

The Sealed Room

A Girl Describes the Man She Would Like to Marry

By Edwin Baird
PART III.

Gas belched from the room in a stifling flood, and Tom dropped to the floor, dragging the girl and the little minister down beside him.

"Lower your heads," he commanded, "and don't breathe deep." Then, cautiously, on hands and knees, he started across the threshold. "And don't follow me," he added.

In another moment he remembered something else.

"That gas jet at the end of the hall, turn it out quick! And open all the windows you can find, wide!"

He crawled swiftly into the poisoned room, across the uncarpeted floor to a window which gave upon a fire escape.

The window was sealed with glue and rags, mute and tragic testimony to the careful preparation for death. Nauseated by the sickening fumes, he wrenched it open and leaned far out and breathed deeply of the warm night air.

Then, whirling, he surveyed the room in a hurried, sweeping glance. The rays of a corner arc lamp shone pitilessly athwart a cheap iron cot on which a motionless girl lay prone.

Two seconds more and he had her in his arms and was bearing her to the opened window. Climbing over the sill, he lifted her out upon the fire escape, and as he lowered her to the iron grating he heard the voice of Winifred (at least he knew her first name) call to him from the room:

"Is she alive? Is she?" The words were tremulous with grief and anxiety.

Tom, kneeling beside the slight, still form, laid his thumb to her pulse while loosening her waist at the throat. He looked up, his face very grave.

"I don't know," he said, and began pumping her arms back and forth as one who revives a drowning person. "I'm afraid not. But call an ambulance at once."

An hour later Tom was walking slowly through a quiet thoroughfare with Winifred Snow—he knew her last name now.

"It's a pretty name," he blurted out, and was promptly astounded at his temerity.

She, however, evinced no trace of confusion or self-consciousness. She looked up at him in a sidelong way, and her wistful blue eyes, smiling at him from beneath her wide-brimmed hat, proved once more disquieting.

"Do you think so, really? So many people joke about it. They say it sounds too cold."

Impulsively he thought to answer: "Nothing about you ever could be cold," but he said instead, conventionally enough: "Some people will joke about anything."

Then she directed the talk into another channel, shyly, as if she feared to become too friendly with this stranger who had misjudged her enough to try to patch up an acquaintance with her on the street, and yet who had proved a friend in need so unexpectedly.

"I don't believe he meant to be impertinent," she thought, and then—

"D'you know," she said, "I'm so excited over Dora, and everything, I can't think straight. But I do want to thank you, more than I can say, for what you've done. You've been perfectly fine, and I—why, I almost owe you my life!"

To walk beside her and hear her utter such thoughts as these was enough to turn the head of a man less susceptible than Tom. And Tom was very susceptible. Ecstatic, exhilarated ineffably, he trod on air, as one in a glorious dream. Nor did he awake until he heard her say:

"Well, here we are. This is where I live. Thank you for walking home with me."

They stood in a populous street, before a huge brick house of faded grandeur, repellent in its unwashed aspect and air of slovenliness. Upon this structure Tom bent a disapproving eye, and became aware of a window sign announcing "Furnished Rooms," and several men in shirt sleeves, lounging on the high front steps.

The girl inclined her head toward them, and, turning to Tom with a smile that was half amusement and half contempt, explained:

"My fellow lodgers."

Tom viewed them with dislike.

"Tell me," he blundered, "I don't quite understand—why do you—a girl like you—I—I mean to say I don't see why—a girl like you—" He paused in hopeless confusion. His tongue, not for the first time, had spoken his mind too hastily.

She, likewise, was embarrassed, and was grateful for the darkness which hid the hot flush in her cheeks.

"You mean to say you don't see why a girl like me should want to live in a shack like that?"

He looked at the "shack," and then at her, and particularly at her neat attire—lacy things and cool white linen—and nodded, still perplexed.

"I'm sorry I spoke, and I beg your pardon, but you see—"

"Oh, don't apologize. But if you were a girl, and worked in an office for nine dollars a week, maybe you'd understand. I'll have to go in now," she said, turning towards the steps, "and thank you again for all you've done for me—and Dora."

Stark panic throttled Tom McKay. He was losing her! Perhaps for ever! The thought was terrifying. He stepped after her, feeling like one submerged.

"Miss Snow—before you go—I—I'd like to give you my name and address. In case your friend—" he hurriedly added, "in case I could be of any help again."

