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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THIS BEGINS THE STORY

Major Harry Carmichael, returned at the World War, is interrested in a charming girl, Claire Elphinstone, at a party. On his surprise later she summons him to a business office. He is mystified by her opening conversation.

"We Were Married Just 15 Minutes"

HER speech over the telephone had been business-like. No clue given as to why she wanted to see him. Merely, "Take down the address, please" * * * "at twelve o'clock * * *" and "Good-by."

Also, the manager who had admitted him had evidently been warned of his coming.

Heaven knew that he, Carmichael, was prepared to take anything that was going, provided that it was in his line at all. He waited, eyes vaguely on the furniture.

But at the girl's very next words Harry Carmichael stared at her so hard and steadily that for the moment he almost broke the surface of his subconscious habit of observation and saw her as anybody else would have seen her: a creature touchingly young and pretty, turned out with every sign of wealth, in manner self-possessed, to poise her man mistress—and yet a creature whose whole being could be summed up in the phrase need of help.

But she spoke negligently, without caution.

"You see, Major Carmichael, when my husband died——"

Carmichael recovered himself quickly, but she'd seen his astonishment.

"Surely you knew I'd been married?"

"No. I'm sorry. I don't go about very much. I certainly thought they said 'Miss.'"

And it was not only that! It was not that she seemed so young. Plenty of girls get married at eighteen; she must be quite three-and-twenty, he thought. But there was something about her that seemed to—so definitely unmarried.

She continued. "I was his typist, first. That was when I was seventeen. By the time I was twenty I was his secretary. He generally saw when I was ready."

"Why——"

"Elphinstone. The head of the firm. He taught me all I knew about it."

"I see."

"That," she went on until fling the strands of lace from about the violets, "that was two years ago. You weren't in England two years ago."

"No."

"Otherwise you'd probably have seen it in the papers. We were married"—she freed the violets and tossed the lace into the waste-basket—"we were married for just fifteen minutes. He died in the car on the way from church."

"Good heavens," began Carmichael, "how sad!"

"It mattered less than you think. I see I haven't told you all this. I only went to the Holes' last night at the very last minute, you know; I was a stop-gap because one of my cousins who was to have been there couldn't go. Well, as I was telling you, the long and the short of it is that Elphinstone Brothers is the biggest firm of its kind in the city, and that I am Elphinstone Brothers."

Then, there at Carmichael, still dazed, she was this phenomenon of a woman, one perhaps half a dozen in the world. Women of the land—women, perhaps, even of the hustle business, the equal of men so powerful that they were not so much men as economic forces! The idea shocked him foolishly, as if a fresh young miss in school of late. Women and economic forces were things to be kept apart. Women might not be men—he chuckled—but women might not be men's equals. Women might not be men's equals. Not at least right. We pay for emotion. There was something to be said for that. Since women, he had heard, were made excellent managers of department stores.

Women in professions—well, he gave lip-service to the woman doctor; any fair-minded Englishman has accepted her. The woman parson, the woman member of Parliament, those first women-barristers—these he still not take seriously. They might remain single instances. A woman in law—he had scarcely met or met them. The women of affairs—no, he did find the idea. The woman head of a large firm, ah, no. This—this lady creature, sitting before him, appearing—and—for business—so completely of the sweet tragedy of a marriage—marriage—married to his—of a woman's—married before. No a woman at all.

But her next words contradicted his conclusion.

"I am sure you representatives don't think much of us. I've read in Harry Green or an like M. Tarbell. I. Here she seemed to wave the lace toward struggle with something—some quality of the wish for—[illegible] I am not, I am plenty of people—[illegible] What I have got, and what I am, maybe for a success is—not enough. Do it." He felt she did not [illegible] something this. "It is something that tells me when to accept a deal, when to turn it right down, when to know if the people are going to be fortunate to the successes I am good at all that. I think I am. Do you understand what I mean by 'magic'?"

"I think—" he set be dreamy. His thoughts wandered to what an [illegible] by magic. That word, for a woman of business, [illegible] in his vocabulary these days.

