The Second Honeymoon

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THIS STARTS THE STORY

Jimmy Challoner, club man, dependent on funds from an elder brother, is passionately in love with Cynthia Farrow, an actress. She breaks her engagement with him to wed the rich Mr. Mortlake, telling Jimmy she loves him dearly, but cannot bear to be poor. Jimmy, in desperation, rushes for sympathy to Christine Wyatt, his childhood sweetheart. In a moment of sudden pique Jimmy proposes marriage to Christine. Mad with memories of Cynthia, he tries to make himself believe he loves Christine. Sangster, a friend of Jimmy's, seeing Christine's false position, chides Jimmy bitterly for his "spite engagement." Just at this juncture Christine's mother dies suddenly. The wedding is to take place at once. Two days before the date fixed, Cynthia begs Jimmy to take her back, but Jimmy resolves to be loyal to the motherless girl.

They are married. A letter is handed the bride, which proves to be from Cynthia, who, finding she could not persuade Jimmy to return to her, gives Christine a detailed account of her acquaintance with Jimmy. Cynthia, out motoring with Mortlake, is seriously injured in an accident. She sends for Jimmy, but before he can reach her she has passed away. Christine, learning of Jimmy's visit to Cynthia, arranges to return to her old home. On the way she meets Alfred Kettering, bound for the same town. They become acquainted. He felt instinctively that there was something wrong with this little girl and her marriage—that she was not happy.

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

HE TRIED to remember what sort of a fellow Jimmy had been in the old days; but his memory of him was vague. He knew that Horatio had often complained bitterly of Jimmy's extravagance—knew that there had been angry scenes between the two Challoners; but he could not recall having heard of anything actually to Jimmy's discredit.

And anyway, surely no man on earth could ever treat this little girl badly, even supposing—even supposing——

"It's not such a very big house," Christine was saying, and he woke from his reverie to answer her. "But it's very pretty, don't you think?" She opened a door on the left. "This used to be our nursery," she told him. They stood together on the threshold; the room was long and low-ceilinged, with a window at each end.

A big rocking-horse covered over with a dust-sheet stood in one corner; there was a doll's house and a big toy box together in another. The whole room was painfully silent and tidy, as if it had long since forgotten what it meant to have children playing there—as if from the echoes of pattering feet and shrill voices had deserted it.

Kettering glanced down at Christine. Her little face was very sad; she was looking at the big rocking-horse, and there were tears in her eyes.

She and Jimmy had so often ridden its imposing back together; this deserted room was full of Jimmy and her mother—to her sad heart it was peopled with ghost faces and whispering voices that would never come any more.

Kettering turned away.

"Shall we see the rest of the house?" he asked. He hated that look of sadness in her face; he was surprised because he felt such a longing to comfort her.

But they had no time to see the rest of the house, for at that moment some one called, "Christine—Christine," from the hall below, and Christine clasped her hands delightedly.

"That is Gladys. Oh, I am so glad—so glad."

She forgot all about Kettering; she ran away from him and down the stairs in childish delight. He followed slowly. He reached the hall just in time to see her fling herself into the arms of a tall girl standing there; just in time to hear smothered ejaculations.

"You poor darling!" and "Oh, Gladys!" and the sound of many kisses.

He stood there awkwardly, not knowing what to do. Over Christine's head his eyes met those of the elder girl. She smiled.

"Christine * * * you didn't tell me you had visitors."

Christine looked up, all smiles now and apologies, as she said:

"Oh, I am so sorry—I forgot." She introduced them. "Mr. Kettering—Miss Leighton. * * * Mr. Kettering has been looking over the house; I hope he will buy it," she added childishly.

"It's a shame it has got to be sold," said Gladys bluntly. There was something very taking about her, in spite of red hair and an indifferent complexion; she had honest blue eyes and a pleasant voice. She looked at Kettering a great deal as she spoke; perhaps she noticed how often his eyes rested on Christine. When presently they went out into the garden, she walked between them; she kept an arm about Christine's little figure.

