

By Sidney Smith

A BACHELOR HUSBAND

By RUBY M. AYRES

Author of "Richard Chatterton," Etc.
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"DON'T think he is in the very least a bit ugly," she said impulsively. "There is something in his face when he smiles that is far better than just ordinary good looks. What do you think, Aunt Madge?"

"I always liked Mr. Dakers," Miss Chester said mildly. "He is a good natured and a gentleman. She was a thing of all Chris' friends. She never saw evil in any one."

Dorothy laughed. "Like him, yes. But he's ugly, all right," she said. "He doesn't have your name."

"No," she answered. "We had lots of little tiffs when we were up in Scotland. I was always a bit of a rebel."

"I think he thought it was a wonderful because I played without a change with Chris and without a change."

"Mr. Dakers isn't a bit narrow-minded," Marie said boldly. Dorothy shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't like Mrs. Heriot either," she said irreverently. "You never told me anything about her. Marie said she was a friend of Chris', not mine."

"Oh, and his friends are not yours?" Marie did not answer. She had never seen Dorothy in such a quarrelsome mood.

The men joined them from the dining room and Chris came to his wife's side.

"On the stool of repentance?" he asked. "Why don't you have a chair?"

"I'm quite comfortable, thank you," she leaned her head against Miss Chester's knee with a little smiling pout.

"The old lady stopped in her work for a moment to stroke the girl's hair."

"I've just remembered," she said, "that I have some tickets for that bazaar tomorrow. Marie, one of us really ought to go. I promised the vicar we would. Couldn't you and Dorothy just run in for half an hour?"

Marie made a little grimace. "I hate bazaars," she said. Dorothy looked across the room at Marie.

"I think I ought to go home tomorrow," she said. "I've been here over a week. You'll be sick to death of me."

"Oh, don't say that," Marie cried. "You were touched by the hard note of happiness in her friend's voice, and reached out her hand to her. Don't Dorothy. They can't have finished with the scarlet fever yet."

"I shall have to see. I dare say I shall hear from home in the morning."

She excused herself presently on the plea of headache and went to bed. Her hands with Feathers and kissed Marie and Miss Chester, but Marie noticed with a queer little shivering at her heart that she seemed to avoid her altogether, and her thoughts went back with unwilling suspicion to the moment when she had found Dorothy's ring.

"Dorothy doesn't look well," Miss Chester said, as the door closed behind the older girl. "I really think all this talk is too much for her. She ought to take a rest and do something less strenuous."

"Knitting shawls, for instance, eh?" Marie asked tenderly. The old lady looked over her glasses. "She said she would do her no harm," she said.

It was only 10 o'clock when Feathers left, and Chris said he would walk part of the way with her.

"I shall be long," he said to Marie. "But it's so hot indoors, and I must get a breath of air."

She said good-night to them both in the hall, and after they had gone she stood for a moment looking at the closed door with a feeling of desolation. She had counted so much on this evening. Feathers had been so kind, and now he had gone—and nothing had happened, nothing had said.

She did not know what she had expected to happen or what she had hoped for, but she was conscious of a bitter disappointment as she went up to bed.

It seemed as if she must have dreamed about those moments on Sunday when he had let her know that he loved her—that they could never have been real, and in her heart she knew that she was not satisfied. She wanted more than the little he had given.

She heard Chris come in just after she had gone to bed, and her heart throbbed wildly as his step crossed the landing and stopped outside her door; but she went on again, and presently silence reigned all on the house.

Marie fell asleep, to dream the next morning of that once more she was drowning—that she was sinking down, down into bottomless depths of green water, and she woke, shivering and fighting for breath. Her face and the palms of her hands were wet with perspiration.

She sat up in bed and turned on the light. "What a dream!" she looked round the room with thankful eyes and a gasp. "It would have been such a simple answer to all her troubles if Feathers had only let her dream that summer's morning."

