THE DANCING MASTER

By RUBY AYRES

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THIS BEGINS THE STORY

Elizabeth Conyers, a demure country girl, pretty in spite of her old-fashioned dowdy dressing, is visiting fashionable relatives in London. At a grand ball she is a disconsolate wallflower. A handsome young man asks her to dance and she has to confess she knows none of the up-to-date steps.

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

An Impromptu Dancing Lesson

"AND—who is Walter?" he asked.

She hesitated.

"Walter!—oh, he's—well, he's just a friend. He's very nice, but of course, he isn't a bit like you—not smart or anything."

"No?" His eyes were very kind as they looked at her.

"Nobody is smart in the village, you see," she explained with a half-sigh. "You see this dress—well, I was quite pleased with it when I made it—I thought it looked awfully nice—I thought"—her voice trembled—"I thought it would be quite good enough for any dance my aunt might take me to, and now—look at it!"

She rose to her feet, catching the folds of the full white skirt and standing before him, forlorn and pathetic in her disappointment.

The man had forgotten his cigarette; it had gone out and hung listlessly between his lips as he scanned her slender figure.

He knew—better than she did—that the frock was half a century behind the times; he knew—better than she did—that every woman in the room had been laughing at her; he had even smiled himself when he first saw her sitting solitary on the big couch in the ballroom, but there was no smile in his eyes now as he answered kindly.

"I don't know a great deal about frocks, but if it's not the right thing, I suppose it can be altered, can't it?"

She shook her head and went back to her chair.

"Nothing could ever make it smart," she said wistfully. "Any more than anything could ever make me smart——" she broke off, to look at him with anxious eyes. "I suppose I am boring you," she submittedly timidly.

"Not in the least." He threw his dead cigarette into the empty grate and sat up with sudden energy.

"At any rate, there's no reason on earth why you can't dance," he said. "It's the easiest thing in the world when you know how."

The color flew to her face.

"Is it? Oh, but then I don't know how * * * I wish I did."

He rose to his feet; he was a tall man, and she felt very small and childish as she sat looking up at him, unconscious of the eagerness in his eyes.

"Let me show you one of the steps," he said. "Nobody will see—and it's ever so easy * * *"

She shrank back in the big chair; she began to say, "Oh, I couldn't," but he held out his hands to her as if it were the most natural thing in the world, and she rose to her feet.

"My shoes are—oh, awful!" she said faintly.

He laughed at that.

"What does shoes matter? * * * Take my hands. This is the fox-trot I'm going to show you first, because it's danced more than anything else just now; you walk backward first * * * so——"

Elizabeth's eyes were glowing; her lips parted eagerly; in spite of her severely dressed hair and dowdy frock she looked very young and pretty as she carefully followed every word he said, her little feet in their country-made shoes tripping lightly over the smooth floor.

"One, two—one, two, three * * *" The man looked down at her and laughed. "Why, you're a born dancer," he said presently. "Have you really never been taught?"

"No—never;" he voice was breathless with excitement; her eyes like stars as she raised them to his face. "Oh, would you mind if we try again?" she appealed.

"Of course not—only too delighted."

He took her round the room half a dozen times.

"The next dance is sure to be a fox-trot," he said. "Will you come out into the ballroom and try it with me?"

She seemed to shrink into her shell instantly.

"Oh—I couldn't," she whispered flushing.

She couldn't explain to him what a nightmare that ballroom had been to her with its dozens of mirrors and many pairs of amused eyes.

He did not press the subject.

"Well, we'll try again in here," he said. "I'll push the chairs and things out of the way when the music begins."

Elizabeth looked at him with glowing eyes; the nightmare had changed suddenly into a wonderful dream. The rhythm of the dance had got into her blood; she felt as if she could not keep still.

The man had fished out another cigarette; he leisurely lit it as he sat on the arm of one of the big chairs.

"You say you are staying in town?" he asked.

"Yes, with my aunt, Mrs. Mason. Do you know her?"

"Only by name."

Elizabeth laughed nervously.

"I think she's sorry she asked me now—I don't think she ever thought I should be * * * like I am."

The man did not answer, and Elizabeth looked at him shyly.

She felt that she could never be sufficiently grateful to him for his friendliness; it was as if she had fallen into a slough of despond from which she could never have arisen but for his helping hand; she thought he was the most wonderful man in the world. She was sure she had never seen anybody so good-looking.