"I missed the train," she explained. "I got your husband's wire, Christine. Oh, yes, I got it all right, and I rushed to pack the very minute; but the cab was slow and I just missed the train. However, I'm here all right."

She looked at Kettering.

"Do you live near here?" she asked him.

"No; but I am hoping to soon," he said; and again she wondered if it were only her imagination that his eyes turned once more to Christine.

When they got back to the house he made them "good-by." The big car was still waiting in the drive; its headlights were lit now, and they shone through the darkness like watchful eyes.

"Who is he, anyhow?" Gladys asked Christine bluntly when Kettering had driven off. Christine shook her head.

"I don't know; he came down in the train with me, and we had lunch at the same table, and he spoke. He was coming down here to look at our house, and so—well, we came up together."

"What do you think Jimmy would say?"

"Jimmy!" There was such depths of bitterness in Christine's voice that the elder girl stared.

"Jimmy! He wouldn't care what I did, or what became of me. I—I—I'm never going to live with him any more."

Gladys opened her mouth to say something, and closed it again.

She had guessed that there had been something behind that urgent wire from Jimmy, but she wisely asked no questions. They went back into the house together.

"You'll have to know in the end, so I may as well tell you now," Christine said hopelessly. She sat down on the rug by the fire, a forlorn little figure enough in her black frock.

She told the whole story from beginning to end. She blamed nobody; she just spoke as if the whole thing had been a muddle which nobody could have foreseen or averted.

Gladys listened silently. She was a very sensible girl; she seldom gave an impulsive judgment on any subject; but now——

"Jimmy wants his neck wrung!" she said vehemently.

Christine looked up with startled eyes.

"Oh, how can you say such a thing! "Because it's true." Gladys looked angry. "He's behaved in a rotten way; men always do, it seems to me. He married you to spite this—this other woman, whoever she was; and then—even then he didn't try to make it up to you, or be ordinarily decent and do his best, did he?"

"He didn't love me, you see; and so——" Christine defended him.

"He'll never love any one in the wide world except himself," Gladys declared disgustedly. "I remember years ago, when we were all kiddies together, how selfish he was and how you always gave in to him. Christine!"—she stretched out her hand impulsively to the younger girl—"do you love him very much?" she asked.

Christine put her head down on her arms.

"Oh, I did—I did," she said ashamedly. "Sometimes I wonder if—if he hadn't been quite so—so sure of me; if—if he would have cared just a little bit more. He must have known all along that I wanted him; and so—" she broke off desolately.

The two girls sat silent for a moment.

"And now—what's he going to do now?" Gladys demanded.

Christine sighed.

"I told him I didn't want to see him. I told him I didn't want him to come down here for six months—and he promised. * * * He isn't to come or even to write unless—unless I ask him to."

"And then—what happens then?"

Christine began to cry.

"Oh, I don't know—I don't know," she sobbed. "I am so miserable—I wish I were dead."

Gladys laid a hand on her bowed head. "You're so young, Christine," she said sadly. "Somehow I don't believe you'll ever grow up." She had not got the heart to tell her that she thought this six months' separation could do no good at all—that it would only tend to widen the breach already between them.

She was a pretty good judge of character; she knew quite well what sort of a man Jimmy Challoner was. And six months—well, six months was a long time.

"Mr. Kettering knows Jimmy's brother," Christine said presently, drying her eyes. "So I suppose if he comes to live anywhere near here, he will know what—what is the matter with—with me and Jimmy, and he'll write and tell Horace."

"And then Jimmy will get his allowance stopped, and serve him right," said Gladys bluntly.

Christine cried out in dismay:

"Oh, but that would be dreadful. What would he do?"

"Work like other men, of course."

But Christine would not listen.

"I shall ask Mr. Kettering not to tell Horace—if I ever see him again," she said agitatedly.

