

A LOVELESS MARRIAGE

By RUBY M. AYRES

Author of "A Man's Way," "The One Unwanted," "A Bachelor Husband" etc.
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WHAT dawn was a nightmare to me: all my life I shall remember those long hours, and the solemn striking of the church clock.

Elsa would be married in that church—the church where I was married. I closed my burning eyes, and tried to picture her in her wedding dress. I knew she would look as fair as a dream. I told myself that even if Richard did not care for her now he would grow to do so.

I was up and dressed before the servants were about: I slipped the bolts of the side door, and went out into the garden.

It was so beautiful and peaceful, the air so fresh.

I opened the gate and went down the road toward the church.

I suppose impulse led me to my boy's grave.

Short bush roses grew there in the narrow bed, and clusters of deep red carnations.

I stood looking at them, and at his name engraved on the stone, and I wondered if it would have made things easier had he been alive.

But in the end, I should have had a wife of his own, and she would have pushed me aside in his heart.

If I went back to the house feeling as if I carried a stone in my breast, Elsa was on the doorstep in the sunshine with Richard.

They both saw me, and Elsa called some greeting.

She looked very pleasant and happy: Richard avoided meeting my eyes.

We all went in to breakfast: Francis looked very pleasant and happy: Richard avoided meeting my eyes.

"Richard and I are going to walk over to Kenton, mother," he told me. She looked at him already as a woman looks at her husband, with that sort of proud, he-belongs-to-me sort of look.

I tried to get away from the room before she did, but I tried in vain. Richard and I were left together at the table.

"I think it's going to be fine," I said stupidly.

He did not answer.

"How do you think the party went off last night?" I asked.

He forced myself to face him.

He was looking at me—with such an expression in his eyes that I hid my eyes.

For the first time an awful doubt entered my soul.

For the first time it was borne home to me that I had it right to allow this marriage to take place.

Elsa was my only child, and Richard had no love for her. I had forced him into this engagement; I was also forcing her into a married life of unhappiness such as I myself had known. He got up suddenly.

CHAPTER XLV

"This cannot go on, Marjorie," Richard said hoarsely. "We have no right to drag this child into our own unhappiness. I ought never to have come here; I must have been married last night when I asked her to marry me—she broke off for a moment, breathing heavily."

"Will you be brave and come away with me?" he asked. "I love you and it's the only way to save us all from everlasting misery. I'll do everything in my power to make you happy. I've waited twenty years for you, Marjorie, will you come?"

"I can't," I said. "I can't! There is Elsa to think of—I would break her heart."

"It will break her heart if she marries me," he answered in a hard voice. "I care nothing for her. You know"

He stopped abruptly and moved away as the door opened and Francis came in. He looked angry; he glanced suspiciously from me to Richard.

"Where is Elsa?" he asked sharply.

Richard answered for me: "I don't know what he said; for the moment I was blind and deaf."

Francis went on talking angrily; he said that things were going wrong at the farm and that he had to go over to Estlin, the nearest market town, on business.

"You can come with me if you like," he said to me. "I'm taking the car."

"I found my voice."

"I'd rather stay at home," I answered. "You know I hate motoring."

His face darkened.

"I wish you to come," he said. "Do you think I'm a fool? I want to see you hanging about with them all day?"

I tried to laugh, and I saw Richard's hands clench.

Elsa came in and Richard's further conversation; she and Richard went out together.

When Francis and I had got about a mile on the road he looked down at me.

"I haven't brought you out for the pleasure of your charming society," he said, "but because I want to talk to you. How long has this affair been going on, between you and Richard Tempest?"

I felt as if some one had struck me a blow over the heart; I could not answer.

"You need not try to act the innocent with me," my husband went on. "I know a good deal more than you think I do. Young Thorold saw you last night in the garden with Tempest making violent love to you. He followed you, thinking Tempest was with Elsa. Thorold's madly in love with her, poor boy, and of course wildly jealous. This morning when he heard she was engaged to Tempest he refused to believe it; he was so furiously angry that he asked him for a reason. He burst it out then he swore it was true. What have you to say for yourself?"

