THE

SWORD OF THE EMPEROR

Romance of an American's Strange Adventures in the Franco-Prussian War

BY

ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE

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CHAPTER I.

I Fall into Disgrace.

I STRUCK my heels together, and came to the "salute."

I like to think I betrayed none of the hot emotion that was boiling in my heart, but that I bore myself as a trained soldier should.

Still, it was a hard pose to assume, for my blood ran riot with anger and my heart was sick with disappointment. I knew this was not only the crisis of my military career, but perhaps as great a crisis in the history of the world.

And thus for a second or so we four remained silent—an odd group, I doubt not, we formed in that vast gilt-and-mirrored room where the bustle and noise of Paris came to us faintly.

In the great, carved armchair at one side of the table, resplendent in blue and gold uniform, sprawled the Emperor.

Short, fat, gray-pallid, his long mustache twisted upward in absurd smartness, his goatee neatly waxed; his small, bloodshot eyes glazed and blinking; his short, stubby fingers fumbling helplessly with the papers I had brought him.

I have seldom seen a less regal figure than was presented at that moment by his Imperial Majesty Napoleon III., Emperor of the French.

On the other hand, in all my life I have never beheld a more imperially beautiful woman than she who leaned over the armored chair-back, glancing at those same papers that strowed her husband's lap.

The Empress Eugenie was at this time well on toward middle age. She had, in fact, passed her forty-fourth birthday. Yet she had the face and form of a girl.

There was a nameless something about her, too, that suggested royal blood—of which, by the way, she had not one drop in her veins. Exquisite in dress, countenance and bearing, she seemed a glint of living sunshine in that tinsled room.

The third of the group—a portly, rubicund man in the uniform of a major-general—was His Grace the Duc de Meride—born politician, born meddler, and—most trusted of Her Majesty's three potent advisers.

In such lofty company it seems anti-climax to mention myself, Ray Benton, New Yorker by birth and now cavalry captain in the French army.

My errand alone accounted for my presence there. At the first whisper of war with Prussia I had been one of several trusted officers sent secretly to Germany.

No, they did not call me a spy. Yet I had been one none the less. And capture would have meant a hempen collar for my neck. But I had escaped—through luck and native Yankee wit—and was the first of the secret envoys to present a full report to their majesties.

It was the Emperor who broke the brief silence. He spoke pettishly, shrugging his stooped shoulders like a peevish child as he addressed De Meride.

"I can make nothing of it all, general," he exclaimed. "There is a wretched error somewhere. I have read your reports, day by day. They tell me our own armies are prepared, down to the last button on the gaiters of the last soldier. They tell me, too, that Prussia is panic-stricken; that her troops are disorganized; that villagers near the Rhine are fleeing eastward in terror, mingling with the frightened, ill-disciplined troops."

"It is so, sire," affirmed De Meride smilingly, the while he cast a covertly lowering look at me. "If"——

"Yet look what reports this 'expert' of yours brings us!" went on the Emperor, unheeding. "Three vast German armies, perfectly equipped, drilled like machines, marching without tents or an ounce of surplus baggage—all headed for the Rhine, planning to move across into France like some three-headed snake—the peasants all along the Rhine rushing to arms, eager to defend their Vaterland.

"Moltke, Bismarck and the rest of the Deutschers, all working out a fearless campaign as they might a game of chess. Mathematical accuracy, calm power, confidence everywhere."

"It is very simple," began the Empress with a nervous little laugh. "We must immediately"——

"The two reports do not agree," interrupted Napoleon with a snarl. "I have been fooled—by some one. By whom? I demand"——

"This man lies," broke in De Meride, coldly insolent. "He"——

"By the laws of our army," I shouted, furious, "I can be shot for striking you, or for challenging you to a duel. Do not presume too far upon those laws. No man shall say I lie. But for the Empress's presence"——

"Tut, tut, tut!" clucked Napoleon in weary reproof. "What have we here? Captain Benton, you forget yourself and the respect due your Emperor. Withdraw that rude speech, or"——

"Willingly, sire," I retorted, "when this man withdraws his accusation that I lie. I have served Your Majesty both here and in Algiers. I risked my life a dozen times on this German venture. For reward, am I to be discredited and branded as a liar? In this case 'liar' means also 'traitor!'

