



FIRST INSTALLMENT
CHAPTER I.

What's the Use?

Grandmother Page refused to budge. I turned her over again, but there was no sign of life. I squirted gasoline into her cylinders, but she didn't seem to care for it.

As you may have surmised, Grandmother Page is a relation of mine only by adoption and purchase. She originally was created and assembled by the Page Motor company of Detroit, but that was so long ago that her years fully entitle her to the title of "Grandmother."

She has had a hard life, too. For four years she has been going nearly everywhere that I go, and for a long time before that she was the traveling companion of a suburban real-estate man who could sell gold bricks to placer miners. I suspect that he taught her some of her deceitful tricks.

It must have been from him that she got her love of the country. She revels in green fields and running brooks and sand-banks and mud-holes. Whenever she finds one she always wants to stay there all day. The farther it is from the city the better she likes it.

I personally am fonder of the city, and when she decides to remain all night on some road fourteen or fifteen miles from anywhere I have sometimes walked home rather than share the sylvan solitudes with her.

Under my breath I murmured: "Durn you, Grandmother," and hit the engine a vindictive tap with a monkey wrench.

"Maybe there is no gasoline in the magneto," suggested Maryella, who had watched my struggle from the front seat.

I made no reply. When some one begins offering me suggestions after I have tried every known trick on a stalled motor I find that the only way to preserve my reputation as a gentleman is to keep absolutely silent.

Even Maryella, whom I have been trying for two years to persuade to become Mrs. Tom Billbeck, can draw fire from me on such a dynamic occasion.

"We've got to get home, Tom," she fretted. "There's a rehearsal of 'Pygmalion and Galatea' to-night, and if we're away they can't do a thing."

No, reader, we are not actors. I am positive of that. Our stage-work receives mention only in the society column. We perform for charity before people who have to like us because we represent such worthy causes. Whenever the Social Settlement sends up a yell for funds we spend about a thousand dollars' worth of time enticing five hundred people to part with fifty cents each to hear us forget our lines.

When Belgium needs bread or the Fiji Islanders run out of pants, who comes to the rescue regardless—of

consequences? The Sheridan Dramatic club!

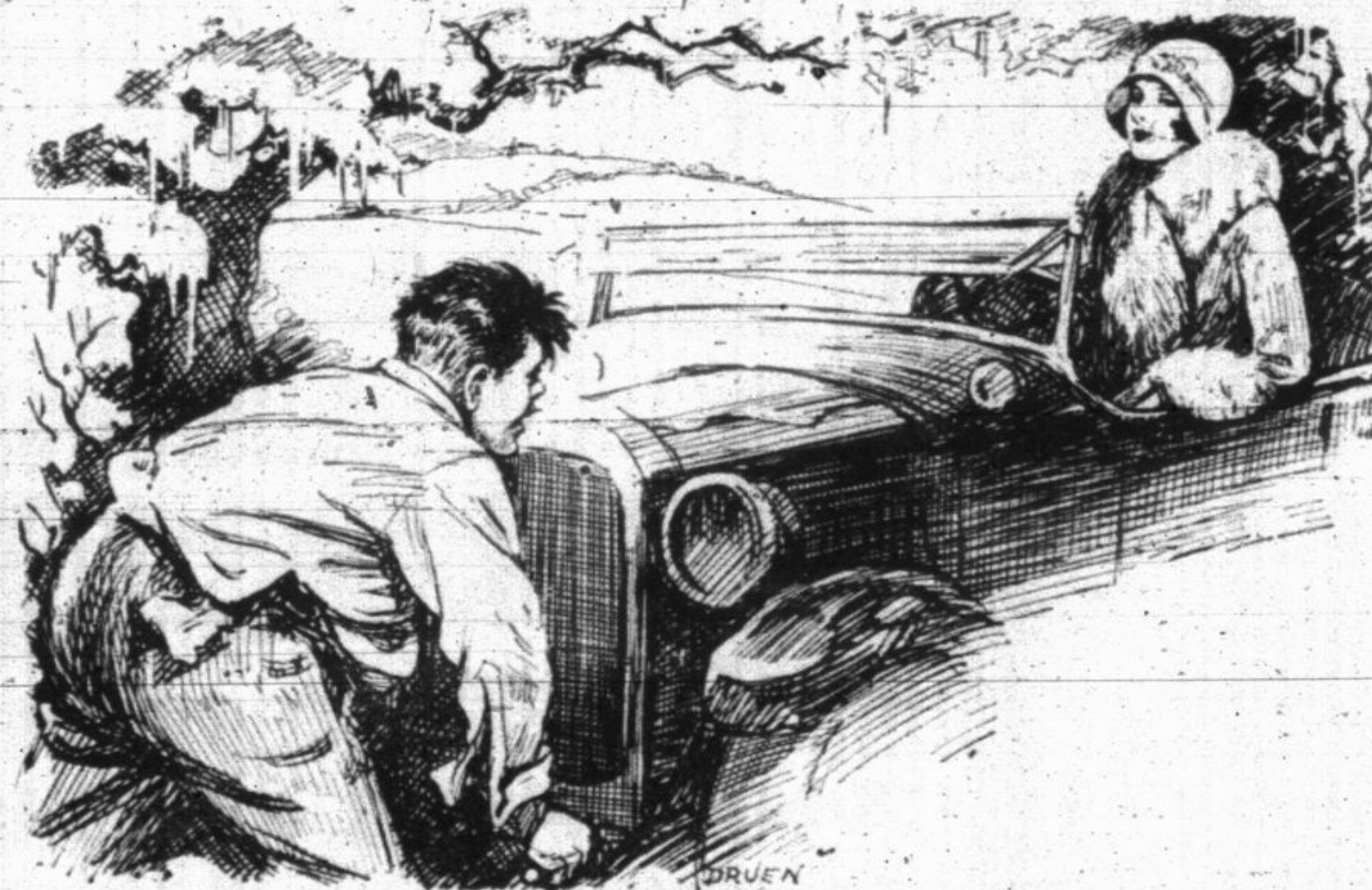
And now we were doing "Pygmalion and Galatea" for the Old Soldiers' Home, which needed some new window-shades or an electric piano, I've forgotten which.

