

THE THREE OF THEM

(Continued from First Page.)

"Now look here, Ed Healey; I get up at 6:30, but I can't see a joke before 10. If you're trying to be funny!"

"Funny? Why, say, listen, Mrs. Foote. I may be a night clerk, but I'm not so low as to get you out at 6:30 to spring a thing like that in fun. I mean it. So did she."

"But a kind of moaning! And then dull raps!"

"Those are her words. A kind of m—"

"Let's not make a chant of it. I think I get you. I'll be down there in ten minutes. Telephone her, will you?"

"Can't you make it five?"

"Not without skipping something vital."

Still, it couldn't have been a second over ten, including shoes, hair and hooks-and-eyes. And a fresh white blouse. It was Martha Foote's theory that a hotel housekeeper, dressed for work, ought to be as inconspicuous as a steel engraving. She would have been, too, if it hadn't been for her eyes.

She paused a moment before the door of six-eighteen and took a deep breath. At the first rat-tat of her knuckles on the door there had sounded a shrill "Come in!" But before she could turn the knob the door was flung open by a kimonoed mulatto girl, her eyes all white. The girl began to jabber, incoherently, but Martha Foote passed on through the little hall to the door of the bedroom.

Six-eighteen was in bed. At sight of her Martha Foote knew that she had to deal with an overwrought woman. Her hair was pushed back wildly from her forehead. Her arms were clasped about her knees. At the left her nightgown had slipped down so that one plump white shoulder gleamed against the background of her streaming hair. The room was in almost comic disorder. It was a room in which a struggle has taken place between its occupants and that burning-eyed hag, sleeplessness. The hag, it was plain, had won. A half-emptied glass of milk was on the table by the bed. Warmed, and sipped slowly, it had evidently failed to soothe. A tray of dishes littered another table. Yesterday's dishes, their contents congealed. Books and magazines, their covers spread wide as if they had been flung, sprawled where they lay. A little heap of gray-black cigarette stubs. The window curtain awry where she had stood there during a feverish moment of the sleepless night, looking down upon the lights of Grant Park and the somber black void beyond that was Lake Michigan. A tiny satin bedroom slipper on a chair, its mate, sole up, peeping out from under the bed. A pair of satin slippers alone, distributed thus, would make a nun's cell look disreputable. Over all this disorder the ceiling lights, the wall lights and the light from two rosy lamps, beat mercilessly down; and upon the white-faced woman in the bed.

She stared, hollow-eyed, and Martha Foote, in the doorway, gazed serenely back upon her. And Geisha McCoy's quick intelligence and drama-sense responded to the picture of this calm and capable figure in the midst of the feverish, overheated room. In that moment the nervous pucker between her eyes ironed out ever so little, and something resembling a wan smile crept into her face. And what she said was:

"I wouldn't have believed it."

"Believed what?" inquired Martha Foote, pleasantly.

"That there was anybody left in the world who could look like that in a white shirtwaist at 6:30 a.m. Is that all your own hair?"

"Strictly."

"Some people have all the luck," sighed Geisha McCoy, and dropped listlessly back on her pillows. Martha Foote came forward into the room. At that instant the woman in bed sat up again, tense, every nerve strained in an attitude of listening. The mulatto girl had come swiftly to the foot of the bed and was clutching the footboard, her knuckles showing white.

"Listen!" A hissing whisper from the haggard woman in the bed. "What's that?"

"Wha' dat!" breathed the colored girl, all her elegance gone, her every look and motion a hundred-year throwback to her voodoo-haunted ancestors.

The three women remained rigid, listening. From the wall somewhere behind the bed came a low, weird monotonous sound, half wail, half croaking moan, like a banshee with a cold. A clanking, then, as of chains. A s-s-swish. Then three dull raps, seemingly from within the very wall itself.

The colored girl was trembling. Her lips were moving, soundlessly. But Geisha McCoy's emotion was made of different stuff.

"Now look here," she said, desperately. "I don't mind a sleepless night. I'm used to 'em. But usually I can drop off at 5 for a little while. And that's been going on—well, I don't know how long. It's driving me crazy. Blanche, you fool, stop that hand wringing! I tell you there's no such

thing as ghosts. Now you"—she turned to Martha Foote again—"you tell me, for God's sake, what is that!"