"I demand justice. If I have served Your Majesty well I deserve credit. If I have deceived you I merit death by martial law. In either case"——

The Empress had been whispering rapidly in De Meride's ear. The Duke now broke in.

"I spoke overhastily," he said in sulky reservation. "Captain Benton's name for honor and all that is upright was well established in Algiers. Indeed, it was on the strength of that reputation, as much as for his known skill as a scout, that he was chosen for this Prussian affair. I was wrong, Your Majesty, to doubt his word. But his tidings are none the less false. He has been grossly misinformed."

"Eh?" queried the Emperor, puzzled. "Yet his report is circumstantial. And it denies all of yours, Duke. For instance, you told me the South German States hated Prussia and would seek alliance with us. He tells us they are flocking to Prussia's aid.

"You told me Prussia could not put two hundred thousand men in the field, and then only after months of recruiting. This report says there are already over four hundred thousand armed men on the march and reserves of"——

"De Meride has just explained," interposed the Empress in that wondrously sweet voice of hers, "that Captain Benton is mistaken. The captain has been misled by German secret agents, of course, who guessed his identity and found it more profitable to send him back with false news than to hang him. The whole report is a web of absurdities."

Now, even had court etiquette permitted, I could not bluntly contradict a woman and tell her that it was she, not I, who was "misled." From the first Eugenie had dabbled in politics—for which she had no talent—and had always been the tool of her unscrupulous or incompetent advisers.

As all the world now knows, it was these "advisers" who had forced on the present conflict with Prussia, letting the Empress believe it was the result of her own statecraft, and encouraging her to refer to the adventure as "my little war."

And among all the advisers—whom she as slavishly obeyed, even as the third Napoleon obeyed her—none other held so complete dominion over her mind as did Meride.

"Are you sure?" muttered Napoleon as his wife paused in her vehement speech. "Because, if not, it would be well to halt our armies that are rushing to the Rhine. It would even be unwise for me to start to-morrow to join Frossard's division on the Saar. If Prussia can really put more than four hundred thousand men into the field"——

"She cannot!" laughed the Empress. "Listen. De Meride and I have been daily in touch with the empire's greatest tacticians. Our secret service force is perfect. Is it likely that every one of our military experts and our most skilled spies is at fault, and that this unknown American cavalryman is right? Is it not on the face of it insanely impossible?"

"An American!" mused Napoleon, much impressed by her bantering yet almost hypnotic tone. "That is true. I had forgotten. I know the American character well. I lived in New Jersey for ten miserable months. And when I told the yokels there I was of imperial blood they used to laugh at me and tell me all men were equal. I might have known better than to trust a man from such a land. Perhaps you and De Meride are right."

"Perhaps?" she mocked reproachfully. "If you begin to doubt us, in whom can you trust? If the word of an American captain of cavalry is to be taken in preference to that of your own wife"——

She got no further. The imperial weathercock had veered in a gusty blast of wrath.

"You're right," he cried. "I was a fool. It is all a thick-headed blunder or worse on the part of this Yankee. What d'ye mean, fellow?" he roared at me, shaking the papers in my face, "what d'ye mean by bringing me a pack of lies like this? If you're not a traitor you're a fool. You've been gulled by German agents. Any one can see that by looking at these lists of yours."

It was hopeless to say or do anything. The man's crafty brain, which had raised him from the lowly position of political exile and New Jersey schoolmaster to the imperial throne of France, was fast losing its old power.

The mortal disease of which he was so soon to die was already upon him. He was a weak, readily influenced wreck of his old shrewd self. I saw the helplessness of it all. Yet I sought once more to right myself.

"Sire," I exclaimed, "I stake my life on my report's accuracy."

"Pish!" he sputtered. "What is the life of one beggarly cavalry officer against the fate of France? You've been tricked, sir. That is the best I can say for you. So gullible a fellow is a disgrace to the army. I advise you to send in your resignation before your blunders do any more damage."

