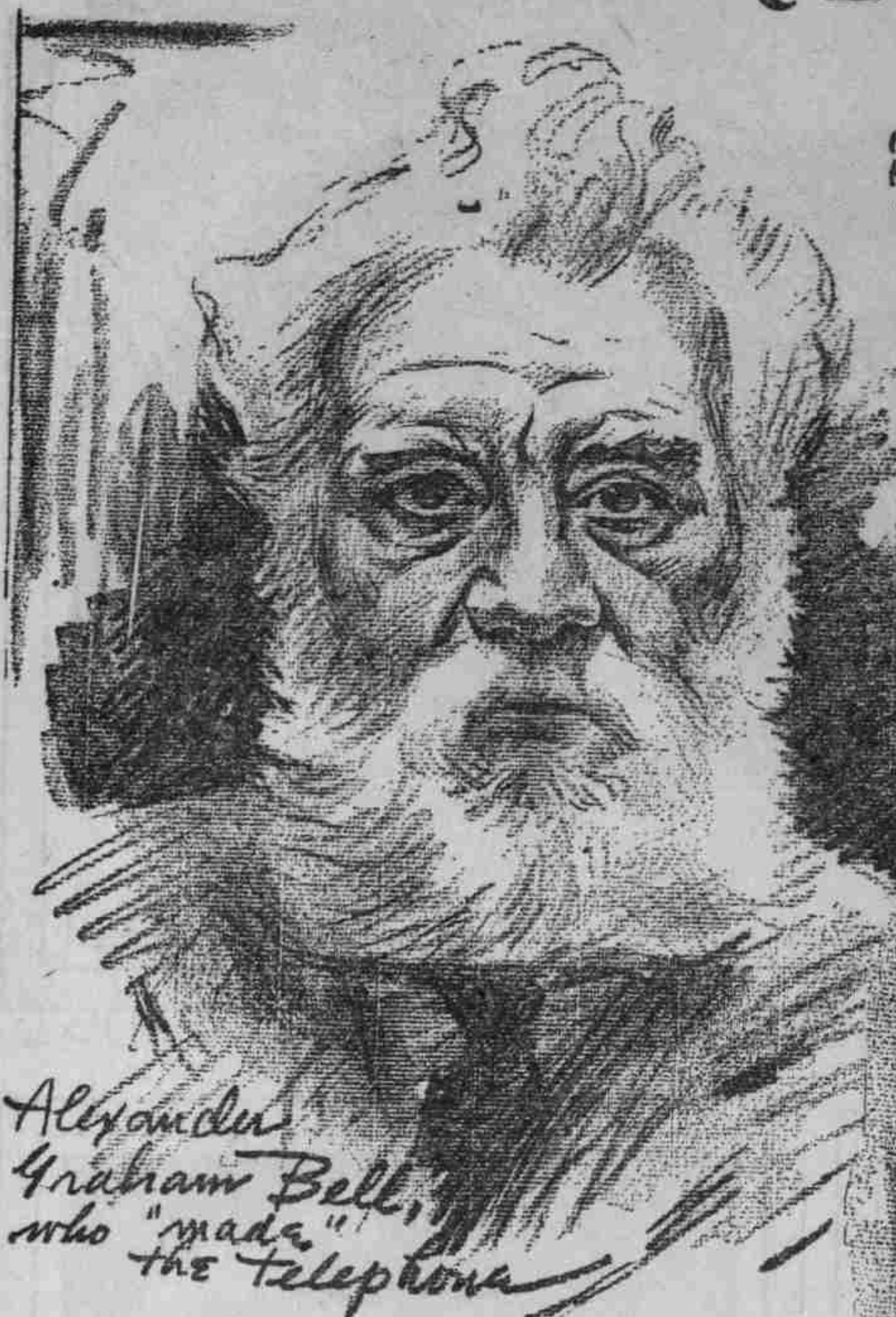
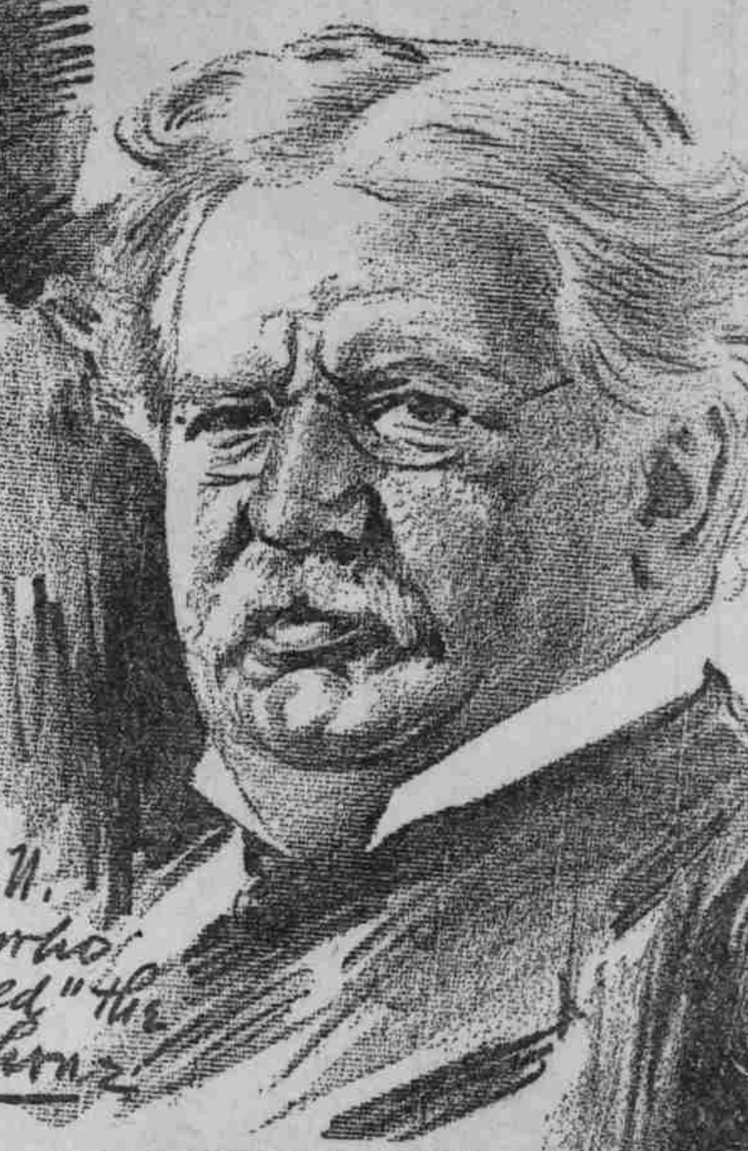