And into Martha Foote's face there came such a look of mingled compassion and mirth as to bring a quick flame of fury into Geisha McCoy's eyes.

"Look here, you may think it's funny, but—"

"I don't. I don't. Wait a minute. Martha Foote turned and was gone. An instant later the weird sounds ceased. The two women in the room looked toward the door, expectantly. And through it came Martha Foote, smiling. She turned and beckoned to some one without. "Come on," she said. Come on." She put out a hand, encouragingly, and brought forward the shrinking, cowering, timorous figure of Anna Czarnik, scrub woman on the sixth floor. Her hand still on her shoulder, Martha Foote led her to the center of the room, where she stood, gazing dumbly about. She was the scrub woman you've seen in every hotel from San Francisco to Scituate. A shapeless, moist, blue calico mass. Her shoes turned up ludicrously at the toes, as do the shoes of one who crawls her way backward, crab-like, on hands and knees. Her hands were the shriveled, unlovely members that bespeak long and daily immersion in dirty water. But even had those invariable marks of her trade been lacking you could not have failed to recognize her type by the large and glittering mock-diamond comb which failed to catch up her dark and stringy hair in the back.

One kindly hand on the woman's arm, Martha Foote performed the introduction.

"This is Mrs. Anna Czarnik, late of Poland. Widowed. Likewise childless. Also brotherless. Also many other uncomfortable things. But the life of the crowd in the scrub-girls' quarters on the top floor. Aren't you, Anna? Mrs. Anna Czarnik, I'm sorry to say, is the source of the blood-curdling moan, and the swishing, and the clanking, and the ghost raps. There is a service stairway just on the other side of this wall. Anna Czarnik was performing her morning job of scrubbing it. The swishing was her wet rag. The clanking was her pail. The dull raps her scrubbing brush striking the stair corner just behind your wall."

"You're forgetting the wail," Geisha McCoy suggested, icily.

"That was Anna Czarnik singing."

"Singing?"

Martha Foote turned and spoke a gibberish of Polish and English to the bewildered woman at her side. Anna Czarnik's dull face lighted up ever so little.

"She says the thing she was singing is a Polish folk-song about death and sorrow, and it's called a—what was that, Anna?"

"Dumka."

"It's called a dumka. It's a song of mourning, you see. Of grief. And of bitterness against the invaders who have laid her country bare."

"Well, what's the idea?" demanded Geisha McCoy. "What kind of a hotel is this anyway? Scrubgirls waking people up in the middle of the night with a Polish cabaret. If she wants to sing her hymn of hate why does she have to pick on me?"

"I'm sorry. You can go, Anna. No sing, remember! Sh-sh-sh!"

Anna Czarnik nodded and made her unwieldy escape.

Geisha McCoy waved a hand at the mulatto maid. "Go to your room, Blanche. I'll ring when I need you."

The girl vanished, gratefully, without a backward glance at the disorderly room. Martha Foote felt herself dismissed, too. And yet she made no move to go. She stood there, in the middle of the room, and every housekeeper inch of her yearned to tidy the chaos all about her, and every sympathetic impulse urged her to comfort the nerve-tortured woman before her. Something of this must have shone in her face, for Geisha McCoy's tone was half pettish, half apologetic as she spoke.

"You've no business allowing things like that, you know. My nerves are all shot to pieces, anyway. But even if they weren't, who could stand that kind of torture? A woman like that ought to lose her job for that. One word from me at the office and she—"

"Don't say it, then," interrupted Martha Foote, and came over to the bed. Mechanically her fingers straightened the tumbled covers, removed a jumble of magazines, flicked away the crumbs. "I'm sorry you were disturbed. The scrubbing can't be helped, of course, but there is a rule against unnecessary noise, and she shouldn't have been singing. But—well, I suppose she's got to find relief somehow. Would you believe that woman is the cut-up of the top floor? She's a natural comedian, and she does more for me in the way of keeping the other girls happy and satisfied than—"

"What about me? Where do I come in? Instead of sleeping until 11 I'm kept awake by this Polish dirge. I go on at the Majestic at 4, and again at 9:45, and I'm sick, I tell you. Sick!"