Gladys laughed dryly.

"Oh, you'll see him again right enough," she said laconically.

It took Jimmy a whole week to realize that Christine meant what she said when she asked him not to write to her, or go near her. At first he had been so sure that in a day or two at most she would be sorry, and want to see him; somehow he could not believe that the little unselfish girl he had known all his life could so determinedly make up her mind and stick to it.

He grumbled and growled to Sangster every time they met.

"I was a fool to let her go. The law is on my side; I could have insisted that she stay with me." He looked at his friend. "I could have insisted, I say!" he repeated.

Sangster raised his eyes.

"I'm not denying it; but it's much wiser as it is. Leave her alone, and things will work out their own salvation."

"She'll forget all about me, and the what will happen?" Jimmy demanded. "A nice thing—a very nice thing she would be."

"No doubt she thinks that is what you wish her to do."

Jimmy called him a fool; he threw a half-smoked cigarette into the fire and sat watching it burn with a scowl on his face.

The last week had seemed endless. He had kept away from the club; the men in the club always knew everything—he had learned that by previous experience; he had no desire for the shower of chaff which he knew would greet his appearance there.

Married a week—and now Christine had gone! It made his soul writhe to think of it. It had hurt enough to be jilted; but this; well, this struck at his pride even more deeply.

"I thought you promised me to go down to Upton House and see how things were," he growled at Sangster. "You haven't been, have you? I suppose you don't mean to go either?"

"My dear chap——"

"Oh, don't 'dear chap' me," Jimmy struck in irritably. "Go, if you mean to go. * * * After all, if anything happens to Christine, it's my responsibility——"

"Then you should go yourself."

"I promised I wouldn't—unless she asked me to. If you were anything of a sport——"

In the end Sangster consented to go. He was not anxious to undertake the journey, much as he wanted to see Christine again. At the end of the second week he went off early one morning without telling Jimmy of his intentions, and was back in town late the same night. Jimmy was waiting for him in the rooms in the unfashionable part of Bloomsbury. It struck Sangster for the first time that Jimmy was beginning to look old; his face was drawn—his eyes looked worried. He turned on his friend with a sort of rage when he entered.

"Why couldn't you have told me where you were going? Here I've been waiting about all day, wondering where you were and what was up."

"I've been to see your wife, and—and there's nothing up."

"You mean you didn't see her?"

"Oh, yes, I did."

"Well—well!" Jimmy's voice sounded as if his nerves were worn to rags; he could hardly keep still.

"She seemed very cheerful," said Sangster slowly. He spoke with care, as if he were choosing his words. "Miss Leighton was with her; and we all had tea together."

"At Upton House?"

"Yes."

Jimmy's eyes were gleaming.

"How does the old place look?" he asked eagerly. "Gad! don't I wish I'd enough money to buy it myself. You've no idea what a ripping fine time we used to have there years ago."

"I'm sure you did; but—well, as a matter of fact, I believe the house is sold."

"Sold!"

"Yes; a man named Kettering—a friend of your brother's, I believe—is negotiating for it, at any rate. Whether the purchase is really completed or not I——"

"Kettering!" Jimmy's voice sounded angry. "Kettering—that stuck-up ass," he said savagely.

Sangster laughed.

"I shouldn't have described him as stuck-up at all," he said calmly. "He struck me as being an extremely nice sort of fellow."

"Was he there, then?"

"Yes—he's staying somewhere in the neighborhood temporarily, I believe, from what I heard; at any rate, he seemed very friendly with—with your wife and Miss Leighton."

Jimmy began pacing the room.

"I remember him well," he said darkly, after a moment. "Big chap with a brown mustache—pots of money." He walked the length of the room again. "Christine ought not to encourage him," he burst out presently. "What on earth must people think, as I'm not there."

"I don't see any harm," Sangster began mildly.

