THE LUCKIEST LADY - ~By~ RUBY M. AYRES

XX—"WE DON'T UNDERSTAND"

That was late on Saturday night, after they had returned from a dance and dinner at one of the newest night-clubs. The Little Flapper had gone to her room, and Marna was sitting by the fireside, still in her evening wraps.

Paget figeted about, conscious that in some inexplicable way he was out of favor, and yet entirely at a loss to know how to account for it. He looked at Marna from time to time in boyish perplexity, then suddenly he crossed the room to her.

"You're tired. Let me take your cloak."

But instead of taking it from her he encircled her with his arms.

"What's the matter, my darling?"

To his amazement she started up, breaking away from him, the soft fur cloak slipping from her shoulders to the floor between them. There was a wild look in her eyes, and her breath came fast as if she were frightened or hurt.

"Don't—don't touch me!" she said sharply. "Oh, if you would only go away and leave me!"

Her nerves were at snapping-point; the evening had been one long torment.

She had avoided Hubbard deliberately; she had refused to dance with him, and when he had asked why she had answered flippantly:

"Well, I've got to get used to being without you, so I may as well begin now."

She had to be cruel to hide her pain; in some strange way it helped her to know she was hurting him. But when he had gone, the pendulum swung the other way.

Another evening had slipped through her hands, and she had not tried to hold it or make the most of the little it offered her. Coming home in the car she had pleaded a headache and let the Little Flapper talk to George Paget. She had sat huddled into her corner, her hands clenched and her eyes shut tightly.

"Only three more days! Only three more days!"

Every movement of the car, every purring sound of its engine, had seemed to sing the same song.

"Only three more days! Only three more days—"

The boat sailed on Wednesday, and then—that was all! She could see nothing beyond.

But the touch of her husband's gentle hands had seemed to break down the iron hand with which she had bound herself; it was as if he had cut the taut string of her nerves, allowing them to vibrate and scream without control of any sort.

She stood looking at him with wild eyes, shrivering and shaking, like an animal who fears the whip.

"Good heavens, Marna!"

Paget was frightened and angered. She looked at him almost as if she hated him; she had sprung away from his caresses as if they were loathsome to her.

With a great effort Marna pulled herself together; she tried to laugh. With shaking hands she pushed the hair back from her forehead.

"It's only—oh, it's only—" she began with white lips. Then the terrible feeling of collapse conquered her, and she would have fallen but for Paget's arms.

He laid her down on the bed and rushed to the Little Flapper's room.

"Marna's ill—faint! Come quickly, Biddy!"

Biddy was standing at the looking-glass, brushing her short, soft hair. She had slipped out of her frock, and looked very little and childish in her short petticoat and tiny bodice, with its ribbon shoulder-straps, but there was motherly tenderness and understanding in her eyes as she pushed Paget unceremoniously aside and fled to Marna.

"Get water—quick! And brandy. No, we don't want a doctor, and we don't want any of the others poking round."

But Marna was only unconscious for a few minutes. Before George Paget was back again she had opened her eyes and was trying to sit up.

"It's all right, darling," Biddy was smoothing her hair and holding her hand. "You fainted. You're tired out, of course. It's all right."

"Don't leave me, Biddy. I only want you. Don't leave me."

"I won't. Not for a single minute. I promise." The Little Flapper stood her ground stoutly against George when he returned.

"I'm going to stay with her. You must go and sleep in the dressing-room tonight."

He stared down at her, frightened and angry, a brandy decanter in one hand and a jug of water in the other.

"If you think I'm going to be ordered out of my own room by you, you're mistaken!" he blustered. "Marna would rather have me with her than you—wouldn't you, Marna?"

"Don't worry her. She's not well enough to be worried," Biddy immediately implored.

Marna turned her face into the pillow and began to sob.

"Marna—"

The Little Flapper took Paget forcibly by the arm and dragged him out of the room, shutting the door firmly upon him.

"Don't be so selfish!" she said.

But the tears were running down her face as she came back to Marna.

Selfish! How could she have been so cruel? He had never been selfish in all his life; he hardly knew the meaning of the word.

