

The Alarm Clock

By ERNEST POOLE

The Hallucination of a Working-Girl

The clock was ticking loud and clear. It stood on a small, cheap table; the table had no covering; the bare wood redoubled the sound. But the slim girl on the bed close beside it might as well have been miles away. Her breathing was fast, irregular; her face flushed; her sleep intense. On the New York street, three flights below, where a gay summer's night had just begun, she would have been called a "good-looker," decidedly so, in spite of the fact that she looked so frail. And as she lay there freshly dressed, all but her hat, in her one cheap array of evening clothes, it was plain that she had made herself ready to be seen and admired. That was the curious part of it. By her clothes, which were fresh, you would have thought she was just going out. By her face, which was haggard in spite of the flush, you would have thought she had just come in.

Miss Winifred Giles had been raised in a drowsy Connecticut town. Strictly raised for fifteen years, and then she had begun to find the town exceedingly dull. At seventeen, at the annual dance in the high school, she had created a scandal by jumping up onto a window sill. The night was warm and the window was open; the sill made a cool, delicious seat. But the sill was high. Miss Giles had swung her diminutive feet. And certain indignant old ladies in charge had made ominous prophecies, which need not be repeated here.

In the two years that had passed since then, Miss Giles had never danced again, for her mother, a widow, had suddenly died, and the sale of the cottage had just paid her debts. A distant cousin, one of those same indignant old ladies, had felt it her duty to offer a home. But Miss Winifred, being now of age, had answered in her pert little voice, "Thanks! I presume I can manage myself!" And then she had come to the city.

She had read about the city, in a thrilling series of novels by the Baroness B. And though her own part in the city's life was confined to a department store counter where she sold hot water bags, she had not forgotten the "strange mad yearnings of a woman's heart" as set forth by the Baroness. These yearnings had been quickened by certain would-be gentlemen friends, one of whom, Mr. Montgomery Brooks, had purchased three hot water bags in the space of one short autumn.

But not even Mr. Montgomery Brooks had been able to get upon intimate terms. For Miss Giles had a lady friend, whom she had met in a lunch room shortly after coming to town, and with whom she had roomed ever since.

Miss Eliza Blake had freckles—of which she never thought. Some two hundred miles down the Jersey coast stood a lonely red brick lighthouse, where she had lived till her father was drowned. And of this she thought a good deal. She was strong as an ox, and in the department store basement she could wrap packages all day long and late into the night without feeling done up. At least she said nothing about it. She didn't say much about anything. Back in the lighthouse days, without much, she had fiercely cherished a doll, an absurdly pretty, frail affair. And now, in a somewhat similar way, she had fastened her silent affections upon Miss Winifred Giles, had set herself the difficult task of keeping Miss Giles alive and safe. Each lady was making five dollars a week.

No gentlemen friends were allowed. Late hours were forbidden. Even the cinematograph show was a perilous place to be left alone. Miss Blake had no special religion, but regularly each Sunday morning the two went early and found a rear pew in a certain large Fifth Avenue church; and there they both sat motionless. Miss Blake thrilled by the music; Miss Giles by the clothes. They had but one other diversion. Each

Friday evening from eight until ten they spent sewing or playing parchesi in a church settlement nearby.

Miss Giles had endured this five-dollar life for about eight months. Then she had reached the point of revolt. But before anything happened, in that mad season when people in the name of Christ crowd the stores until late at night and the faces behind the counters grow white—Miss Giles had received a terrible scare. The first days of nervous prostration can be of a kind to scare any girl, and Miss Giles was not of the strongest. But without saying much Eliza Blake had nursed her through the sickness. During the process, on certain desperate tedious nights, that silent, fierce affection had been expressed in a few quiet words. Miss Giles had responded passionately. And when at last she was back at work she

