

Buttered Side Down: Stories

by

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1. The Frog And The Puddle

Any one who has ever written for the magazines (nobody could devise a more sweeping opening; it includes the iceman who does a humorous article on the subject of his troubles, and the neglected wife next door, who journalizes) knows that a story the scene of which is not New York is merely junk. Take Fifth Avenue as a framework, pad it out to five thousand words, and there you have the ideal short story.

Consequently I feel a certain timidity in confessing that I do not know Fifth Avenue from Hester Street when I see it, because I've never seen it. It has been said that from the latter to the former is a ten-year journey, from which I have gathered that they lie some miles apart. As for Forty-second Street, of which musical comedians carol, I know not if it be a fashionable shopping thoroughfare or a factory district.

A confession of this kind is not only good for the soul, but for the editor. It saves him the trouble of turning to page two.

This is a story of Chicago, which is a first cousin of New York, although the two are not on chummy terms. It is a story of that part of Chicago which lies east of Dearborn Avenue and south of Division Street, and which may be called the Nottingham curtain district.

In the Nottingham curtain district every front parlor window is embellished with a "Rooms With or Without Board" sign. The curtains themselves have mellowed from their original department-store-basement-white to a rich, deep tone of Chicago smoke, which has the notorious London variety beaten by several shades. Block after block the two-story-and-basement houses stretch, all grimy and gritty and looking sadly down upon the five square feet of mangy grass forming the pitiful front yard of each. Now and then the monotonous line of front stoops is broken by an outjutting basement delicatessen shop. But not often. The Nottingham curtain district does not run heavily to delicacies. It is stronger on creamed cabbage and bread pudding.

Up in the third floor back at Mis' Buck's (elegant rooms \$2.50 and up a week. Gents preferred) Gertie was brushing her hair for the night. One hundred strokes with a bristle brush. Anyone who reads the beauty column in the newspapers knows that. There was something heroic in the sight of Gertie brushing her hair one hundred strokes before going to bed at night. Only a woman could understand her doing it.

Gertie clerked downtown on State Street, in a gents' glove department. A gents' glove department requires careful dressing on the part of its clerks, and the manager, in selecting them, is particular about choosing "lookers," with especial attention to figure, hair, and finger nails. Gertie was a looker. Providence had taken care of that. But you cannot leave your hair and finger nails to Providence. They demand coaxing with a bristle brush and an orangewood stick.

Now clerking, as Gertie would tell you, is fierce on the feet. And when your feet are tired you are tired all over. Gertie's feet were tired every night. About eight-thirty she longed to peel off her clothes, drop them in a heap on the floor, and tumble, unbrushed, unwashed, unmanicured, into bed. She never did it.

Things had been particularly trying to-night. After washing out three handkerchiefs and pasting them with practised hand over the mirror, Gertie had taken off her shoes and discovered a hole the size of a silver quarter in the heel of her left stocking. Gertie had a country-bred horror of holey stockings. She darned the hole, yawning, her aching feet pressed against the smooth, cool leg of the iron bed. That done, she had had the colossal courage to wash her face, slap cold cream on it, and push back the cuticle around her nails.

Seated huddled on the side of her thin little iron bed, Gertie was brushing her hair bravely, counting the strokes somewhere in her sub-conscious mind and thinking busily all the while of something else. Her brush rose, fell, swept downward, rose, fell, rhythmically.

"Ninety-six, ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety -- Oh, darn it! What's the use!" cried Gertie, and hurled the brush across the room with a crack.

She sat looking after it with wide, staring eyes until the brush blurred in with the faded red roses on the carpet. When she found it doing that she got up, wadded her hair viciously into a hard bun in the back instead of braiding it carefully as usual, crossed the room (it wasn't much of a trip), picked up the brush, and stood looking down at it, her under lip caught between her teeth. That is the humiliating part of losing your temper and throwing things. You have to come down to picking them up, anyway.

Her lip still held prisoner, Gertie tossed the brush on the bureau, fastened her nightgown at the throat with a safety pin, turned out the gas and crawled into bed.

Perhaps the hard bun at the back of her head kept her awake. She lay there with her eyes wide open and sleepless, staring into the darkness.

At midnight the Kid Next Door came in whistling, like one unused to boarding-house rules. Gertie liked him for that. At the head of the stairs he stopped whistling and came softly into his own third floor back just next to Gertie's. Gertie liked him for that, too.