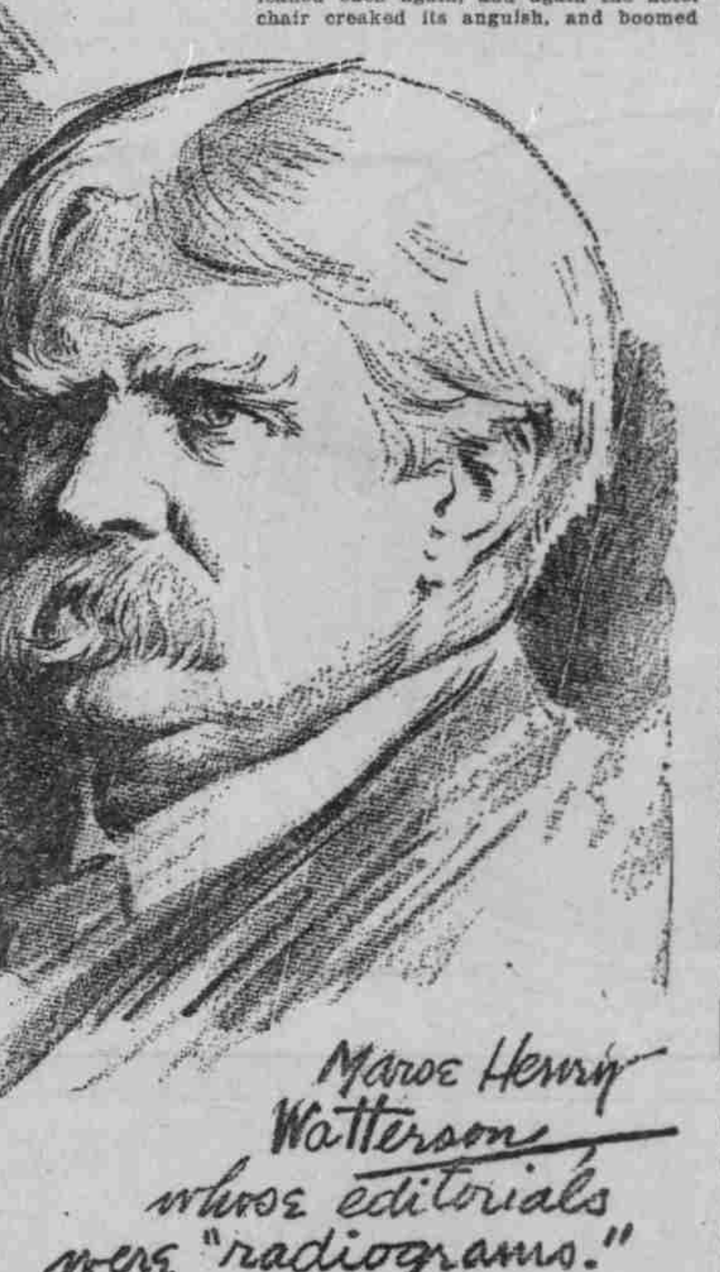
Three Great Personalities that Will Never Die

