



## The Furnished Room

**R**ESTLESS, ALWAYS MOVING, FOREVER PASSING like time itself, are most of the people who live in these old red houses. This is on New York's West Side.

The people are homeless, yet they have a hundred homes. They go from furnished room to furnished room. They are **transients**, transients forever—transients in living place, transients in heart and mind. They sing the song, "Home, Sweet Home," but they sing it without feeling what it means. They can carry everything they own in one small box. They know nothing of gardens. To them, flowers and leaves are something to put on a woman's hat.

The houses of this part of the city have had a thousand people living in them. Therefore each house should have a thousand stories to tell. Perhaps most of these stories would not be interesting. But it

would be strange if you did not feel, in some of these houses, that you were among people you could not see. The spirits of some who had lived and suffered there must surely remain, though their bodies had gone.

One evening a young man appeared, going from one to another of these big old houses, ringing the doorbell. At the twelfth house, he put down the bag he carried. He cleaned the dust from his face. Then he touched the bell. It sounded far, far away, as if it were ringing deep underground.

The woman who owned the house came to the door. The young man looked at her. He thought that she was like some fat, colorless, legless thing that had come up from a hole in the ground, hungrily hoping for something, or someone, to eat.

He asked if there was a room that he could have for the night.

“Come in,” said the woman. Her voice was soft, but for some reason he did not like it. “I have the back room on the third floor. Do you wish to look at it?”

The young man followed her up. There was little light in the halls. He could not see where that light came from. The covering on the floor was old and ragged. There were places in the walls made, perhaps, to hold flowering plants. If this were true, the plants had died long before this evening. The air was bad; no flowers could have lived in it for long.

“This is the room,” said the woman in her soft, thick voice. “It’s a nice room. Someone is usually living in it. I had some very nice people in it last summer. I had no trouble with them. They paid on time. The water is at the end of the hall. Sprowls and Mooney had the room for three months. You know them? **Theater** people. The **gas** is here. You see there is plenty of space to hang your clothes. It’s a room everyone likes. If you don’t take it, someone else will take it soon.”

“Do you have many theater people living here?” asked the young man.

“They come and go. Many of my people work in the theater. Yes, sir, this is the part of the city where theater people live. They never stay long any place. They live in all the houses near here. They come

and they go.”

The young man paid for the room for a week. He was going to stay there, he said, and rest. He counted out the money.

The room was all ready, she said. He would find everything that he needed. As she moved away he asked his question. He had asked it already a thousand times. It was always there, waiting to be asked again.

“A young girl—Eloise Vashner—do you remember her? Has she ever been in this house? She would be singing in the theater, probably. A girl of middle height, thin, with red-gold hair and a small dark spot on her face near her left eye.”

“No, I don’t remember the name. Theater people change names as often as they change their rooms. They come and they go. No, I don’t remember that one.”

No. Always no. He had asked his question for five months, and the answer was always no.

Every day he questioned men who knew theater people. Had she gone to them to ask for work?

Every evening he went to the theaters. He went to good theaters and to bad ones. Some were so bad that he was afraid to find her there. Yet he went to them, hoping.

He who had loved her best had tried to find her. She had suddenly gone from her home. He was sure that this great city, this island, held her. But everything in the city was moving, restless. What was on top today, was lost at the bottom tomorrow.

The furnished room received the young man with a certain warmth. Or it seemed to receive him warmly. It seemed to promise that here he could rest. There was a bed and there were two chairs with ragged covers. Between the two windows there was a looking-glass about twelve inches wide. There were pictures on the walls.

The young man sat down in a chair, while the room tried to tell him its history. The words it used were strange, not easy to understand, as if they were words of many distant foreign countries.

There was a floor covering of many colors, like an island of flow-

ers in the middle of the room. Dust lay all around it.

There was bright wall-paper on the wall. There was a fireplace. On the wall above it, some bright pieces of cloth were hanging. Perhaps they had been put there to add beauty to the room. This they did not do. And the pictures on the walls were pictures the young man had seen a hundred times before in other furnished rooms.

Here and there around the room were small objects forgotten by others who had used the room. There were pictures of theater people, something to hold flowers, but nothing valuable.

One by one the little signs grew clear. They showed the young man the others who had lived there before him.

In front of the looking-glass there was a thin spot in the floor covering. That told him that women had been in the room.

Small finger marks on the wall told of children, trying to feel their way to sun and air.

A larger spot on the wall made him think of someone, in anger, throwing something there.

Across the looking-glass, some person had written the name, "Marie."

It seemed to him that those who had lived in the furnished room had been angry with it, and had done all they could to hurt it. Perhaps their anger had been caused by the room's brightness and its coldness. For there was no true warmth in the room.

There were cuts and holes in the chairs and in the walls. The bed was half broken. The floor cried out as if in pain when it was walked on.