"What you say is partly true," I told him with a flash of desperate courage. "I have loved Richard all my life. If it hadn't been for you we should have been married twenty years ago."

His face grew livid; I could see how his hands were clenched on the steering wheel.

He went on raving and swearing; he dragged up the many little differences we had had during our married life.

I tried to keep my temper, but my patience broke down at last. I answered passionately that I wanted nothing more than to be free, that our marriage had been a far bitter tragedy to me than it had to him—that I wished I had died years ago. A sudden change crossed his face—he grew gray—like stone, and his lips moved as if he were trying to speak, no sound passed them.

Then all at once he seemed to collect himself. He slipped sideways helplessly toward me, his hands falling limply from the wheel.

CHAPTER XLVI

I suppose in my panic I did the wrong thing, for the car swerved and ran up the bank that bordered the narrow road—there was a grinding sound and sickening, snaking movement before the whole thing turned over. I was not flung clear, and though I made desperate efforts to free myself,

all the lower part of my body seemed pinned to the ground by some dreadful weight.

I felt numb and there was a dull pain at the back of my head, and presently I felt something trickling down my face. It was blood, I knew, and when I renewed my efforts to get free I felt a dreadful faintness creeping over me. I tried to cry for help, but we were so far out in the country there was a poor chance of any one coming. I knew, and I thought—

"This is how my boy's life went out—as I hope mine will go."

And then everything seemed to sink away from me as the sunshine faded. When I next remembered anything I was lying flat on my back on the dining-room table where, as a child, I had watched my mother die and the air was heavy with the sickly scent of chloroform.

The young doctor who had bought Dr. Inglis' practice—the old man had been in some years—was standing beside me—and another man whose face I did not know, and some one else was holding my hand and crying. I tried to turn my head, and the strange doctor spoke quickly.

"Don't try to move. Lie quite still. I looked up at him.

"Am I going to die?" I asked weakly.

"No—no—you've hurt your back—we can't move you for a little while—but you'll be all right."

I was conscious of a thrill of bleak disappointment.

"Oh," I said, with quivering lips. "I hoped I was—I hoped it was all over!"

"Mother! Mother!"

It was Elsa's voice that broke the silence with that bitter cry. Elsa's tears fell on my hand—Elsa's kisses, too.

"Don't say that," she sobbed broken-heartedly. "Don't say that—Richard's heart! Oh, I do love you—I ran on my back for weeks, and Elsa nursed me devotedly."

"We've only got each other now," she told me with a breaking voice, and then she broke to me as gently as she could what I already knew—that her father was dead.

It was not the accident to the car which had killed him, but the seizure which had caused the accident.

All his life he had lived too well—gone the pace too fast, and now he was dead.

Perhaps Elsa saw the relief in my eyes for she turned her face away quickly.

"I loved him," she said faintly. "I pressed the hand that lay in mine. He loved you, too—better than any one."

I answered.

"I wanted to ask about Richard, but it was several days before I could summon enough courage, and then she answered with a little laugh: 'I sent him away.' He wanted to stay, but men are a nuisance when any one is ill, so I sent him away."

CHAPTER XLVII

During all the weeks I lay ill he never once came to the house, though Elsa sometimes went to London to meet him; but I never questioned her about him and she never volunteered any information.

Then—in July, the doctors said I might go away. I could walk a little, then, and every day I felt myself growing stronger.

"Where will you go, Mummy, darling?" Elsa asked me. She was such a dear little daughter to me since my accident, and I had grown to depend on her so much that my greatest dread now was the thought that I should soon have to lose her.

I tried only to think of Richard as her husband—I tried only to wish for her happiness.

"The little village in Devonshire," I began, when she interrupted: "I know—Mr. Tempest told me about it—weren't you there once when he was a child?"