Alexander Graham Bell Made the Phone Ring, Theodore Vail Switchboarded the Continent, "Marse Henry" Talked Across the World, and Robert Lincoln, Host, Got Only a Sniff of Mr. Watterson's Pullman Omelet on a Hot Kentucky Morning


KRIEG HOFF
Alexander Graham Bell, who "made" the Telephone


Theodore N. Vail, who "managed" the Telephone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Marse Henry Watterson whose editorials were "radiograms."

BY IRVING S. SAYFORD

IN THE night, some ten or so years ago, I knocked at the door of Alexander Graham Bell in Washington. Knocked and waited. I was about to knock again, when the unseemliness of the hour, which had been troubling me, made me forbear.

To be sure, the occasion was important. Something had happened or threatened to happen, I do not remember which; and the Associated Press desired an expression from Mr. Bell.

Then, as I stood "armed in hesitance," the door opened. Without sound, without any light. And a thickset man wrapped in a gray bathrobe, whom I dimly perceived, said—

"Yes?"

I remember that he said it from the bottom of his chest, and the deep-toned hearty friendliness of the word has lingered with me.

We went together into the library, he retying the cord of the great, rumpled bathrobe And we talked of what I had come about, and disposed of that. And I said, being entranced by the man and loath to go away: "Isn't it true that transportation is the one big force back of every stride civilization has taken?"

He looked at me, his great eyes under their shaggy cliff-brows kindled as the windows of a lighthouse look out into the sea. "Let us have some coffee," he said, "and we will talk."

We went into the kitchen. And he made coffee, and not too quickly, that was very black, I remember, and very good. And we carried our cups which he got from a cupboard, and the coffeepot, into the dining room, and drew up chairs at a great table, and sat down.

He sipped greedily. I had to make pretense; it was so scalding hot.

"Transportation," he said. And I shall not ever forget his eyes, the deepness of his voice. "I know what you mean—communication. Transportation is only the larger word. It is the greatest word in the lexicon. It is the label on the very paper that science is wrapped in. Transportation! Communication is only its immediate fraction. Have some coffee."

"It is good," I said.

"I have had to learn to make it well, because it is my dissipation. I love it." His eyes fastened into distance. "Transportation," he said. "It may be the beating of a drum across an African wilderness. It may be the magical circle which is a cart-wheel. It may be a ship at sea with letters for some port. It may be the taking down of a telephone receiver to speak and be heard across the invisible. Transportation! Communication! It is a man laughing at the elements! And we have only begun to learn how to laugh! We shall sail like the birds into far places or near, and be there swiftly. We shall run races with the fishes and nose out the secrets of the oceans. Transportation! Communication!

"There can be no society without contact. There can be no civilization without society. There can be no community without intercourse. Why, communication is the very blood-stream of life! We will make some fresh coffee. . . .

"Where shall you look for savagery and find it? Where there is no intercourse with states or tribes or groups which have progressed. And how can there be intercourse without transportation? It is impossible. Archaeology and ethnology are no more, in the final word, than the record of people's efforts to communicate. The muck-drowned villages of the Florida everglades have given up to science the evidence of trade contracts which make us wonder how far, in God's name, could a canoe travel or a runner endure."

