

TICK, TACK, TOE

By Jack Lait

Illustrated by Dorothy Dulin.



Let us call this story by the title you see above. A truly inspired writer gets his story first and his title afterward. But I am not inspired. I write for a living, and I know my mechanics. So I think up a story before I write it, and I fit a title to it before I begin it.

For a story one must have characters. So you will see here four principal persons, two boys and two girls; one must have plot, so you will find here motives and action; one must have many things and one should have a sermon. So you will find here a parable which, were it written in somewhat the accustomed language of parables, might say:

"Thou shalt stay in thy class, for thou art born unto it and thou art as a polar bear in New Orleans when thou gettest beyond thy depth; moreover, oh, ye children of earth, seek not that which is forbidden, for even though ye land it, ye shall yet be empty-handed and kicking."

When it came to selecting a title I was at first tempted to call this "The Double Cross," which epitomizes the tale, but which would be misunderstood to be slang. So I labeled it "Tick, Tack, Toe," and I ask you to fancy the familiar figures employed in playing that juvenile game. The four corners will stand for the starting points of our four characters; the central square will be their common meeting ground. That will still leave four spaces—open spaces above, below, right and left, where they will stand before the narrative shall have been finished.

Two mansions frowned side by side. The owner of one had a son and the owner of the other had a daughter—children. Behind each mansion was a conservatory, behind each of which lived a gardener. Each of the gardeners had a child, one a boy, the other a girl. So we have four youngsters of about the same age—the boys a year or two older than the girls, let us say—within a small area.

There is a social chasm, a financial canyon, between the four: one boy and one girl rich, one girl and one boy poor.

But they are children. And childhood is a democracy. Children love to play and they love to play with other children. So these four children got to playing together, for proximity is the closest bond between children.

THIS is the story of two frowning mansions and the game of tick, tack, toe fate played with their occupants. And when they were all through—well, read it for yourself.

Let us name our four now, so that we can handle them in story style. The rich boy's name was Gilman Stanton; the rich girl's name was Annabelle Hoover; the poor boy's name was John Smith and the poor girl's name was Mabel Jones. Thus, though it isn't always so in real life, will we give character to our children by their names and make the picture easier to follow.

Gilman was a weak boy. He had been suckled on a sanitary flask of prepared fodder and he had a nursery and he had electrical toys.

John was a husky kid. He had been nursed by his healthy mother, he had started playing outdoors at the age of 1 and his main idea of sport was to heave bricks at cats.

Annabelle, too, was frail. She promised to be lithe and svelte, but at this stage she was only pale and skinny. She was learning French and her mother sent her for the daily airing in a victoria.

Mabel was a chunky, stout, round little minx with a pug nose and freckles, the perfectly normal kid of a thoroughly balanced workman and his phlegmatic, stolid spouse.

Now the law of opposites seems to be an even more potent guide to children than to grown-ups, because children just follow their natural bent, whereas their elders fight nature with such outlanders as reason, judgment, fashion and what will people say?

Therefore the four played in foursome through all sorts of weather. When it sunned they were outdoors a bit, much to the worry of the stylish mammas of Annabelle and Gilman, and when it blustered or rained they found places in the hothouses.

And, as they grew, anyone except the mothers, who never see anything important, could have seen that the double cross was taking place—that Gilman showed marked preference for the soc-

ety of Mabel and that Annabelle favored John. We state it in that order because, by every rule, the rich do the choosing.

And wasn't it quite natural that this should be so—that these rich children should select their poor opposites?

Annabelle found in John all that she did not and never could find in Gilman or the other silk-socked, frilled children of her set whom she met formally. John could shin up a fence, he was strong, he was cheery, he was diffident, he was different.

And Gilman saw in Mabel what he could not see in Annabelle or Annabelle's friends, his decreed playmates of nursery and callers of drawing-room. Mabel had simplicity and healthy good looks and no affectations. Mabel could run and she didn't cry when he pulled her hair.

Now what did John and Mabel find in their rich companions? Oh, everything. They had what the children of the poor never could acquire. They had bewildering clothes, they had position, they had fragile and delicate beauty in place of grubby and vulgar features, they had intoxicating playthings and they had that intangible but unmistakable article which was more potent than all these—"class."

So, in children's manner of falling in love, Gilman and Mabel were sweethearts and John and Annabelle were paired. The mothers of the rich ones, if they thought of it at all, regarded it as harmless, because children will be little barbarians, no matter how finely bred or guardedly reared. The gardeners' wives just kept after their offspring not to be insolent or take anything for granted—to remember their places.

There was a tacit impression in society that Gilman and Annabelle would marry some day. Their parents were neighbors and intimates. I believe their fathers were interested in the same color of bonds—have it so if it helps the story any.

The two gardeners, as they sat out in the back lawn and smoked their pipes together, agreed that it wouldn't be at all extraordinary if John and Mabel, raised together and mates from the crib, should some day hit it off before a justice of the peace.

