

Three, A.M. by Jack Lait

WHEN Sabina Kozminsky began to grow up and take notice, in the slums of the big American town whither she had been brought as an infant by her immigrating parents from Krakow, she had no way of knowing that in time she would turn out to be tall and ravishing and physically exquisite; that the day and the night would come when her satin skin would recoil from the touch of anything less soothing; that she would be somebody and that her soul would yearn for "class."

She was reared like all the rest of the youngsters about the murky and noisy streets of the poor and the rude. She played prisoners' base and shrieked shrilly and threw muddy snowballs at inoffensive peddlers and heckled the policemen and "sassed" her elders and skipped a piece of clothe-line on the congested sidewalks just like the other children of the soiled.

She went to school, where she learned to talk ungrammatical English, chew gum, hate her teachers and all other persons and symbols associated with discipline or restraint; where she learned how to lie and fight and cheat and become a typical adopted daughter of the United States as she is turned out in a million copies from about the same east down where the social riffraff wallows and blooms.

When Sabina reached that stage where her mother began to slap her for spooning with the boys in the dark hallways, and for staying out after nine, and for talking to the taxi driver's wife downstairs against express forbiddance, it was time for her to go to work. Her skirts were lengthened a little and she was taken to a varnish factory, where she was given a job, a number, a time-card and \$3 a week.

It would have been a safe bet that Sabina was set to remain a number until she had stained her hands and probably her soul in the varnish plant, until and maybe even after some greasy roughneck with filthy fingernails had married her at a giddy ceremony, and thereafter she would live out and fight out and swear out the rest of her predestined existence between raising disorderly children in her own image, battling with a maudlin and soggy husband, growing old and slatternly and hard-boiled and sour.

And so it would have drifted, most likely, had it not happened that an unforeseen and apparently inconsequential event had transpired—amateur night at a shabby theatre near the tenement where Sabina and her semi-savage flock lived. Sabina had been to a few Saturday night dances, and her natural gracefulness and developing charms had marked her as a "spicler" that could not be buried in the hubbub and mass confusion of many.

Whenever Sabina danced in the cheap party dress her mother had made she was singled out. Especially when she danced with Tony Bartello did she make all the other varnish-stainers and the rest of the good union girls look like lambs. Tony was a trifle squatty and had his hair raised round on the back of his neck and clipped above his ears like a poodle. But he had sliding feet and a powerful hold and was a hoofing enthusiast, therefore he excelled the mob and was regarded as the logical partner for Sabina, the dancing sensation of the precinct.

The amateur night was to be climaxed with a grand dancing contest for couples, the prize to be \$20, the decision to be by popular applause. There was a good deal of campaigning in advance. Residents of the slums haven't much faith in essential justice, and haven't much use for it, either. They learn early what maneuvering means, in politics especially. And the dancing contest was approached with organized rival cliques and cliques pledged to applaud for certain pairs, merit notwithstanding. Tony had some following, but Sabina was entirely lacking in pre-arranged support, depending entirely on the unattached elements who might sincerely warm to her work—of course, there would be some of those, too, as not every one in the whole house who came would come "instructed."

The grotesque performers did their stuff one after the other, each taking himself and herself with deadly seriousness and a wild, remote clutch at the chance that destiny might come out of heaven and call. The applause was more sympathetic and tactless than grateful. Every one was waiting for the grand dancing contest that would bring forth real talent and real combat.

The first couple naturally rode to a fall. The management had a smattering idea of which ones were in the running and which were the buffers. So the obvious lame ducks were sent skidding and stumbling to the slaughter, and the gang watched with impatience for the real contestants. The third couple began to get some important recognition; the fourth took an ovation; the fifth salved; the sixth a welcome and a getaway that might have satisfied a conquering general; the seventh—and so on.

Sabina and Tony were ninth. The clatter on entrance was not as solid as it had been for some of those with more personal partisans, but the strangers began to lean forward and get interested as the lithe, fire-eyed flapper with the limbs of a race horse and the lines of an antelope bent and swayed to the insidious rhythm of the rag-time orchestration. Tony, the expert, dwindled into a partner on sight—he was only the left-hand accompaniment, the canvas of the animated masterpiece. Several times the "hand" broke loose in the progress of the dance, and at the finish—pandemonium!

There were two more couples, who did nobly, and then the voting. Every one sat tense. The pairs were brought forth in order of their appearance. The openers got scant and scattered tattoos from their relations and immediate neighbors and the few who always favor the licked underdogs. Then it began to work up. The banded clappers bent to it as their own came on. The manager had to raise his hand many a time to stop the noise, and then it ceased reluctantly, though the clappers knew they would get another chance, for when the applause was called off it meant that the objects thereof would appear again in the gradual elimination until only two couples would stand on the stage.

Sabina and Tony were gratefully hailed and were temporarily out of danger. But the first volley for Katey Pheon and Mike Kramer was so formidable, though Katey couldn't dance in the



same county with Sabina if disinterested judges were to rule, that it looked like a walkaway for Katey and Mike. Mike was the secretary of the Garment Workers' local and Katey was a peroxide blonde of the sort that would cause most of the bovine hearts in such a district to hammer. They had come down with a delegation numbering fully a third of the theatre's capacity, and their adherents would "stick"—the harder the opposition and the more shamelessly unfair the fight—the harder.

