Shorty Does a Parlor Stunt

By SEWELL FORD

Drawings by F. Vaux Wilson

SUCH a twistedness! And all on account of Sadie's draggin' me into places where I ain't any more useful than a bottle of buttermilk at an Elks' banquet.

But first off, was I tellin' you how Gertie—that's Mrs. Pinckney, you know—has made a part-time commuter out of the dear boy? Say, but she's a bright and shinin' star, Gertie is, even if she did come from out where the mines are! She manages them legacy twins of theirs with one hand, and Pinckney with the other, and all the time he thinks he's handlin' the steerin' wheel himself. It was to get the twins out of town, where they could find some less excitin' sport than dodgin' teams on their roller skates, that she mesmerizes Pinckney into believin' he wants to make a move away from the asphalt.

"By Jove!" says he. "I'll tell you, Gertie; we must have a country place."

"Oh, very well, dear," says she. "Perhaps you'd better buy one."

And that's how Pinckney come to pick up this Soundmere joint off the real estate bargain counter, where it had been left by a bu'sted promoter that got caught in the pinch. It's up Larchmont way, where every other man is a Commodore. There's a quarter of a mile water frontage, all nicely rocked up, and a twelve-acre park sowed to fir trees and blue stone drives. The house is some elegant too; and Pinckney bought it all standin', includin' a vault full of silver spoons and a frozen water meter. You can get out there on an electric train inside of an hour, if nothin' happens. Pinckney makes it in a taxicab over the road in thirty minutes; which is all lovely unless Mr. Mellen gets onto him and yanks him up before the Supreme Court for bein' unconstitutional.

Sadie was describin' to me how he put in the first day there, roamin' around through the rooms restless, like a cat that's been moved, and how he says that he's sure he's going to like it after he gets acclimated.

"Yes," says Gertie, "you'll find the Sundays no longer here than in town, and if you're good you may come up once during the week too."

"Once!" says Pinckney. "Why, I was planning to—"

"Just like you," says Gertie. "So thoughtful and self sacrificing! But you will keep your quarters at the club, as usual, and run up to see us every Saturday afternoon."

Well say, before that Pinckney thought he was makin' a martyr of himself for the sake of the family; but when he finds he's been sidetracked to the callin' list, he's just wild to stay with 'em all the time. Gertie only smiles and shakes her head; but after awhile she compromises on lettin' him come up twice a week, when his other dates don't interfere. See how she does it? You couldn't tie a chap like Pinckney down to showin' up at the same time and place for dinner every night, any more'n you could harness a butterfly; but there's other ways of keepin' a man around than nailin' his shoes to the hearth rug.

WELL, they hadn't more'n got their trunks out there, before Sadie begins plannin' what she calls a mid-Lent house warmin' party for them. Gertie, she shies some at that. She's had a few rounds of the giddy whirl in our lively little village, and she ain't got much use for it. It's enough to know, though, that when Sadie starts out gettin' up a party for anyone the event's as good as pulled off. Gertie gives in; but she specifies that there mustn't be a mob, and that bridge fiends are barred.

"Oh, that'll be all right," says Sadie. "You just leave it to Mrs. Purdy-Pell and me."

"What you two plannin' to spring?" says I on the quiet.

"Why, the idea, Shorty!" says Sadie, rollin' them Irish blue eyes of hers and handin' me the baby stare, as innocent as a four-year-old.

"Eh?" says I, chuckin' her chin up and takin' a closer look. "So you have got somethin' up your sleeve besides an arm? Guess I'd better give Pinckney the tip to keep cases on the pair of you."

"Pooh!" says she, "Pinckney knows all about it. So there!"

At that I gets the bottom facts of this great conspiracy. The house warmin' party is just a side issue, the main scheme being to get together a young couple that Sadie's more or less interested in. I've heard about their little fallin' out before. Marjorie's a real nice girl too, only she's a high flyer; and Reginald hasn't got sense enough not to take her too serious. They've had one grand smash-up; she's sent back the ring and the letters; and it looks like a certain Count Frizetti had a clear field down the home stretch.

"And there isn't another place where we can get them to meet that the Count won't be under foot all the time," says Sadie; "so Gertie simply must have a party."

"Suppose one of your pair of trace jumpers balks at gettin' into such close range with the other?" says I.

"Goose!" says Sadie. "Do you think we're going to tell them?"

"Gee, Sadie!" says I. "Why not sandbag 'em? It's simpler."

But my little side remarks on such things don't carry any more weight with her than a minority report at a packed caucus. She only lets loose a laugh and chucks a sofa pillow at me; and by the time we've righted the chairs and straightened out the rugs, and Sadie's got over her merry fit, I've forgot what it was all about.

BUT I'm reminded of it a few days later, when Sadie's had the streamer trunk tied on the back of the tourin' car, and is about to start for Soundmere. "Oh, by the way," says she, "you're to come up Friday night for over Sunday, you know."

"Me!" says I. "Ah, quit your kiddin', Sadie! What's the use luggin' me into this hearts-asunder business? I'd only get my feet tangled in the bow-knots and have Cupid callin' for help. You play this as a lone hand."

"I shall send Pinckney down after you in the car, then," says she, and off she goes.

Well, I puts in a couple of busy days at the studio, and eats a couple of lonesome dinners at the hotel, and when Pinckney does show up I'm just in the act of throwin' my patent leather shoes into the grip on top of my dress shirt, and am as ready to go out to Soundmere as if these backward spring house parties was what I lived for.

"Hope they've fixed up that awful Madge and Reggie tragedy before this, though," says I, as we climbs in on the leather seats and gives Henri the word to turn on the third speed.

