

# The Subconscious Courtship

A modern woman's extraordinary scheme to keep suitors from interfering with her life is told in this fascinating novel

By **BERTA RUCK**  
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**The Firm Offer**  
 "Ove begins with the first look," declared a philosopher, "and ends with the first kiss. Half-fanciful, half-practical, this theory is now as out of date as the coronet and the sword of state. Today we hold that love's beginning is the first glance of courtesy and not the first kiss. Long ago, even before these, a host of deep-down impulses, of unacknowledged yearning, of traits suppressed, of 'temperamentalities' not recognized, must have subconsciously combined to prepare his or her conscious personalities for that they call 'That time when we first knew we cared.'"  
 Take this attitude of Ove and Harry Carmichael. One day they saw each other for the first time alone—each in such unpromising circumstances.

They had seen each other, though not alone, but once back to his rooms and on his way back to his rooms and Harry Carmichael's mind (quite unreasonably) wondered continually about this particular girl. Please realize that there was no question of being attracted; no tingling of feelings, no "what did she look at me like" sort of thing. At first he had thought that he had forgotten the girl before he had forgotten her name. Her first glance at him in the Holts' drawing-room had conveyed that impression. But then, why hadn't he said so instead of suddenly lifting his face to search for a puzzled look? He had looked at her, even at the moment of their hostess' murmuring name ("This is Major Carmichael"), and he had not noticed her face. He had not noticed her face, or what she had on, except that it was dark, probably black, and that she had white bare arms. But even he could not help noticing that she had looked at him again, still in that odd, stork-like way, several times during the dinner. He hadn't taken her in; Jim Holt, her host, had taken her in. Carmichael had taken one of Jim's sisters. Opposite to him had sat this other girl and her eyes, which had been looking at him, had been looking at him, and this girl had played accompaniment. Once during a song she had looked across the room at him, and he had looked across the room at her. He had been talking to Mrs. Holt.

Then when everybody was going away, this gazing girl had done something odder still. Carmichael had seen her go. He had seen her in the hall, with a big fur wrap-thing on. Alone, he was coming downstairs in search of Jim, who had offered him a post-night room. Suddenly, on a landing, he had found this girl at his elbow; and again she'd turned that look upon him. He had been sure she was going to speak to him. She had actually opened her lips.

Then Jim Holt (one of the world's worst butters-in, by the way) had looked into view. The girl had darted past them both upstairs again. Her hair and ankles, sitting swiftly upward, a glimpse through the banisters; and she had been seen of her.

This morning, the morning after the dinner, his telephone had rung just as he was huttering through shaving. With a muttered grunt he'd put down his brush, and in his pajamas had raced down the wooden steps from his bathroom into the Chelsea garage below where they kept a couple of motor-cycles and caches of oily rags, petrol tins, lock-up boxes of tools.

He had expected to be rung up this morning, thought sure as this, by a man he knew in the Air Ministry. He took up the receiver.

"Is that Major Carmichael?" a gentle, feminine and self-possessed voice had asked.

"Yes," he had replied. He hoped that the invention which allows the person speaking through the telephone to see the person at the other end would never actually come into being. What the girl now ringing him up would have looked like would have been the chin and jaw of a snow man talking into a receiver snatched in a shrivel-father.

"This is Carmichael; who is that, please?"

Expecting to hear a man's name given by a trust, he was taken aback by these words.

"Clover Elphinstone. You met me last night at the Holts. I was on the 'Oh—oh—yes.'"

"Can you see me this morning at 12 o'clock?"

"Er—will you hold on a minute, Mrs. Elphinstone? I'll look at my book." "Yes, I can. Where?"

"Take it down, please. Follow an address in the city. 'Near the bank. Read it out, please.'"

He did so.

"That is quite right," he was told.

"At 12. Good-by." Receiver hung up.

Internally odd. He had been—yes, surprised into making the appointment. . . . She was a friend of the Holts' too. . . .

Near the bank, of all places on earth, at 12 o'clock of a filthy, foggy January morning? What did she want to drag him down there for? She lived—he thought he'd caught some one saying so—on Richmond Hill. Why wasn't he to meet her (if at all) at Richmond, instead of in the heart of the city? He pondered as he finished shaving. Did she work in a city office all day, dine and dance at night; that sort of thing?