So he had told her that! For a moment I shut my eyes to the pain of the memory—then I smiled. "Yes—it's such a dear little place. I am sure I shall get quite well there."

Elsa arranged it all. She took rooms in the same cottage where I had stayed before, and she went down a day earlier than I did to see that everything was there for my comfort.

It was 6 o'clock on a glorious July evening when I drove up to the little cottage by the sea—the front door stood open, and the door of my sitting room, and I could see that there were many flowers in the room.

"It looks almost like a wedding," I thought, as I went into the room.

"Elsa," I called. "Elsa!"

But there was no answer, and I was turning away in surprise when I saw a letter lying on the table—addressed in Elsa's writing with the one word, "Mother."

I took it up with vague apprehension. Why should she write to me? Why was she not here?

And this was the letter:

"Mother Darling:

"Forgive me, but I had to do it this way, or I knew you would never have consented. I broke off my engagement to Mr. Tempest the night after your accident. When they brought you home we both thought you were dead—I have never seen any one so broken-hearted as he was—and it was then that he told me the truth. I've been a silly little idiot; I can see it now, and I hope you will forgive me. When you got this darling letter, I shall be Tony Thorold's wife—he loves me and he's a dear; I'm very fond of him, and we're going to be quite happy. I know. And so are you—I couldn't have left you like this, only I know you will be looked after, even better than I could have done it. Tony and I are going abroad for a month. I shall write often and never forget, Mummy darling. I love you."

I read the letter through twice before I seemed able to grasp its meaning, and for a long time afterward I sat with it in my lap, afraid to recognize that at last the gates of happiness had been unlocked for me—I know you will be looked after, even better than I could have done it.

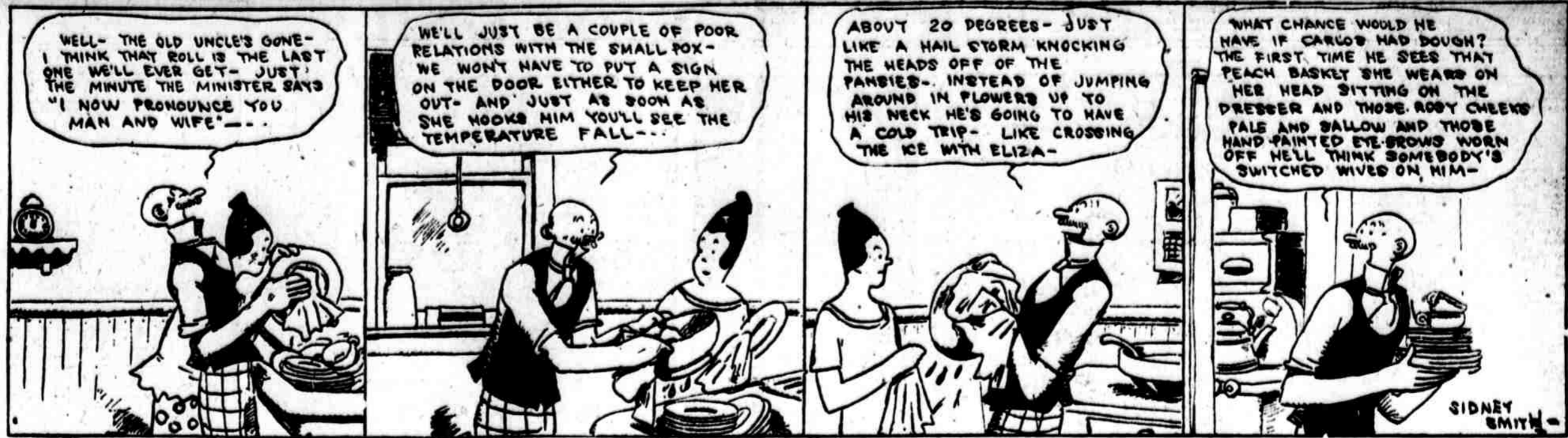
Those words from her letter leaped to my mind as I heard the click of the gate, and a step on the garden path outside—then a step in the hall.