"And these ancientries that science digs up," I said, "do they mean to you that we are just learning over again, in a bigger way?"

"Or should we say in a small way?" he laughed at me. "Ask me that when I have died.

"This I know: That in human existence, isolation is death, communication is life. Transportation? We are only fingering the tips of its wings. We are only just catching the beat of its breath. We are getting ready to begin to 'travel!'

"Have some coffee."

Some time in the dead hours of the night I came away, filled high up with good coffee and great thoughts. And as I walked through the silent streets of the nation's capital—than which no streets of a big city are more utterly silent before the dawn—I would have been reminded, could I have looked a few years ahead, of another doorway, another huge-chested man of magic affairs, in another city.

You knew he would be a great figure of a man before you swung open the door of his hotel room and entered. You knew it, possibly, by hearsay; you knew it certainly by the timbre that still reverberated in response to the rap-rap on the panel.

There had been no appointment. Yet Theodore N. Vail, rising, rising, rising (like some mighty-chested forbear of Kipling's Little Mildred in "The Man Who Came Back"), at the writing-table dragged to the light of a window, said at once with outstretched hand:

"You are of the press. I am glad to see you. Sit down."

One observes, in going nither and yon about the world asking other people things about other people's business and thereby making a living, that there are several kinds of big men ranging loose, and that a limited number of them are of the bigness of the fourth dimension—a measurement which through all the sentient ages has been abroad in our midst while scientists have been harrying the flanks of the universe, like persistent fleas, to discover it.

Yet the thing is so absurdly apparent—when you set to measuring an all-and-all big man. He is high, he is wide, he is thick; and for the fourth dimension his brain and heart and soul are of a bigness that finite instruments cannot measure. And there's your fourth dimension right under your nose. It's so simple even Einstein might have thought of it—relatively.

Now there was, as well I recall it on that sunny-wind Texas afternoon beside a gulf shore—there was, I say, a certain personal space in this fourth dimension of Theodore N. Vail, and by the grace of what gods there be it was filled with something thicker than ether. By his hearty invitation we at once investigated it.

"It is of the best, sir," I said, setting down my glass reluctantly. "Do you, may I ask, carry it with you?" (He was upon one of his long and rather frequent trips required of him as president of the American Telephone & Telegraph company).

"I did this time," he twinkled. His dark, brilliant eyes—gleaming black at times—shone with a whimsical friendliness through the polished lenses of his spectacles. "I no more believe, and I speak for myself, not having sufficient wisdom to speak in such matters for the rest of mankind, I no more believe in total abstinence than I believe in excess," he said. "I enjoy good liquor just as I enjoy a well-prepared meal and a properly selected cigar. Now these," he said, pushing forward on the table a partly emptied box of exceedingly fragrant Havanas, "these may be to your liking."

They were. "You are too polite," I said, "to think that I came only to partake of your fine hospitality. Aside from wishing the privilege of meeting you, shall I tell you what I did come for?"

"Now that," beamed Theodore Vail, "would be quite in order; though I am content to enjoy the pleasure of this companionship."

"I believe that important men, very busy men, do not say such things so readily without rather meaning them," I retorted, "and I thank you. I came to ask you, sir, what you would do if you were a telephone girl and some delayed male at the other end of the line lost his temper and swore at you completely?"

"I'd swear back at him like hell!" snapped Theodore Vail. Then he leaned back until the hotel chair creaked, and laughed his great, reverberating laugh. "No," he said, slipping off his spectacles to polish them because the quick mist of fun had quite blurred the bright lenses; "no, being a lady, I couldn't do that, could I?"

"And being a company employe you couldn't either, because you'd be fired," I suggested.

"As to that part," twinkled the big man, "I might forget and take a chance. But you did put your finger on something there. It affords me an opportunity I'm glad of to pay tribute to the almost universal patience of the telephone operator, her remarkable self-control in the matter of civility under hours-long strain which the public but faintly comprehends, if the public thinks about it at all. More and more each year it is coming to be a tradition of the telephone service that efficiency wherever mechanically possible, and politeness always, are to prevail on 'Central's' part as something bigger, broader, finer than mere rules whose volation justifies discipline.