But, when adolescence came, the age when every one expected that the Gilman-Mabel and Annabelle-John ententes would be dispersed, it wasn't so. It is one thing for tots to play together; it is quite another for a lad back from his junior year, with a little fuzz on his lip, to be seen holding the hand of the next door gardener's daughter; and it is even more alarming and revolutionary to see a millionaire's daughter of 17, home from finishing school—nearly finished—reading a dollar-and-a-half novel in a hammock to the son of a workman, sitting on the grass in overalls.

So Messrs. Stanton and Hoover, who met one day at a directors' meeting and drove back in the town car of one of them, talked it over—oh, not in agitation at all, but just as a passing matter—and decided that it wasn't wise or pretty to let this continue. Since John's father worked for Gilman's father and Mabel's father worked for Annabelle's father, each rich father decided to talk to the poor father whom he employed, and to tell him that it wasn't wise or pretty.

The gardener-fathers were considerably scared, and ran panic-stricken to their respective children to tell them that it wasn't wise or pretty.

But, to relieve your suspense, it was too late.

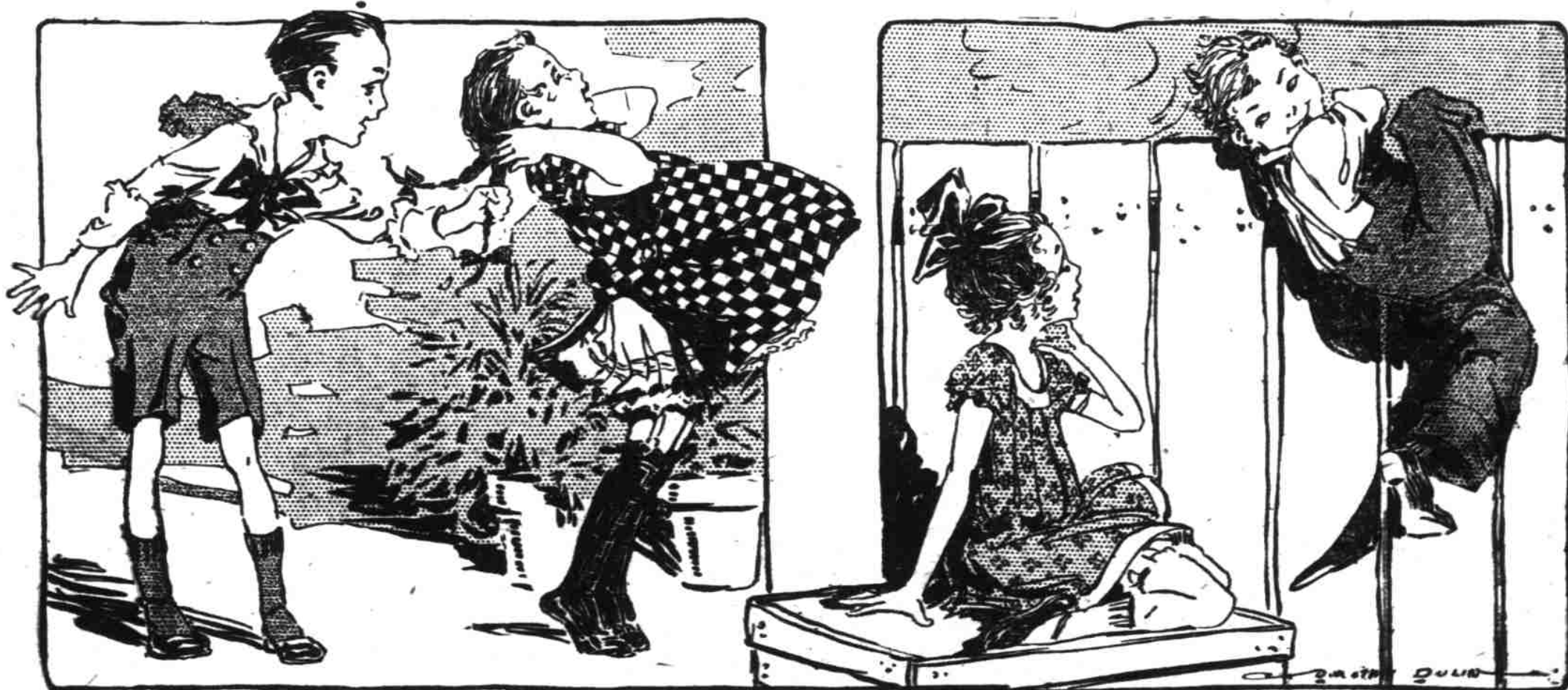
Gilman and Annabelle were sent back to college, but each had made up a mind or let a seed sprout.

And by the time Gilman had been graduated and was given an office of his own as a broker, what did he resolve to do except to engage Mabel as his stenographer?

And a better, a straighter, a more efficient and a more pleasant stenographer he couldn't have found anywhere. And there in the office, a year or so later, he asked her to marry him.

He told her that he hated society girls, the pale, frail, vapid, vacuous, insipid, pampered, artificial snobs; he wanted what every American man wants: a good, decent, wholesome, pretty, natural American wife.

She saw in him the crown of romance. He had all that she never could have hoped to reach—money and position, ed-



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