I whipped out my sword. The Emperor flinched. So did De Meride. Eugenie alone was unmoved, and eyed me with that wondrous, inscrutable smile of hers.

Before De Meride could touch the bell at his elbow I had broken the blade of my sabre across my knee.

Dropping the pieces at the Emperor's feet I saluted and stamped from the room.

Along the marble corridor and down the wide stairway I hastened, my empty scabbard clattering against the stones, my brain a maze of impotent fury.

At peril of life I had brought my Emperor tidings of vital import that might well save him—and France too—from the pit yawning just ahead.

I own I had hoped for promotion, at the very least. Instead, my reward had been vile insult that I could not resent. I had incurred the charge of being a liar, a fool or a traitor—or all three. And my military career was at an end.

I had looked forward to this war as a golden opportunity for high advancement; as a conflict where my sword might perhaps cleave for me a path to the coveted marshal's baton. Instead, I was a discredited outcast, a stranger in a strange land.

And all because I had served my master overwell.

Out of the palace I strode, and blindly stamped through the quiet garden paths, seeking to get away—anywhere—to outrun my furious despair—to avoid the sight of man.

Around a turn in the prim, hedge-bordered gravel walk I wheeled. Then I halted—brought up, all standing, and momentarily sane again—by the sight of a face.

CHAPTER II.

The Wonder-Girl.

IT was a girl who barred the narrow, twisting path before me. Even before she spoke I knew she was an American. Looking back on the scene, I recall she was dressed as only American girls know how to dress. But, at the moment, I saw nothing but her face.

I have seen more classic, regular features, but never a countenance whose ineffable sweetness so struck to my very soul. On sight of it I felt, I think, the same mad impulse of enthusiasm that brought a whole vast audience involuntarily to its feet when Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" was first sung.

This praise sounds overdrawn to you, perhaps. But then you never saw Madge Clay.

My red rage forgotten, I halted, staring stupidly at the girl, with the absurd fantasy that—somewhere—some time—she and I had met in dreams.

She, on her part, had stopped as I swung blindly round the curve into the path; and she drew back a step to avoid colliding with me.

But now, as our eyes met, a wondering look flashed over her face—first doubt, then astonishment, and last of all a sudden radiant joy that transfigured her.

"Dick!" she cried, as I still stood marvelling. "Dick Graeme!"

Before I could reply or fairly grasp her words she had taken an eager step forward, had thrown both arms about my neck and had kissed me.

No, it was not an illusion or heaven sent mirage. She kissed me. Full on the mouth!

If it seems strange to you who read, then judge what effect it had on me—when this tall, gloriously lovely maiden—an utter stranger to me—called me rapturously by a name not my own, and—kissed me.

Will you laugh at me when I say my first clear sensation was of shame? Not shame for my own unheard of good luck; but for the humiliation this sweet American girl must experience when she should know of her mistake.

Of course, she had mistaken me for some one dear to her. A brother; no—a sweetheart. There was nothing sisterly in the joyous amaze of her greeting. I sought to ease the impossible situation as best I might.

"Pardon!" I managed to say, as her arms released me. "I am Ray Benton, captain in His Majesty's Ninety-eighth Hussars. I"——

She fell back. But there was no mortified apology in her pained gaze.

"Why, Dick!" she cried in surprise, "that isn't a pretty joke. Aren't you glad to see me?"

"Gladder than for any sight that has met my eyes in years," I blundered impulsively, "but sorry beyond words that I am not the fortunate man you take me to be. I am Ray Benton, an American, serving in the French cavalry. May I ask your forgiveness for letting you make such a divine error? And will you believe me when I promise to forget your—your greeting? I no doubt have the good luck to resemble some one who"——

"Dick!" she cried with impatient despair, "are you crazy? You can't have forgotten my very looks in six little months. You know I am Madge Clay as well as I know you are Richard Graeme."

"Madge Clay?" I echoed absently.

For again at the name the absurd fancy seized me that this wonder-girl and I had met in dreams.

