

# The Baited Trap

A Story in Five Parts by Edwin Baird

## PART ONE

Bob Yates had lived three weeks in Mrs. McNally's rooming house before he became acquainted with Frank Sherwood, who occupied the adjoining room. He and Sherwood met one autumn evening in the lower hall, and ascended the staircase together. The situation, even in Chicago, demanded some semblance of amenities. Comments were passed on the weather and upon the narrowness, steepness, and creakiness of the stairs; and when they reached the upper landing they exchanged cards and shook hands.

"I hear," said Sherwood, with his hand on his doorknob, "that you're from the country." He spoke with an interrogative inflection, but there was no impertinent curiosity in his pleasant brown eyes—only a friendly interest.

"Yup," said Bob, smiling. "I was born and raised on a farm." He liked this round-faced, stocky young man, and regretted he hadn't met him earlier.

Sherwood opened his door. The interest in his brown eyes had kindled.

"Do come in," he urged cordially. "I'd like to talk with you. I'm mightily interested in farming."

The room they entered, tho small, was as trim and tidy as its neatly dressed tenant, and as attractive as a rooming-house chamber ever can be. On a table near the window were stacked, in orderly array, divers books on farming, pamphlets and bulletins from the United States Department of Agriculture, and several volumes of an agricultural periodical. Near-by was a card-index cabinet. The calcimined walls were undecorated with pictures, but on the bureau there were two large-sized photographs of an exceedingly pretty girl—dark-eyed, black-haired, her face expressive of fresh innocence and purity.

Sherwood rolled a chair forward for his guest, seated himself on the edge of the bed and indicated a jar of cigars.

"Help yourself," he invited.

Bob lighted a cigar, his eyes roaming about the neat, clean room. They came to rest on the girl's photograph. When he sat down he was still gazing at it. Then he heard Sherwood ask:

"How long have you lived in Chicago, Mr. Yates?"

"Less than a month," said Bob, facing his host.

"Mrs. McNally tells me you're a street-car conductor."

Bob nodded; then, under pretense of tapping his cigar against the ash tray on the bureau, he turned and again looked at the two photographs propped against the mirror.

"Do you like Chicago better than the farm?"

"Well—yes," said Bob absently. "I sort of got tired of farm life. D'ye know, there's something familiar about this girl's face, and yet I can't remember exactly where I've seen it before." He turned back to Sherwood, his yellow brows knitted with perplexity.

Sherwood smiled:

"You no doubt saw it in a magazine. Her picture is reproduced in scores of magazines."

"She's not an actress?" Bob, honest to the core, had an old-fashioned prejudice against "girls who went on the stage."

"No; she's a model—commercial photography. Her picture appears only among the ads."

Bob whacked his knee with his open palm and looked again at the photographs.

"Now I remember!" he exclaimed. "I saw her holding a cake of soap on the back cover of a magazine. And I never have forgotten her!" He added to himself, "And no wonder!"

Sherwood offered no comment.

Bob continued to gaze at the photograph nearest him. His cigar, unheeded, went out. He leaned forward intently, arms resting on the bureau, mind absorbed in the picture. There was something in the girl's dark eyes—a glowing light—that called to him irresistibly; something that struck deeper than mere physical appeal; something spiritual, divine. He could not name it, nor could he analyze his emotion: he only knew that if there existed a girl he might love thru eternity this was she.

He was called suddenly back from the clouds by the sound of Sherwood, clearing his throat preparatory to speaking, and he straightened up in his chair, apologetically, and turned his back to the bureau and his face toward the bed, where sat Sherwood. A slight flush effaced the freckles on his high cheek-bones. He fumbled for a match and lighted his dead cigar with fingers that were not entirely

steady. He felt the guilty fear of a boy who has been caught stealing green apples.

Sherwood, tho, had the decency to ignore his confusion.

"I'd like to show you what I've been doing in a farming way," And the chub-faced young man rose smilingly and walked to the card-index cabinet. Bob followed.

The cabinet proved to be a treasure-trove of agriculture lore, arranged systematically under categorical heads, and its proud owner pulled out the drawers and ran a caressing hand over the alphabetically marked cards, explaining his work with quickening enthusiasm.

"I haven't overlooked anything," he said. "It's all here—all the knowledge that is required to run a modern farm in a businesslike up-to-date way. The beauty of it is, you can find the answer to any farm problem in a minute's time." By way of



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demonstrating the efficacy of his system, he asked himself a few questions and instantly plucked forth the answers, neatly typed on thin cards. "I did all this myself," he ended, pointing to a typewriter beneath the bed.

"Where'd you get all your information?" asked Bob.

"From books and farm papers. Almost all of our knowledge comes from reading."

"And do you think you can run a farm that way?" Bob was plainly incredulous.

"Most assuredly. A farm, if it is to be run profitably, must be managed as carefully as any other business."

Bob smiled in gentle dissent, shaking his head. "I never heard of runnin' a farm thataway," he said, nodding at the oak cabinet.

