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The Baited Trap

A Story in Five Parts by Edwin Baird

PART IV.

It all had come about so easily, so naturally, without even the faintest suggestion of a jar, that Bob felt somewhat like a man in a dream. That he should be on terms of friendship, if not downright intimacy, with this glorious girl whom he had adored from afar—it seemed too wonderful to be actually true. His feet trod on clouds, instead of asphalt paving blocks. A thrilling exhilaration buoyed him up intoxicatingly. He developed, quite surprisingly, an unsuspected nimbleness of wit, and when they swung into the ultra-fashionable spring tide of Michigan Boulevard he was cleverly holding his own with his two effervescent companions. From time to time, as they moved northward against the well-dressed crowds, he stole sidelong looks at Dolores, who walked beside him. She was so much finer, so much more delightful, and more beautiful and charming than he had ever imagined her to be. Her photograph had told him much, had hinted of the depth of character that lay beneath the beauty of her face, but her photograph now seemed a colorless, lifeless thing.

"None of 'em do her justice," he thought. "And to think that I once believed she couldn't come up to those pictures in every-day life!"

An odd quirk of fancy recalled the opening of "A Tenement Tragedy" and the horror he had felt a minute later. It seemed a long way off now and most unreal—like an unpleasant dream, ages old—and not by the strongest stretch of his imagination could he associate this radiant young creature in the May sunshine with the hideous old woman he had seen on the gloomy stage. But it moved him to ask, as soon as he had an opening:

"Did I upset you girls when I hopped up in the theatre and clapped?"

The girls exchanged quick glances, then burst into such whole-hearted laughter that a passer-by—a narrow shouldered youth wearing a wash-bowl hat—slackened his step and smiled at them sweetly.

Bob looked at them in puzzled good nature.

"Did I say anything funny?" he asked when they had left the syrupy youth behind.

This sent them into another outburst of mirth. Evidently he had said something very funny indeed.

"We were thinking," said Dolores, still laughing, "of paying you to do that regularly at every performance."

"It's the only thing that'll ever get the sketch across," declared Miss Fisher with an emphatic nod of her blond head that set the sigret on her hat trembling like a cornstalk in a smart wind.

"It's a flivver you see," explained Dolores to Bob.

"A flivver?" Bob knitted his brows.

"A failure. We're doing big time with it, but it won't go. What did you think of it?"

Honesty compelled Bob to answer: "As far as I saw of it, it seemed pretty good. But I didn't see it all."

The girls again laughed, the not so exuberantly as before.

"Sure-fire proof of its rankness," nodded Miss Fisher. "He couldn't stand the agony."

Bob reddened.

"The truth is I didn't buy a ticket to see the play, exactly. I bought it for another reason."

"You bought it to see the trained cats!" accused Dolores.

"I didn't even know they had trained cats. No, that ain't it. I went to the theatre because I wanted—" He paused. She was looking up into his face and he was gazing down into her eyes—the most marvellous eyes in the universe! He saw a bit of heaven in each of them. His heart grew warm and began to swell like a pan of dough on the back of a kitchen range. He wanted to say, "I wanted to see you." But how could he? The swelling of his

heart almost suffocated him and wouldn't let him speak.

And, anyhow, an unfortunate mishap, which occurred a moment later, put an abrupt climax on the situation and sprayed his glowing ardor with ice water. Because of his all-absorbing interest in Dolores's eyes he was, of necessity, walking with his head turned sidewise. Thus blinded to the road ahead, he collided squarely, and with considerable force, with a portly matron who had just alighted from her limousine and was proceeding with excessive dignity across the sidewalk toward a millinery establishment, followed by a liveried footman bearing an enormous band box. The matron was outraged, tho not at all hurt, and in answer to Bob's confused apology she raised a pearl-handled lorgnette to her eyes, surveyed him coldly, murmured something about "an uncouth ruffian," and proceeded on her way.

When Bob overtook his companions, who, undesirous of witnessing his discomfiture, had considerably walked on, his train of thought was side-tracked. But there was something else on the main line.

"Why," he asked of Dolores, "do you put all that ugly paint and stuff on your face in the show?"

"That's my art," she said lightly.

"I don't see much art about it," he protested.

She smiled at his naivete.

"Really, you are the most refreshingly honest person I've ever met!"

"Well, I still don't see," he doggedly persisted. "Why you want to disfigure your beau—yourself that way?"

"One of us had to take the weather-beaten part. Since I am less handsome than Annie—well, you see how it is!"

"She's kidding you, Mr. Yates," cut in Annie. "She knows as well as you, or anybody else, that she's got me

lashed to the jibbail when it comes to looks. If our sketch doesn't go on the reefs in a week we'll take turn about at the old hag's role—but say," she broke off to exclaim, "aren't we taking you out of your way, Mr. Yates? You don't have to trail along, you know, unless you want to."

The dreaded moment had come! Vaguely, beneath the warm flush of his happiness, he had apprehended it from the beginning of their walk. He had recognized all along that his position was anomalous, that it was connected with theirs by the exceedingly slender thread of his having known Miss Sherwood's brother—her brother whom his father had outrageously treated, and perhaps ruined! On Miss Fisher's words he could, of course, place but one construction—they had enjoyed their little fling with him, and now they wanted to get rid of him.

He walked on with them a short distance in silence, trying to shape his thoughts for a reply that would allow him to withdraw, without too grievous a wound to his pride. Before he could think of one, Dolores, as if suddenly struck by a happy idea, stopped short with the suggestion:

"Perhaps Mr. Yates would like to go with us to Mother Fritzi's."

Annie faced him vivaciously, her blue eyes sparkling with mischievous merriment.

"Do please come, Mr. Yates!" she begged. "You'll be tickled half to death."

"Sure, I'll come," said Bob, who knew as much about "Mother Fritzi" as a groundhog knows about the nebular hypothesis.

"Then let's get a taxi. It's too far to hike—even on a perfect day like this." She held up two fingers to a taxicab chauffeur loitering near the corner of the Congress Hotel, and a minute later his vehicle sidled into the curb where they stood.

She gave the man an address which Bob failed to hear, then stepped into the car, followed by Dolores.

Bob entered last, fumbling surrepti-