She winced at my colorless repetition of her name. Then her dark eyes flashed.

"If I had not known you all my life," she murmured, her sweet voice shaking, "if we had not been engaged for a whole year—if you had not told me a thousand times that you love me—if I did not know you for a man of stainless honor—I should believe you were taking this cruel, brutal way of breaking our engage"——

"Miss Clay!" I cried. "You are torturing yourself on my wretched account, and falsely blaming some honorable man who no doubt adores you. Can't you see I am telling you the truth? Could any man who was not a lunatic pretend not to know you unless he really didn't?

"I am Ray Benton. A hundred men in Paris can verify that. The army lists here and in Algiers will quickly prove it to you. Who the doubly happy Richard Graeme may be I do not know, though the name, as you speak it, seems to have a vaguely familiar sound to me. I have no doubt read it somewhere. I wish to Heaven," I added bitterly, "that I were indeed he. In all this broad earth there is not one living soul who can show such joy at seeing me."

"Oh, you are mad! Insane!" she exclaimed. "I know you as no one else does. I know your very mood and expression. And you never could pretend so successfully. Am I dreaming, or have I too gone crazy? It is all a horrible nightmare."

"On the contrary," I soothed her, "it is the sort of thing that happens every day in this old world of mistakes and surprises. Every man is said to have a double. It is my lot, no doubt, to look so much like your fiance that after six months of separation you take me for him. Is he by any chance a French officer, too?"

"No. He is—you are—a captain in the United states army. A veteran of the Civil War. A member of my father's staff. You"——

"It was not my fortune to bear arms for my own country," said I, "and five years ago, when the Civil War ended, I was sous-lieutenant of cavalry in Algiers. My legal term of service for France was not yet over and I could not have gone to America. Indeed, I have not been in the United States in—in—more years than I can remember. As for"——

"Listen to me," she broke in, laying on my arm a little hand whose magnetic touch somehow went through my whole being. "Listen to me," she went on, holding my eyes with hers and speaking in the slow, compelling tone one uses in imparting a lesson to some backward child. "You have lost your senses! How you come to be in French cavalry uniform and calling yourself 'Benton' I do not know. But you are suffering from some terrible delusion; and if both our lives are not to be wrecked I must rouse you from it.

"You left America—New York—just six months ago. Father and I came to the dock to see you off. You came, by order of the Government at Washington, to study French cavalry conditions, and to be on the spot in case the rumored trouble between France and Prussia should develop into war.

"You wrote me regularly—at first. Then for months I heard nothing from you. But father told me you were no doubt visiting the various garrison towns where the postal system was defective. So I kept on trusting you. Then when news of the war came, and father and others of our generals hurried over here to watch the manoeuvres for the Government, I made father bring me along. This is our very first day in Paris. Father and I were walking to the Tuileries and he stopped, back there, to speak to an old acquaintance. I grew tired of waiting. So I strolled on—and came face to face with you. And now you don't even know me!"

All at once the whole situation was clear. I wondered I had not thought of it before. This glorious girl—whose sad eyes and broken voice had wrung my very soul—was a lunatic! There was no other explanation.

All her talk of a lost lover—her detailed account of his supposititious career—her own present plight—all were explained by this single theory. She had managed to give her nurses the slip and was walking abroad alone in search of her imaginary sweetheart.

I was confirmed in this knowledge by the fact that I had more than once scanned the full lists of the American officers on governmental duty in Paris, searching there for some familiar name. And "Richard Graeme" was nowhere on those lists.

At this solution my heart ached the more for her. I must persuade her to come with me to her guardians. Paris streets on the eve of war were no fit place for a beautiful, demented girl to walk alone.

I turned to her and was about to speak when she saw—and misread—the change in my expression.

"Ah!" she cried. "You are beginning to remember? You do remember, Dick?"

"Yes," I said—and the consolatory lie checked me—"I remember. Now you and I must go straight to your friends. They will be anxious to see me."