The two rooms had been one in the fashionable days of the Nottingham curtain district, long before the advent of Mis' Buck. That thrifty lady, on coming into possession, had caused a flimsy partition to be run up, slicing the room in twain and doubling its rental.

Lying there Gertie could hear the Kid Next Door moving about getting ready for bed and humming "Every Little Movement Has a Meaning of Its Own" very lightly, under his breath. He polished his shoes briskly, and Gertie smiled there in the darkness of her own room in sympathy. Poor kid, he had his beauty struggles, too.

Gertie had never seen the Kid Next Door, although he had come four months ago. But she knew he wasn't a grouch, because he alternately whistled and sang off-key tenor while dressing in the morning. She had also discovered that his bed must run along the same wall against which her bed was pushed. Gertie told herself that there was something almost immodest about being able to hear him breathing as he slept. He had tumbled into bed with a little grunt of weariness.

Gertie lay there another hour, staring into the darkness. Then she began to cry softly, lying on her face with her head between her arms. The cold cream and the salt tears mingled and formed a slippery paste. Gertie wept on because she couldn't help it. The longer she wept the more difficult her sobs became, until finally they bordered on the hysterical. They filled her lungs until they ached and reached her throat with a force that jerked her head back.

"Rap-rap-rap!" sounded sharply from the head of her bed.

Gertie stopped sobbing, and her heart stopped beating. She lay tense and still, listening. Everyone knows that spooks rap three times at the head of one's bed. It's a regular high-sign with them.

"Rap-rap-rap!"

Gertie's skin became goose-flesh, and coldwater effects chased up and down her spine.

"What's your trouble in there?" demanded an unspooky voice so near that Gertie jumped. "Sick?"

It was the Kid Next Door.

"N-no, I'm not sick," faltered Gertie, her mouth close to the wall. Just then a belated sob that had stopped halfway when the raps began hustled on to join its sisters. It took Gertie by surprise, and brought prompt response from the other side of the wall.

"I'll bet I scared you green. I didn't mean to, but, on the square, if you're feeling sick, a little nip of brandy will set you up. Excuse my mentioning it, girlie, but I'd do the same for my sister. I hate like sin to hear a woman suffer like that, and, anyway, I don't know whether you're fourteen or forty, so it's perfectly respectable. I'll get the bottle and leave it outside your door."

"No you don't!" answered Gertie in a hollow voice, praying meanwhile that the woman in the room below might be sleeping. "I'm not sick, honestly I'm not. I'm just as much obliged, and I'm dead sorry I woke you up with my blubbering. I started out with the soft pedal on, but things got away from me. Can you hear me?"

"Like a phonograph. Sure you couldn't use a sip of brandy where it'd do the most good?"

"Sure."

"Well, then, cut out the weeps and get your beauty sleep, kid. He ain't worth sobbing over, anyway, believe me."

"He!" snorted Gertie indignantly. "You're cold. There never was anything in peg-tops that could make me carry on like the heroine of the Elsie series."

"Lost your job?"

"No such luck."

"Well, then, what in Sam Hill could make a woman----"

"Lonesome!" snapped Gertie. "And the floorwalker got fresh to-day. And I found two gray hairs to-night. And I'd give my next week's pay envelope to hear the double click that our front gate gives back home."

"Back home!" echoed the Kid Next Door in a dangerously loud voice. "Say, I want to talk to you. If you'll promise you won't get sore and think I'm fresh, I'll ask you a favor. Slip on a kimono and we'll sneak down to the front stoop and talk it over. I'm as wide awake as a chorus girl and twice as hungry. I've got two apples and a box of crackers. Are you on?"

Gertie snickered. "It isn't done in our best sets, but I'm on. I've got a can of sardines and an orange. I'll be ready in six minutes."

She was, too. She wiped off the cold cream and salt tears with a dry towel, did her hair in a schoolgirl braid and tied it with a big bow, and dressed herself in a black skirt and a baby blue dressing sacque. The Kid Next Door was waiting outside in the hall. His gray sweater covered a multitude of sartorial deficiencies. Gertie stared at him, and he stared at Gertie in the sickly blue light of the boarding-house hall, and it took her one-half of one second to discover that she liked his mouth, and his eyes, and the way his hair was mussed.

"Why, you're only a kid!" whispered the Kid Next Door, in surprise.