But for once in his life George Paget was offended. He got up early the next morning, and, without waiting to see his wife, he went round to the hotel where Hugh Hubbard was staying. Hubbard was up and breakfasting in the dining room and Paget sat down beside him at the table and began to unfold his troubles.

"Marna was ill when we got home last night. Fainted—the same sort of faint as before. You remember—eh? The night you came home, wasn't it? Well, she fainted again. I tell you, I don't like the look of it. She'll have to see a specialist. Never fainted in her life before, and all about nothing this time. I was just talking to her about Martin—told her I didn't like the fellow, and she got positively angry, don'tcherknow!" He sighed heavily and moved his long legs into an easier position. "Do you like Renny Martin?" he demanded.

"Not particularly."

Paget looked pleased.

"Glad to hear it. Chap's all right. I never minded him till lately, but he does hang about round Marna so. Not that I'm suggesting anything against her; don't think that—but, of course, I know you won't—but between you and me and the gatepost, I believe the blackguard rather prides himself that she—oh, you know what I mean."

"Yes." Hubbard pushed his plate away. "Go on," he said hardily.

"Nothing more to say," Paget admitted. "I just told her I didn't want him about the place so much, and I don't! I'll break the head of any man who comes hanging round my wife!" He brought his fist down heavily on the table. "You'd do the same, wouldn't you, if Marna was your wife—eh, what?" he demanded. Hubbard smiled faintly.

"Yes."

"Well, there you are, then!" Paget said contentedly. He leaned back more comfortably in his chair. "That was all that happened, and Marna fainted—"

"Over-tired. Too many late nights."

"I know. That's what I think." Paget let his monocle fall with an agitated click. "Queer part of it is, she, turned round on me. 'That's what I can't understand. It hurt, I can tell you. We've always been so happy together—never a word or a misunderstanding. It hurt, I can tell you," he repeated, his handsome face flushed at the memory of the look in Marna's eyes. "If I thought there was anything between Marna and the scoundrel Martin—"

"George, for heaven's sake—"

With an effort Paget controlled himself.

"Sorry. All rot, of course. Marna's the best woman in the world, but women do like Martin, confound him! Look at the women he's boasted about—"

"Not women like—like your wife."

"I know. Forget I said that, will you, old chap?"

"Of course."

The dining-room was empty save for the two men and a waiter away at the far end, and Hubbard laid his hand on his friend's arm.

"We men don't understand women, perhaps," he said with an effort. "We've just got to be—kind—and humor them—" His voice broke. Kind! What a poor, inadequate word for all he longed to do!

"I know." Paget softened at once. "That's it. We just don't understand 'em."

"Take her away for a holiday. She likes traveling." Every word was a growing difficulty to Hubbard.

Paget's handsome face brightened.

"Rippin' idea! Did her a lot of good before when she was ill. Took her to the South of France then. Wonder where she'd like to go this time?"

"Well, there are heaps of places she hasn't seen."

"I know! We'll take a trip out to Shanghai to see you."

Hubbard made a convulsive movement, knocking over the cup at his elbow, and in the following excitement the suggestion was left unanswered. But the idea stayed in Paget's mind. He thought it a most excellent plan.

(To be continued)

PAJAMA PARTY IS GIVEN AFTER SHOW

Mill City.—After a theater party Friday evening several girls gathered for a pajama party at the home of Miss Merle Chestnut. The evening was spent with games, stunts and dancing. Refreshments were served at 1 o'clock after which the girls retired and after chattering and giggling until 5 o'clock doughnuts and water was passed. After a few hours of slumber breakfast was served by Mrs. Chesnut at 11 o'clock.

Those present were the Misses Elsa Plambeck, Margaret Bodicker, Marjorie Sumpter, Maxine Jewel, Meldon Raines, Marian Allen and Merle Chesnut.