"Besides," continued Maryella, shivering slightly, "it's getting colder, and I think I felt a drop of rain a minute ago."

"That being the case," I observed sarcastically, "we'll start."

"Let's," she encouraged.

Grandmother Page and I repeated our justly celebrated repertoire of tricks, from adjusting the spark-coil to putting gasoline in our eye while lying prone under the tank. Each separate adjustment was preceded and followed by reducing-exercises with the starting-crank.



Maryella Watching the Struggle from the Front Seat of Grandmother Page

"Jim Cooper has a self-starter on his car," Maryella observed sympathetically while I was trying to catch my breath.

"Then why," I inquired in icy exasperation that I regretted instantly, "why don't you marry Jim Cooper, if you're so-crazy about a self-starter?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Maryella, inarticulate with rage at my remark. "You have no right to insult me like that!"

"I didn't mean to insult you, dear." I forgot Grandmother Page for the moment in my anxiety to square myself for my tactical blunder.

It was the wrong move. My very humility made her think that she really had been offended in some way, so she dabbed at her pretty eyes to see if she could scare up a tear. She could not. That made her more angry.

"I know one thing," she stated, clambering out of the seat. "I'll never ride in your old car again as long as I live!"

She started down the road.

"I'll walk home first!"

Why are girls of twenty so adorable—and why are men a few years older such fools about them? The

answer to that question may explain also why I followed her through the dusk that was part twilight and part gathering rainstorm.

"Listen, Maryella," I called after her. "Be reasonable."

No response.

"You can't walk all the way home. It's ten miles."

"I'd probably have to walk anyway," she observed dispassionately, "so I might as well get started before dark."

That remark about walking home anyway was the crowning insult to me and Grandmother Page. It hurt the more because it was probably true. I turned back angrily. She trudged on.

Down the road came a purring motor. I had hardly expected a car to pass that way. I had purposely chosen a back-country road for my

who would ask a question like that. His sense of humor is very low, just above that of an anthropoid ape. When bromidioms were being passed around he took one of each.

I'll admit that he is rather a good looking chap. His hair just escapes being too blond and he has a wisp of a mustache such as you see on the men in the clothing advertisements.

Nature did all she could for the outside, but let him go without filling in the place which was originally intended for a mind. Whatever people seem to be doing he does without questioning whether there is any sense in it. He plays golf because so many others seem to enjoy it, not from any love of the game. He is one of Maryella's admirers, for the same reason.

Maybe I am prejudiced, but I can't believe that he really appreciates her adorableness.

Maryella is flattered by his attention, not knowing what a small tribute it is. The fact that he asks her opinion on every move he makes, from changing brands of tooth-powder to buying a summer home, caters to her love of power.

"Are you sure you've got gasoline in the tank?"

Jim Cooper continued his ruthless assault on the remaining shreds of my temper.

"The trouble is in the spark," I volunteered briefly, looking around for a weapon in case he should ask another question.

"Oh! Can I give you a lift home old man? Of course, there isn't an extra seat, but you could sit on the gasoline-tank at the rear. I think it will hold you."

He surveyed me doubtfully.

A slight snicker from the lady in the car spurred me to a quick refusal.

"No, thank you. I'll have my car going in a few minutes."

"Oh! Miss Waite told me it wouldn't go at all."

"Did she?" I murmured politely. "I didn't know that she was interested."

"Maybe we had better wait," he suggested, "until you get started, and follow you into town. Then if anything goes wrong we can pick you up along the road."

"Please don't," I urged, with just a shade of feeling showing in my voice.

"Just as you say, old top. I'd like awfully well to help you if I could."

He got back into his car and insulted us once more with the subdued but efficient purr of his electric starter. Then waving at me airily, he turned about and disappeared in a cloud of dust toward the city.

I sat by the roadside and told myself that I was probably one of the seven worst "fussers" in the United States and the Dominion of Canada. I had played my game like a fifteen-jeweled boob. The first rule for making a girl eat out of your hand is never to let her know when you get mad. The second is not to be sorry if you do. I had a blow-out in both rules.

While I sat there it began to drizzle, but I thought too little of myself to care to move, so I didn't. Instead I recollected with delightful pain how eminently desirable Maryella was.

Slim and slender and cool-looking, she was obviously the handiwork of a beauty-loving god who wanted to

"What's the matter? Won't the engine run?"

Jim Cooper is the kind of a man