She looked it, too. Suddenly she twisted about and flung herself face downward on the pillow. "Oh, God!"

she cried, without any particular expression. "Oh, God! Oh, God!"

That decided Martha Foote. She crossed over to the other side of the bed, first flicking off the glaring top lights, sat down beside the shaking woman on the pillows and laid a cool, light hand on her shoulder.

"It isn't as bad as that. Or it won't be, anyway, after you've told me about it."

She waited. Geisha McCoy remained as she was, face down. But she did not openly resent the hand on her shoulder. So Martha Foote waited. And as suddenly as six-eighteen had flung herself prone she twisted about and sat up, breathing quickly. She passed a hand over her eyes and pushed back her streaming hair with an oddly desperate little gesture. Her lips were parted, her eyes wide.

"They've got away from me," she cried, and Martha Foote knew what she meant. "I can't hold 'em any more. I work as hard as ever—harder. That's it. It seems the harder I work the colder they get. Last week in Indianapolis they couldn't have been more indifferent if I'd been the educational film that closes the show. And, oh my God! They sit and knit!"

"Knit?" echoed Martha Foote. "But everybody's knitting nowadays."

"Not when I'm on. They can't. But they do. There were three of them in the third row yesterday afternoon. One of 'em was doing a gray sock with four shiny needles. Four! I couldn't keep my eyes off them. And the second was doing a sweater and the third a helmet. I could tell by the shape. And you can't be funny, can you, when you're hypnotized by three stony-faced females all doubled up over a bunch of olive-drab? Olive-drab! I'm scared of it. It sticks out all over the house. Last night there were two young kids in uniform right down in the first row, center, right. I'll bet the oldest wasn't twenty-three. There they sat, looking up at me with their baby faces. That's all they are—kids. The house seems to be peppered with 'em. You wouldn't think olive-drab could stick out the way it does. I can see it farther than red. I can see it day and night. I can't seem to see anything else. I can't—"

Her head came down on her arms, that rested on her tight-hugged knees.

"Somebody of yours in it?" Martha Foote asked quietly. She waited. Then she made a wild guess—an intuitive guess. "Son?"

"How did you know?" Geisha McCoy's head came up.

"I didn't."

"Well, you're right. There aren't fifty people in the world, outside my own friends, who know I've got a grown-up son. It's bad business to have them think you're middle-aged. And besides, there's nothing of the stage about Fred. He's one of those square-jawed kids that are just cut out to be engineers. Third year at Boston Tech."

"Is he still there, then?"

"There! He's in France, that's where he is. Somewhere—in France. And I've worked for twenty-two years with everything in me just set, like an alarm clock, for the time when that kid would step off on his own. He always hated to take money from me, and I loved him for it. I never went on that I didn't think of him. I never came off with a half dozen encores that I didn't wish he could hear it. Why, when I played a college town it used to be a riot, because I loved every fresh-faced boy in the house, and they knew it. And now—and now—what's there in it? What's there in it? I can't even hold 'em any more. I'm through, I tell you. I'm through!"

And waited to be disputed. Martha Foote did not disappoint her.

"There's just this in it. It's up to you to make those three women in the third row forget what they're knitting for, even if they don't forget their knitting. Let 'em go on knitting with their hands, but keep their heads off it. That's your job. You're lucky to have it."

"Lucky?"

"Yes, ma'am! You can do all the dumka stuff in private, the way Anna Czarnik does, but it's up to you to make them laugh twice a day for twenty minutes."

"It's all very well for you to talk that cheer-o stuff. It hasn't come home to you, I can see that."

Martha Foote smiled. "If you don't mind my saying it, Miss McCoy, you're too worn out from lack of sleep to see anything clearly. You don't know me, but I do know you, you see. I know that a year ago Anna Czarnik would have been the most interesting thing in this town for you. You'd have copied her clothes and got a translation of her sob song, and made her as real to a thousand audiences as she was to us this morning; tragic history, patient animal face, comic shoes and all. And that's the trouble with you, my dear. When we begin to brood about our own troubles we lose what they call the human touch. And that's your business asset."