He drew a card from one pocket, a pencil from another, employed both busily, gave the card to her, and bowed and withdrew.

He had gone three

blocks before he re-

membered that he,

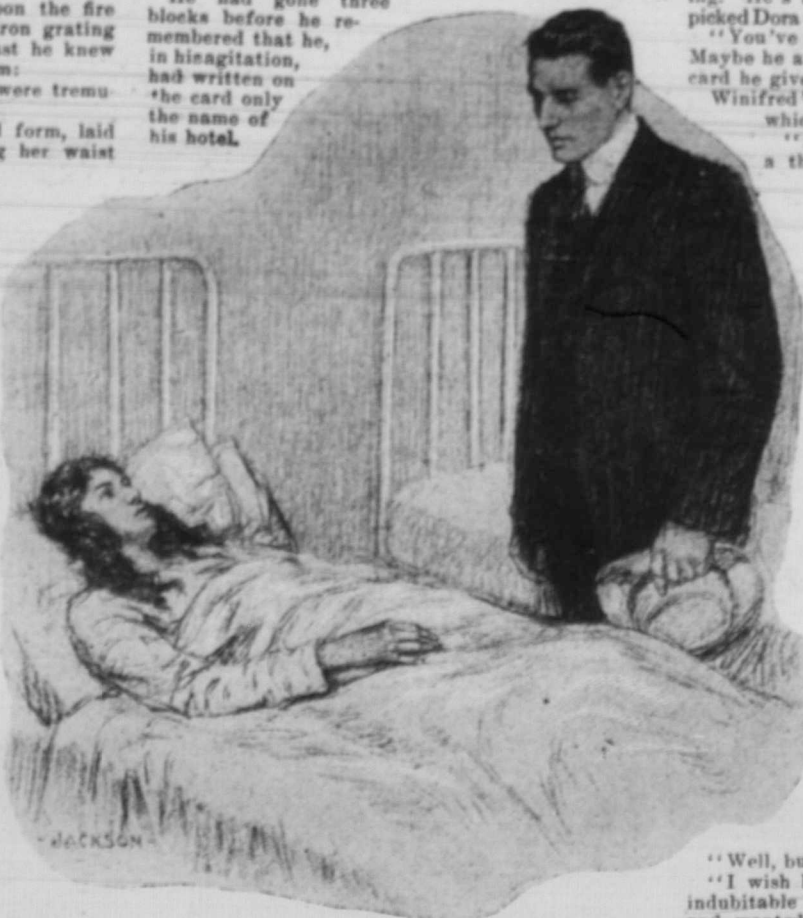
in his agitation,

had written on

the card only

the name of

his hotel.



He looked down at her wasted face and she smiled feebly up at him

It was considerably later before he discovered another mistake of importance: the card bore the name of Patrick J. Henneberry of the Broadway Motor Car Company.

"Well, if you ain't the limit!" remarked Miss Plum, sitting up in bed and hugging her knees. "Honest, I don't see how you could 'a' done it, kid. Sure you ain't kiddin' me?"

Winifred, brushing her heavy blond hair before the crinkly mirror, indicated, without resentment, that she was not kidding.

"Well, you sure are the limit," repeated Miss Plum; and then, stretching her tired body beneath the sheet, she, like Oliver Twist, asked for more.

But Winifred had fully narrated the evening's episode half a dozen times or more, and had elaborated it and polished all details, and there was nothing more to tell. She said so. She also said she was tired, and all she wanted now was a glass of milk and her bath and bed. Besides, she was thinking now of another matter, upon which she did not care to dwell—unless persuaded to do so.

She did not mention that; but when two girls, of similar tastes and habits, share the same bed in a furnished room they become united by a sort of telepathy, requiring few words and no explanation.

Miss Henrietta Plum, gazing sympathetically at her lovely room-mate, saw only her back, but she read her thoughts unerringly. She said in a gentler voice:

"Ain't it thrillin', Win, you meetin' 'im the second time? Jus' like a novel, wasn't it, Win? D'you s'pose you'll ever see 'im again?"

Winifred lowered the hairbrush and gazed at her reflection in the wavy mirror, and the deep blue eyes, gazing back at her, contained the same wistful look which first had attracted Tom McKay.