Girls did, he believed.

Constantly, men he knew were being rung up by girls they'd never seen before, asked to take them to dances, to look at him ought to show anybody did go to dances or take girls anywhere. So it wasn't that. Over another suspicion of what her motive might be was frowned. There was his beastly, over-advertised, spectacular prison-exploit over again? Carmichael could have torn into strips the man who had allowed all that to get into the papers. Women, he knew, had been "impressed." They'd written notes on pressed or scented paper; sent him invitations to dinner, gushed, sickeningly; until they discovered that there was no flattery-and-flirtation change to be got out of "the" Carmichael. Then they'd dropped him, such an old story, now. Everybody was fed up with anything that reminded one of the war.

Nevertheless it was typically that of a soldier and a sportsman; and that one cut made for nothing better. Slim of figure, both he and his shabby clothing were admirably built. He'd fair hair, relentlessly flattened back out of its flimsy and streaked by premature gray; very straight, with black points looking that he did not really see; small gilded mustache over lips as firmly fitting as a tight-shut door; chin held high on a prominent, smooth throat. Expression: the usual public-school mark, plus something. . . . Some people might call it "Vision." For the things Carmichael didn't see were always concrete things only.

That morning he breakfasted on coffee, toast and kipper excellently prepared by the charwoman, who was wife to a neighboring chauffeur and who "aided" for Carmichael; he'd another telephone talk, with the Air Ministry man this time, that led to nothing in particular; he wrote letters, that would also probably lead to nothing much. Then he took the tube, the bus, and during the whole journey he wondered why on earth he'd told the girl he could come. Hadn't he troubles enough on his hands? Hadn't he his own special engrossing and permanent trouble with the girl?

"Bank, Bank," rasped the conductor. Carmichael stepped off the bus.

It was "for it" now.

Morning was at twelve and all was going with his world. Also, that January, the city was witnessing a revival of the real old-fashioned London fog. Through its dusky-orange-hued milk and its pervading soot suffrage flavor, Carmichael made his way, past groups of other gapers, to the pavement, turning the right, and to the fronting block of offices of which he'd jotted down the telephoned address.

Wondering over it more and more as the interview drew near, he took the lift to the top floor, where, in a room opposite ground glass lettered panels: "ELPHINSTONE BROTHERS, IMPORTERS AND MERCHANTS"

Elphinstone? Her own name? Probably she was the young daughter to one of the firm.

He turned to "Inquiries," but a middle-aged man with a pointed beard—confidential clerk or manager from his appearance—was at his elbow.

"Is it Major Carmichael? Yes: will you be so good as to come this way, please?"

He was shown into a large and luxurious private office with a generous fire that had already cleared the room of fog. Carpet, thick and scarlet; mahogany mantel-piece seven feet high, with a small silver-cased traveling-clock in the middle of it. Everything about the place was solid, expensive and conventional; and at an immense table-desk, clear of everything but a black-satin hand-sach, a pair of white gloves and a tightly compressed sixpenny market bunch of violets put beside the gloves, sat the girl who had gazed at him so intently the night before.

"You Wonder Why I Asked You to Come?"

Carmichael's light-blue eyes took in a little of her except that she was differently dressed, of course. For one thing, she had a hat on.

A woman might have observed that this hat of black velvet was faultless of its kind and had cost anything between ten and fifteen guineas; that the rest of the girl's attire was a restrained French walking-dress of fine blue serge with touch of black satin and a creamy waistcoat; that her stockings were of black silk clocked a four, her shoes of black crocodile leather, and that her subtle stole, tossed down over the chair behind her, backed her like a shrubbery. A man, most men, would have passed her dress as "simple and quiet," and appreciated the undeniable looks of the girl. But not Harry Carmichael. He did not dwell upon her slim, harmonious figure, a sort of visual half-echo of the arms and shoulders, bared and exquisite, that he had almost noticed last night. The little of her hair that showed was dark, but her coloring was fair as that of her namesake, a white clover-blossom with its tinge of pink, and her face was a pure oval.

She lifted her chin as he was announced, looking up at him, not in the least as she had looked the night before. She scrutinized him, precisely as though he had been some lad bringing references for the post of office-boy.

"Good morning," she said, a prettily modulated voice; entire impersonal.

"Good morning."

"Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you." He did so.

