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 thrown upon the grudging hospitality of her aunt and cousin in fashionable London through the death of an uncle who leaves her with only £100, instead of an expected fortune. At a loss as she is taught to dance by handsome Pat Royston, a former service man, who has taken up dance teaching. Walter Sneath, a solid but not very vivacious country lad, proposes marriage in her plight. She refuses him and plans to earn her living by dancing. Hunting for a place to give dancing lessons, she meets Enid Ranger, a mannequin, to whom Pat is unhappily married. Elizabeth leaves her aunt's home, going to live with Netta, Royston's assistant. Royston, after teaching Elizabeth all she is capable of, turns her over to Mme. Senestis, a noted French dancing mistress.

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

Elizabeth's Chance Comes

He glanced up at him timidly and met his eyes.

"Don't you ever get married, Miss Conyers," he said, half in fun, half seriously.

Elizabeth shook her head.

"I've never had the chance, at least, by Walter."

"Walter! The man you told me about the first night we met."

"Yes."

"So he wants to marry you?"

"Yes—at least, he did last time I saw him."

"He is not very likely to have changed his mind so soon."

"Oh, I don't know," Elizabeth said wearily. "Netta says that men soon forget and get over things."

"Netta is a cynic," Royston said.

"What do you mean?"

"That she doesn't care for men."

"She is very fond of you," Elizabeth said unthinkingly.

"Of me! Well—I'm different; we're just friends, you see."

"Yes." They were almost home now. Elizabeth measured the distance to the end of the road with regretful eyes. She had not yet realized why it was that time always sped so swiftly when she was in Royston's company or why it dragged so deplorably when he was away from him.

"You will let me know what Mme. Senestis says when you see her again this evening," she asked, "and what you want me to do?"

"Yes, I will try to see her before then this afternoon, as I have that engagement tonight."

"Netta's new frock has come home," Elizabeth said with a sigh.

Royston smiled.

"You will never get over your love of pretty clothes," he said.

Elizabeth laughed, shaking her head.

"I hope I never shall. If ever I get rich I shall buy heaps and heaps."

"So you told me once before."

She flushed sensitively.

"You think me very silly?" she said.

"No."

They had reached the house, and Elizabeth ran up the steps to ring the bell, when Mrs. Silcum appeared. She looked rather agitated and she gave a sigh of relief when she saw Royston.

"Oh, sir! I'm that glad you've come, and Miss Netta worrying herself to fiddlestrings, and crying her eyes out about tonight. It's no use telling her that it can't be helped, and that accidents will happen in the best regulated family. She just cries and cries——"

"Cries! Why, what has happened?" Elizabeth asked breathlessly.

She did not wait for an answer. She pushed Mrs. Silcum aside, and ran upstairs to the sitting room.

Netta lay on the couch in the window, her foot propped up on a pillow and swathed in bandages. Her face was swollen with crying, and when she saw Elizabeth she broke into tears again.

"I've sprained my ankle. Those beastly stairs! I k-knew I should do it one day. Just after you went out this morning. I was running downstairs, and the doctor says it's worse than a sprain, because I've torn some of the lig—whatever you call the things—as well."

"Oh, Netta! You poor dear!"

Elizabeth would have put her arms round her, but Netta resisted. "It means that I can't go with Pat tonight, and I wouldn't have missed it for the world. My new dress ready, and everything. Oh, dear, what shall I do!"

"There's nothing to worry about," Royston said quietly. He had just come into the room, and he walked over to Netta and laid a hand on her shoulder. "My dear girl, for heaven's sake don't worry. I'm only too sorry it's happened, of course, but I can manage about tonight all right."

Netta went on sobbing.

"It was an extra special show—you know it was, Pat." She looked up at Elizabeth through her tears. "We were hoping great things from it—it might have meant a permanent summer engagement, and now he can't go alone—how can he?"

There was a little silence. Royston was looking at Elizabeth with a curious expression in his eyes.

"If it comes to that," he said suddenly, "perhaps Miss Conyers will partner for me for once; she knows the steps perfectly, and——"

He broke off, silenced by the look of radiant delight that had flashed into Elizabeth's face.

"Oh, if I may, if I may!" she said jealously.

Netta checked her tears. She looked at Elizabeth with faint jealousy.

"You! Why you'd be scared to death," she said in scorn.