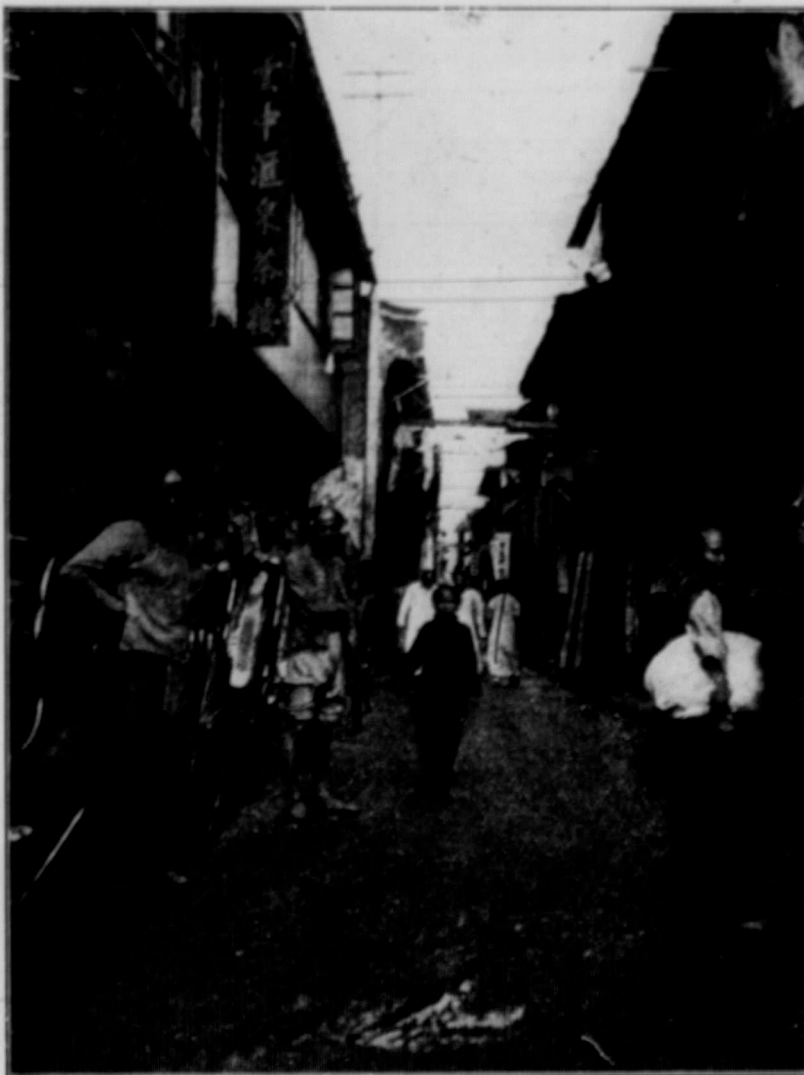
then with a quick look at the door she sprang toward the bed, fell down on her knees, jerked out an old brown telescope bag, and began to cram and stuff into it all her cheap belongings.

And still the clock ticked loud and clear. And still she did not hear it.

But she did hear the strong, quiet hand at the door. And before Miss Blake had entered the room Miss Giles had abruptly turned her back, had bent low over her packing and was savagely biting her lips. For even this flimsy doll affair had some nerve, some pride. And she wanted to get away.

For some moments, by her instinct, Eliza Blake said nothing. It took her time to understand. At last it appeared that she did understand. But still she did not move.

"Win, why are you packing that bag?"



THE AWAKENING OF CHINA

The lowest types of Shanghai Chinese: they are seldom seen in the foreign quarter

had solemnly sworn to herself that the "yearnings of a woman's heart" should be indefinitely postponed.

That was about six months ago.

Miss Giles woke up. How she woke up should be carefully noted. The whole story hangs on this.

We have already remarked that her sleep had been intense. Now as she suddenly sat up, then very slowly got out of bed and stood looking slowly about the room, the expression on her face grew still more excited. Some exceedingly vivid memory, with pictures, seemed to be surging up in her mind. For a moment she fought against it all, refused to believe it, struggled to control herself, get her bearings, think it out. But Miss Giles' mind was not of the strongest, and what there was of it had been under excessive strain. So she gave up her struggle to think, stood there rigid, her face growing pale, and

"That's my business!" Miss Winifred tried to make her tone snappy, but failed. It shook.