Her cloud-gray eyes turned from him to the desk. She picked up those violet (unusually cold and crushed, their long stalks swaddled in raffia) up to the looms, which were surrounded with a Toby-frill of green leaves, after the hideous fashion of market-bunches) and her least movement was graceful.

Carmichael's mind nearly always worked just a little below the surface. Therefore, though the girl's movements, her hat, and the milky gleam of throat below it were quite wasted on him, other things struck him.

First of all, he was conscious that here was something that looked very feminine sitting at a desk that looked particularly masculine. Then, he took in that she seemed "at home" there; not as if she had just perched herself in her father's or her uncle's swivel chair for this interview only.

And, by the way, where was Mr. Elphinstone? It was surely not this pretty but disconcerting apparition who actually "ran" the business?

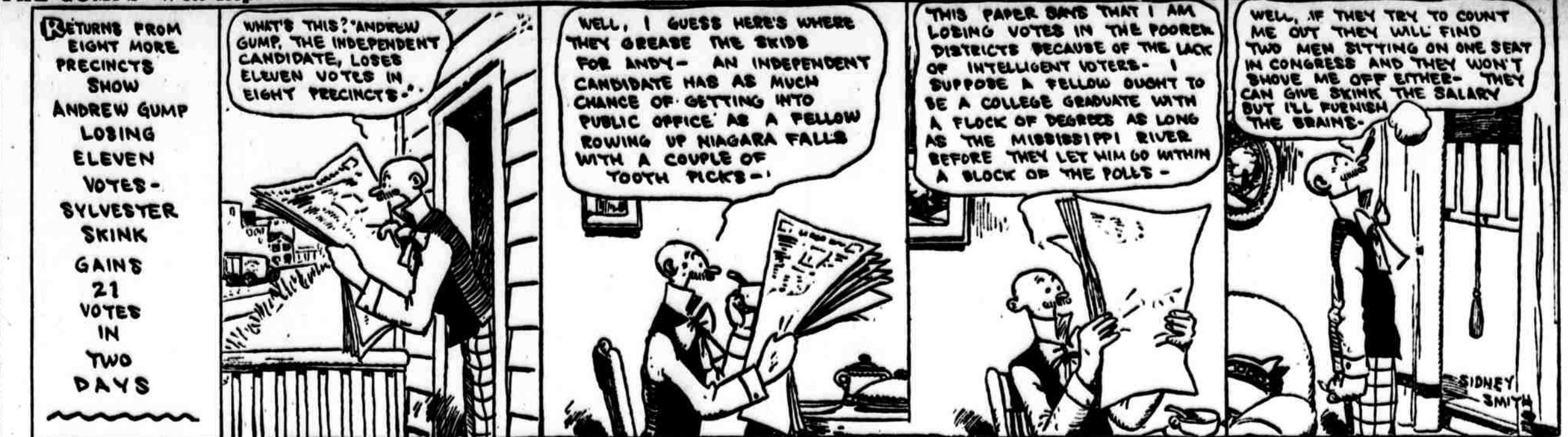
She spoke, answering his unspoken surmise.

"Of course you are wondering why I asked you to come, Major Carmichael. I want to tell you. I suppose, to begin with, it is because my affairs are getting altogether too much for me."

