

THE DANCING MASTER

By RUBY AYRES

Author of "The Phantom Lover," "A Bachelor Husband," "The One Unwanted," etc.

THIS BEGINS THE STORY
Elizabeth Conyers, a demure country girl, pretty in spite of her old-fashioned dowdy dressing, is visiting her relatives in London. At a grand ball she is a discomfited witness to a handsome young man who is dancing with the up-to-date steps. He is Pat Royston, and Elizabeth's aunt and cousin rebuke her, as he is only a dancing master. Elizabeth hears her uncle, with whom she made her home in the country, is dead.

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

It was raining hard when Elizabeth left her aunt's house the following morning. Breakfast had been brought to her bedroom, and she had been left to eat it alone.

At 10 o'clock a maid came to say that a taxi was waiting to take her to the station.

Elizabeth raised her startled eyes. "But, my aunt! I haven't said good-bye to her."

"Mrs. Mason is sleeping and cannot be disturbed," the maid said rather indignantly.

"And—and—my cousin?" she faltered.

"Miss Dolly left orders that nobody was to go to her room before 11."

There was a little silence, then Elizabeth said:

"Oh, very well."

Her heart was swelling with hurt indignation. Was she of so little account that nobody cared whether she went away or not? She took up her handbag nervously, gave the maid two shillings from her little store of money and went down into the hall.

Her one shabby box was already on the waiting taxi, and a very formal-looking man-sevant stood at its open door, pouring rain. Elizabeth almost ran past him; she knew she could not afford another two shillings for him, and doubted very much if she would ever have had the pleasure of it to any one so ungrateful; her cheeks burned as the cab turned about and bore her quickly down the road.

She looked back once and up at the house, most of the blinds were still drawn, and there was an air of unfriendliness about it all, she thought, as she pulled the window up to keep out the driving rain and leaned back in her corner.

So this was the end of the visit of which she had hoped so much.

She did not believe that her aunt would repeat the invitation; she knew only too well that she had proved a failure, and yet through all the disappointment there was one little patch of sunshine which nothing could disperse—the time during which she had danced with Pat Royston.

She might never see him again! She believed that she never would, and yet—all her life she knew that she would remember him and the joyous moments he had given her.

She had thought him a fairy prince, and all the time she had been just an ordinary dancing master.

Was it, then, such a very dreadful thing to be a dancing master? What did it matter how a man earned his living if he were honest and straightforward?

Pat Appears Again
Elizabeth sighed. Well, she would never see him again, at any rate, and she tears suddenly blinded her eyes as she looked at the street through the rain-streaked window.

She wiped them hurriedly away as the cab turned down the sloping road to Paddington Station, and counted out some more of the few precious shillings; the noise and bustle confused her as she stood on the pavement, waiting for a porter to take her box. She felt nervous and unhappy.

She thought that the porter looked contemptuous when, in reply to his questions as to what class she was traveling she said third; she was sure she was not satisfied with the fare she gave him; she was thankful to get into the carriage, away from the man's stare that seemed everywhere to be staring at her.

There was nobody else in the carriage, and presently her sense of panic died down, and she opened the window and looked out at the incessant stream of people.

A girl in a smartly striped costume and gray suede shoes attracted her attention, and her eyes grew wistful; there were such lovely clothes in the world if one had only the money with which to buy them; no wonder this girl looked so happy as she walked along by the side of the tall man in the big overcoat.

Elizabeth glanced at him interestedly; then the blood rushed to her face, and her heart gave a throb of grief, for the man was Pat Royston.

He and the girl in the gray shoes had stopped at the bookstall opposite Elizabeth's carriage and were looking at the magazines; Elizabeth could hear his voice, and once his laugh, as she saw there, her hands tightly clasped in her lap, her eyes fixed on his face.

Was this girl the smart costume she could be, judging from what Dolly had said. Or had Dolly been delirious with grief?

