

# THE DANCING MASTER

By RUBY AYRES

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**THIS BEGINS THE STORY**

Elizabeth Conyers, a demure country girl, pretty in spite of her old-fashioned dowdy dressing, is thrown upon the grinding life of a city in London through the death of an uncle, who leaves her with only £100, instead of an expected fortune. At a ball she is taken to dance by handball player Pat Royston, a former service man, who has taken up dance teaching. Walter Snatch, a solid but not very vicious country lad, proposes marriage in her plight. She refuses him, and plans to earn her living by dancing. Hunting for a place to take dancing lessons, she meets Enid Dangle, a mannequin, who asks Elizabeth to share her apartment. There she meets Royston, who tells her she must go back to her aunt. He then teaches her professional dancing and takes her to dinner on the road home.

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

She was not sure if she ought to pay for the dinner she had had. She looked at her purse, but could not make up her mind.

"What about the lessons?" Royston asked, as they drove away from the restaurant. "Would you like me to call and see your aunt?"

Elizabeth hesitated for a moment, but she said at last truthfully, "If she was different—but, oh, she thinks I'm an impossible little fool to want to learn." She raised her troubled eyes to his face. "What do you think?" she appealed. "I don't think you will find it exactly a pathway paved with gold," he said.

"No! I suppose not, and yet you said I was a born dancer," she reminded him.

"I did, and I meant it; but it means hard work and long hours."

"I am not afraid of that."

"I am sure you are not. Well, think it over and let me know. You know now where I am to be found?"

"Yes."

She wanted to ask when she would see him again, but she did not dare. Elizabeth and Royston spoke for some minutes; then Elizabeth said abruptly: "I hope your wife will not be angry with me."

Royston flushed to the roots of his hair.

"I will explain to her," he said in a hard voice.

Elizabeth was very kind that day I met her," Elizabeth went on.

He made no answer.

"Have you—have you been married long?" she asked, hesitatingly.

He laughed mirthlessly.

"It seems a long time," he said, shortly.

He opened the door. "Here we are."

Elizabeth stifled a sigh; she hated the thought of returning to her aunt, and yet she knew that it was the only possible thing for her to do.

She held out her hand to him.

"Good-by and thank you very much."

"I think it is I who should thank you for being so kind," he said.

He was turning away when a car turned the corner of the street and drove up close to the curb.

Elizabeth flushed scarlet; she knew it was the car which her aunt hired from a neighboring garage, and she wished that the earth would open and swallow her up when its door opened and Mrs. Mason stepped out.

The stooped motionless when she saw Elizabeth. She looked from the girl to Pat Royston and her voice was like ice when she spoke.

"So this is the way you spend your time when I am away." She took a step toward Elizabeth.

"How dare you go out with this man after what I have said to you?" Elizabeth had been too scared to speak or move, but now, at this direct insult to Royston took a quick step forward.

"Aunt Emma. Oh! how can you?"

Mrs. Mason silenced her with a gesture.

"Don't dare to argue with me, Elizabeth. I have had my suspicions—my unwilling suspicions—about you ever since you first came to us, and now they are only confirmed. How long have you been in the company of this gentleman, may I ask?"

"I met him by accident, at a friend's house," Elizabeth hardly knew what she was saying. Her very nervousness made her appear guilty. "He has been very kind. We had supper together, and then after he drove me home and—"

"And if I had not appeared upon the scene you would no doubt have taken him into my house," Mrs. Mason said, frowning. "I am ashamed of you—ashamed that you should be my niece. I might have known—"

She stopped, as for the first time Royston interfered.

His eyes were like fire, but his voice was quite steady.

"If you have finished insulting your niece, Mrs. Mason, perhaps you will listen to what I have to say. I met Elizabeth by accident, and I brought her home. It's a matter of my absolute indifference to me what you think about me, but I cannot stand by and allow you to insult her." Mrs. Mason laughed cynically. "You cannot stand by!" she echoed. "At I forgot. You were always a champion of the weaker sex," Elizabeth went into the house at once. Elizabeth looked at Royston. Her eyes were white, though she tried to smile.

"I told you I was not wanted," she said. "I knew what it would be if I came back."

"Go into the house at once!" Mrs. Mason said again, furiously.

"I think you had better go," Royston said. "I am afraid this is all my fault. Good-by."

Elizabeth turned away without answering; she felt ashamed to be thinking of her soul. What could he be thinking? Mrs. Mason followed her into the house, scolding all the way. Elizabeth, of the type of woman who never minded who was watching her, she said once, "Elizabeth went into the drawing room and went on accusing her."