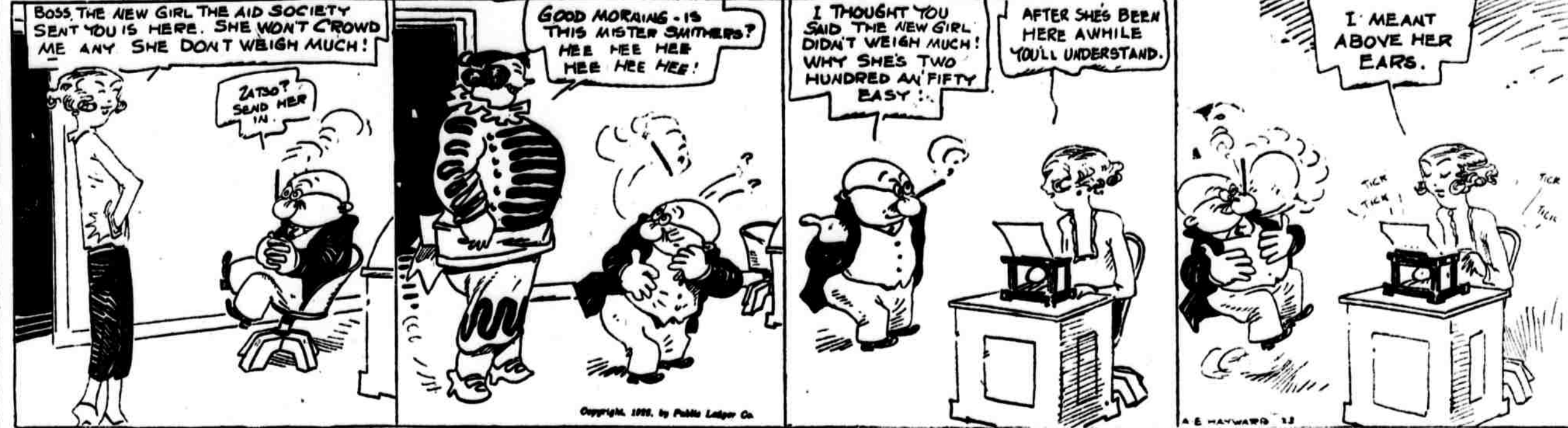
Her affairs? She had affairs of some sort then. He would have supposed them to be love affairs merely except that in that case she would certainly not have sent for a man of his kind. But perhaps she was going to offer him a job?

Continued tomorrow

## THE GUMPS—Well Represented



## SOMEBODY'S STENOG—Weights and Measures



## The Young Lady Across the Way



## THE TERRIBLE-TEMPERED MR. BANG



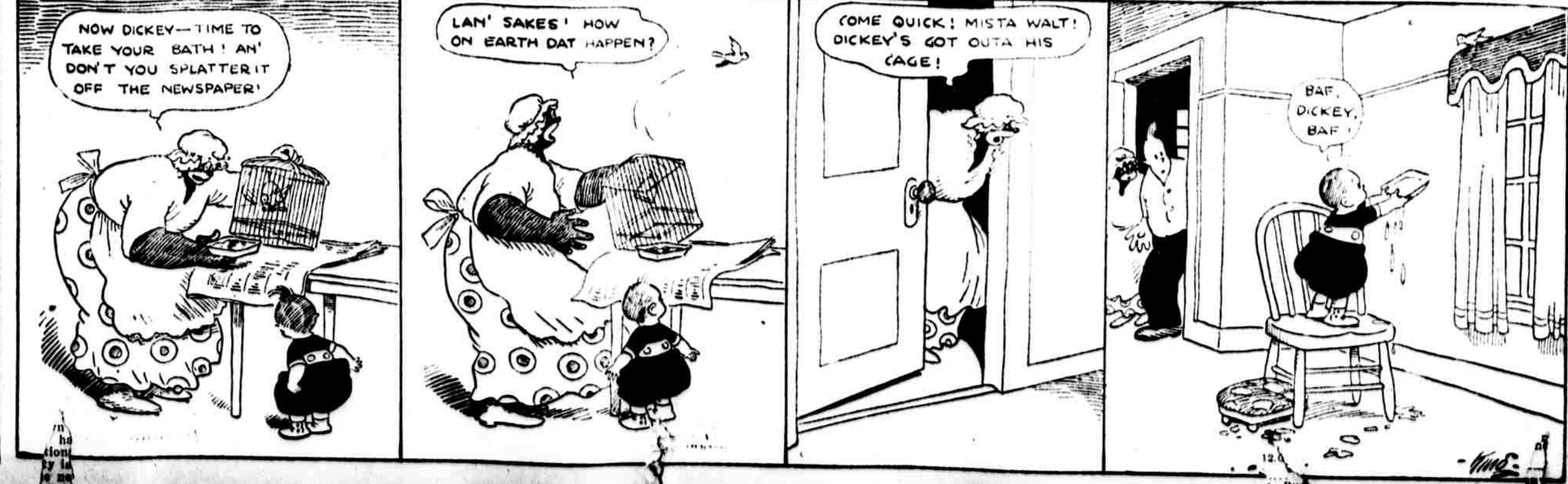
## SCHOOL DAYS.



## PETEY—They Only Seem Longer



## GASOLINE ALLEY—Try a Salt Bath, Skeezix



Continued tomorrow