Sherwood was undismayed.

"No doubt it does seem theoretical to you—here in a city rooming house. But it won't on a farm."

"You own a farm?" asked Bob.

"Not—just yet." Sherwood hesitated, thoughtfully; then, with the impulsiveness which often prompts lonely men in big cities to divulge their intimate affairs to strangers, he said: "But I shall pretty soon. I'm negotiating now for a place. Advertised in the farm journals and got about a thousand answers—wait, I'll show you." He crossed to a steamer trunk, threw up the lid, and took out a bundle of photographs of assorted shapes and sizes. "Pictures of some of the places," he explained. "Oh, here's another picture of Dolores!" He stooped and picked up the photograph, then handed it to Bob.

It was a fresh view of her, taken in a low-necked dress, and she was more charming, more captivating, than in either of the other two pictures—or so Bob thought. She was gazing into the "eye" of the camera, and as Bob looked down into her softly glowing, dark eyes he felt his blood quicken. What a wonderful girl she was! . . . Dolores. The name suited her well.

Sherwood, standing at his elbow, was displaying the farm pictures and talking of them, but Bob neither saw nor heard. He had eyes and thoughts only for the picture he held in his hand. At the first opportunity he asked:

"What is her last name?"

"Sherwood," came the prompt answer.

"Then she's—is she—" Bob stopped lamely, flushing with embarrassment. He wanted to say,

"Is she your wife?"—but the words stuck in his throat.

"She's my sister," said Sherwood, looking closely at one of his pictures.

A great billow of relief surged gratefully over Bob. He longed to say something that would express his joy. He looked at Sherwood with shining eyes and said:

"Do you mind me saying, Mr. Sherwood, that your sister is the most beautiful girl I've ever seen?"

Sherwood glanced up from the picture he was studying. A smile edged his full lips.

"Not at all. Everybody who sees her says the same thing."

Bob became conscious of a sudden depression. Such a girl must have many admirers—many suitors. "She's not engaged?" he asked quickly.

Sherwood nodded briefly.

"As a matter of fact, she is; and to a fellow I most heartily detest. Oscar Lawrie's his name, and he's a ne'er-do-well, if ever there was one."

Bob's first feeling was like unto that of a hungry dog who sees a beefsteak snatched from him before he can sink his teeth into it. He felt cheated, abused. He had, while gazing at Dolores's picture, built a pretty romance around himself. He had looked ahead to the time when he and Sherwood would be warm friends; he had pictured the day when Sherwood would present him to his sister; he had seen himself making love to Dolores, and at last winning her heart. And now his romance—a house of cards—came clattering about his ears, shattered by a word. It was rough—rough! He gazed into the dark eyes of the girl he had lost, and, almost unconsciously, shook his head with the slow sadness of one who utters a heart-breaking farewell.

Sherwood now thrust another photograph into his hand. It was the one which Sherwood had been inspecting narrowly.

"That," said the plump young man, "is the place I've decided to buy."

For perhaps two seconds Bob looked at the photograph without recognizing it—without, indeed, even seeing it. Then, quite suddenly, his eyes widened, and he drew a quick breath and held it. Somewhat mechanically, what of his utter absorption, he put the girl's picture down and held the other to the light. And he shook his head as if very bewildered.

"You seem to know the place," remarked Sherwood.

Bob looked at the round-faced young man steadily for a moment. He was quite silent. At last he moistened his lips and spoke.

"Yes," said he, "I do know it. It's my father's farm."

## II.

At twilight on the following day Bob cut thru the Badger woodlot which adjoined his father's farm on the south, climbed a wooden fence, and tramped across a wheat field to an old style red barn, where he found his father examining the teeth of a harrow in the fading light. There was no sign of any of the hired men, which was somewhat strange. On his way to the barn Bob paused at the several outbuildings for a hasty inspection, and he found plentiful evidence of bumper crops. In fact everything, from silo to hayricks, exhaled the very spirit of prosperity. And it was this which brought a frown of worry to his face. A vague suspicion, conceived on the train en route to Wisconsin from Chicago, was now taking definite shape in his mind.

No telegram had preaged his home-coming, and yet his father, a spare, raw-boned man of fifty, with a brick-red face and shaggy eyebrows, evinced no surprise at sight of him. Neither did he show much gladness.

"Howdy, Bob," he said extending a leathery hand. "Just get in!"

"I came straight here from the station," replied Bob. "Walked it. Where is everybody?"

The senior Yates, feigning an interest in the harrow, did not look at his son.

"All gone, Bob, 'cept your ma and me. I'm sellin' out."

Bob placed his valise on the floor and half seated himself on a plow handle.

"So I understand," he said quietly. "A Mr. Sherwood of Peoria told me."

Even this did not startle the old man. He looked up slowly, drawing the back of his bony hand across his brow—a familiar gesture.

"I thought likely you'd know of it, seen' as you and him lived at the same place in Chicago."

Continued on Page 40