

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

Author of "The Wrong Mr. Wright," "The Arrant Rover," Etc. Copyright, 1921, Dodd, Mead & Co.

WHO'S WHO IN THE STORY

CLOVER ELPHINSTONE, character who has inherited a big business. She is tried by relatives and friends who want to spend her money, and suitors who want to marry her for it. She decides to marry "the horprie," a "conscience," to fend off the suitors.

MAJOR HARRY CARMICHAEL, World War veteran, man of personality, an engineer who has invented a new motor, to finance which he agrees to marry Clover, "strictly business" proposition.

ROSEMARY MEADOWS, Clover's cousin, a pretty girl of the period.

MRS. MEADOWS, aunt, who has befriended Clover in adversity and is showered with favors.

SANDAL, younger daughter, a beauty.

SIM HOLT, big, good-natured chap, beautifully in love with Rosemary.

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"Major Carmichael and our dear Clover may not seem to have very much to say to each other, but when none of us are here, I expect it's a very different story."

It was, though not in the sense that the gentle soul imagined.

Take, for instance, that discussion of theirs about February 14. It has come in this country to mean far less than Guy Fawkes, less than the Feast of All Fools. Only some lovers still remember; some sentimentalists, some sentimentals. Mrs. Meadows, hearing the date fixed for Clover's wedding, murmured, "Valentine's Day! How touching!" Her mind went back decades to what St. Valentine's Day had meant to her: the cardboard casket with the frill of lace; the heart of pink perfumed padded satin; the ribbon-tag that, pulled, revealed an opening bouquet of paper-blossoms bearing the motto, "Be Mine." That fashion was dead as the then fashionable bustle. To her daughters Rosemary and Lavender "a valentine" had still meant the excuse for presents from admirers who wished to send chocolates in a lordly box or sent in a phial of cloudy glass. Little Sandal would have cried, "Valentines! Those weird cards with doves doing nose dives on them? It must have been a scream to have anybody in love with you in those days!"

Still, to be married on Valentine's Day had seemed a pretty idea.

Consider, however, how much the prettiness of the idea meant to those dances, once away from those whom it must impress.

Carmichael, turning over his small pocket diary, said, "Yes, I did make a forward note for the 14th. Here 'tis. You booked it, too?"

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Handsome Pair in the Room

They waited, neither conscious of the other—was it only now that they were for a space conscious of the essential Clover and the real Carmichael?

Inwardly perhaps already these selves gaped each toward the other. Outwardly they were merely the handsome pair in the room.

Sandal, stopping where the last chord of the tune left her with one foot held high, heard a Pierrot near her telling his neighbor—"dancing with the Spanish lady with the red rose . . . the one you know Carmichael's . . . he . . . there was all that chat about in the papers some time ago . . . he . . ."

"What are you saying," demanded Sandal of this perfect stranger, "about Major Carmichael?"

And when it was borne in upon her that this was "the" Carmichael who had escaped from that Turkish prison camp, she took another of her wild, sliding dashes across the room, flinging herself upon him. "Why do you look at me, Clover? He called me Sandal. Harry, will you please promise me something at once?"

"What is it?"

"No, you promise me?"

"Not unconditionally; no."

"Oh, you attractive duck, how well I can see how you made Clover like you! Just by her not being sure of you," cried the flapper. "But do give me something, Harry, that I do want. Your autograph!"

He sighed; it sounded so like the letters that had been addressed to him after his "exploit." So now she knew? "Yes, only your autograph six times written out," she pleaded. "There are just a few girls I know who would so love it. I don't mean now, you know, and some notepaper, when you come. You don't mind my knowing you are the Turkish camp man, do you? Thank you so much. I know you don't really mind me—"

For with dismay on his face there mingled a look of indulgence toward this child. Clover, also, thought, "The world's a stage, and she's my partner. She's welcome to him if she'd only leave my things alone."

All the same, the next hesitation Sandal found her forgetting in Carmichael's arms that it was Carmichael with whom she danced.

"They're engaged!" Sandal, very important, hanging back from one of her lads, blurted it out over her shoulder at the Elizabethan gillnet. "They're engaged. Pukka. No, Bobby, I don't mean they're engaged for every dance tonight. They're going to be married. And when you've recovered consciousness you'll have to go over and congratulate them."