"You have behaved like a charity girl, and, after all, I suppose that is what is worse, he is living apart from both. The scandals about them are as numerous as the sands of the sea. Do you think I am going to intend mixing with people of that sort? Dolly, thank Heaven, is a lady who knows her own mind, and would no more think of making a friend of Royston than she would think of calling on the man in the moon. You will have to know—your understanding."

Elizabeth's cheeks were crimson.

"I should not be here now; I should not have come back at all, but for Mr. Royston," she said, passionately. "I have been here; oh! I have been here."

Her heart was bursting with shame and bitterness; nobody had ever

spoken to her in such a manner before. Robert Conyers had shown her no great affection, but at least he had never insulted her.

She felt that she could never forgive her aunt; and the taunt about Dolly had hurt her more than anything.

Dolly, a lady to her fingertips, when she had inherited the other half of all Elizabeth had in the world.

"I will not stay; I will not," she told herself, frantically.

She went to her room and paced up and down for hours, unable to think coherently.

Finally she fell asleep, dressed as she was, lying huddled up on the bed. She awoke with a splitting headache and a sense of dreary depression; to find that she had overslept and that it was half-past 10.

In a panic she tidied her hair, changed her frock and hurried downstairs.

Breakfast was cleared away "by Mrs. Mason's orders," so the maid told her.

"Is my aunt down then, already?" she asked. As a rule Mrs. Mason seldom put in an appearance until lunch time.

"She was down very early for her half-past 8," so the maid answered, with a little giggle.

Elizabeth went back to her room and began to dress. "I will not stay; I will not," she told herself again and again.

She had almost finished when she heard her aunt's voice on the stairs. Elizabeth closed the half-open trunk and hurriedly restored the room to order; then she stood waiting, her heart beating fast.

Mrs. Mason came to the door.

"Oh, so you are up!" she said, with sarcasm.

Elizabeth made no reply, and her aunt continued: "That is as well, seeing that I have made arrangements for a lady to call here at half-past 12 to interview you. I saw the advertisement in this morning's paper and went personally to answer it; I have told the lady all about you, and she seems willing to give you a trial. She will take you immediately—today, if necessary."

Elizabeth moistened her dry lips.

"As—what?" she asked.

"As a mother's help," Mrs. Mason answered bluntly, "and you are most fortunate to have secured a comfortable home so easily. There are four children dear mites," she added, with swift remembrance of the trifling and crying she had heard proceeding from the nursery when she called at the house. "You will receive twenty-five pounds a year—not a large salary, I admit, for the present day, but you must remember that you are quite untrained. Well, what do you say?"

"I have nothing to say," said Elizabeth, quietly.

"You were always ungrateful," Mrs. Mason said, bitterly. "You will be here at half-past 12 to interview this lady—her name is Mrs. Lewin." She paused. "Did you hear what I said?" she demanded.

"Yes," said Elizabeth. "I heard what you said."

Mrs. Mason called triumphantly away, and presently Elizabeth saw her leave the house with Dolly.

She finished packing at fever speed; she put on her hat and coat and went downstairs and out into the road.

She walked about till she found a disengaged taxi; then she took it back to the house.

"Please wait for me," she said.

She went up to her room again, and unsatisfied dragged the trunk down the three flights of stairs.

One of the maids hearing the noise, came to see what was the matter.

Elizabeth looked at her defiantly.

"I am going away," she said. "You can tell my aunt I shall never come back again. No, you need not help me; I can manage."

But the girl insisted upon helping her.

"I don't blame you for not staying, miss. Many's the time we've said downstairs that it was disgraceful the way you've been treated," she said, sympathetically.

Elizabeth laughed; she felt utterly reckless.

"It doesn't matter now," she said. "It's all over."

She got into the taxi and the driver shut the door.

"Where to, miss?" he asked.

Elizabeth hesitated. For the first time she realized her utter loneliness. Where could she go? She had no friend in the world. Then suddenly she thought of Royston. He had said that she must always count on him as a friend. The color flowed back to her pale face.

She would go to him. Even if he sent her away, it could not hurt her more than she had been hurt already, and there seemed nothing else to do.

"Where to, miss?" the driver asked again, thinking she had not heard.

Elizabeth gave the address of the Primus Dancing School.

A great deal of Elizabeth's courage had gone by the time she reached the big porch door, but with the desperate feeling that one blow more or less could not matter, she asked the taxi-man to wait and went upstairs.

There was a mannequin playing in the big room and at first nobody heard her knock; then the dark-haired girl whom she had seen before came out.

Elizabeth asked for Royston.