"There are times when delay, unexplained or explained, is almost maddening to the party calling—I say that not as a telephone official but as one of the millions of the public who frequently use the phone; but I say, too, as a telephone official now, that in the very large majority of such annoyances the cause is mechanical rather than human, due to some technicality of the elements or of the mechanical instrumentality, rather than to indifference upon the part of an employe. And in both fields, conditions are improving yearly, I believe. Now, a little of this——?"

"By all means," I said. "If you had not asked me I might have been tempted to do what you said you would-but-would-not do if you were a hello girl. You know."

I had wanted to hear that deep, timbred laugh again, and it came.

"This afternoon reminds me," I said, standing and looking out the hotel window and down upon the scraggly bit of shore that did duty below the sea-wall as "beach," "of a certain occasion some years ago very much farther north but still very much in the south."

"What was that occasion?" he demanded, with the quick, interested curiosity which was a very part of the man's life—he handled huge things, thought immense thoughts, but details—passing observations—were not, to him, petty because by chance they might be small. I have always considered that was one of the unhidden secrets of Theodore Vail's greatness in life.

"It is about Henry Watterson and Robert T. Lincoln and a private car of the Pullman company and a breakfast and an unspeakably hot summer day in mid-Kentucky and a flag-draped village square where the sun blazed and——"

"But," he interrupted eagerly, motioning to the cigars and helping himself, "why does such an occasion remind you of this?"

"Because," I said, daring to look a great man in the eyes and tell him an honest compliment, "because the setting was so different and the momentary companionship holds so much in common." He looked at me very steadily, very inspectingly through the bright spectacles in whose lens I caught by a freak of the window-light a reflection of his white hair that was far whiter and finer than spun white-gold. And then very slightly, very understandingly, I thought, he bowed. "Will you tell me about—Mr. Watterson and—the rest?" he asked.

"The train," I said, accepting the offered match, "was bound from Louisville to Hodgenville, and at Hodgenville was to be unveiled in the early afternoon Gutzon Borglum's heroic statue of Abraham Lincoln. The train carried the private car of Mr. Robert Lincoln, then president of the Pullman company——"

"That was 'Tad' of the president's days," said Mr. Vail.

"That was 'Tad,'" I answered. "Marse Henry was to deliver the oration, and he was Mr. Lincoln's guest. I went to their car to get the possible manuscript of the speech—which, as a thorough newspaper man, the editor had with him in maifold; and I was invited to come in."

"Don't stop," said Mr. Vail. "I want it all—I like contact with these intimate things. Go on!"

"It was early forenoon, and breakfast was being served in the car. Marse Henry, I remember, had just begun to remove into himself his portion of a Spanish omelet. I can see that omelet yet—though it was disappearing with precision. It was the largest, most gorgeously bedecked funeral meat of yellow eggs I ever up to that time had looked upon. I think not fewer than six of the best hens must have contributed at least two offerings apiece to it. There was that faintly wedded odor of garlic and onions which can arise only when there has been on the immediate job some 'delicate, white-handed, dilettante priest' of a chef to bless the breaking of eggshells with incantations. There were other——"

The big president of the American Telephone & Telegraph company leaned back again, and again the hotel chair creaked its anguish, and boomed again like a chime of chimes, that deep laugh, this time muted to something like a cathedral chuckle. "Now just a bit of——"

"Surely. Thank you," I said. "I thought by the tale to whet your appetite; in return, you are excellently whetting mine."

"Now I want to ask you something—in strictest confidence," said Mr. Vail, and bent upon me through his spectacles a tell-the-truth gaze that brought the answer at once, unhesitant: "No, sir," I said, "to the best of my recollection and belief Mr. Robert Lincoln did not get any of that omelet—if I recall, he preferred to breakfast on fruit."

Again the chimes struck. "I guessed it!" laughed Theodore Vail. "Marse Henry was as great a feeder as he was a writer—that's one of the reasons he wrote so mightily."

"There's food for thought in that," I reflected.

"There was for Marse Henry," twinkled my host. "Well, you got to Hodgenville?—and——?"

"We got to Hodgenville, and no caterpillar tank traversing a place of many ruins ever made faster time than that Kentucky train getting there. That is God's truth on a hot day.

"And then—the statue!