"How strangely you speak!" she murmured. "You're not one bit like yourself. But this cloud that has been over your brain is lifting a little. I can see that. We must get you good medical care and you'll soon be well. You poor boy—sick and out of your mind in a foreign land? Oh, the pity of it! I thank Heaven I met you in time."

"Yes, yes," I soothed. "It is very, very fortunate. Now let us hurry as fast as we can to where you are stopping. You know the address, of course?"

Her great eyes were brimming with tears. I was in haste to get her away. At any moment the hedge bordered, secluded walk where we stood might be invaded by some party of gay officers—each or all of whom she might claim as the mythical "Richard Graeme."

"Come," I repeated, "take my arm, won't you? Now where do you live?"

"Dick," she exclaimed, drawing away from me. "What is it? You don't talk like an insane man. Rather as if it were I you thought crazy. Are"——

Round the curve hurried rapid, firm footsteps. An elderly, heavily built man, sprucely dressed and wearing the sweeping mustache and "Burnside" whiskers then so common in American army circles rounded the turn and came up with us.

At sight of the girl confronted by a stranger in French cavalry uniform he halted in angry dismay, then pushed between us.

"Madge!" he demanded sharply, "is this foreign puppy annoying you? If—Lord bless my soul!" he broke off, rushing at me and seizing both my hands in delighted grip. "It's Dick Graeme! Dick, you old rascal, what d'ye mean by dressing up like a Frenchy and growing a mustache and goatee? I hardly knew you, lad!"

CHAPTER III.

The Girl and the General.

THE old gentleman was pink in the face with the pleasure the meeting gave him. Every inch of his portly form, from the shiny patent leather boots to the waving white whiskers, seemed to exhale delight. I stood gaping at him like an idiot.

"Upon my word, boy!" he rumbled, noting my blank expression. "You don't seem especially tickled to meet your old chief. If your welcome to Madge wasn't any warmer, I don't wonder her eyes are wet. What's the matter? Have you two been quarreling?"

"Father"—— began Madge.

Then her voice failed her. She clung to the old fellow's arm as to a haven of refuge in a storm. From pink his face went red.

"What's this?" he demanded. "Here's a pretty scene after six months' absence! Dick, will you explain?"

Explain! My brain was dizzy. My common sense told me it was quite impossible that two lunatics should be abroad in the Tuileries gardens that morning with precisely the same hallucination.

So I was forced to revert to my first idea. I bore a marvellous resemblance to one Richard Graeme, whom they both knew—and whose head at that moment of dire embarrassment, I would have taken exquisite pleasure in punching.

"The explanation was very simple," I answered. "Miss Clay has"——

"Miss Clay?" he interrupted. "Next you'll be calling me 'Gen. Clay' instead of 'Chief!' What"——

"Miss Clay," I pursued stiffly, "has mistaken me for a Capt. Graeme of the United States army, whom it appears, I resemble. You, sir, have evidently fallen into the same error. May I offer once more my apologies for having unconsciously caused either of you any embarrassment, and"——

"You talk like a book," snorted the general. "Are you crazy or only drunk? Or are you trying to be funny?"

My temper is never of the most patient. And events that day had strained it sorely.

"I am neither drunk nor out of my head," I snapped; "and, with all my sins, no one ever accused me of being a humorist. I repeat, there has been a mistake, which, though it was no fault of mine, I greatly regret. Permit me"——

I wheeled about, strode along the walk to the point where it merged in the bustling avenue beyond. But as I reached the end of the path Gen. Clay's hand was on my shoulder.

"Hold on, Dick—hold on!" he puffed, winded by his haste.

I stopped reluctantly. Had he been younger I should have shaken off his detaining grasp and hurried away.

"Hold on, lad!" he repeated. "Madge is in a terrible state about you. She thinks you've lost your wits or something. You can't leave us like this. You and I fought side by side through the last two years of the Civil War, and"——

"And you captured Lee at Appomattox, while I was busy catching Jefferson Davis and taking Richmond single handed." I growled in hearty sarcasm. "I remember it perfectly. My name in those days was Hiram Graeme and yours was Ulysses A. Grant. It's all perfectly plain—as simple as the Chinese puzzle. And now that I've admitted everything you claim, perhaps you will let me go my way."