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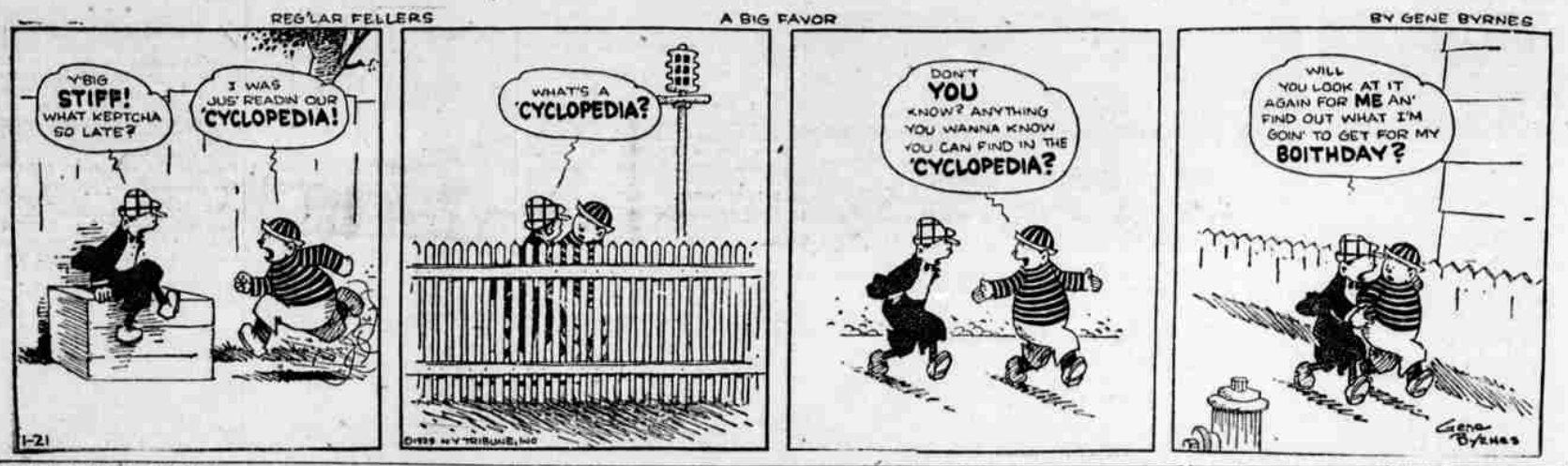

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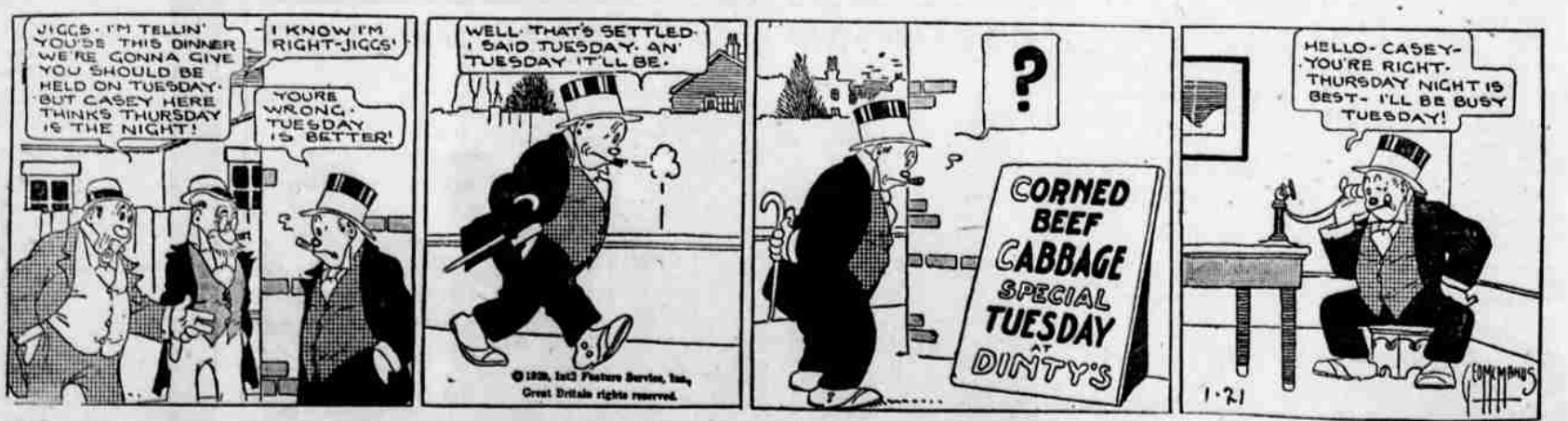

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