Elizabeth laughed excitedly. "I wouldn't!" She turned to Royston, her hands clasped. "Take me, please, take me! Oh, I've always wanted to dance with you as Netta does."

For an instant she thought he was going to refuse, and she broke out again breathlessly: "Oh, please! Please!"

Royston laughed—a laugh which held a note of defiance.

"Very well—if you are sure you want to come."

The rest of the day passed like a dream to Elizabeth. She was so excited she could settle to nothing.

She did her best to make Netta comfortable, but she knew that the elder girl was jealous because Royston had so calmly arranged for the evening without her.

"Pat will never forgive you if you make a mistake and let him down," she said once irrelevantly, when Elizabeth was making tea. "He has got a terrible temper when he is annoyed."

Elizabeth laughed. She did not believe it, and did not much care, anyway.

"I don't think I shall let him down," she answered quietly.

Netta regarded her gloomily.

"Don't you be too sure! Just wait till you find yourself in the middle of a crowded room with every one staring at you, watching and hoping you'll make a fool of yourself. It makes you nervous, I tell you."

"I don't think I shall be nervous," Elizabeth said. Netta drank her tea in silence.

"And if you spoil my frock I'll never forgive you," she said suddenly after a moment.

Elizabeth flushed.

"I did not want to wear your frock," she said defensively. "It was Mr. Royston's suggestion."

It had been Royston's suggestion. He had asked what Elizabeth proposed to wear, and when she hesitated, pointedly asked Netta about the new frock.

"Miss Conyers and you are much about the same build," he said, "and it will be some time before you can get about again, I am afraid, Netta, so why not let Miss Conyers wear it?"

Netta flew into a rage at first. Nobody cared that she was in pain and miserable, so she stormed. Why should Elizabeth have her new frock?

"I don't want it. I will wear my own," Elizabeth had declared, and walked out of the room.

She took her own not very smart frock from the wardrobe, shook it out and tried to make the best of it.

People would not look at her frock, but at her dancing, was the hope with which she tried to console herself; but she knew it was not all the truth; she had many times heard Netta say that frocks were half the battle at a "show," and her heart sank a little.

It was not until after lunch, when Royston had gone, that Netta said sulkily:

"You can wear my frock; I promised Pat you should."

Elizabeth's cheeks flamed.

"Thank you, but I would rather not," she said quietly.

"There you are! Always so proud! I suppose you think it's not good enough. Pat will be furious." She began to cry in earnest.

So Elizabeth gave way, and, tingling with excitement, she had tried the new frock on and presented herself for Netta's approval.

"It might have been made for you," was the elder girl's grudging comment.

"It's lovely!" Elizabeth said with a long drawn-in breath.

She mounted on a chair to catch a glimpse of herself in Mrs. Silcum's gilt-framed mirror which hung above the sideboard, and her heart beat fast at the sight of her dainty reflection.

Although she knew that she was no longer the dowdy, countrified girl she had been when she came to London from Dilbury, yet she had never believed it possible for her to be quite so transformed.

The frock was made of the palest sky blue, with a skirt much frilled on the hips with foamy tulle, and the skimpy bodice held by shoulder straps of tiniest rosebuds.

"Oh, I never thought I should have such a frock!" she said with a little gasp. "No wonder people can be happy if they can wear such things."

Netta looked contemptuous.

"As if frocks matter," she said wearily. "I wouldn't care what I wore if I——" She broke off. "You talk like a baby," she said sharply.

Elizabeth clambered down from the chair and carefully discarded the frock.

"It's dear of you to let me have it," she said gratefully.

"It's only because I promised Pat," was the answer. "He's been such a sport to me, I'd walk barefoot from one end of the world to the other if he asked me to." Then she laughed, ashamed of her vehemence.

That had all been before tea, so Elizabeth was rather hurt and surprised when late in the afternoon Netta suddenly turned disagreeable again.

"I told you I didn't want the frock," Elizabeth protested, flushing. "I'll wear my own."

"And Pat would be furious!" Netta snapped. "No, of course, you must wear it. I promised. And you'll have to get dressed soon; he'll be here at 7 o'clock."

Elizabeth glanced at the clock. It was a quarter to 6.

Netta Is Disagreeable

Only another hour, and then * * * her excitement faded as she looked at Netta's drawn face.

"I wish you could go instead of me," she said impulsively.

