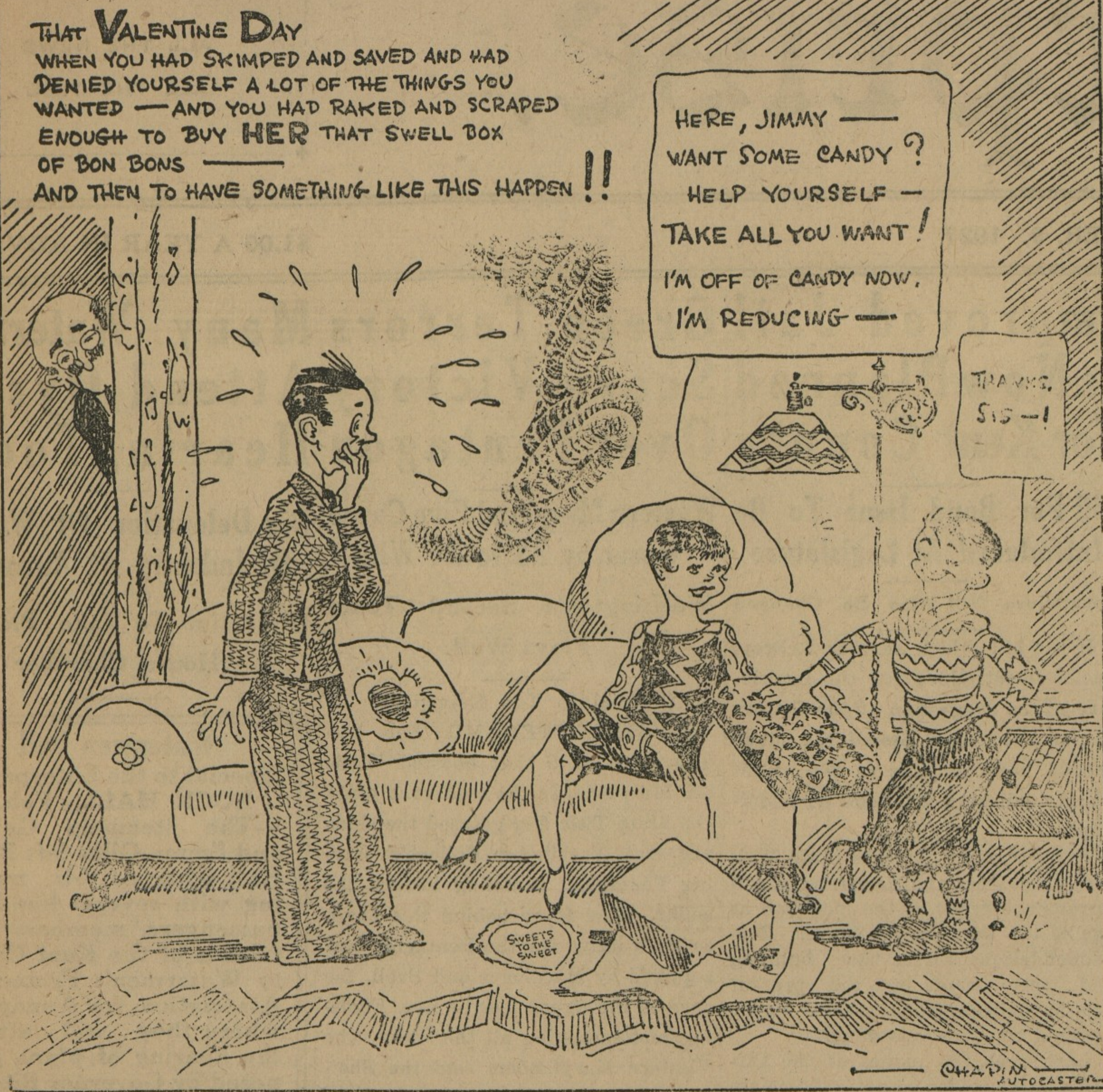


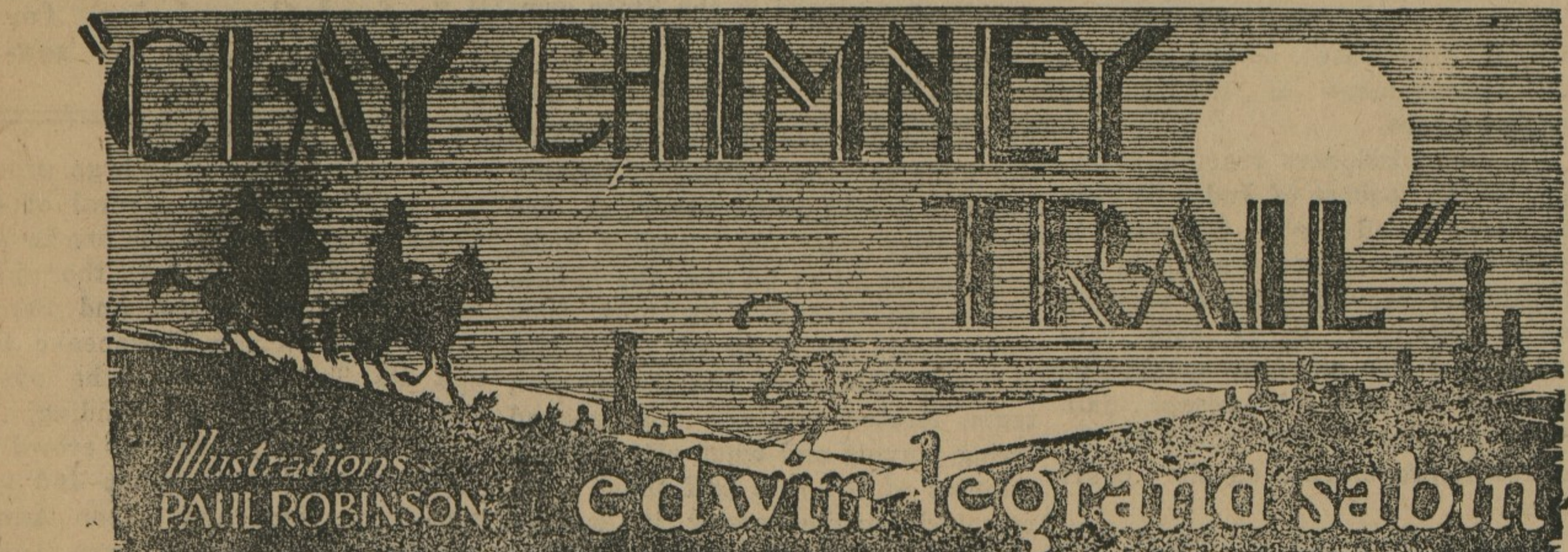
THE DARKEST DAY IN HISTORY

By A. B. CHAPIN



THAT VALENTINE DAY WHEN YOU HAD SKIMPED AND SAVED AND HAD DENIED YOURSELF A LOT OF THE THINGS YOU WANTED — AND YOU HAD RAVED AND SCRAPED ENOUGH TO BUY HER THAT SWELL BOX OF BON BONS — AND THEN TO HAVE SOMETHING LIKE THIS HAPPEN !!

HERE, JIMMY — WANT SOME CANDY? HELP YOURSELF — TAKE ALL YOU WANT! I'M OFF OF CANDY NOW, I'M REDUCING —



WHAT'S GONE BEFORE

It is 1868 and the Pacific Railroad has reached its newest "farthest west"—Benton, Wyoming, a town described as "roaring," as each new terminus, temporarily, was.

Frank Beeson, a young man from Albany, New York, comes here because he is in search of health and Benton is considered "high and dry."

Edna Montoyo, a fellow passenger on the train from Omaha, impresses Beeson with the beauty of her blue eyes and the style of her apparel. Equally she astonished him by taking a "smile" of brandy before breakfast. A brakeman tells Beeson she has "followed her man" to Benton.