Bobby Llewellyn, the barrister with a gift for amateur theatricals and fashionable tailoring, stood there so agitated that several waiting couples bumped into him as he stood before he pulled himself together, felt involuntarily for a discarded monocle, pulled his rapier from between his silken knees, and drew back into the doorway.

"Gad," he muttered to himself, "his disconnected gaze again followed the dancers; followed the Spaniard's short full frock of creamy lace; her black tulle and high, black, white, black, above her face; her slim, white, black, black, her little black shoes that carried her poised, swaying, gliding in her brief second of conduct; her hair, Carmichael's light cloak flew out behind him in the dance, leaving his tall, black-and-white figure like a mast to that following suit of gold-embroidered satin all in a row; and at a turning stop it furled itself about his partner, enfolding them together; it had to be caught away, and again it streamed out, a golden banner behind them."

With a blank face Llewellyn watched. "There's many a slip," he told himself. "They're not married!"

He sent a glance after Carmichael which (could looks have slain) would have put an end then and there to any marriage prospects, and he repeated, "They aren't married yet!"

Joy-Bells

Comments attend an engagement as naturally as birds follow the plow. But the Clover-Carmichael engagement provided few juicy tidbits for the gossip. These people knew merely that the pair had met at a dinner; that they were to be married very soon; on February 14.

Nobody had heard of that silent young man he had fallen in love at first sight with that independent young woman. What he said about her, what she thought about him, and exactly "how much in love" the couple were—all this side of it remained a disappointing blank.

"So reserved, both of them," was Clover Meadows' verdict. "Darling, deeper feelings even to us. We know they say to be here. And, though people do say a girl is attracted by her Major Carmichael is a case of 'like to like.' I have never yet seen the young man look at Clover—not what she should call 'look' in my day."

She was in the Richmond Victorian-Jazz drawing-room, talking to her girls.

Rosemary said, "Your day was so dually sentimental, dear. It makes us post-war people quite faint to think of it. Our world is more full of a number of things. Clover's got the business. He's got his engineering. They've put lots of themselves into their work, mother. But the nineteenth century was the age for putting all the emotional eggs into one basket. And, when the whole lot crashed at one moment, oh, the onsets of sentiment!"

Here Sandal's clear treble broke in with, "I call him Harry! I haven't heard her call him Harry yet. Not to his face. I once read somewhere that 'the pronoun YOU in a certain tone of voice is the most passionate and earnest that can be uttered by a woman's lips. Naturally I'm always listening for it, hard," proclaimed the

CONVINCED TOMORROW

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This happened when they had gone out for a walk ("to discuss final arrangements on Wimbledon Common. The world's a stage, and she's my partner. She's welcome to him if she'd only leave my things alone. . . . upon their torrents of cold and driving rain; the roads and the paths between the horse-buses were deserted—green up to this adventurous couple in their wet-wear. They strode along, drooping splashing through puddles, cold drops on their eyelashes, able to see little ahead—in any case it would have been a comfortless prospect enough, that afternoon.

"Right. That's our wedding day then," said he briskly. "A quiet affair. Just your aunt and those girls, I suppose. You won't want any one else, Clover?"

Clover, sharply, "Quiet? Certainly not! Just the family? Good gracious! What made you think of such a thing? That would miss the whole point!"

"What point? Surely you don't want a tannish? Mob of people?"

"But, of course, that's exactly what I do want!"

Horrible silence from the bridegroom-to-be. "I want," said the bride-to-be, resolutely, "every outward and visible sign that I can have. A big wedding. Joy-bells. A crush at the Hyde Park Hotel. Red carpet and confetti galore, masses of flowers, cases and cases of champagne. Everybody I know. Everybody! I must have the difference well marked."

"Er—what difference?"

"The difference that there is going to be in my life. In my way of living, at all events. I want that made obvious to everybody. A hot-and-corner wedding would not seem so like a real one. Don't you understand what I want?"

He did not reply. Gloomily he stared ahead, seeing in the swaying land scape, but that ceremony, that crush. He could not have told any one how hideous and what a mockery it all seemed suddenly to him.

To Clover, too, it suddenly appeared from another angle. She had meant to exclude everything but the business aspect. Unreasonably, and thus late on other aspects of her conduct dimmed from behind the clear expediency of it. Why? It had seemed perfectly all right two years before when she had found herself willing to make a marriage of convenience with that remote employer of hers, John Elphinstone. But now—on the eve of this not-even-marriage where the man would benefit as much as she—now, at the eleventh hour, she found herself thinking against it.