Pinckney chuckles. "They haven't," says he, "and what is more, they're in the loveliest tangle you ever saw. Sadie doesn't know which way to turn, and Mrs. Purdy-Pell is fairly grinding her teeth, she's so vexed."

"Don't!" says I. "I can't stand these sudden shocks. Is it a case of Marje and Reggie still stickin' their tongues out at each other?"

"Not at all," says Pinckney; "but they're too much interested in Gussie and the Widow Bill."

"The widow! Say, Pinckney," says I, "come across with that last once more, and say it slower."

"Beg pardon, old man," says he; "but I thought you had heard of Wilhelmina. We call her the Widow Bill for short, you know."

Seems that she was a kind of stepcousin of Mrs. Purdy-Pell's, and she'd come up from her place down on Long Island for a visit, just in time so's they couldn't dodge countin' her in on the party. But they didn't look for any trouble from her, she bein' one of the kind that's perfectly satisfied if she has a horse to ride and a couple of setter dogs for comp'ny. She's a real sod widow, with no past and blamed little future.

"But this Gussie girl; who's she?" says I.

"She?" says Pinckney. "Why, that's Augustus Van Pelt Rhinelander!"

"Oh, that real ladylike little chappie with the rosebud mouth and the albino hair?" says I. "What kind of a collection have you got up there, anyway, Pinckney?"

He explains that Gussie was invited because he's so handy at decoratin' and thinkin' up stunts. About as harmless as a white rabbit, Gussie is; so I asks how it was he'd been interferin'. And what do you think? Marjorie and Reginald, while bein' as polite to each other as you please, no sooner finds themselves corraled under the same roof, than they pairs off with these two freaks, Marjorie pretendin' to be awful chummy with the widow, and Reggie strikin' up a sudden liking for Augustus, followin' him around like a mastiff guardin' a pet spaniel. Of course it's just a bluff, Pinckney says; for a big, husky chap like Reginald can't get any real joy out of the society of such a mollycoddle as Gussie; and the Widow Bill ain't Marjorie's style at all.

"But it prevents Sadie and Mrs. Purdy-Pell from working their little scheme; don't you see?" says Pinckney. "And the whole situation is perfectly killing to watch."

"Maybe," says I; "but I ain't afraid of losin' any buttons over it."

"Wait until you see," says Pinckney.

AND say, it was kind of entertainin', knowin' the inside details, to see them two couple dodgin' each other; Reggie towin' Gussie off one way, and Marjorie leadin' the Widow Bill off the other, while everyone else was in cahoots to get 'em together and give 'em a chance to make up.

"Looks like your little reunion program was hung on the hook; eh, Sadie?" says I.

"There, Shorty, don't rub it in!" says she. "And it's too silly of them, acting this way! Really, they think the world of each other; but Madge is just pig headed enough to keep it up, and maybe run off with that frowzy little Count the minute she gets back to town. If she does, Reggie is going to take it mighty hard. Can't you think of some way to break up that absurd combination?"

"What! with my cabbage head?" says I.

"Modesty, my boy, modesty!" says Pinckney, driftin' up just then. "We all know, Shorty, that when it comes to using social finesse, you can give us—"

"Ah, stow it in the tin!" says I. "You can't pin any josh medals on me."

But when Pinckney gets to runnin' on a joke that he's thought up all by himself he works it overtime. So he goes around whisperin' confidential that it's all right now, since I've been put on the job. He gets away with it too; for at dinner I see 'em pointin' me out as Mr. Fixit, the broken vow specialist, called in for this one occasion.

Nice reputation to get among that bunch, wa'n't it? Sure, there was lots I haven't named; but this ain't any panorama I'm givin'. Guess even Reginald must have got some inkling of that fool report; for once or twice I catches him scowlin' my way, and I colors up like I'd been spotted pocketin' some of the silverware. They'd placed him and Marjorie next each other at the table; but he does all his conversin' with Mrs. Twombley-Crane, while Madge follows suit by lettin' on she can't see over her right shoulder strap. As a performance given for a special purpose, this party of Sadie's was worse'n a first-night frost on Broadway.

NOT that it had me worried any. I've been tellin' Sadie she'd get stung sooner or later, and I thinks maybe this'll cure her ambitions for pairin' off young folks that might do better if they was left alone. And I has no more notion of gettin' mixed up in it than a one-legged man has of dancin' a jig; but next forenoon, as I was strollin' through the billiard room lookin' for Pinckney, I runs across Augustus, lightin' up a mild cigarette, and I don't have any better sense than to trail the string for him a little.

Never saw this young Rhinelander, eh? He's a soft pine two-by-four all the way up and down, with a complexion like a wax pear, nice silky eyelashes, and a voice like a peevish turtle dove,—reg'lar wrist slapper.

"Hello, Gussie!" says I, lookin' at the paper pipe. "Bein' real devilish, ain't you? Havin' a good time up here?"

"Oh, ya-as," says he. "Ripping good fun, these little affairs out of town, y'know. Jolly set, and all that."

"Yes, the bunch is all right," says I. "What special one have you been singing 'Love Me and the World Is Mine' to?" says I. "Come, own up!"

"Oh, fudge!" says Gussie, comin' one of them wavy wiggles. "Really, you know, I don't sing at all."

"No?" says I. "But you're a heartbreaker. Now don't deny it; I see it in your eye. Didn't I watch you puttin' the spell on the widow last night? Eh? How about it?"

"What! Her?" gasps Gussie. "Why—why—I never so much as—"

"That'll do, that'll do, Gussie!" says I, winkin'