Jim, a typical western ruffian whom she knows apparently well insults and is floored by Frank whose prowess impresses the passengers.

Desert Dust

What shall I say of a young man like myself, fresh from a green East of New York and the Hudson River, landed expectant as just aroused from a dream of rare beauty, at this Benton City, Wyoming Territory? The dust, as fine as powder and as white, but shot through with the crimson of sunset, hung like a fog, amidst which swelled a deafening clamor from figures rushing hither and thither about the platform like half-world shades. Two score hands grabbed at my valise and shoved me and dragged me.

"The Desert Hotel. Best in the West. This way, sir." "Buffalo Hump Corral! Free drinks at the Buffalo Hump." A deep voice boomed, stunning me.

"The Queen, the Queen! Bath for every room. Individual towels. The Queen, the Queen, she's clean, she's clean."

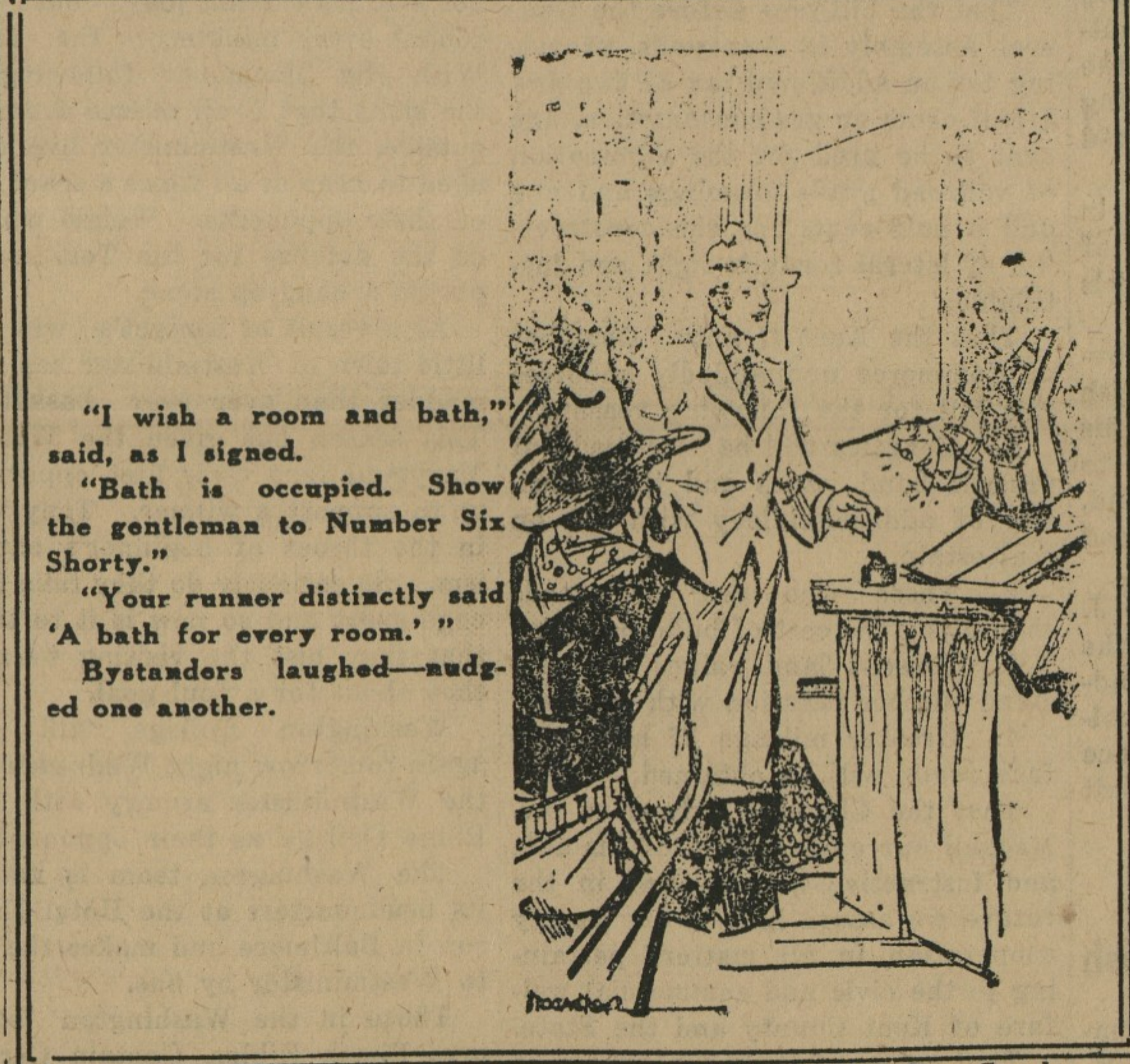
The promise of "individual towels" won me over. We left the station platform and went ploughing up a street over shootouts with the impalpable dust. The noises as from a great city swelled strident. But although pedestrians streamed to and fro, the men in motley of complexions and costumes, the women, some of them fashionably dressed, with skirts edging furiously; and wagons rolled, horses cantered, and from right and left merchants and hawksters seemed to be calling their wares, of city itself I could see only the veriest husk.