Royston had moved away to the kiosk where cigarettes and tobacco were sold, and with a sudden impulse Elizabeth opened the carriage door and stepped out onto the platform.

She felt that she must speak to him—just for a moment; just to tell him that she was going away, and why.

Not that he would care or be interested. And yes—just might he had said that he hoped they would meet again.

He Cuts Elizabeth
Her heart was beating up in her throat as she walked swiftly along the platform. He had bought his cigarettes and was lighting one while the girl in the kiosk counted out his change.

Elizabeth stopped close beside him. He must see her when he turned around, she knew, and she trembled with eagerness as she waited.

Then he flung the spent match away, gathered up his change and dropped it carelessly into a side pocket of the big overcoat before he swung around, almost knocking against Elizabeth.

"I beg your pardon," he raised his eyes but in careless apology, and his hand swept her face without the least look of recognition in them before he turned away, and walked back to the kiosk at the bookstall.

Elizabeth stood looking after him with dazed eyes.

He had cut her deliberately. The thought was like a stab. It was some moments before she could move. Her limbs felt nerveless and dead. Then very slowly she went back to the railway carriage.

Royston and the girl were still at the bookstall laughing and talking together; but Elizabeth no longer looked at them. She was crushed with the bitterness of her disappointment and indignation.

"My clothes!" she kept telling

herself over and over again. "It's my clothes. How could he want to be seen with any one as dowdy as I am?"

The thought was anguish to her sensitive heart.

She hated the girl in the striped costume and gray shoes as keenly as she had hated Dolly last night. It was bitterly unfair was the cry of her heart. Why should some have everything and others nothing at all?

Her little glimpse of enjoyment had awakened the keen desire for more; before she came to London she had been more or less content, or at least resigned to the dullness of her life, but now she felt that never again would she be able to tolerate it.

The thought of her uncle's house stifled her, and it was in vain that she told herself she was ungrateful and unkind.

She shrank from the knowledge that Walter Sneath was waiting for her.

She tried hard to remember how good he had always been—and that she owed what little pleasure she had ever experienced to him.

It was as if she saw him now in her imagination, as she had seen herself in those many mirrors last night; saw just how commonplace he was, just how contrived and uninteresting, and her heart swelled with bitterness as she raised her eyes again to the tall figure in the big overcoat standing at the bookstall. There was a great deal of whistling and banging of doors, and as the train began to move slowly from the platform Elizabeth covered her face with her hands and burst into tears.

She cried nearly all the way to Dillbury, and felt better for it—much of the bitterness and disappointment had gone before they drew slowly into the small country station.

It was still raining hard, but Walter Sneath was waiting on the platform in an old-fashioned looking meekintosh of yellowish color and a cloth cap well pulled down over his eyes.

Walter Meets Elizabeth
Elizabeth shrank back into her corner with a sudden feeling of panic. She could not rid herself of the feeling that she was being dragged back to prison.

It cost her an actual effort of will to let down the carriage window and call to him.

His stolid face beneath the unbecoming tweed cap lit up as he saw her, and he came eagerly forward.

If he saw the tear stains on her face he put them down to grief at her uncle's death, and he gripped her hand hard for a moment before he went off to look for her luggage.

Elizabeth stood waiting in the rain. She had never felt so much depressed in her life, and all the time there was a throbbing of rebellion at her heart.

Was she not to know anything different from this? Her face was set when presently she followed Walter Sneath to the station.

He had secured the best closed cab the small town boasted; it was shabby and stuffy and smelt of straw, and Elizabeth let down the window with an impatient hand.

She felt as if she were stifling; and when presently Walter put a diffident arm about her it was all she could do to keep from crying out in anger.

"Your uncle's death has been a bad shock for you," he said.

Elizabeth nodded. "Yes—how did it happen?"

"Just heart failure," the doctor said. He was found dead close to his bedroom door. I dare say he felt ill, and had been trying to call for help."