"My [illegible] I'm still in a than this thing. I'm [illegible] married [illegible] than. Now, [illegible] fair, apart from my [illegible] people here, and [illegible] I've learnt here since I was seventeen. I—" Here again, was something that came to interrupt from her. "I'm a rather helpless person. Here—why I'd've not in this business [illegible] to get out to eat."

"In what way—why I help you, Mrs. Elphinstone?"

"Well, I am [illegible] You see I am the actual head of this business. It's supposed to be a [illegible] it was. So [illegible] she added quickly, consciously. "But like everybody else we are feeling [illegible] better times come. We haven't sacked a single employee. During the war we kept their places [illegible] till they came back. We [illegible] down the waves. So we are only just keeping our heads above the water. That's all inside the firm. We can manage that. But it's—outside that's trying to drown us!"

"Outside?" "You mean your private expenses are too heavy?"

"I mean other people's are. My friends. Their friends. And—oh, anybody who chooses. You see?"

Less and less did Carmichael see why she had dragged him down to the City to talk to him of all this. Elphinstone Brothers surely hadn't a job for him. Their huge sign bore the words "Importers and Merchants"; and what earthly good was that to him? You might as well offer a professor of botany a milk round in Camden Town. Carmichael was an engineer, but no Vickers or Beardmore or people who would have been of use to him had ever sent for him to pour out their troubles to find and to beg him to pull them through. No such luck.

He moved in his chair, eyeing his hat. Why didn't this Mrs. Elphinstone cut it short? Was there something she was funking?

She hesitated still. Loosening the stalks of those violets she shook them gently, and from the ugly hard green-and-purple rosette that they had formed they became in her fingers a graceful cluster. That, too, Carmichael (thinking just under the threshold of conscious observation) did not see. Nor did he see that anything of a woman's character may be read from this one trifling thing: the manner in which she tends or handles flowers. All he saw was that the young woman was now fidgeting with her violets to gain more time before she came to the horses.

In parentheses she said, "I wonder if you'd mind touching the bell."

He rang. A neat typist appeared.

"Bring me a glass of water, please; lukewarm."

With swift sure touches she began arranging her bouquet in the glass. "I hate to see flowers lie withering; I had to buy these as I came in. His last bunch, the old man said * * * Well, about this outside part, Major Carmichael. It takes any money I have. I have always been able to get money. It's quite true it is a flair as my husband said. He saw it in me as soon as I came. It's equality. It's like being double-jointed, or having the power of water-finding, or being able to carry colors in your head to match. People can't learn it, I think."

He found himself suppressing a small spasm of crossness and envy. This chit of a girl, with no purpose in life but clothes to put on her back, probably had this gift, while he, for all his single purpose—never, never in this world had Harry Carmichael been able to "get" money.

"I," he continued, "can't keep money. That's my luck. I fritter and scatter and piece it away, somehow. People think I'm kind-hearted and generous. I'm not. I'm lazy and feckless and vain——"

"Oh——" he protested, bored.

"Vain of being well off in my own right, vain of being Elphinstone Brothers, vain of having it in my power to help such crowds of other people. The fact is I don't know how to refuse them. I don't know how to say 'No' to all these begging letters and institutions and sad cases and hard-luck tales. I don't even know how to say it to men. Men who want to marry me, I mean."

"What the devil," famed Carmichael, "had that got to do with him?" He kept an irritated silence. In that silence there stole up softly, softly, into the fire-warmed air the scent of the reviving violets.

Now men and women are very much in this sense sex-equalities, and most of us have one sense much more wide-awake than the others. For some of us the sense of color is most vivid. Others are swayed by the secret pulse of rhythm. Others are all ears for sounds, intonations; these fall in love with mere timbres. It is not the conquest of these that British girl were given that strange, if little more-noted speaking voice. Others certainly women live in their sense of texture and touch.

"I Don't Like Men!"