It took close judging in spots, but at last the contest narrowed down to the two couples. The manager set them before him at the edge of the footlights, then dramatically holding the leashed hands of his audience, he suddenly shot his right palm outward and finger tips upward, over the heads of Katey and Mike. The house shook with the simultaneous contact of perhaps a thousand hard, husky hands. From every section came whistles and wows. Then he raised his left over the heads of Sabina and Tony. It began more slowly, and there wasn't the concentrated explosion. But it lived, grew, swelled until it was a decent showing, enough to demand a recount. Again the hand went up over Katey and Mike; again that spicco, voluminous mob applause, seemingly more hefty than even in the first instance.

And something happened—something psychological, too deeply so to have been planned. Emotional, quick-tempered Sabina, standing there and hearing that convincing, decisive hammering for her rivals, bit her lips, jabbed her finger nails into her palms, but it was no use—the temperament of the Polish girl sizzled in her veins and she began to sob and weep.

The applause stopped—dead. The manager raised his hand over Sabina and Tony. With a cannonading that rattled the walls, every hand that wasn't steeped in the sin of having sworn to put over Katey and Mike, went up at it. It was a riot. A hundred men jumped to their feet and screamed. A thousand feet stamped. Sabina, now carried away by the tumult even more than she was by the danger, shook more hysterically, and the belching and the battering rose in proportion. Katey and Mike looked injured and helpless. But there was nothing to it—Sabina and Tony had won so overwhelmingly that all debate was quashed. And they took the prize amid a thunder that would have embarrassed an emperor.

The direct result was that Sabina was a notable in that community. The result of this result was that the manager of the theatre offered her a week's engagement at fabulous compensation—\$40—and she accepted. She had to quit the factory for that. Her mother shook her head over that, and the idea of her daughter appearing as a professional on a stage was new and rather terrifying, but the \$40 was a clincher. Sabina rehearsed new steps with Tony, who also got \$40 and who temporarily "laid off" from his regular job as bootlegger's deliverer of contraband, and in due time they "opened."

The house was unusually crowded, and the turn "went" like mad. Business remained big all week and the "team" was held over. The vaudeville agents and sharpshooters uptown heard of this "find," and while they were skeptical over "neighborhood discoveries" and headlining "locals," they sneaked down for a look anyway. And they raved—here was a beauty, a natural dancing artist, a rare "personality" and a ready-made "act." Before the fortnight was past Sabina had been run ragged with offers. Of these she accepted one at a sum each week that was low for vaudeville salaries, but to her was beyond the seventh heaven of dreams or hopes. Tony, of course, went along.

Within a month the girl was seen in a better house and within three months she had an offer from a musical show—but alone.

Now came the rub. Tony, who had warded himself into the spotlight through a scratch, was not only satisfied that he had "made" Sabina, and "learned her all she knew," but that she belonged to him. He had changed his name to Anthony Plotrowsky and Sabina had become Elyse Golet with their first move out of the submerged area, and Tony had begun to put on airs and lord it about in front of the theatre and tell his old cronies colossal lies about the letters he got from women and the pathetic devotion of Sabina to him.

In truth, he was as insanely infatuated with Sabina as he naturally might have become, dancing in the arms of so intoxicating a creature, sharing with her the dirty triumphs that had lifted them out of the slums and into the glory.

He had at first announced to her that they would be married, and when Sabina had looked askance, he had changed his tone slightly to one of command. When she had finished telling him just what kind of a fresh bozo he was and just where he got off at, he drew back his fist. Tony had a mighty fist. He could have terrorized almost any one with it, and he was of the nature that would use it for a bluff and follow through with the wallop. But Sabina hadn't been raised where



It Was Only a Step to the Door. He Helped Her on with Her Downy Cloak of Fluffy Fur That Slipped Over Her Fetching, Bare Shoulders.

had been raised for nothing. As he reached back with his fist she reached back for a bottle. "Come on," she said quietly, "you lift that miff from where it is an' I'll bounce this bottle off your bean so hard I'll break both your legs. Who'd you think you're bullyin', you penny-ante bum!" Tony subsided. His next move was to beg. He pleaded, he implored, he swore that he adored the shadow that her lovely form cast and the dirt she spurned with her nifty feet. She looked at him with a sneer and told him to go and marry some Polack slob from where he came from, not go bothering Elyse Golet.

Elyse had begun to "feel" herself. She had been approached and propositioned. That was no novelty to her, young as she still was—but the scenes had changed. Now, instead of sweated teamsters and mustached laborers and insolent street loafers, there were men of consequence and standing pursuing her. Her agent, her house managers, the other actors on the bills, then college boys, then sports, then prosperous business men—finally a millionaire—in that order her vista

had opened and spread in its accustomed gradations.

The offer from the revue manager meant the ultimate. She knew that once planted in that atmosphere, her world would be the top—the top that her imagination then could reach. She knew that she would make good. The only thorn was Tony.