Jimmy rounded on him:

"You—you wouldn't see harm in anything; but Christine's a very attractive little thing, and——"

He broke off, flushing dully. "Anyway, I won't have it," he added snappily.

"I don't see how you're going to stop it, unless——"

"Unless what?"

"Unless you go down there." Sangster spoke deliberately now. In spite of his calm assertion that there was no harm in Kettering's visit to Upton House, his anxious eyes had noticed the indefinable something in Kettering's manner toward Christine that had struck Gladys Leighton that first evening. Sangster knew men well, and he knew, without any plainer signs or telling, that it was not the house itself that took Kettering there so often, but the little mistress of the house, with her sweet eyes and her pathetic little smile.

He got up and laid a hand on Jimmy's shoulder as he spoke.

"Why not go down yourself?" he said, casually.

Jimmy swore. "I said I wouldn't. * * * I'm not going to be the first to give in. It was her doing—she sent me away. If she wants me she can say so."

"She has her pride, too, you know."

Jimmy swore again. He was feeling very ill and upset; he was firmly convinced that he was the most ill-used beggar in the whole of London. Remorse was gnawing at his heart, though he was trying to believe that it was entirely another emotion. He had not slept properly for nights; his head ached, and his nerves were jumpy.

"I'll not go till she sends for me," he said again obstinately.

Sangster made no comment. He did not see Jimmy again for some days, though he heard of him once or twice from a mutual acquaintance.

(CONTINUED TOMORROW)

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The Young Lady Across the Way

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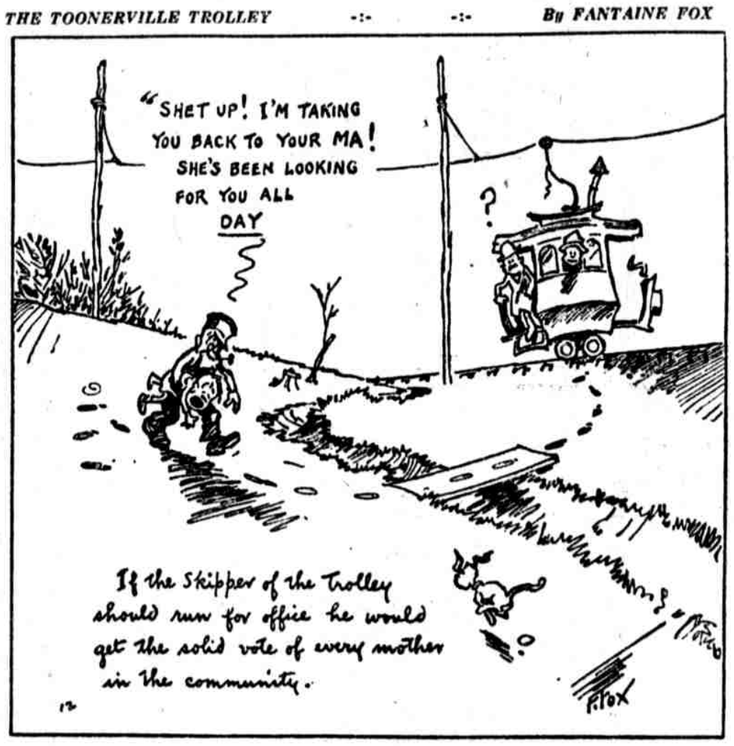