Now, this young engineer, Carmichael, who had lived the last years on abstractions, who was mostly forgetful of the colors of things, and who was wont to be reached by their sounds, had, all the same, his own specially keen physical sense. To him scent was the unexpected channel. Scent, he felt, action. He could see it were, "visualize" them. Certain scents were to him place only recollable as price tags. He [illegible]

Scrunchier under the [illegible]
A breeze off the sea,
Mignonette in the [illegible]
Dim [illegible]
Violets in a warm room!

In this scarcely memorable room it seemed such a contradiction and an anomaly. Involuntarily he [illegible] the perfume, enjoying it. Beyond that enjoyment there stirred in him a kind of shamefacedness, because the [illegible] perfumes again a deeper [illegible]

The girl proceeded. "I'm not thinking about it at all, of course. I wanted to marry anybody—I would be different. But I don't. I don't like men. Except to do business with. Then give me a man every time."

"But I don't want them, in other ways. Not as friends. Friendship is a lever to me. The [illegible] element. But [illegible] I'm not going on [illegible] I can't go on with them. I [illegible] no usefulness here. [illegible] the business. [illegible] nothing to do with [illegible]

"[illegible] I'm [illegible] people. [illegible] the usual [illegible] were pretty [illegible] of [illegible] Where [illegible] Who [illegible] (1) [illegible] as a typist.

(2) She had [illegible] of years to get [illegible] the principal.

(3) She had [illegible] married here and [illegible] the whole concern.

Pretty calculation—if it looked [illegible] Anyway it was for [illegible] She had her [illegible] Herman [illegible] kindly and not [illegible] to help her to get [illegible] rally [illegible] the other [illegible] and [illegible] the [illegible] girl.

She raised [illegible] Again [illegible] prose [illegible] using their [illegible] in her [illegible] voice. "Yes, yes, I know that. Naturally I would be made [illegible] for a while. This that I'm going to suggest to you isn't going to interfere with your engineering. I might help it."

He looked hard at her. "What might, may I ask?"

"This proposition that I have to make to you."

He looked harder still. "And that is?"

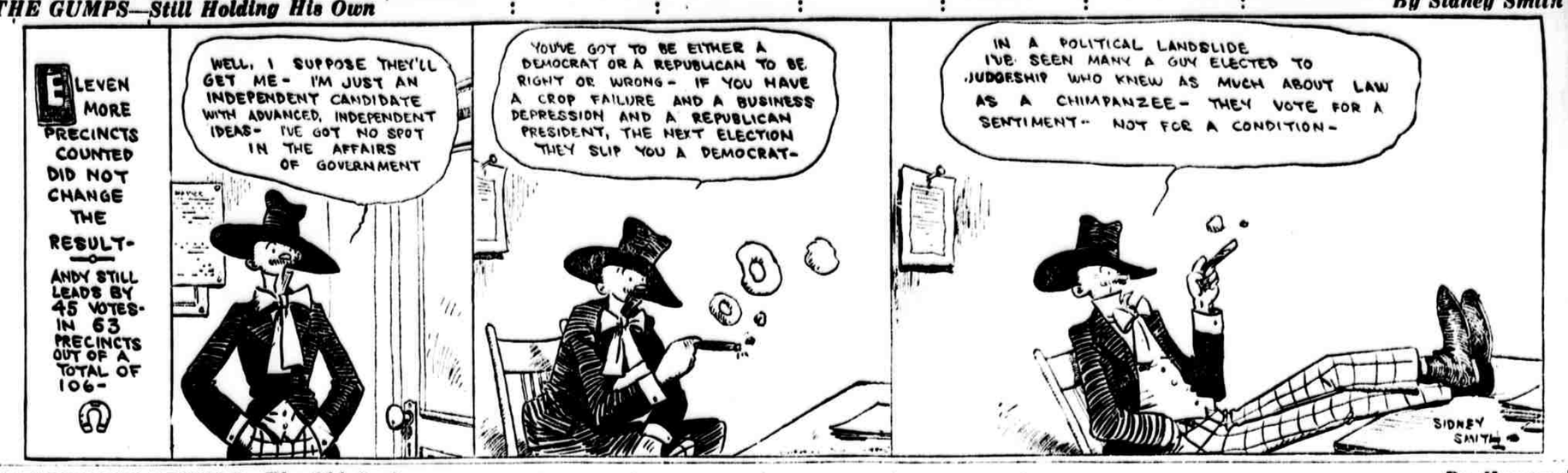
Her fingers moved again to the violets. She paused. (He thought: At last she'd come to it—and now she funked it!)