The majority of the buildings were mere canvas—faced up for a few feet, perhaps, with sheet iron or flimsy boards, interspersed there were a few wooden structures, rough and unpainted.

I was ushered into a widely-open tent-building whose canvas sign depending above a narrow veranda declared: "The Queen Hotel. Beds \$3. Meals \$1 each."

Now as whitely powdered as any of the natives I stumbled across a single large room bordered at one side by a bar and a number of small tables (all well patronized) and was brought up at the counter un-

der the alert eyes of a clerk coatless silk-shirted, diamond-scarfed, pomaded and slick-haired, waiting with register turned and pen extended. "Quite right, sir," the clerk assented, "So there is. A bath for every room and the best bath in town. Entirely private; fresh towel supplied. Only one dollar and four bits. That, with lodging, makes four dollars and a half. If you please, sir." A bitter wave of homesickness welled into my throat, as conscious of the enveloping dust, the utter shams, the alien unsympathetic on-lookers, the sense of having been "done" and through my own fault, I peeled a greenback from the folded pocket in my purse and handed it over. Rather foolishly I intended that this display of funds should rebuke this finicky clerk; but he accepted without comment and sought



front and greasy flowing tie, and trousers tucked into cowhide boots. I grasped the hand wonderingly. It enclosed mine with a soft pulpy squeeze; and lingered. "As usual, when I last saw it, sir," I responded. "But I am from Albany." "Of course. Albany, the capital, a city to be proud of, sir, I welcome you, sir, to our West, as a fellow-citizen." "You are from Albany?" I exclaimed. "Bohn and raised right near there; been there many a time. Yes, sir. From the grand old Empire State, like yourself, sir, and without apologies. Whenever I meet with a New York State man I cotton to him." "Have I your name, sir?" I inquired. "You know of my family, perhaps."

"I wish a room and bath," said, as I signed. "Bath is occupied. Show the gentleman to Number Six Shorty." "Your runner distinctly said 'A bath for every room.'" Bystanders laughed—audged one another.

This way, sir. I am partial to a brand particularly to be recommended for clearing this damnable dust from one's throat."

"Thank you, sir, but I prefer to tidy my person, first," I suggested. "Number six for the gentleman," announced the clerk, returning to me my change from the bill. I stuffed it into my pocket—the Colonel's singular eyes followed it with uncomfortable interest. The runner picked up my bag, but was interrupted by my new friend.

"The privilege of showing the gentleman to his quarters shall be mine."

"All right, Colonel," the clerk carelessly consented. "Number Six."

"And my bath?" I pursued. "You will be notified, sir. There are only five ahead of you, and one gentleman now in. Your turn will come in about two hours."

In No. 6, there were three double beds: one well rumpled as if just vacated; one (the middle) tenanted by a frowsy-headed, whiskered man asleep in shirt sleeves and revolver and boots; the third, at the other end, recently made up by having its blanket covering hastily thrown against a distinctly dirty pillow.