"If you two are going to the bazaar this afternoon," Chris said at lunch next day, "I'll go and look Feathers up. He asked me last night if I would, but I didn't promise." He looked at Marie. "I'll come with you if you like," he said quickly.

"Of course not! We shan't stay any longer than we can help," Dorothy said. "But I promised the vicar." Miss Chester broke in, in distress. "I think you really must go, my dears."

"Of course we will," Marie said. "If there's a fortune teller we'll have her palms read, shall we, Dorothy?"

The older girl shrugged her shoulders. "You don't believe in that rubbish, surely?"

"I think it's fun," Marie answered. She was childishly pleased when, during the afternoon, they found a fortune teller in a corner of the big hall where the bazaar was being held.

"Do let's go in," she urged on Dorothy, but it was Marie who went in first. Dorothy followed her.

A woman sat at a small round table on the half light of the tent. She was dressed in a white dress, and she looked back at Marie instead of in the usual gaudy wrappings which such people affect.

She was small and dark, with rather plaintive face and large eyes, and Marie was struck by the extreme whiteness and whiteness of her hands as they rested on a little velvet cushion on the table before her.

"We want to have our palms read," Marie said. She was conscious of an eerie feeling, and she looked back at the closed flap of the tent nervously.

"Dorothy—you go first." "I don't believe in it," Dorothy said, "but she sat down at the table, and laid her hands, palms upward, on the cushion."

The palmist spoke then, for the first time, to Marie. "You will kindly wait outside, mademoiselle," she said. She spoke with a slightly foreign accent, but her voice was soft and musical. Marie went reluctantly. She would like to have heard what Dorothy was told.

It was only a few minutes before Dorothy was out again, her face flushed and her eyes bright as if with unshed tears.

"It's all rubbish," she said harshly, when Marie eagerly questioned her. "As if anybody believes in it! Are you going in? Very well, be quick. I'll tell you afterward what she said to me."

Marie went back into the tent. She had taken off her gloves and slipped her wedding ring into her pocket. The palmist had addressed her as mademoiselle, and she was curious to know if she would still believe her to be unmarried when she had examined her hands.

"She laid them palm upward on the cushion, and the woman opposite her took them in her soft clasps, smoothing the palms with her forefingers and peering into the little lines and creases for a moment without speaking. Marie watched her curiously. Her first nervousness had lost itself in interest. She almost started when, quite suddenly, the woman began to speak in a low, clear voice.

"You are very young, but you are already a wife. You have married a man whom you love devotedly, but he is blind. And because he is blind he has let your love wander from him to the keeping of another. You are proud! You have wrapped your heart about with pride, until you have stifled the best affections, and persuaded yourself that you are right."

She ran her slender fingers along a faint line at the base of Marie's fingers. "You started with dreams—alas! so many dreams—and they have forsaken you one by one. But they will come back. And she raised her dark eyes suddenly to Marie's pale face. "A little patience, and they will come back dreams no longer, but reality. You were meant to be a happy wife and mother, my little lady, but something has intervened—something has fallen across your life like a big shadow, and for a little the sunshine will be blotted out."

Marie smiled faintly. "I was nearly drowned once," she said. "I can never forget it."

"She drew her hands away. "I don't think I want to hear any more," she said.

She paid double the fee and went to join Dorothy.

Marie smiled faintly. "I was rather eerie," she said. "But I don't believe in it. Shall we go home?"

"What did she say to you?" Dorothy asked as they drove away together. "She told me that I had had one disappointment in my life which I should never get over."

"She laughed. "She was right, too." Not that Marie believed in fortune telling.

Marie hardly listened. She was thinking of the palmist's soft voice and the touch of her hands as she had said: "I can see the sea in your hand—and again in the future I can see much water. It will come again in your life, and it carries on its bosom trouble and many tears."

"You are trembling, mademoiselle," she said in her soft voice.