I had the grace to be ashamed of my boorish, petty anger, even before the hurt look on the old man's face checked my awkward flight of irony.

But remember I was scarce myself that day. The scene at the palace had shaken my temper and nerves.

"My boy," answered the general, "you are pleased to make fun of what we both once held sacred, and to sneer at events and people that are part of our country's history. That is your affair—not mine. But when you deny you are Richard Graeme, my old staff officer, and my only daughter's fiance, then the matter does concern me. I want an explanation; and you must give it."

"I have already explained in full," I replied more quietly. "I am Capt. Ray Benton of the Ninety-eighth Hussars. If you doubt that, I will go with you to my regimental headquarters and prove it. You and Miss Clay declare I parted with you both six months ago. Six months ago I was quartered at Algiers, as my comrades there can testify. I had been there for years. Who Richard Graeme may be I don't know; nor am I responsible for my chance likeness to him. My only regret in the affair is that I seem to have caused your daughter keen sorrow. I wish I might some way atone for that."

He was studying my face rather than my words. Now abruptly he said:

"You came direct to Paris from Algiers?"

"I did. I was transferred to the Ninety-eighth from the"——

"You say you served for years in Algiers. How many years?"

"I—I don't remember. You will find the record at"——

"Don't remember how long you served there? When were you last in America?"

"I—I don't recall. It was so long ago that"——

"Since the Civil War?"

"No sir. It was, of course, many years before that. In my boyhood. So long ago that the events are blurred in my memory."

"You are not Richard Graeme, you say, and"——

"I have told you again and again that I am not."

"And yet you have his face, his voice, his every expression."

"The likeness must indeed be close if"——

"Likeness?" he scoffed. "Many a man looks like some other. But only in story books can that likeness continue to deceive his best friends when they see him at close range and hear him speak. This is not a question of 'likeness.' You are Richard Graeme, a Civil War veteran, and formerly of my staff. And you are engaged to my daughter. What you mean by this queer pose I do not know, but for Madge's sake I mean to find out."

There was a truculence, an ugly threat in his deep voice. It roused my newly allayed anger.

Was this some unusually clever adventurer—some swindler who was playing a deep game of his own, with myself as his victim? Paris was just then alive with such gentry; and no far-fetched romance could exaggerate many of the fantastic measures they resorted to in order to gain their ends.

I looked more closely at the irate old man who called himself Gen. Clay, and who claimed such close acquaintance with me. From him my suspicious glance shifted to Madge's pale, miserable face as she rejoined us.

No! That girl was no swindler's decoy. In the most prejudiced court of justice those honest dark eyes of hers would have given the lie to such a charge.

And yet——

A ragged cheer rose from the loitering groups on the avenue. Down the street, with loud jingling of chains and accouterments trotted a dozen gorgeously attired officers. One or two in general's uniform.

In the bevy there was but one in civilian dress—a little, soldierly, black clad man, who managed his restive roan horse with the consummate skill of a born cavalry leader.

The little man's piercing eyes chanced to rest for an instant on us as we stood at the entrance to the path. At once he reined his roan out of the fast-trotting cavalcade, darted across pavement and sidewalk, reined up a second just in front of us, saluted in gay familiarity, and cried:

"Welcome to Paris, Gen. Clay! Miss Clay, I shall hope for the pleasure of calling on you before we start for the front."

With a wave of his hand he had galloped off to rejoin his companions, leaving me looking after him in new wonder.

For I had at once recognized the little rider in civilian dress. There was not an officer in all Paris who had not seen and admired this most distinguished guest of the French nation.

"You know that man?" queried Gen. Clay.

"Yes—by sight. It is the American general, Phil Sheridan."

"Under whom you served in the Shenandoah Valley."