"Yes—Elizabeth looked away from the honest face beside her. "Poor uncle!" she said, mechanically.

"There was a little silence."

"It seemed hard to have to send for you when you so seldom have any enjoyment," Walter said again stolidly.

Elizabeth laughed. "Oh, I wasn't having a very good time. I'm not smart enough for my aunt or Dolly," she said bitterly.

His eyes wandered over her. "Not smart enough?" he said, amazed; he thought it impossible that any one could be more attractive than this girl.

Elizabeth nodded again.

"Yes—so—so, you see, I wasn't altogether sorry to come back; you were quite right to send for me, of course."

She waited a moment, then asked with a passionate note in her voice: "And now—what is to become of me now?"

He looked at her, the color deepening in his face.

"I am here," he said quietly.

"It was impossible to mistake his meaning, but Elizabeth shivered; never to be in the same out of moment; never to be any better off—for Walter was a man of limitations, and Elizabeth knew it well."

He was a clerk in a country solicitor's office; he worked and honest as the day, but the type of man who would live and die a clerk, who would be quite content to earn a living wage and go to church on Sunday, and take a week's holiday during the summer, and a day off on bank holiday, and go down to his grave unambitious and unknown.

"I don't love you—and it's not fair to marry you if I don't love you," she said, helplessly, and all the time in her heart another voice was saying: "I can't. He's too short, and too dull, and too ordinary," and her traitorous thoughts would fly again and again to Pat Royston with intolerable pain.

The shabby carriage drew up at the house before there was time to say any more, and Elizabeth got out with a sigh of relief.

The blinds were all drawn, and some one—probably the little maid-of-all-work, who had been left to look after Robert Conyers—had tied a streamer of black to the door-knocker.

Elizabeth shivered as she went into the narrow hall and looked around.

Lunch was waiting for her, but she could not eat, though, thought Walter Sneath fussed around and did his best to coax her.

"I think your aunt or cousin might have come with you," he said presently.

Elizabeth smiled cynically.

"Do you? You wouldn't think so if you knew them," she said. "Aunt said she might come down to the funeral, but, somehow, I don't think she will."

The tears welled into her eyes, and she looked away.

Walter took her hand.

"Elizabeth if you will be my wife, I will make you so happy."

She shook her head.

"I know you would try, but—I can't, Walter, indeed I can't."

Elizabeth's eyes were fixed on his face, and she felt that she was staring at her.