He turned suddenly, as if conscious of her gaze.

"And you are—a Miss Mason?" he asked.

"Oh, no! My name is Elizabeth Conyers——" She hesitated, flushing shyly. "Would * * * will you tell me your name?"

"Certainly. My name is Royston—Pat Royston."

"Oh!" She had expected something much more aristocratic and splendid, and yet now she had heard what it was it seemed to suit him admirably.

"I like the name Pat," she said. "I once had an Irish terrier called Pat."

The man roared with laughter, a very unaffected, boyish sort of laugh, in which, after a perplexed moment, Elizabeth joined.

"I suppose it was rather a silly thing to say," she submitted presently.

"Not in the least; it sounded as if you might have been rather fond of my predecessor."

"I was—he was a dear."

She stood for a moment lost in thought; then she gave herself a little shake and began to move slowly backward in the step he had shown her.

"That's good," he said approvingly. "Wait a minute, I'll whistle the tune for you, and you see if you can keep proper time."

He laid his cigarette down and began to whistle softly, his eyes following her as she carefully tried to remember the steps, her whole attention bent on the task, forgetful of everything else.

She was quite a picture in her own little way, he thought, and extremely refreshing after the type of girl to which the past few months had accustomed him.

They were all so very much alike—all too much powdered and too little frocked; all with so much the same modern ideas of life and love and marriage that a man knew them all quite well beforehand.

This girl, in her home-made frock and low-heeled shoes, was something different; she was so absolutely natural and unaffected, it was like coming across a ray of sunlight and a breath of fresh air when one has lived for weeks in an atmosphere of manufactured scent and artificial light.

He knew that, differently dressed and with her hair loosened a little from its primness, she would be pretty; in spite of her ugly shoes, her feet were small and dainty, and there was a lightness and grace in the way she moved that made him think of flowers swaying in a breeze.

Unconsciously he stopped whistling as he looked at her, and she swung round, flushed and breathless.

"Oh, was I doing the wrong step?" Royston started.

"No, it was splendid; come here; try dancing it with me."

He pushed the chairs out of the way and put his arm about her. "Good; there's the band starting again. Now then * * *"

Elizabeth felt as if she were in a dream; she had forgotten the agonies of shyness she had suffered earlier in the evening; her feet seemed to fly over the smooth floor as if they had wings; when at last the music stopped she stood for a moment, with Royston's arm still about her, looking up at him with dazed eyes.

"Oh, that was—lovely!" she said with a long breath.

"Yes, our steps go together wonderfully well." He kept her hand in his and drew her back to the chair. "Not feeling giddy?" he asked.

"Oh, no." She drew her hand from his and sank back against the cushions. "I could dance all night," she said.

He laughed at that.

"You'd soon get tired. I don't know anything more tiring after an all-night ball than coming out into the daylight and creeping home to bed."

"I should love it."

"I don't think you would—once the novelty had worn off." She stifled a sigh.

"I'm not ever likely to have the chance to try. I—before you came I had made up my mind to go home tomorrow. I just felt that I couldn't stand it any more."

There was a little silence; Royston was looking into the ballroom through the half-closed door. "And—now?" he asked.

She laughed and sighed.

"Well, if I could dance with you every day I think I should never want to go home at all," she said.

"Your cousin goes to a great many dances, I believe; she would take you."

"Yes, but you would not be there," she said unthinkingly. "And nobody else would want to dance with me——" She glanced down again at her frock.

Royston turned his head slowly and looked at her; she had spoken quite unconsciously, he could see, and a faint smile crept into his eyes.

"I go to a great many dances myself," he said after a moment. "And I should ask nothing better than to have you for a partner—if you would honor me."

"Oh, do you really mean it?"

Her voice was incredulous; of course, he could not be serious; how could such a man care to be seen dancing with any one so dowdy and countrified as she?

He colored with faint embarrassment.

"With a little practice you will dance beautifully," he said rather constrainedly.

There was a momentary silence, then Elizabeth drew a quick breath of decision.

Elizabeth Decides to Stay

"I shall not go home, then, if my aunt will let me stay," she said.

Royston made no answer, and she went on eagerly:

"Haven't you got any one to dance with—I mean, except me? Dolly—she's my cousin—says that every one has a dancing partner nowadays, and, of course, any one who dances as beautifully as you do——"

He laughed rather dryly.