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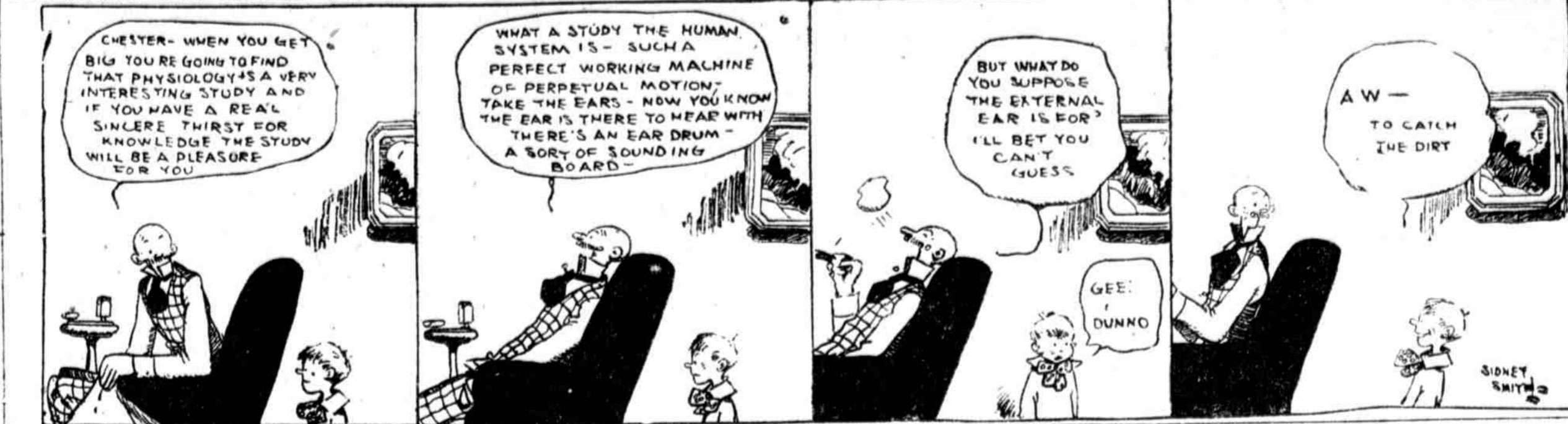
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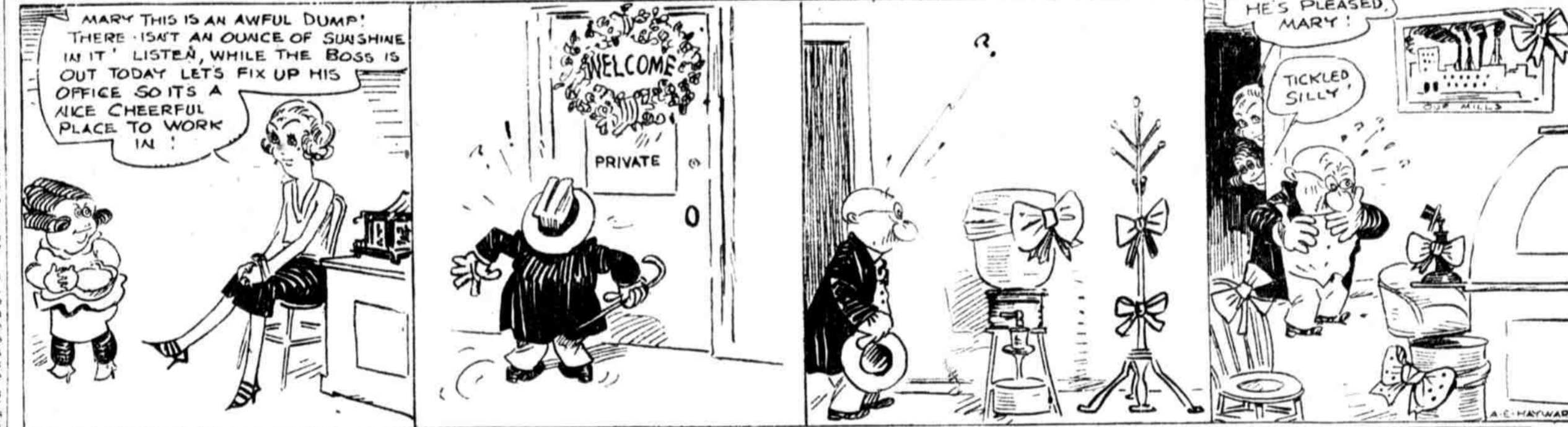
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THE GUMPS—Professor Andrew Gump