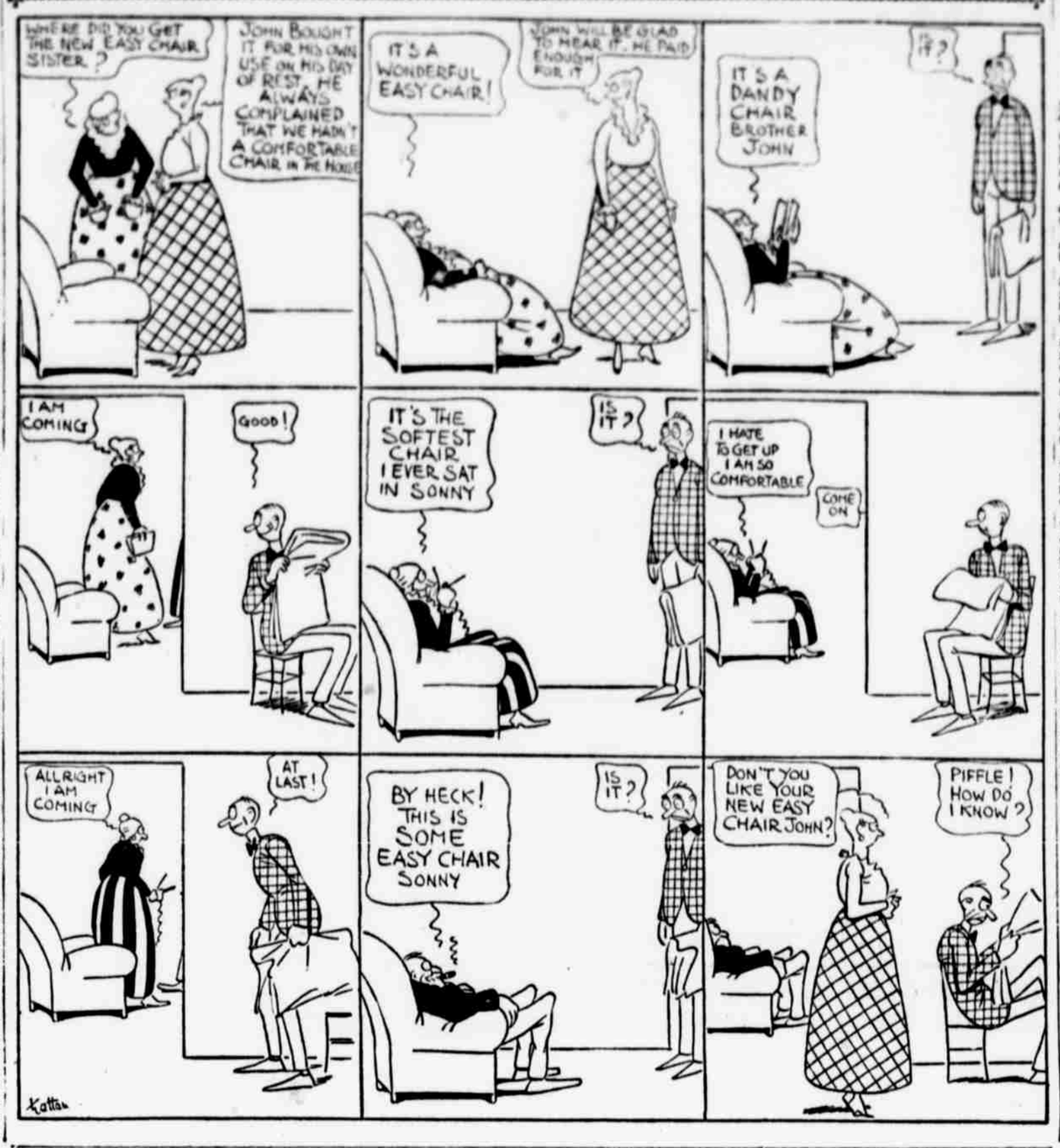
"Whom I never saw until he came to Paris," I retorted.

But there was now less anger and no suspicion in my tone. The man whom Phil Sheridan had so cordially hailed as a brother-in-arms could surely be no mere imposter. Once more my theories were all at sea.

(To Be Continued.)

The Day of Rest

By Maurice Ketten



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