"Oh, I've plenty of dancing partners," he said. He rose to his feet. "Aren't you hungry? Don't you want any refreshment?"

She laughed happily.

"I believe I am hungry—just a little, but I'm so excited I should never have thought of it if you hadn't asked me."

"We can get to the supper room this way," he said, and turned to the door which Elizabeth had locked.

She stopped him with an exclamation.

"It's locked * * * I mean——" Her eyes fell in confusion. "I locked it because I was so afraid some one would come in and find me."

"Find you?" he echoed, not understanding.

"Yes—and laugh at me again. I know they've all been laughing at my frock and me all the evening, and I felt I couldn't stand it any more; even Dolly, though she's my cousin, and Mr. Farmer——"

Royston interrupted rather contemptuously.

"Oh! Farmer!"

"Yes, do you know him?"

"We were in the same regiment in France." He held out his hand. "Have you got the key? I'll bring some supper here if you'd rather not go into the supper room."

"It's on the table." She watched beneath her long lashes as he took it up. "Do you think I'm very—silly?" she asked painfully.

He looked back at her, laughed and shook his head as he unlocked the door. "I won't be a minute."

Elizabeth went back to her chair, her eyes were like stars.

She had forgotten her homesickness.

Royston came back with a laden tray.

"I had to bring champagne," he said. "There was nothing else but coffee, and that's rotten stuff to dance on." He filled a glass to the brim with the clear, sparkling wine.

"I've never tasted it in my life," Elizabeth said; she just touched it with her lips. "Oh, it's good."

"Of course it is; what will you have to eat? A sandwich to start with? I've got some meringues, too, and iced pudding. I'm hungry, if you're not," he added as he laughed.

They emptied the tray between them, and Royston took it back to the supper room.

The band was playing when he returned, and he said again:

"You are sure you won't try in the big room?"

Elizabeth hesitated; she wanted to do as he asked—she was longing to show all the women and men who had laughed at her that she could dance, and yet * * *

He saw the wavering in her face, and drew here hand through his arm. "Come along." And the next moment they were among the streams of dancers.

CONTINUED TOMORROW

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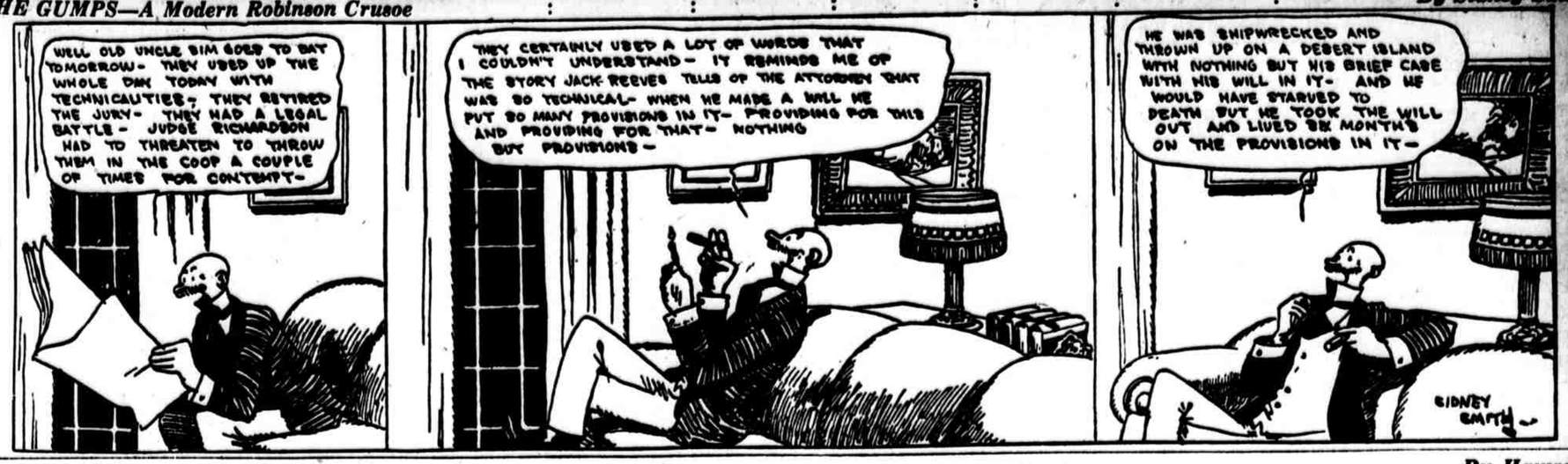