"Where are you going, Win? What's up?"

Miss Winifred swallowed hard, her back still turned:

"That old maid cousin of mine. She's dyin'—wants me with her."

"That's a lie." At last Miss Blake was sure—so sure that as she came forward, she gripped her lady friend's arm and jerked her to her feet. Miss Giles, after one defiant look, saw it was useless to lie.

"Well then?" Her thin little voice was sullen.

"It's that man. Montgomery Brooks."

"Well then?"

"You're not going, Win."

"Ain't I?"

"No."

There was a short silence. During this silence, that curious look of doubt again swept over the younger girl's face. Then came certainty and fright. She waited until she could steady herself:

"Suppose it's—too late—for anything to be said?"

For the first time in her life Eliza Blake's right hand came slowly to her heart, stayed there a moment, pressing hard. Then she spoke chokingly:

"That's not true!"

"Ain't it? Say, look at me."

Miss Blake looked. And from that look Miss Giles turned slowly away. But even in that moment, a scene from one of the novels of Baroness B. flashed into her mind.

"So you see it's all over between me an' you—an' I might as well be goin'," she said.

"No." The older girl's voice was quiet again, intensely so. "You're going to tell me, Win—everything—exact."

"Can't you see there ain't any use?"

"You're no judge. You're too scared. Yes, you are! Scared!" Her quiet grip had tightened. "And so you're going to tell me. Then we'll figure out what's to be done."

"There ain't nothin' to be done!" Miss Giles strove hard to get angry, flare up. "I can't live on five dollars a week!"

"Yes you can. We've done it."

"Well then, s'pose we have! Look at it!" Miss Winifred's eyes swept the cheap, bare room. "What do you think of it? How do you like it? Five dollars a week. Twenty cents for fun an' clothes!"

"What have you done?"

"I quit! That's what I done! I decided I'd have some fun out of life! Why wouldn't I? Ain't I got some looks? Don't others do it? How do they like it? Ask 'em! Listen to 'em laugh! Get onto their clothes, hats, gloves, an' shoes! You can spot them girls every time! How? Because they're havin' fun! Somebody's spending his money!"

"Stop this nonsense. Talk exact."

"I will. Yesterday, jest before lunch, when the store was so hot you couldn't breathe, a fat old lady came to my counter, wanted to buy a hot water bag. Sounds romantic, don't it? Wait. She said she was goin' to Europe, she wanted the bag because she was afraid that her feet would get cold on the boat. Ha, ha! I've read about them boats, I've read all about 'em, in a book by Baroness B. They have dances out on deck. Long rows of colored lanterns, clothes, diamonds, an' a band! Can you see it? I can! An she was afraid that her feet would get cold! Ha, ha! Put me on a boat like that! I'd keep warm!"

"You're shivering now!"

"I ain't! How can you tell how I feel? I can see you on a boat like that. You'd sit all alone way up in the bow an' rubber at the waves! Your father ran a lighthouse! But I'm dead sick of your lighthouse game! Understand? I'm sick of my job. I'm sick of this hot room! Twenty cents a week for clothes!"

"Stop it! . . . Now. . . What have you done?"

"I got thinkin' about that big swell boat. I decided I'd been a fool long enough, that I wouldn't stand it another day. Then Mister Brooks, he came to my counter—invited me to the theatre. Oh, yes, I knew jest what it meant. An' I told him he could call at eight."

From Eliza Blake came a kind of groan:

"I was late last night!"

"Yes, an' I knew you would be! I didn't want to see you! I don't now!"

"Quiet! . . . Talk exact."

"Well then—I come home. I was excited, all worked up. I forgot about eatin', an' I felt queer. By the time

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