The manager was pat and steadfast on that—Tony was impossible. Sabina was as thoroughly satisfied that he was right, and she was good and tired of

He knew a few harpies on the ragged edge of the "show business" through his few weeks in the profession, and he got shady and shabby jobs here and there for a few weeks, but he had nothing above the average of his type, and he soon found himself up against closed doors and deaf ears. His squawks against the ingratitude of that up-stage dame whom he had "made," and his broad insinuations that her rise hadn't been on the level, and all that went with it as a matter of course, soon wore out its audience. Tony was again a bootlegger's helper, save that he occasionally "worked a cabaret on the side"—hopeless and helpless in his craving for a career, for distinction in that fairland of which the downtrodden and the poor and the incompetent dream—and of which he had lived his brief, embittering hours.

Elyse went right on and right up. First a show-girl with a bit of a specialty, then a principal in a gown and dance number, then "billed," then "featured," then "starred"—a famous beauty, the toast of the night café.

Gradually she had ascended socially. At first a second-rate hotel and a "wild" cafe and taxis and telephone calls and mediocre-priced jewels had set her head spinning. Then a rocco apartment on "the Drive," with its marble and its brass. Then a gaudy racing car—etc., etc., and finally a quiet little apartment in an old-fashioned dwelling far from the "Rialto" and even from the "Avenue," a black town car, fawns by modistes who didn't cater to mere money—in a word, "class."

The brat of the alleys and the muck had blossomed and bloomed into that miracle of all artificial creations—a lady. How keenly she now regretted her whole past—so fresh a past—cannot be told. The errors she had made in the glittering dazzles of her advancement, the brass she had so eagerly grasped as priceless gold, the glass she had so ingeniously seized as blue-white diamonds, the clumsy advances she had thrust to as romance, the—

Elyse Golet even hated the tincan name she had adopted, but which was now welded to her and inseparable because of the publicity; it had become her identity. The spelling of the shabby-genteel Christian name she had selected as the apotheosis of splendor—the last name she had flished from a family that had never done her a-y harm—it gave her the horrors to realize what an all around plebeian she had been—had everlastingly shown herself to have been—to be, probably.

And when Chester Hibben, a splendid man of established status in all the subdivisions of the society that now appealed to her, asked her to marry him, she wept—she wept as she had not since that night when she stood, a tawdry and gawky factory mechanic, heart-broken over the shock of seeing half of a \$20 cash prize go glimmering in a ten-cent dive crowded with hot polloi.

How could she marry Chester Hibben? True, her manner and her speech and her tastes had been refined until she could walk beside him or live with him and raise no eyebrows. But—he didn't know; and she did. Confession alone could not be enough—she might confess her specific misdeeds and he might swallow hard and forgive, but the rest he could never understand. One must live the criminal vulgarities to appreciate them.

She tried to make him realize, but he swept away all her protests. He didn't want to know of what had gone before—he had a fair idea of what rising in musical shows meant to some girls who had to pluck themselves out of the gutter. He wanted her for what she was and as she was, not for anything that had gone before. He was no hectic rah rah boy in the pitch of his first enamoration—he was a widower, had lived, had seen, had thought; and he knew just what he was doing.

So Elyse said yes, and that night after the theatre they went forth to celebrate at a late cabaret. It was all right for them to do so. Two years before her presence there was open to criticism she was skylarking. Now she was slumming. The established star, the substantial merchant who was her affianced, could hit it up with dignity. And when they remained until 3 a. m., tumbling judiciously and dancing intermittently, no one thought more of it than to point them out discreetly, repeat who they were, gossip and buzz in respectful tones. Even the choristers who had known her when—and it hadn't been so long since—let it go at that and didn't press the details.

"Come, dear," suggested Hibben. "It's three o'clock."

They rose and walked to the checking stand and got their wraps.

It was only a step to the door. He helped her on with her downy cloak of fluffy fur that slipped over her fetching bare shoulders.

A man who stood cramped against the wall as though he didn't want to intrude across a sweeping vision of the walk caught Chester's eye. It seemed to him the man was scrutinizing Elyse with even more than the pointed admiration that she always drew from gawkers.

She took his arm and they started over the threshold toward his car.

A fist flew up, Hibben ducked violently, Elyse, whose attention had been averted for an abstracted moment, stopped and turned. The fist wavered.

"Excuse me," whispered Elyse and disengaged her arm from Hibben's. She crossed him. He saw her draw back her dainty hand and smack the man with the cap smartly in the face. He cringed and recoiled.

"I told you to stay away 'f me, Tony," hissed Elyse, in a tone Hibben had never heard her use. "Now—the nex' time you come botherin' me, I'll knock you for a goul—an' then send you to the hoosegow. Now get out o' here before I kick you in that ugly mug, you bum!"

The man turned and slunk off. Elyse turned the other way.

"Now," said Elyse, "I suppose you'll never talk to me again."

"Now," said Hibben, "I know what you meant . . . reversion to type, eh?"

"No, Chester. Not reversion—revelation. The type is only hidden by a gown and a little powder. I should suggest a little more powder," said Chester coolly.

"Good night," said Elyse, more coolly. . . . "Oh, Tony . . . take me home, will you?"