

The Little Gray Girl.

[A Story of Misconceptions.]

She won the heart of every man in the room, I think, the first day that she entered it. It was not a very large room and the light and ventilation were equally bad. To reach it, one climbed three flights of grimy, ill-smelling stairs, and some of the dust acquired in transit clung to her neat gray dress and even rested on her smooth, pale cheeks, as she came in very timidly, and inquired in low, bell-like tones for the managing editor.

The managing editor, a mild-featured and amiable gentleman who wore gold glasses, had a desk in a corner by a window; for, although the paper was making money rapidly, the proprietor was a person that believed in domestic economy, and as a consequence, we—that is to say, the whole editorial staff—were huddled together, some fourteen of us in all, in this one apartment.

The bell like tones caused every one, the managing editor included, to look up. After the first look the beating of fourteen masculine hearts—and none of them any too tender, at that—was at once accelerated. The newcomer could not have been much over five feet in height, but a daintier or more winning presence could not possibly be imagined. She had big, appealing blue eyes, and from beneath her becoming straw hat a few bronze curls escaped rebelliously. Her figure was the very incarnation of symmetrical daintiness. Her feet were small and perfectly shod. In her neatly gloved hands she carried a formidable package of manuscript. Jorkins, the Sunday editor, saw that the latter was packed flat, not rolled, and respected the lady accordingly.

The managing editor leaned forward, and his courteously interrogative inclination brought the young woman to his side. After a brief conversation between them, carried on in tones so low that what we overheard was fragmentary, our chief, visibly interested, reached out his hand for the manuscript. After glancing over the first few pages, he rose hastily, in great apparent excitement, and, begging his caller to accompany him, led the way into the next room, in which the chief proprietor of the paper sat in state from 10 to 4 every day. When the door closed behind them the buzz broke forth.

"Scored a bull's eye the first time!"
 "What the deuce has she got?"
 "She's a winner all over, anyway!"
 "The old man's mashed at last!"

And so on. Some of the remarks were even more flippant in tone, and Edwards, the dapper little society reporter, seemed to voice the general sentiment when he expressed the hope that if she got a steady job she would let him make room for her beside him.

It was half an hour before the managing editor reappeared and proceeded to bow his fair visitor out. The next morning the latter's "story" appeared. It occupied a full page of the paper, and made what Jorkins styled the hit of the season. The young woman had been to Cuba alone, on her own responsibility, and the result of her work was a masterpiece, both from a standpoint of literature and of news. She had penetrated where no other correspondent had penetrated; she described battles and horrors that the world would never have heard of but for her; she gave facts and figures of incalculable value, and the style of her narrative was simply perfect; in the entire article there was no flabdoodle, no attempt at pyrotechnics, simply a cold and convincing array of facts, and at frequent intervals a chapter of description worthy of the pen of a Hugo or Carlyle. To say that she afflicted the entire office with a stroke of paralysis by her performance is to put it very mildly.

None of us ever knew the amount of

money she received for her article. It was whispered that "The Old Man" had opened his heart and given her a check for \$1,000. What was more to the point was the almost immediate installment of Miss Laura Croisac in the office as "special writer." Most of us, moreover, bitterly envied little Edwards, for he had his wish, her desk being placed next to his.

It was Edwards, in fact, who christened her "The Little Gray Girl," and the name seemed to fit her, so timid and gentle were her ways, and so unobtrusive the manner in which she fitted herself into the daily routine of the office. The influence she exercised over us all, too, was undeniably for our good. There was no profanity when she was in the office, and one by one the fellows took to sprucing themselves up in order to look their best in her eyes. Even Billy Bradshaw, the sporting editor—a youth of herculean mould and bulldoggy visage—bought himself a quiet suit of clothes, and electrified us one day by making his appearance in a white shirt, his linen heretofore having always been of the thunder-and-lightning variety.

But "The Little Gray Girl" was a worker. Do not imagine anything else for a moment. She would sit at her desk and grind out "copy" in a steady stream for hours at a time, and when she looked up at the close of her work with a satisfied smile on her tired little face, it was impossible to do anything but smile back at her encouragingly. I got into the habit of watching her (superstitiously over the top of my papers—I was the exchange editor, you must know—and I used to wonder how so fair and frail a little body could ever have withstood the hardships of that wonderful Cuban campaign that she had described so magnificently in her first article for the paper.

It took about three months, as nearly as I can estimate it, for "The Little Gray Girl" to reduce every man in the office to a condition of slavery most abject and pitiful. It was nothing but the impartiality with which she treated us that made the situation in any way tolerable. She had the same cheery smile and pleasant word for every one. She believed in reciprocity, too. If Jorkins gave her a bunch of violets one day, she would trim his pencils for him the next. When the managing editor gave her theatre tickets she cut the leaves of his books and arranged his desk during his absence at luncheon next day. Edwards wrote some paragraphs for her one afternoon when she was overwhelmed with work, and she retaliated in the evening by writing for him a decidedly better account of a wedding than he ever wrote himself. But it was the colossal Bradshaw who finally broke the spell, and filled us all with a raging jealousy that in some climates would have resulted in his being lynched.

He came in one day carrying a small basket, and, lounging carelessly over to Miss Croisac's desk, placed it carefully upon it. The young woman came in shortly afterward and extracted from the basket a funny, fuzzy little terrier pup. After that it seemed as if she had given her heart to the big sporting editor in exchange for his miserable dog.

As for Bradshaw, he had always been something of a wonder. In a way, he was a perfect specimen of manhood, the magnificence of his physique atoning for his hard, square features. There was a story abroad to the effect that he was the son of a rich man who had disowned him for some grievous fault; but no one cared anything about that. The mystery about him lay in his ability to retain his position on the paper and draw his salary regardless of any vagaries in which he might indulge. He was an excellent workman when he chose to work, but if he saw fit to absent himself from the office for weeks at a time he

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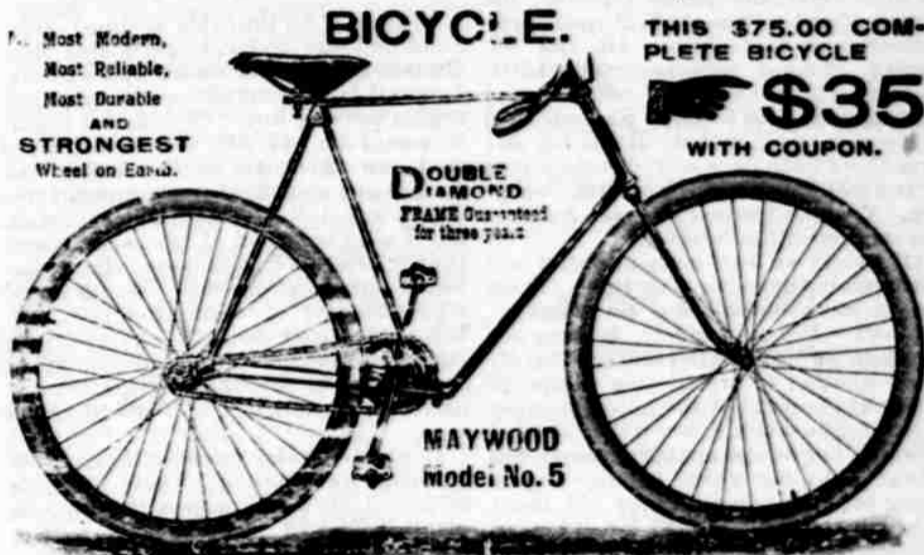
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