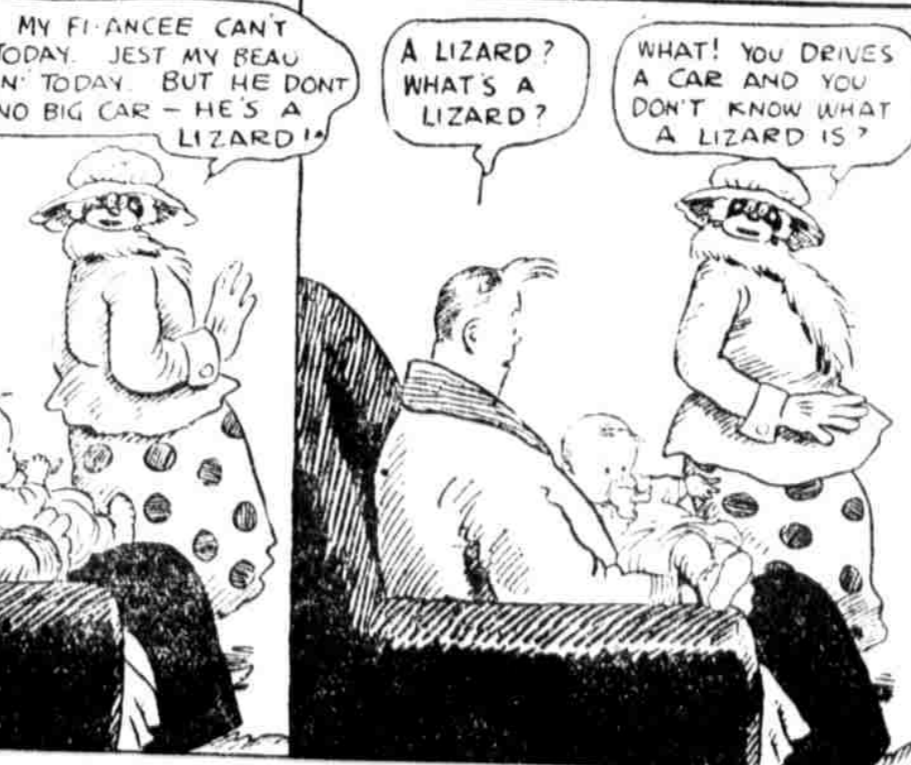
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