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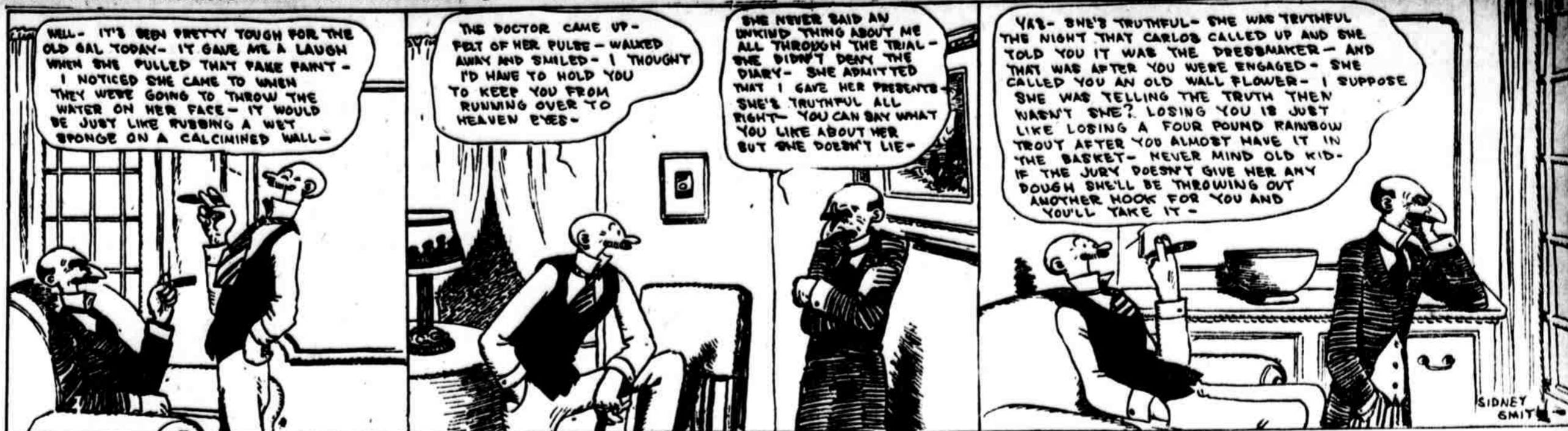
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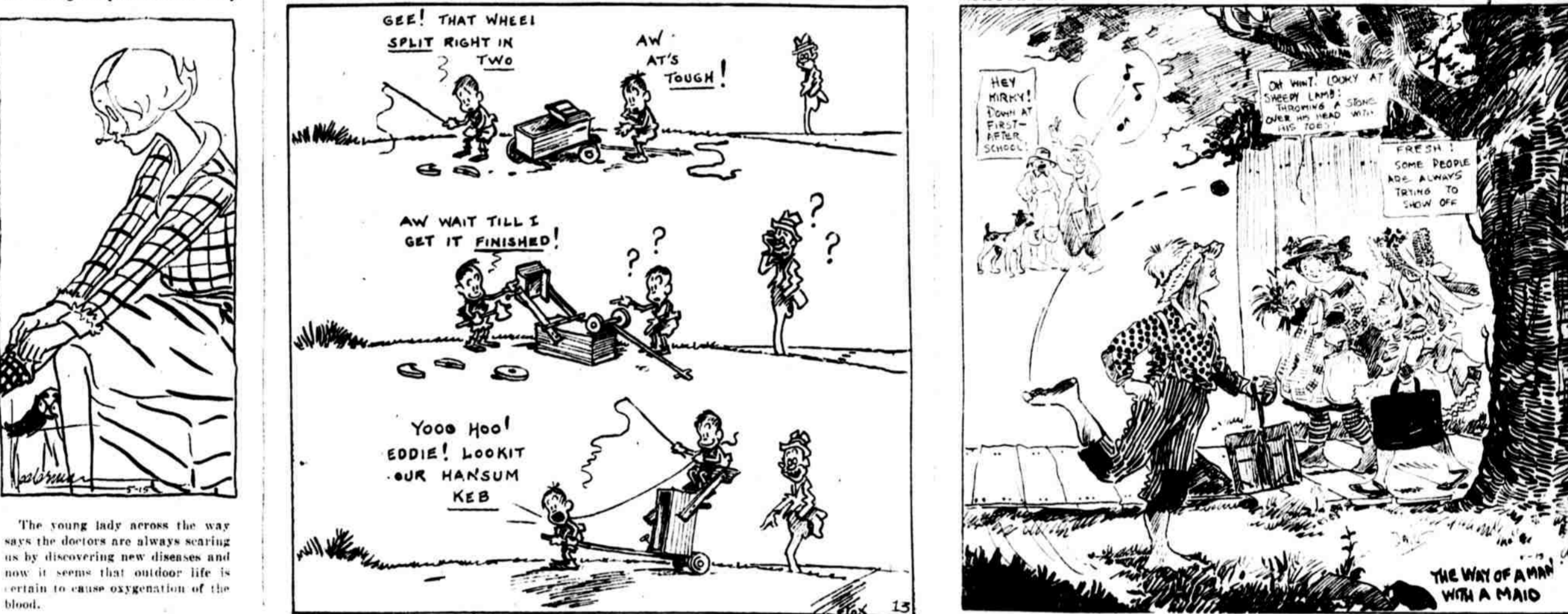
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