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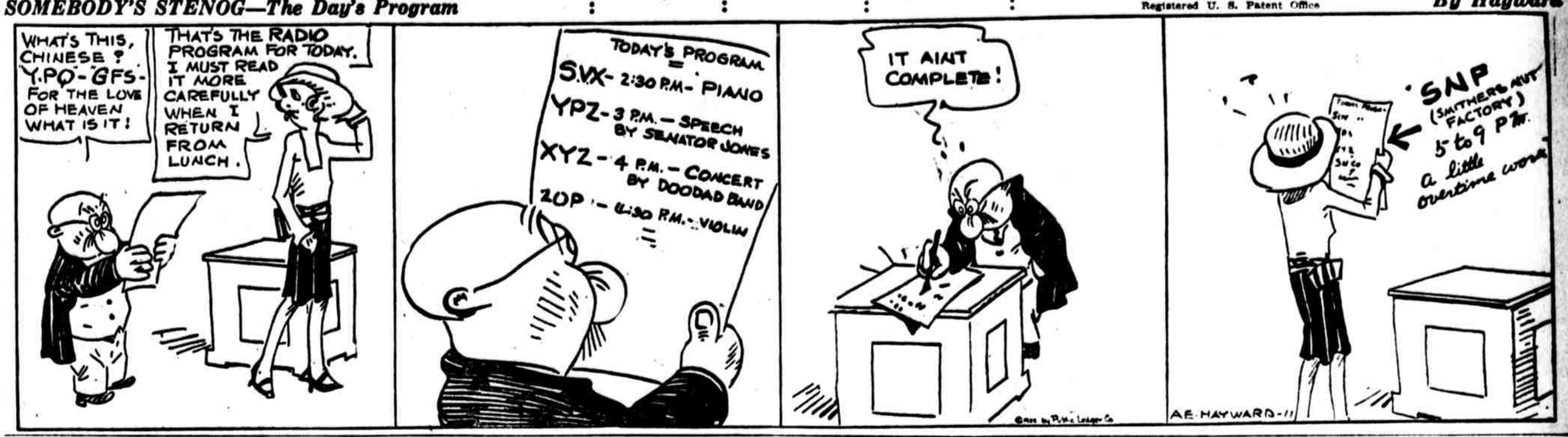

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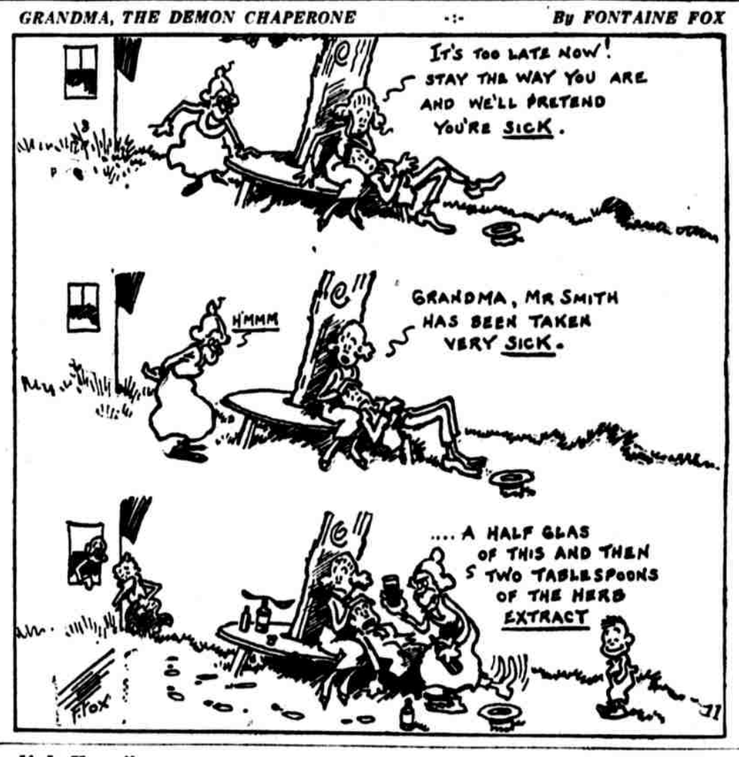

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