Gertie smothered a laugh. "You're not the first man that's been deceived by a pig-tail braid and a baby blue waist. I could locate those two gray hairs for you with my eyes shut and my feet in a sack. Come on, boy. These Robert W. Chambers situations make me nervous."

Many earnest young writers with a flow of adjectives and a passion for detail have attempted to describe the quiet of a great city at night, when a few million people within it are sleeping, or ought to be. They work in the clang of a distant owl car, and the roar of an occasional "L" train, and the hollow echo of the footsteps of the late passer-by. They

go elaborately into description, and are strong on the brooding hush, but the thing has never been done satisfactorily.

Gertie, sitting on the front stoop at two in the morning, with her orange in one hand and the sardine can in the other, put it this way:

"If I was to hear a cricket chirp now, I'd screech. This isn't really quiet. It's like waiting for a cannon cracker to go off just before the fuse is burned down. The bang isn't there yet, but you hear it a hundred times in your mind before it happens."

"My name's Augustus G. Eddy," announced the Kid Next Door, solemnly. "Back home they always called me Gus. You peel that orange while I unroll the top of this sardine can. I'm guilty of having interrupted you in the middle of what the girls call a good cry, and I know you'll have to get it out of your system some way. Take a bite of apple and then wade right in and tell me what you're doing in this burg if you don't like it."

"This thing ought to have slow music," began Gertie. "It's pathetic. I came to Chicago from Beloit, Wisconsin, because I thought that little town was a lonesome hole for a vivacious creature like me. Lonesome! Listen while I laugh a low mirthless laugh. I didn't know anything about the three-ply, double-barreled, extra heavy brand of lonesomeness that a big town like this can deal out. Talk about your desert wastes! They're sociable and snug compared to this. I know three-fourths of the people in Beloit, Wisconsin, by their first names. I've lived here six months and I'm not on informal terms with anybody except Teddy, the landlady's dog, and he's a trained rat-and-book-agent terrier, and not inclined to overfriendliness. When I clerked at the Enterprise Store in Beloit the women used to come in and ask for something we didn't carry just for an excuse to copy the way the lace yoke effects were planned in my shirtwaists. You ought to see the way those same shirtwaist stack up here. Why, boy, the lingerie waists that the other girls in my department wear make my best hand-tucked effort look like a simple English country blouse. They're so dripping with Irish crochet and real Val and Cluny insertions that it's a wonder the girls don't get stoop-shouldered carrying 'em around."

"Hold on a minute," commanded Gus. "This thing is uncanny. Our cases dovetail like the deductions in a detective story. Kneel here at my feet, little daughter, and I'll tell you the story of my sad young life. I'm no child of the city streets, either. Say, I came to this town because I thought there was a bigger field for me in Gents' Furnishings. Joke, what?"

But Gertie didn't smile. She gazed up at Gus, and Gus gazed down at her, and his fingers fiddled absently with the big bow at the end of her braid.

"And isn't there?" asked Gertie, sympathetically.

"Girlie, I haven't saved twelve dollars since I came. I'm no tightwad, and I don't believe in packing everything away into a white marble mausoleum, but still a gink kind of whispers to himself that some day he'll be furnishing up a kitchen pantry of his own."

"Oh!" said Gertie.

"And let me mention in passing," continued Gus, winding the ribbon bow around his finger, "that in the last hour or so that whisper has been swelling to a shout."

"Oh!" said Gertie again.

"You said it. But I couldn't buy a secondhand gas stove with what I've saved in the last half-year here. Back home they used to think I was a regular little village John Drew, I was so dressy. But here I look like a yokel on circus day compared to the other fellows in the store. All they need is a field glass strung over their shoulder to make them look like a clothing ad in the back of a popular magazine. Say, girlie, you've got the prettiest hair I've seen since I blew in here. Look at that braid! Thick as a rope! That's no relation to the piles of jute that the Flossies here stack on their heads. And shines! Like satin."

"It ought to," said Gertrude, wearily. "I brush it a hundred strokes every night. Sometimes I'm so beat that I fall asleep with my brush in the air. The manager won't stand for any romping curls or hooks-and-eyes that don't connect. It keeps me so busy being beautiful, and what the society writers call 'well groomed,' that I don't have time to sew the buttons on my underclothes."

"But don't you get some amusement in the evening?" marveled Gus. "What was the matter with you and the other girls in the store? Can't you hit it off?"