"I will not keep him long," she said, and then with a wavering smile she added: "And I won't run away this time."

The girl left her and almost immediately Royston came from the big room.

He shut the communicating door behind him and looked at Elizabeth with distressed eyes.

"Your aunt has turned you out?"

Elizabeth shook her head; tears swam into her eyes, though she did her best to check them.

"No," she said; "I ran away."

There was a moment of silence; then she went on breathlessly: "She had got me some dreadful job as a mother's help—she looked her four children—and I couldn't do it; I couldn't do it; but I pretended it was all right. Then, as soon as she went out, I packed my things and came here. My trunk is downstairs in a taxi—"

She broke off, only to rush on painfully. "You said you were my friend. I know it's dreadful to trouble you like this, but—I have nowhere else to go—nowhere in the world."

"I am glad you came to me," Royston said. "Please don't worry—everything will be quite all right. Just let me think for a moment."

Elizabeth wiped her tears away furiously; she felt vaguely comforted.

Royston went back to the inner room, to return almost at once with the dark-haired girl.

"Miss Conyers, this is Miss Stacey," he said. "I have told her that you are coming to me to be trained. Fortunately there is a vacant room in the house where she lives, and if you will allow her to take you there you can leave your luggage and have some lunch together."

The two girls looked at one another curiously, then Miss Stacey smiled.

CONTINUED TOMORROW

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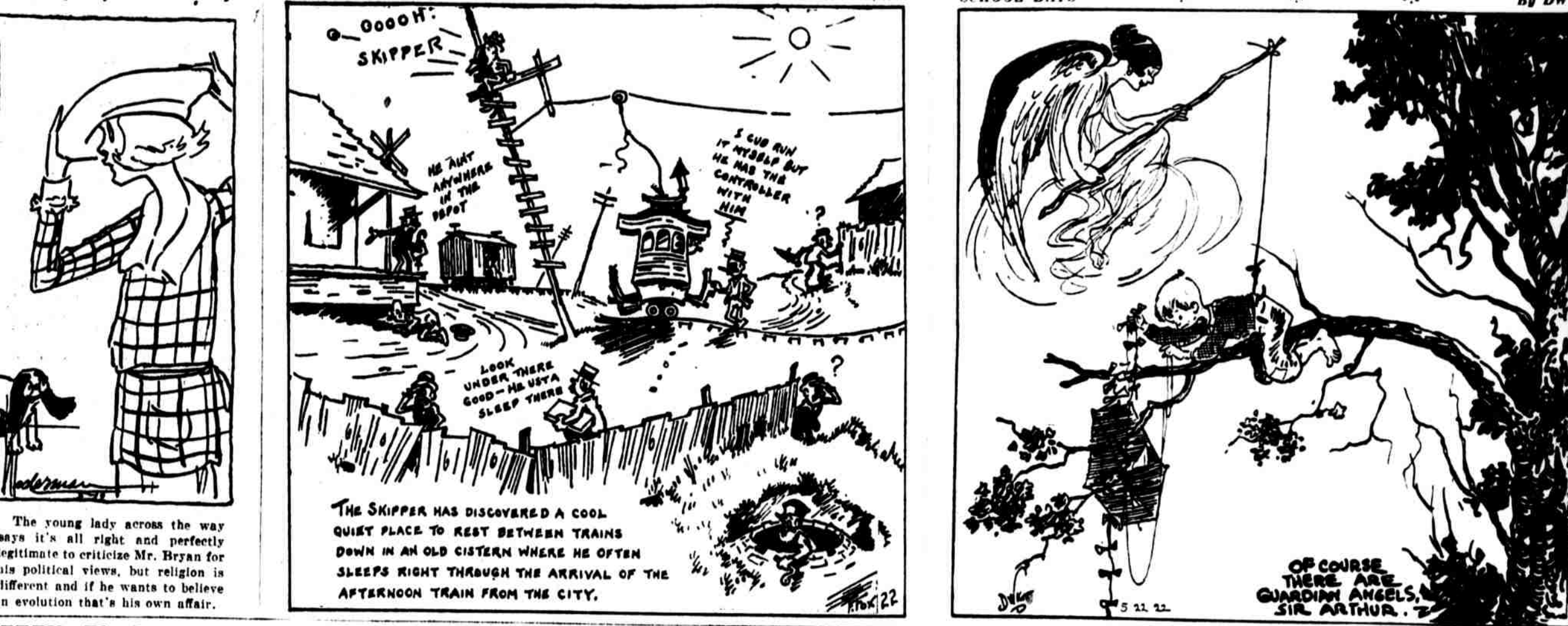
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