"The meager, straggling village within rifleshot of the log-cabin birth-roof; the scores upon scores of hitched buggies and saddle-horses around the four sides of the square; the simple country square itself, a-flutter with uncounted flags lapping listlessly at the hot breeze that barely blew; the rude and rustic crowds; the ribboned, blossom-strewing school children in white; the gray and weather-sunken roofs about—all, all faded alike into one background of simple dignity when the lanyards were twitched, and there sat looking out beyond the scene in all the mighty majesty of bronze the great and humble Lincoln. Looking, as it were, into that inscrutable eternity into which his soul, which he ever captained, had gone. Metal breathed into by genius, as though the dead had returned again to his own lowly birthplace, to live.

"Huge, colossal, brooding in the majestic but kindly thoughtfulness of one whose life had been garlanded with so little of happiness and heaped upon with so much of bitter care, yet played upon from within by a grace of humor rare and undismayed; in its vast chair the Figure sat, and gazed against the hills. I do not know how any man can ever pass it without baring his head in simple, homely salute."

There was a silence.

"Man!" said the deep voice of Theodore Vail. "I wish I could have been there. . . . What did Watterson—say?"

I could not tell him; I had forgot. But Marse Henry can tell him, now.

* * *

The mighty Kentuckian went out upon the long, long way, from the lovely city of Jacksonville, in Florida, just before the Christmas chimes of 1921 rang beside the sea.

I had gone down into the south on an editorial interview trip and was to cut his trail in the metropolis of the palms. He had arrived at the Seminole a few days before me, and they told me at the hotel desk he was very ill.

And when breakfast was served in my room the next day, there came with the tray the Times-Union. I opened to the first page to scan. And Marse Henry was dead.

It was the passing of a great soul; the taking from the world of a warrior spirit the world could not afford to lose. I thought of Tennyson's lines:

"Sad as the pipe of half-awakened birds to dying ears, when unto dying eyes the casement slowly grows a glimmering square." Poe has cited that passage, with one from "The Faerie Queen," as among the most perfect expressions of poetic imagery in the language. And it is.

I thought, too, of the massive Blaine standing beside the bier of Garfield in the dimness of the vast rotunda in the capitol at Washington, and closing his almost matchless eulogy with these words:

"With wan, fevered face unlifted to the cooling breeze he gazed out wistfully upon the ocean's changing wonders; on its far sails whitening in the morning light; on the great waves rushing shoreward to break and die beneath the noonday sun; on the red clouds of evening arching low to the horizon; on the serene and solemn pathway of the stars. Let us think that his dying eyes read a mystic meaning which only the rapt and parting soul may know. Let us believe that in the silence of the receding world he heard the great waves breaking on a farther shore, and felt already on his wasted brow the breath of the eternal morning."

India's Caste System Rigid.

THE religious laws of Brahmanism divide the Hindu people in India into four principal hereditary classes or castes—the Brahmans (priests), kshatiyas (rulers and warriors), vaslayas (merchants and husbandmen) and sudras (mechanics, laborers or servants), the first three being known as "twiceborn" and the last as "once-born." These original castes, however, have become to a great extent sub-divided—the men being known by their work or trades, as the "caste" of shoemakers and the "caste" of sweepers—so that nowadays the Brahmans alone are said to remain as a distinct caste. Aside from all these are the Pariahs (or outcasts) who have no caste. According to the Cyclopedia of India, "the effect of the caste system is that no man may lawfully eat with any individual of any other caste, or partake of food cooked by him, or marry into another caste family; but he may be his friend, his master, his servant, his partner."

"Tomboy of the Air" Unique.

One of the unique figures of filmdom is Andre Peyre. She is called "the tomboy of the air," her business being to perform risky stunts for serial thrillers.

She has been a licensed air pilot since she was 17. That was five years ago. She was taught the tricks of aviation by Poulet, French flier, at Issy les Moulineaux and claims to be the only girl flier who can do all the air stunts done by the late Ormer Locklear.

Mademoiselle Peyre appeared in several French films. She has just completed her work as a stunt flier in "The Riddle of the Range," starring Ruth Roland, and is on the way to France to see her mother. Upon her return to America she will probably appear in a serial starring Pearl White or Ruth Roland.

She's an all-round athlete, an expert swimmer and diver. And she's good looking.

Ancestry Begins Up a Tree.

"Why did Percy van Dubb give up trying to trace his ancestry?"

"He said that the farther back he went the harder it was, until at last he found himself completely up a tree."