The telephone bell rang.

CONTINUED TOMORROW

THE GUMPS—Still Holding His Own

By Sidney Smith



SOMEBODY'S STENOG—The Old Crab

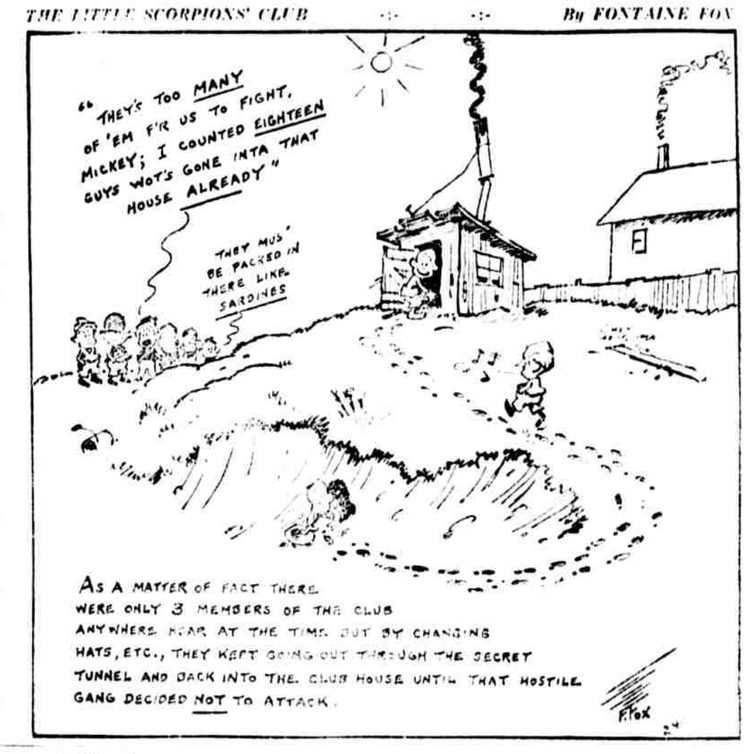
By Hayward

The Young Lady Across the Way

The young lady across the way says she's opposed to ship subsidy on the ground that the shipping interests, like everybody else, are taxed enough already.