"Me? No. I guess I was too woodsy for them. I went out with them a couple of times. I guess they're nice girls all right; but they've got what you call a broader way of looking at things than I have. Living in a little town all your life makes you narrow. These girls!-- Well, maybe I'll get educated up to their plane some day, but----"

"No, you don't!" hissed Gus. "Not if I can help it."

"But you can't," replied Gertie, sweetly. "My, ain't this a grand night! Evenings like this I used to love to putter around the yard after supper, sprinkling the grass and weeding the radishes. I'm the greatest kid to fool around with a hose. And flowers! Say, they just grow for me. You ought to have seen my pansies and nasturtiums last summer."

The fingers of the Kid Next Door wandered until they found Gertie's. They clasped them.

"This thing just points one way, little one. It's just as plain as a path leading up to a cozy little three-room flat up here on the North Side somewhere. See it? With me and you married, and playing at housekeeping in a parlor and bedroom and kitchen? And both of us going down town to work in the morning just the same as we do now. Only not the same, either."

"Wake up, little boy," said Gertie, prying her fingers away from those other detaining ones. "I'd fit into a three-room flat like a whale in a kitchen sink. I'm going back to

Beloit, Wisconsin. I've learned my lesson all right. There's a fellow there waiting for me. I used to think he was too slow. But say, he's got the nicest little painting and paper-hanging business you ever saw, and making money. He's secretary of the K. P.'s back home. They give some swell little dances during the winter, especially for the married members. In five years we'll own our home, with a vegetable garden in the back. I'm a little frog, and it's me for the puddle."

Gus stood up slowly. Gertie felt a little pang of compunction when she saw what a boy he was.

"I don't know when I've enjoyed a talk like this. I've heard about these dawn teas, but I never thought I'd go to one," she said.

"Good-night, girlie," interrupted Gus, abruptly. "It's the dreamless couch for mine. We've got a big sale on in tan and black seconds to-morrow."

2. The Man Who Came Back

There are two ways of doing battle against Disgrace. You may live it down; or you may run away from it and hide. The first method is heart-breaking, but sure. The second cannot be relied upon because of the uncomfortable way Disgrace has of turning up at your heels just when you think you have eluded her in the last town but one.

Ted Terrill did not choose the first method. He had it thrust upon him. After Ted had served his term he came back home to visit his mother's grave, intending to take the next train out. He wore none of the prison pallor that you read about in books, because he had been shortstop on the penitentiary all-star baseball team, and famed for the dexterity with which he could grab up red-hot grounders. The storied lock step and the clipped hair effect also were missing. The superintendent of Ted's prison had been one of the reform kind.

You never would have picked Ted for a criminal. He had none of those interesting phrenological bumps and depressions that usually are shown to such frank advantage in the Bertillon photographs. Ted had been assistant cashier in the Citizens' National Bank. In a mad moment he had attempted a little sleight-of-hand act in which certain Citizens' National funds were to be transformed into certain glittering shares and back again so quickly that the examiners couldn't follow it with their eyes. But Ted was unaccustomed to these now-you-see-it-and-now-you-don't feats and his hand slipped. The trick dropped to the floor with an awful clatter.

Ted had been a lovable young kid, six feet high, and blonde, with a great reputation as a dresser. He had the first yellow plush hat in our town. It sat on his golden head like a halo. The women all liked Ted. Mrs. Dankworth, the dashing widow (why will widows persist in being dashing?), said that he was the only man in our town who knew how to wear a dress suit. The men were forever slapping him on the back and asking him to have a little something.

Ted's good looks and his clever tongue and a certain charming Irish way he had with him caused him to be taken up by the smart set. Now, if you've never lived in a small town you will be much amused at the idea of its boasting a smart set. Which proves your ignorance. The small town smart set is deadly serious about its smartness. It likes to take six-hour runs down to the city to fit a pair of shoes and hear Caruso. Its clothes are as well made, and its scandals as crisp, and its pace as hasty, and its golf club as dull as the clothes, and scandals, and pace, and golf club of its city cousins.

The hasty pace killed Ted. He tried to keep step in a set of young folks whose fathers had made our town. And all the time his pocketbook was yelling, "Whoa!" The young people ran largely to scarlet-upholstered touring cars, and country-club doings, and house parties, as small town younger generations are apt to. When Ted went to high school half the boys in his little clique spent their after-school hours dashing up and down Main street in their big, glittering cars, sitting slumped down on the middle of their spines in

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