People for a time had called this room "home," and yet they had hurt it. This was a fact not easy to believe. But perhaps it was, strangely, a deep love of home that was the cause. The people who had lived in the room perhaps never knew what a real home was. But they knew that this room was not a home. Therefore their deep anger rose up and made them strike out.

The young man in the chair allowed these thoughts to move one by one, softly, through his mind.

At the same time, sounds and smells from other furnished rooms

came into his room. He heard someone laughing, laughing in a manner that was neither happy nor pleasant. From other rooms he heard a woman talking too loudly; and he heard people playing games for money; and he heard a woman singing to a baby, and he heard someone weeping. Above him there was music. Doors opened and closed. The trains outside rushed noisily past. Some animal cried out in the night outside.

And the young man felt the breath of the house. It had a smell that was more than bad; it seemed cold and sick and old and dying.

Then suddenly, as he rested there, the room was filled with the strong, sweet smell of a flower, small and white, named mignonette. The smell came so surely and so strongly that it almost seemed like a living person entering the room. And the man cried aloud: "What, dear?" as if he had been called.

He jumped up and turned around. The rich smell was near, and all around him. He opened his arms for it. For a moment he did not know where he was or what he was doing.

How could anyone be called by a smell? Surely it must have been a sound. But could a sound have touched him?

"She has been in this room," he cried, and he began to seek some sign of her. He knew that if he found any small thing that had belonged to her, he would know that it was hers. If she had only touched it, he would know it. This smell of flowers that was all around him—she had loved it and had made it her own. Where did it come from?

The room had been carelessly cleaned. He found many small things that women had left. Something to hold their hair in place. Something to wear in the hair to make it more beautiful. A piece of cloth that smelled of another flower. A book. Nothing that had been hers.

And he began to walk around the room like a dog hunting a wild animal. He looked in corners. He got down on his hands and knees to look at the floor.

He wanted something that he could see. He could not realize that she was there beside, around, against, within, above him, near to him, calling him.

Then once again he felt the call. Once again he answered loudly: "Yes, dear!" and turned, wild-eyed, to look at nothing. For he could not yet see the form and color and love and reaching arms that were there in the smell of white flowers. Oh, God! Where did the smell of flowers come from? Since when has a smell had a voice to call? So he wondered, and went on seeking.

He found many small things, left by many who had used the room. But of her, who may have been there, whose spirit seemed to be there, he found no sign.

And then he thought of the owner.

He ran from the room, with its smell of flowers, going down and to a door where he could see a light.

She came out.

He tried to speak quietly. "Will you tell me," he asked her, "who was in my room before I came here?"

"Yes, sir. I can tell you again. It was Sprowls and Mooney, as I said. It was really Mr. and Mrs. Mooney, but she used her own name. Theater people do that."

"Tell me about Mrs. Mooney. What did she look like?"

"Black-haired, short and fat. They left here a week ago."

"And before they were here?"

"There was a gentleman. Not in the theater business. He didn't pay. Before him was Mrs. Crowder and her two children. They stayed four months. And before them was old Mr. Doyle. His sons paid for him. He had the room six months. That is a year, and further I do not remember."

He thanked her and went slowly back to his room.

The room was dead. The smell of flowers had made it alive, but the smell of flowers was gone. In its place was the smell of the house.

His hope was gone. He sat looking at the yellow gaslight. Soon he walked to the bed and took the covers. He began to tear them into pieces. He pushed the pieces into every open space around windows and door. No air, now, would be able to enter the room. When all was as he wished it, he put out the burning gaslight. Then, in the dark, he

started the gas again, and he lay down thankfully on the bed.

It was Mrs. McCool's night to go and get them something cold to drink. So she went and came back, and sat with Mrs. Purdy in one of those rooms underground where the women who own these old houses meet and talk.

"I have a young man in my third floor back room this evening," said Mrs. Purdy, taking a drink. "He went up to bed two hours ago."

"Is that true, Mrs. Purdy?" said Mrs. McCool. It was easy to see that she thought this was a fine and surprising thing. "You always find someone to take a room like that. I don't know how you do it. Did you tell him about it?"

"Rooms," said Mrs. Purdy, in her soft thick voice, "are furnished to be used by those that need them. I did not tell him, Mrs. McCool."

"You are right, Mrs. Purdy. It's the money we get for the rooms that keeps us alive. You have the real feeling for business. There are many people who wouldn't take a room like that if they knew. If you told them that someone had died in the bed, and died by their own hand, they wouldn't enter the room."

"As you say, we have our living to think of," said Mrs. Purdy.

"Yes, it is true. Only one week ago I helped you there in the third floor back room. She was a pretty little girl. And to kill herself with the gas! She had a sweet little face, Mrs. Purdy."

"She would have been called beautiful, as you say," said Mrs. Purdy, "except for that dark spot she had growing by her left eye. Do fill up your glass again, Mrs. McCool."