THE LITTLE SCORPIONS' CLUB

By FONTAINE FOX

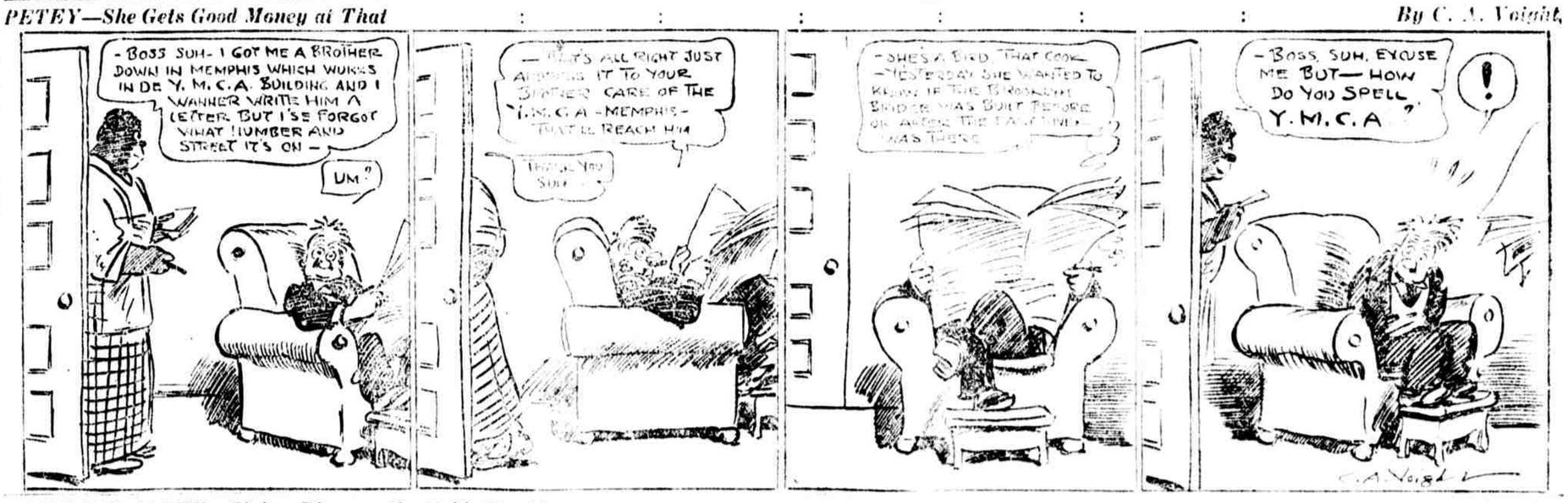


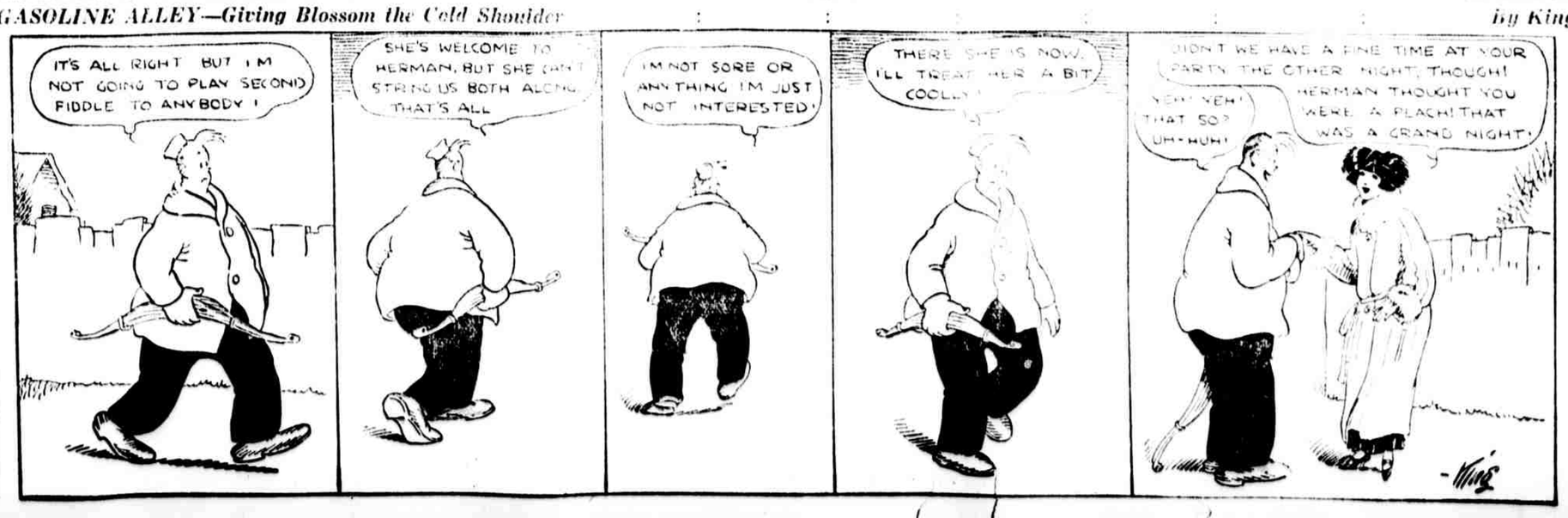
SCHOOL DAYS

By DWIG

PETEY—She Gets Good Money at That

By C. A. Voight



GASOLINE ALLEY—Giving Blossom the Cold Shoulder

By King