"I wonder," she murmured pensively, and picked up the card from the bureau, and read for perhaps the fiftieth time, the printed words thereon. "If only he wasn't an auto agent! And if he only hadn't spoken to me at the theatre! Why couldn't he be—something else?"

Again Miss Plum sat up in bed and clasped her knees with her thin arms, her pale grey eyes wide with astonishment. "Well, if you ain't the—What d'you want, anyway? A multimillionaire?"

"Auto agents," continued Winifred, "are so sporty, and I'm getting so I hate sporty men. I hate everything connected with the city, and I wish I'd never seen one! I wish I lived on a farm! . . . Still," she added, after a moment's reflection, "he didn't seem to be that sort at all, come to think of it. He seemed well-bred and kind of quiet. I wonder—"

"What'd he look like?" eagerly asked the enraptured Miss Plum.

"Oh—big? Big and bronzed, and athletic-looking. He's terribly strong—for an auto agent. He picked Dora up as if she was a baby, and carried her—"

"You've told me that, dear, seventy-seven times. Maybe he ain't no auto man after all. Maybe that card he give you b'longs to somebody else."

Winifred's blue eyes lit with a sudden hope, which as suddenly died away.

"No," she sighed, braiding her hair in a thick yellow plait. "It's his, all right."

He told me his name, and it was Irish. I don't remember just what, but it must have been Patrick J. Henneberry."

A little later, clad in a blue-flowered dressing robe, she pattered down the musty hall to the bathroom, and, later still, glowing rosily, she procured a bottle of milk from the window ledge, swallowing the contents, turned out the gas, and crept quietly into bed beside Henrietta.

For five minutes silence embraced the room. Then, softly: "Win!"

"Yes?"

"Sleep?"

"No."

"Win, if it should happen he wasn't a auto man, what would you rather he'd be?"

A sudden and violent commotion in the bed denoted that Win, far from being sleepy, had turned on her side in wide-awake animation.

"D'you know, I was just thinking of that very same thing! I was thinking that people who live in the country are the only ones who have any fun in this world. They're the only ones who get a square deal these days. What do you and I get out of life, living like beggars in a place like this, working for starvation wages—"

"Well, but what would you rather—"

"I wish he was a farmer!" said Winifred with indubitable emphasis. "And I wish he loved me, and wanted to marry me, and carry me back to his farm. But shucks! What's the use of wishing? You could tell by his clothes and the way he talked that he never saw a farm in his life, and wouldn't know a pig from a yearling heifer." With this she turned her face to the wall and shaped her thoughts for sleep.

While she was sleeping and dreaming of Tom, suppose we look in on him? The exciting events of the last few hours had left his mind in a chaotic swirl, which disregarded sleep. He had, of course, forgotten his train, now screaming across the western prairies. Thus we find him pacing his room, and thinking, always thinking of her.

He thought of things she had said to him as they strolled along together, and he wondered now, though he hadn't then, why she had said so little of Dora. Why hadn't she told him who Dora was? Why hadn't she explained how she happened to know such a girl, and why was she so concerned about her. Why had she made such a mystery of the thing? And what did all this signify?

He shrank from naming the obvious answer, even to himself; and yet it lay coiled in the back of his mind, as poisonous as a cobra and, ready to spring and devour him, contributed no little to his sleeplessness.

Once, in his restless striding to and fro, he was stung by a poignant regret that he had come to Chicago—or, having come, that he had encountered her. If he hadn't met her he would be sleeping now, instead of suffering this torment. As matters stood—well, here he was insanely in love with a girl

Continued on Page 46

A BUSINESS

On this page Life Members organization to less be of inter should be very the next few in this thing appe as indicated in R. Murray, Wi to our annual last:—

"There is a important phase the developmen izations that v my mind by c sion this morni and we cannot ticularly just the insuring a that the first ahead of us al hideous war to This is put fo the address of Wood, and alw "Now who this first probl hands is brow elusion, and t the day we a we hope for, there are goin notice in the Grerar, which you this after the problems on your prog from Saskate to you to-mor the War." I the line along believe that the autocracy been vanquish ada are going our own on o have the fight ple and the f I believe, an democratic pe that the fa Western Can we have in t izations are anxious, as y pointed out, other class or but at the sa to fight if v going to do izations in and more m we all realiz ter, the need you cannot f ably some c you had mo get certain r get them if

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