It was an ugly shame!

It was taking cover behind what was intended to shelter something tender and beautiful!

It was a gigantic fraud on her own people! It "wasn't" true! She had been pure business. Her deep down and growing repugnance to it did not keep Clover silent. On the contrary to down the voice of the whisperer from the depths, she became deliberately fluent.

"This wedding," she declared, "is to make what is vulgarly called 'a splash.' And, while I remember! I wish you, please, to get married in uniform. If I could wear orange-blossoms and Auntie's wonderful Lin-crick lace veil and a court dress of white miracle-brocade, I would. But I can't."

"Can't you? Why not?"

"Of course, widows don't."

"I see."

Striding along beside her, he checked an almost imperceptible smile. "What sort of a widow is this girl who had just said 'married' for exactly a quarter of an hour? The same sort of 'widow' she would go on being if anything happened to her second husband."

"I see," he said again. "Widows don't. And I am sorry, but I am afraid demobilized temporary officers don't either."

"Wear uniforms at our weddings?"

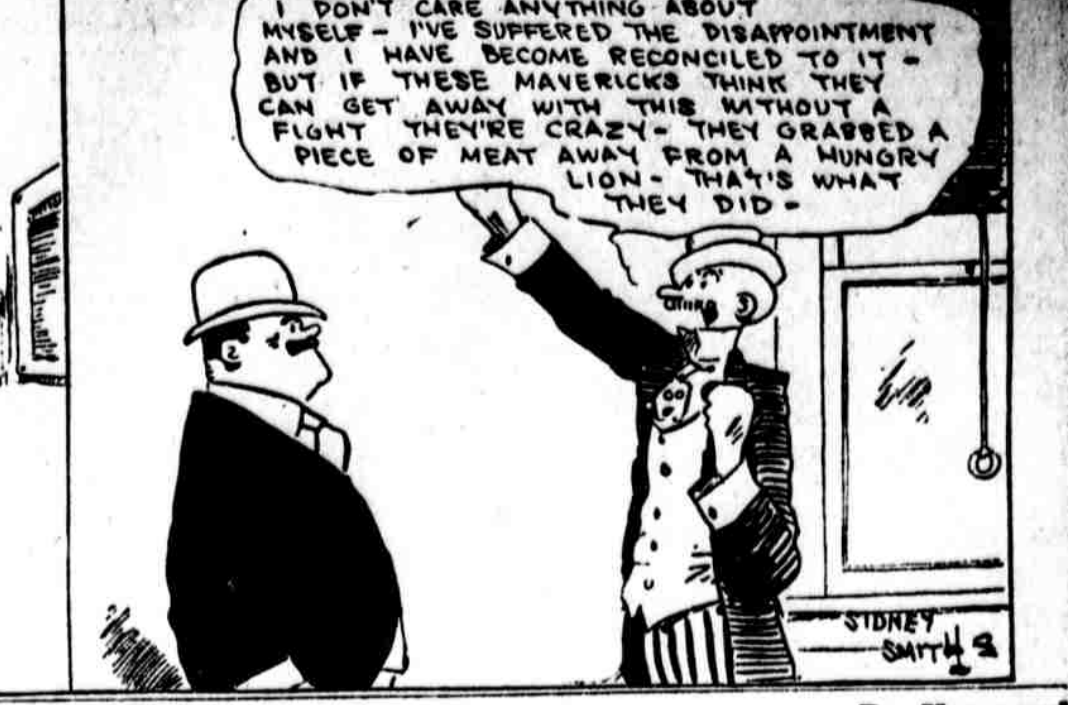
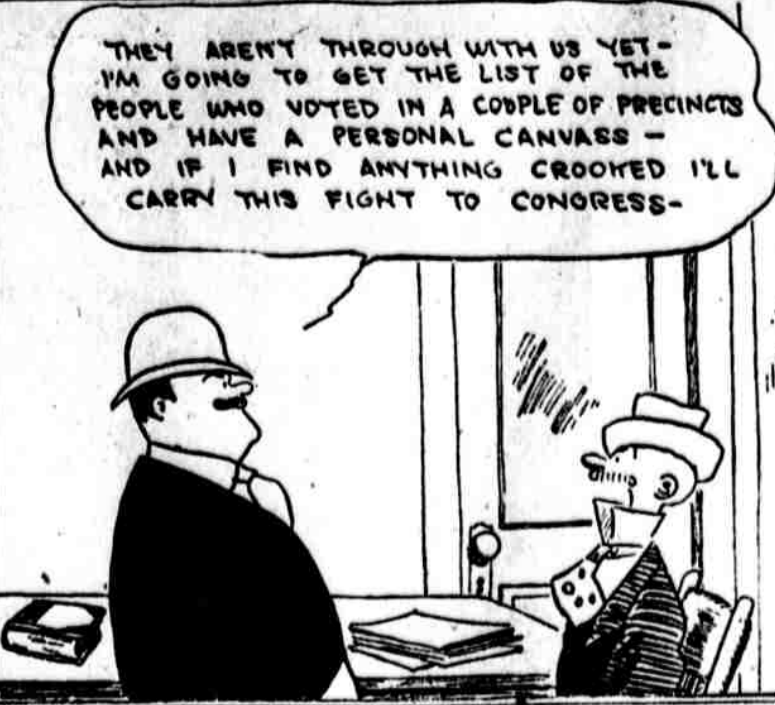
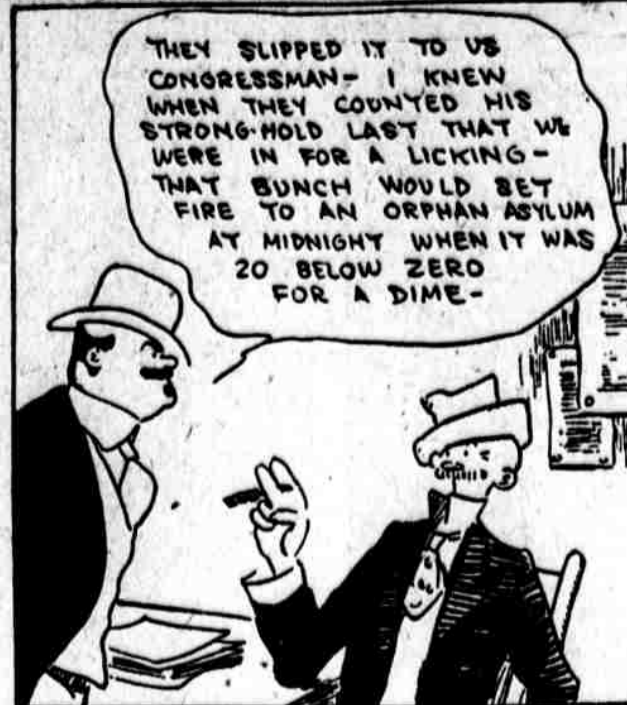
"Do you mean you aren't allowed to?"