I could not raise my eyes—but my heart seemed to stop beating.

Then—"Marjorie," said the voice I had loved all my life, and I looked up into Richard Tempest's face.

THE END.

THE GUMPS—Ho! Hum!



WELL—THE OLD UNCLE'S GONE—I THINK THAT ROLL IS THE LAST ONE WE'LL EVER GET—JUST THE MINUTE THE MINISTER SAYS 'I NOW PRONOUNCE YOU MAN AND WIFE'—

WE'LL JUST BE A COUPLE OF POOR RELATIONS WITH THE SMALL FOX—WE WON'T HAVE TO PUT A SIGN ON THE DOOR EITHER TO KEEP HER OUT—AND JUST AS SOON AS SHE HOOKS HIM YOU'LL SEE THE TEMPERATURE FALL—

ABOUT 20 DEGREES—JUST LIKE A HAIL STORM KNOCKING THE HEADS OFF OF THE PANSIES—INSTEAD OF JUMPING AROUND IN FLOWERS UP TO HIS NECK HE'S GOING TO HAVE A COLD TRIP—LIKE CROSSING THE ICE WITH ELIZA—

WHAT CHANCE WOULD HE HAVE IF CARLO HAD DOUGH? THE FIRST TIME HE SEES THAT PEACH BASKET SHE WEARS ON HER HEAD SITTING ON THE DRESSER AND THOSE ROBY CHEEKS PALE AND BELLOW AND THOSE HAND-PAINTED EYE-BROWS WORN OFF HELL THINK SOMEBODY'S SWITCHED WIVES ON HIM—

SIDNEY SMITH

SOMEBODY'S STENOGRAPHER—Have You Your Little Hiking Suit?



GOOD MORNING FELLOW SLAVES!

WHAT KIND OF POOL OUTFIT IS THIS TO WEAR IN AN OFFICE? ARE Y' SOMEBODY'S SHOOPER?

SILLY! IT'S THE LATEST. IT'S MY NEW WALKING SUIT!

OH! AND WHERE ARE YOU GOIN' TO WALK FAIR ONE?

OH, I DUNNO—I HADN'T THOUGHT.

—WELL I'LL TELL YOU! YOU'RE GOIN' TO WALK OUT OF THIS OFFICE PRETTY SOON! SOME THINGS ARE LIKE STRAWS WHAT BUST CAMEL'S BACKS! YOU MAKE ME TIRED!