Geisha McCoy was looking up at her with a whimsical half smile. "Look here. You know too much. You're

not really the hotel housekeeper, are you?"

"I am."

"Well, then, you weren't always—"

"Yes, I was. So far as I know I'm the only hotel housekeeper in history who can't look back to the time when she had three servants of her own and her private carriage. I'm no decayed black-silk gentlewoman. Not me. My father drove a hack in Sorgham, Minn., and my mother took in boarders and I helped wait on table. I married when I was twenty, my man died two years later, and I've been earning my living ever since."

"Happy?"

"I must be, because I don't stop to think about it. It's part of my job to know everything that concerns the comfort of the guests of this hotel."

"Including hysterics in six-eighteen?"

"Including. And that reminds me. Up on the twelfth floor of this hotel there's a big old-fashioned bedroom. In half an hour I can have that room made up with the softest linen sheets, and the curtains pulled down, and not a sound. That room's so restful it would put old insomnia himself to sleep. Will you let me tuck you away in it?"

Geisha McCoy slid down among her rumpled covers and nestled her head in the lumpy, tortured pillows. "Me! I'm going to stay right here."

"But this room's—why, it's as stale as a Pullman sleeper. Let me have the chambermaid in to freshen it up while you're gone."

"I'm used to it. I've got to have a room mussed up, to feel at home in it. Thanks just the same."

Martha Foote rose. "I'm sorry. I just thought if I could help—"

Geisha McCoy leaned forward with one of her quick movements and caught Martha Foote's hand in both of her own. "You have! And I don't mean to be rude when I tell you I haven't felt so much like sleeping in weeks. Just turn out those lights, will you? And sort of tiptoe out to give the effect." Then, as Martha Foote reached the door, "And, oh, say!

And that's the way the money goes. Pop goes the weasel.

D'you think she'd sell me those shoes?"

Martha Foote didn't get her dinner that night until almost eight, what with one thing and another. Still, as days go, it wasn't so bad as Monday; she and Irish Nellie, who had come in to turn down her bed, agreed on that. The Senate Hotel housekeeper was having her dinner in her room. Tony, the waiter, had just brought it on and had set it out for her, a gleaming island of white linen and domed-shaped metal tops. Irish Nellie, a privileged person, always waxed conversational as she folded back the bed covers in a neat triangular wedge.

"Six-eighteen kinda ca'med down, didn't she? High toime, the devil. She had us jumpin' yist'iddy. I loike t' went off me head wid her, and th' day girl th' same. Some folks ain't got no feelin', I dunno."

Martha Foote unfolded her napkin with a little tired gesture. "You can't always judge, Nellie. That woman's got a son who has gone to war and she couldn't see her way clear to living without him. She's better now. I talked to her this evening at 6. She said she had a fine afternoon."

"Shure, she ain't the only one. An' what do you be hearin' from your boy, Mis' Phut, that's in France?"

"He's well and happy. His arm's all healed, and he says he'll be in it again by the time I get his letter."

"Humph," said Irish Nellie. And prepared to leave. She cast an inquisitive eye over the little table as she made for the door—inquisitive, but kindly. Her wide Irish nostrils sniffed a familiar smell. "Well, fur th' land, Mis' Phut! If I was housekeeper here, an' cud have hothouse strawberries an' swatebreads under glass an' sparrowgrass an' chicken an' ice cream the way you can whiniver yuh loike, I wouldn't be a-eatin' cornbeef an' cabbage. Not me."

"Oh, yes, you would, Nellie," replied Martha Foote, quietly, and spooned up the thin amber gravy. "Oh, yes, you would."

(Copyright, 1919.)

Around the City.

D ID you ever hear tell of a song called "Pop Goes the Weasel?" The reason for asking is because here's the chorus of it done into a human reel:

Two vamped looking young women were trying on hats. Another woman of the dub type sat on a stool and watched them.