"I'm afraid not," said he, feeling for the first time in his career some gratitude toward the powers-that-be. She objected, "But you're a special reserve man? I thought you could apply for permission."

"Impossible. I am afraid," returned Carmichael, and she saw it was final, if not from the War Office, then from himself.

Very cross with both of them, she agreed. "Well, if it's impossible, you can't, of course. And she wondered if it was the soldiers would have felt that to wear the King's uniform, at this wedding, would have been making it a masquerade, even as her cloak had been for him."

THE GUMPS—Flirting With Disaster



SOMEBODY'S STENOG—Why Go South?



The Young Lady Across the Way



WHO SAYS THERE ISN'T ANY SANTA CLAUS?



SCHOOL DAYS



PETEY—From Now On Silence in the Reading Room



GASOLINE ALLEY—And He Danced With Blossom



THE YOUNG LADY ACROSS THE WAY

The young lady across the way says she simply doesn't see how any true American can be for the separation of church and state in view of what the constitution says about it.

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SCHOOL DAYS

GIVE THE COUNTERSINK AND PULL THE LATCHSTRING, BROTHER

PETEY—From Now On Silence in the Reading Room

ER—SAY—I'M GOING UP IN THE ATTIC TO DO SOME READING—DON'T NOBODY DISTURB ME—

GASOLINE ALLEY—And He Danced With Blossom

GOLLY, THERE'S HERMAN! HE'S THE TALL, DARK MAN THE GYPSY TOLD ME TO KEEP SHY OF!

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