She went over to where the elder girl lay on the couch and bent to kiss her, but, to her surprise, Netta jerked her head away.

"You are a little liar," she said savagely.

Elizabeth drew back.

"Why, what do you mean?" she stammered.

Netta grew remorseful at once. She caught Elizabeth's hand.

"Nothing. I'm a beast! Kiss me and don't look so hurt. I hope you'll have a good time and get through all right. There, run off and dress."

Elizabeth kissed her half-heartedly. A little chill had fallen upon her when she went to her room. She stood for some seconds, making no attempt to dress, a troubled look in her eyes. What had Netta meant?

But she dismissed the thought. The wonderful night lay before her, and she meant to give herself up entirely to its enjoyment.

She knew she would not fail. She had never been more sure of herself. Her eyes shone like stars when presently she looked in the glass.

Her hair seemed as if it must have been dressed by magic fingers. Every soft wave lay in picturesque simplicity, and the narrow band of silver with which she had bound it seemed to intensify its fairness.

She wondered what her aunt and Dolly would say if they could see her now. And Walter Sneath—poor Walter, whose last letter she had forgotten to answer.

She turned away from the glass, glowing with happiness. This new, present excitement had wiped all thoughts of Mme. Senestis from her mind. The fact that she was to dance with Pat Royston seemed of far greater importance than the fact that some day she might be a premiere danseuse.

As she opened her bedroom door she heard his voice in the sitting room opposite, and she stood still with a flood of unconquerable shyness.

What would he think of her? Would he think she looked as sweet and dainty as the mirror had declared? It cost her an actual effort to walk into the room where Royston and Netta waited.

"Well, here I am," she said nervously.

She looked at Royston timidly and yet with a kind of demand to be recognized as something more than the ugly duckling she had been when they first met.

But his eyes rested on her casually enough, and all he said was: "You are punctual. I am glad. I like to arrive early."

He turned again to Netta, and Elizabeth stood by with a little cold feeling of disappointment.

She was not to be the center of attraction, after all, it seemed. The mirror had lied to her.

CONTINUED TOMORROW

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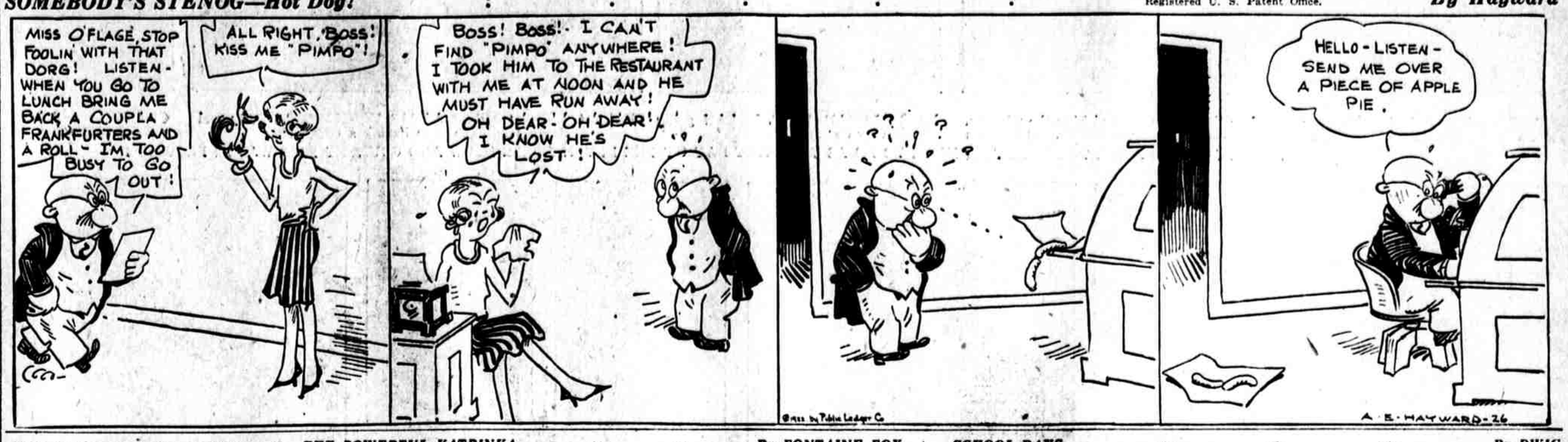