"Becomes me, doesn't it?" The one who asked was looking at herself in a triple mirror that showed every vantage point of a violet tam all bound around with a lemon plume that dangled over her eyes. "Twenty bones is a whole lot to pay out of my salary, but it takes money to dress well these days—"

"Don't forget that dentist bill! You know how you have been worrying over it."

The warning came from the dub.

"You certainly are one damp blanket, Nance."

"Well, you told me to remind you of it if I saw you throwing your money away."

"But I don't consider it throwing money away for a stylish thing like this. I suppose I ought to get something more durable, but—"

"Oh, buy what you want! It will be all the same a hundred years from now."

This cheerful philosophy was administered by the woman who was admiring the back of her head, via a hand glass, topped off with a shape that is called overseas, a military inspiration exactly like soldiers never wore and never will.

"That's what I say, too, M'rie. Looks as if it was made for me, doesn't it? But I can't get it, of course, because I've only got \$15 to my name. Wish I hadn't blown myself to those white kids. I didn't really need them, anyhow in hot weather like this. Say, M'rie, lend me a V till pay day?"

"I like your nerve! If I get this I'll have to go on tick, myself. You've got money, Nance. Lend her some."

"That's a bully good idea, Nance! Lend me a V. I'll pay you Monday—honor-connor—"

The dub had no money with her. She was afraid to carry more than she needed for carfare and lunch until she had finished up her victory bonds—but she could let her have it in the morning.

"I suppose that will have to do. I can pay the fifteen down—and, say, Nance, why don't you get yourself a new hat. You can't wear that shabby thing all summer—"

It wasn't a shabby hat, at all. It was a nice black straw with rosettes of yellow straw. The dub ought to know; she made it herself. It's a shame for people to hurt other people's feelings like that, especially when you know what bonds cost, and M'rie said as much:

"Do let her hat be! It's all right, Nance. I wouldn't spend my good money on this except that it's so perfectly stunning I can't help myself. Don't forget my two dollars, Hon."

And that's the way the money goes. Pop goes the weasel.

A MAN coughed. Another man on the car said to the woman with him:

"That poor chap has a close date with the graveyard. I agree with Ingersoll—that health should be catching instead of disease."

The woman didn't in the least look like one who feels called on to run the universe, but—you never can tell:

"That's all you know about it. Overpopulation caused by unanimous health would have left so little room for food growing that the world would have been starved out before you and I got a chance to be born. No, sir! If I had to run the world I could make a better bluff at it than that, anyhow."

Then she stopped to laugh at her own foolishness, and while she was about it the man helped out with another laugh, in which chumminess was streaked with derision. And the derision put the woman on her mettle.

"I could so! Mind, I'm fully convinced that this world is better than if I had made it myself, but all the same—say, you take the present system: So much time for unrealizing childhood, so little time for youth and the vigorous mentality of middle years and so much more than the two times put together for old age crawling on to senility and death. Now then—"

"If I had been in Nature's place, I should have fixed it this way: All the babies should be, say, eighty years old to begin with. Then they would grow younger every day until they died at last of cholera infantum. My plan would eliminate the loneliness of old age and the fear of death and give to men and women long lifetimes of glorious, ever-growing strength and happiness. But I'm not considering a patent."

While the two chuckled over her nonsense the woman turned suddenly serious.

The man across the aisle had coughed again.

"I reckon Nature knows her own business best. Maybe we need the loneliness and the fear to try us out for something better to come."

And the man with her said:

"I reckon."

A MAP of Latin America done in colored pencils was fluttering over a car-stop platform the other day. A woman picked it up and brought it to this small twinkle of the big, shining Star.

She said she is so proud of a map made by her own youngster that she thought it would be nice if the twinkle was to try and return it to the schoolboy artist whose name was signed to the work, so that his folks could save it away. Aren't mothers the sweetest, curiousest things?

So, Louis Dove, honey, if you want your map you know where to come. P. S.—And here's another find: A white silk handkerchief with an embroidered symbol in the corner—sword and key crossed over a wheel and topped by a wide-winged eagle. It is so twinklike to another handkerchief that a Yank sent to his mother from France that, though this isn't 'actly a lost-and-found column, name the color of the border and the handkerchief is yours.

NANNIE LANCASTER.