"Your bed yonder, sir, I reckon," prompted the Colonel (whose accents did not smack of New York at all).

I gazed about, sickened. "There are no private rooms?" I asked.

"You are perfectly private right here, sir," assured the Colonel. "You may strip the hide or you may sleep with your boots on, and no questions asked. Generally speaking gentlemen prefer to retain a lawyer of artificial covering—but you ain't troubled much with the bugs, are you Bill?"

He leveled this query at the frowsy, whiskered man, who had awakened.

"I'm too alkalded, I recon," Bill responded. "Varmints will leave me any time when there's fresh bait handy. That's why I likes to double up."

The Colonel turned to me. "Shake hands with my friend Mr. Bill Brady."

The frowsy man extended his hand.

"Proud to make yore acquaintance, sir."

"The bath-room? Where is it, gentlemen?" I ventured.

"If you will step outside the door, sir, you can hear the splashing down the hall. It is the custom, however, for gentlemen at tub to keep the bath-room door closed, in case the ladies promenading. I judge, with five ahead of you and one in, the clerk was mighty near right when he said about two hours. That allows twenty minutes to each gentleman, which is the limit."

"What is your line of business?" Bill invited.

"I am out here for my health, at present," said I. "I have been advised by my physician to seek a place in the Far West that is high and dry, Benton"—I laughed miserably, "certainly is dry. And high judging by the rates."

"Healthily dry, sir, in the matter of water," the Colonel approved. "We are not cursed by the humidity of New York State, grand old State that she is. For those who require water, there is the Platte only three miles distant. The nearer proximity of water we consider a detriment to the robustness of a community."

I made a meager toilet. "Now I am at your service during a short period, gentlemen," I announced. "Later I have an engagement, and I shall ask to be excused."

"A little liquid refreshment is in order first, I reckon," quoth the Colonel. And after that—you have sporting blood, sir? You will desire to take a turn or two for the honor of the Empire State?"

"If you are referring to card gambling, sir," I answered, "you have chosen a poor companion. But I do not intend to be a spoil sport, and I shall be glad to have you show me whatever you think worth while in the city, so far as I have the leisure."

"That's it, that's it, sir," The Colonel appeared delighted. "Let us libate to the gods of chance, gentlemen; and then take a stroll."

After a round of drinks—I took lemonade—we issued into the street. Surely such an hotch-potch never before populated an American town; Men flannel shirted, high booted, bearded, with formidable revolvers, balanced, not infrequently, by sheathed butcher-knives—men whom I took to be teamsters, miners, railroad graders and the like.

Of the women I saw several in amazing costumes of tightly fitting black like ballet girls, low necked, waists skirted around the smooth waists snake-skin belts supporting handsome little pistols and dainty poignards. Contrasted, there were women in gowns and bonnets that would do them credit anywhere in New York, and some, of course, commonly attired in calico and gingham as proper to the humbler station of laundresses, cooks, and so forth.

"How are you on the goose, sir?" Bill demanded of me.

"The goose?" I uttered.

"Yes, Keno." "I am a stranger to the goose," said I.

He grunted. "It gives a quick turn for a small stake. So do the three-card and rondo."

Of passageway there was not much choice between the middle of the street and the borders.