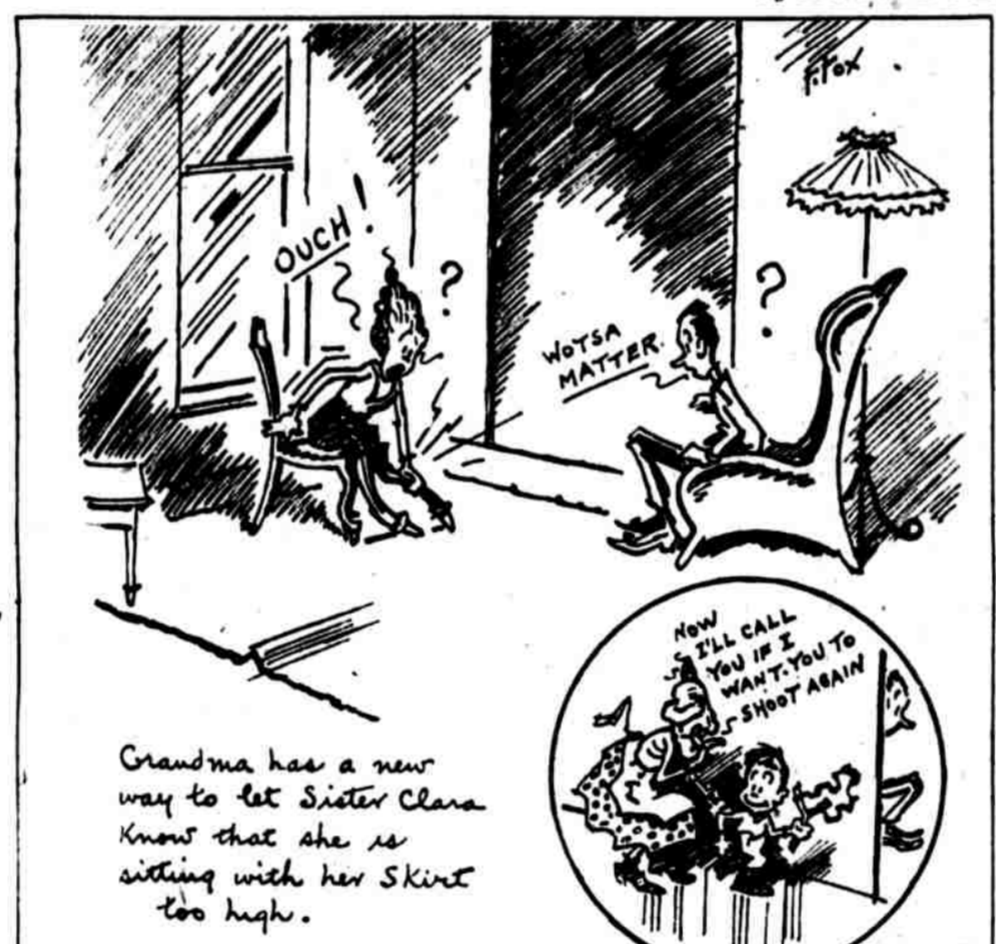
By Hayward

The Young Lady Across the Way



The young lady across the way says they call it manuevering for some unknown reason, but she imagines at least ten women to one man have it done.

GRANDMA, THE DEMON CHAPERONE



Grandma has a new way to let Sister Clara know that she is sitting with her skirt too high.

By FONTAINE FOX

SCHOOL DAYS



WHAT? TRADE YOU THIS BULL FOR THAT OL' KITE? SAY! WHAT'Y'OU TAKE ME FOR?

THIS IS THE BEST BULL I EVER HAD! GENUINE CEDAR, THIS IS! RAZOR EDGED—WITH SAND PAPER—BOB HAMILTON MADE IT—

IT'S TOO FLIMMY HERE OF IT!

THE HUMMING BULL

By DWIG

PETEY—Still at Pinehurst



—I'M SO AFRAID THE MANAGER OF THE HOTEL WILL DISCOVER WE HAVE NO MONEY TO PAY OUR BILL—GOODNESS! WHAT A SITUATION!

—I GOTTA SCHEME I THINK WILL MAKE HIM THINK I'M RICHER THAN ROCKEFELLER—AND HE WON'T WORRY US ABOUT THE BILL

—HELLO! HELLO! OFFICE?—SAY—SELL OUT THAT P.D.O. STOCK AND TAKE THE MILLION PROFIT AND PUT IT INTO HOT LEE DOG!

—AND SAY, BY THE WAY, I NEED A LITTLE CASH ABOUT \$10,000—THAT'LL LAST ME TILL I LEAVE HERE—I LIKE THIS PLACE FINE!

—THAT PHONE HAS BEEN OUT OF ORDER FOR A MONTH!

By C. A. Voight

GASOLINE ALLEY—You Can't Stump Avery



HO HO!! THAT'S GOOD! I HADN'T THOUGHT OF THAT! I MUST TELL THE BUNCH!

LISTEN FELLAS! WE CAN DEDUCT THAT ONE-A-MINUTE OIL STOCK LOSS FROM OUR INCOME TAX NEXT YEAR!

SURE!

HMP!

SHUCKS! THAT'S NOTHIN'! I JUST CHARGED OFF \$1000 OF CONGLOMERATED GROCERY STORES FROM MINE YESTERDAY!

By King