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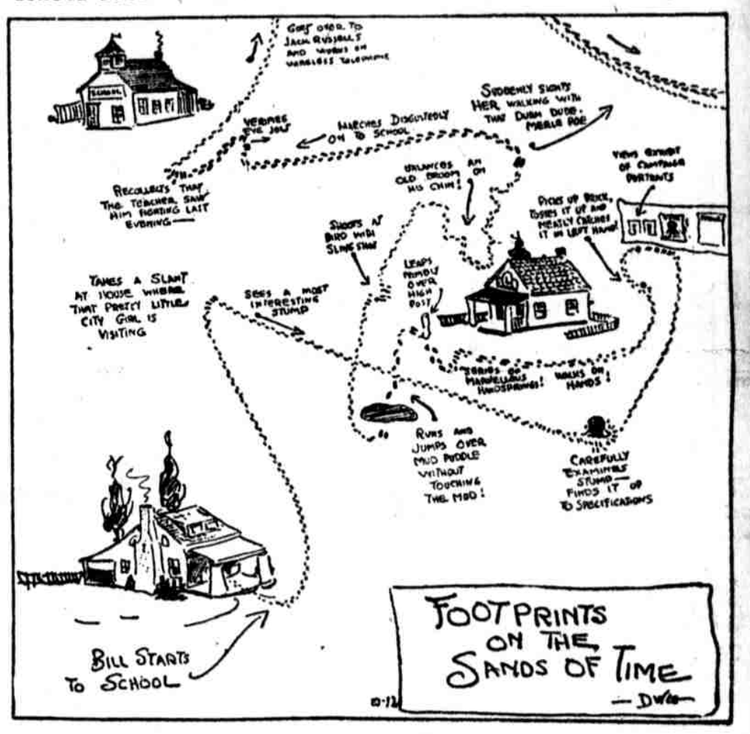

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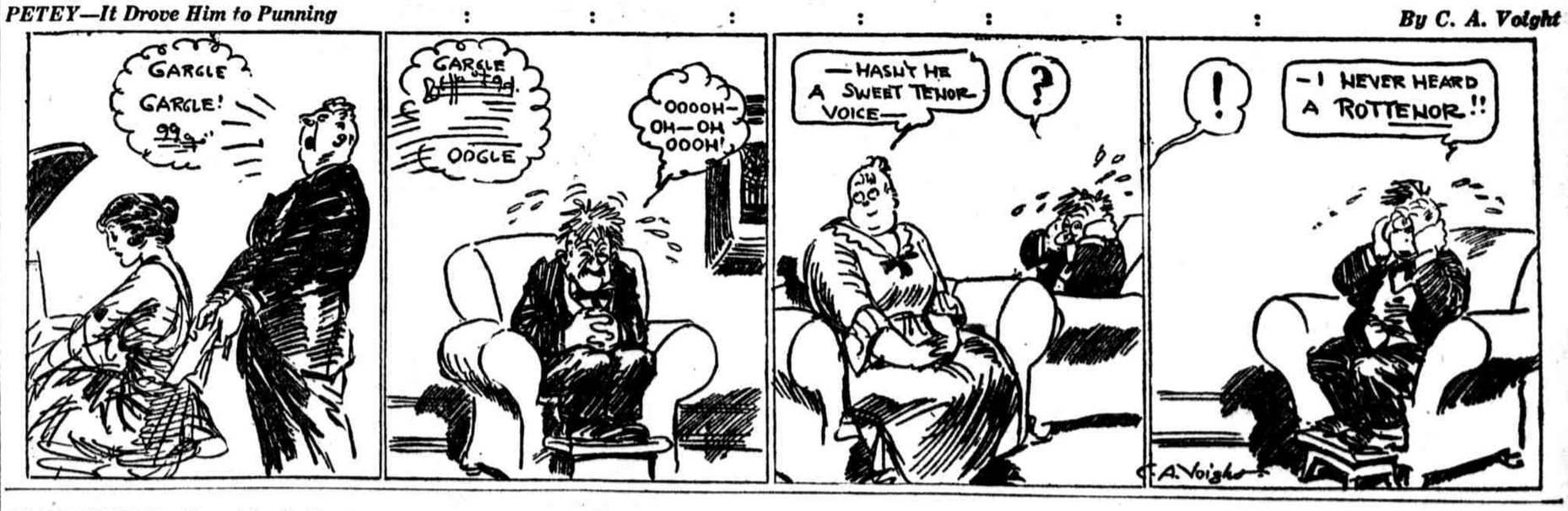

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