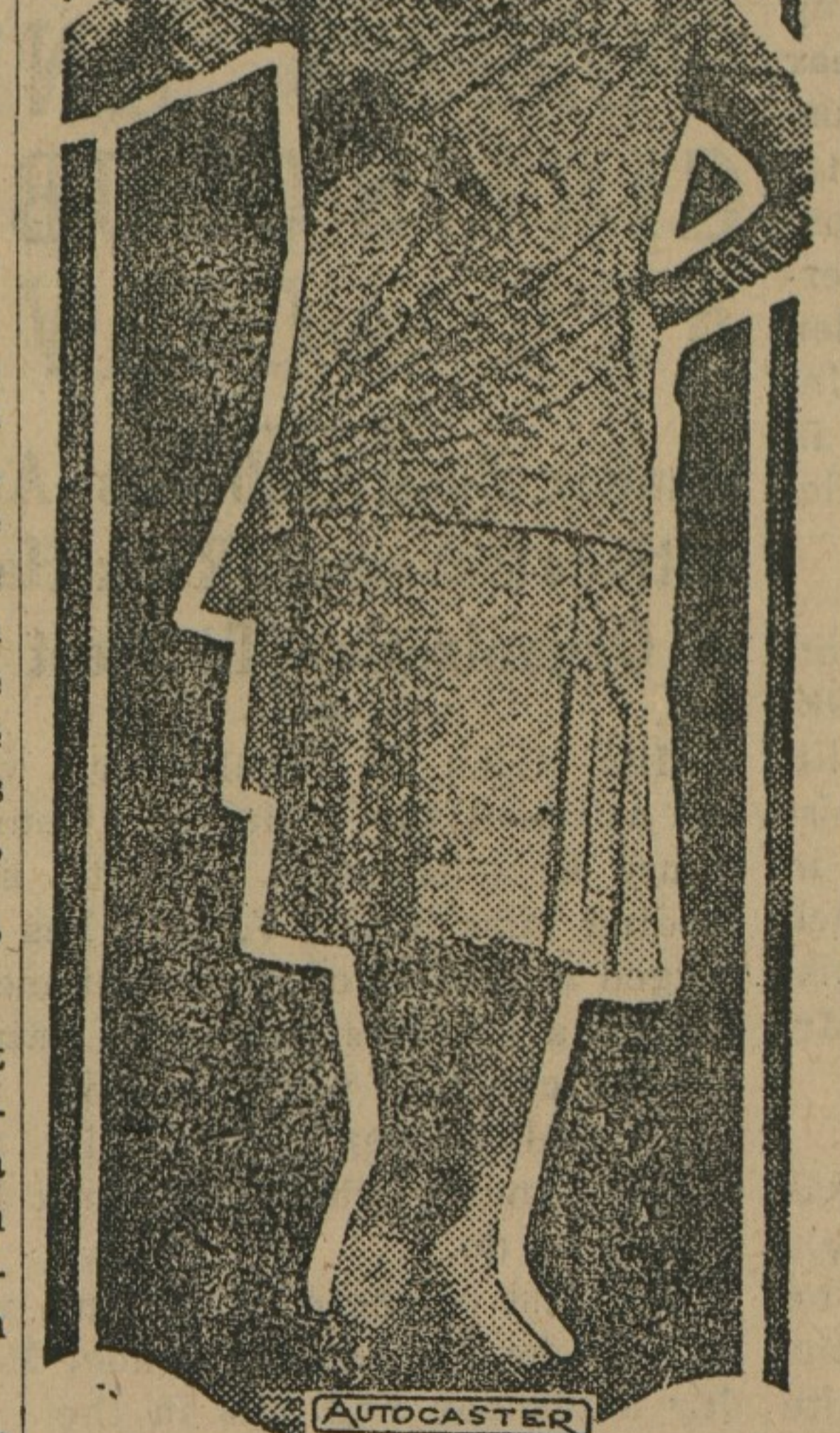
Seemed to me as we weaved along through groups of idlers and among busily stepping people that every other shop was a saloon with door widely open and bar and gambling tables well attended.

My guides nodded right and left with "Hello, Frank," "How are you Dan?" "Evening, Charley," and so on.

Occasionally the Colonel swept off his hat, with elaborate deference to a woman, but I looked in vain for My Lady of the Blue Eyes. I did not see her—nor did I see her peer, despite the fact that now and then I observed a face and figure of apparent attractiveness.

Copyright EDWIN L. SABIN. Does our hero find the Lady of the Blue Eyes? Don't miss next week's installment.

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Despite fashion forecasts to the contrary, figured and print silks are getting the call in advanced spring models, this pretty dress for street wear being one of the newer silhouettes.

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