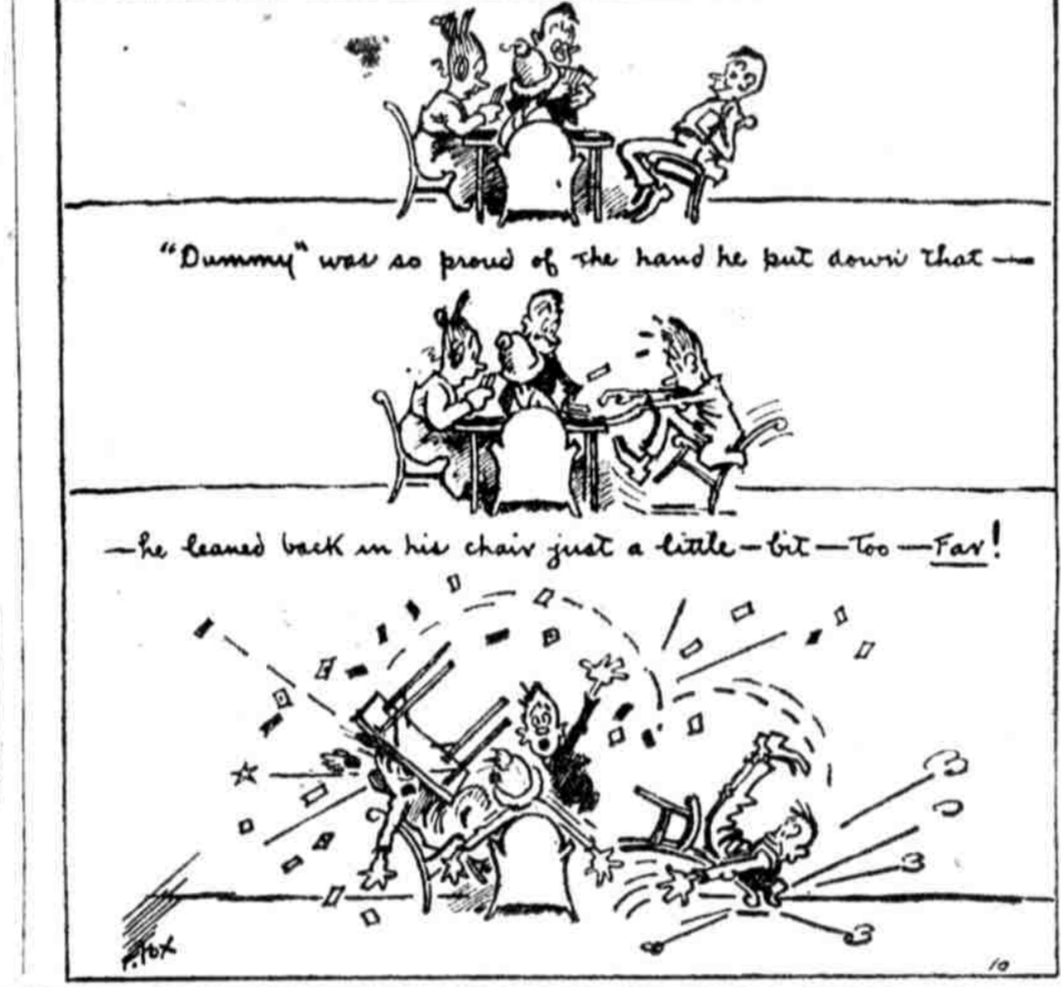
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