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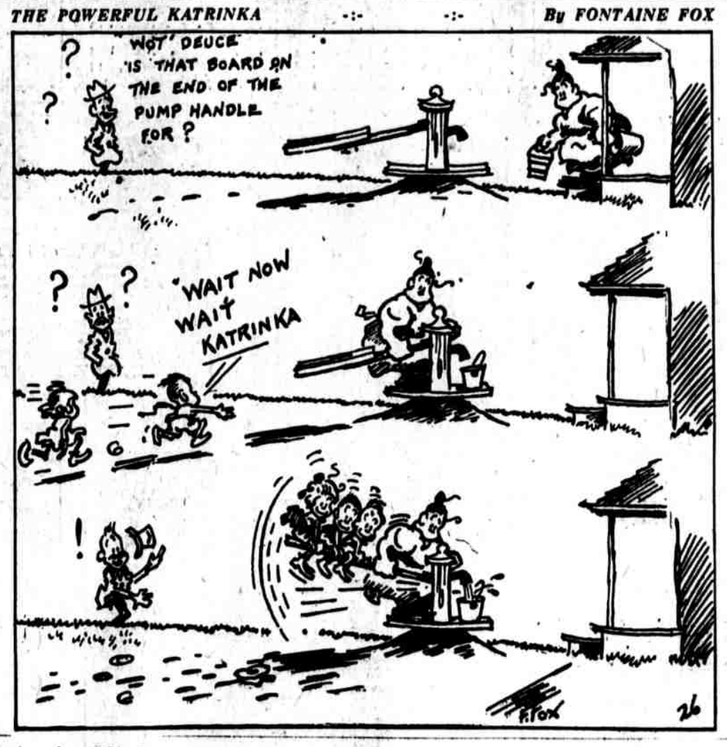

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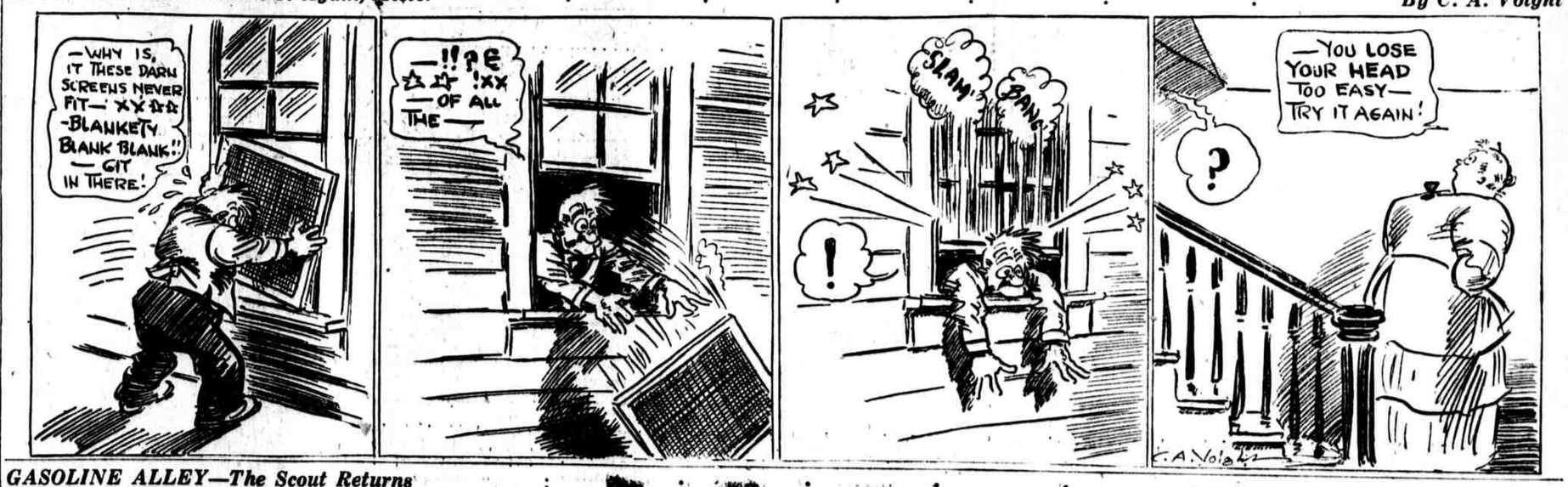

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