

The Curfew Kid

by Gordon Seagrove

AT seven o'clock on a sweltering August evening the last curtain before the supper show was rung down in the Hippodrome on Sweeney's Seven Minstrel Girls, wherein Miss Louella Jason earned twenty dollars a week for services rendered.

"My gosh!" fussed Louella impatiently as she started for the steaming dressing-room in the basement; "it's funny how they never look at me until the last show. Did you see that pale-faced guy in six center pipin' me off? He never took his eyes offen me."

"Look here, Lou," snorted Mrs. Sweeney, "ain't you never goin' to quit stormin' about them lovers o' yours? Land! I never saw your beat!"

"But he kep' lampin' me, Sweeney—"

"You'll get over it some day, Lou," snapped Mrs. Sweeney, "when you get a bum husband. Go on now. Get dressed and get some sleep to-night. Rehearsal at seven to-morrow 'cause No. 6 is sick—"

Louella whisked a wisp of moist hair away from her perspiring forehead and frowned.

"My gosh!" she fretted; "there ain't no rest for nobody in vodelville. It's me for the movies in the fall. Sammie Sonninclein's already told me he'd fix—"

But her words trailed off into the fetid atmosphere below stage as she fell to work

removing her make-up. Five minutes later, refreshed by a hurried sponge-bath in cool water, she picked her way carefully over the props of the second shift that presented its acts until nearly midnight, and let herself out through the stage door into an evil-smelling alley. Under the flare of an early burning arc-lamp she saw a figure loitering.

"Gosh!" she whispered. "It's that pale guy from six center."

She paused a moment, pretending to fix her collar while she appraised him with eyes that were both old and experienced and a trifle hard "A sucker," she thought as she noted the conservative and bit out-of-date cut of his gray suit, the worn straw hat, and the plain, unfigured tie—"a sticker, stage-bit for the first time."

Well, their dinners were just as good sometimes as those that came with fat paunches, diamond rings, and taxicabs. So an inviting glance crossed that from the eyes of the pale young man.

In a moment he stood before her, his hat held bashfully in one thin hand, his whole figure drooping in lank awkwardness.

"I hope—I hope—" he began uneasily; "I hope you'll pardon me. I saw you out in front—"

"I saw you, too," she cut in, turning her eyes warmly upon him, "Didn't you see me smilin'? Honest, I smiled so hard I thought I'd

get a call from the manager.”

He nodded apathetically and put his hat back on his head.

“I hope—you’re not—not angry,” he went on haltingly. “Are you?”

“If it was anybody else I might be,” Louella lied with professional alacrity; “but, gosh—you got such an air with you I couldn’t get sore! An’ now where do we eat?”

The pale young man shifted position and looked appealingly in her eyes. It was plain that he knew little of the cafés which at that moment were sending out the first incandescence that heralded the gay midnight to come.

“All right,” she laughed, taking his arm. “you just leave it to me like a regular fellah, an’ I’ll take you where you can get the swellest combination salad you ever swallowed.”

And with that she led him down the alley and out into the city’s cañon that stretched westward into a maze of cabarets and restaurants. It was but a step to the Tavern, which Louella chose because she thought its scale of prices would not terrorize the lanky young man who might be needed some time in the future when bookings were crowded and agents shooed away all but the cream of “vodeville.”

As the sleek-cheeked and purring head waiter led them down a palm-flanked aisle Louella’s escort’s eyes widened uneasily and he seemed conscious of his unfamiliarity with such a setting.

When they had been seated at a table in a drowsy corner, near the rush of the fans, Louella chatted volubly and of many things—of orchestras that “killed her stuff,” of the curse of dressing-rooms, of jealous rivals who “swiped her gags,” of managers that were unholy, and of stockings that were holey.

But somehow the pale young man did not seem to be interested, and there were times when Louella thought that he was about to

interrupt her in what she considered a great revelation of the true life in the variety. Had it not been for the excellent dinner that lay temptingly before her, she might have been inclined to speak her mind after the manner of demigoddess chorus-girls who found their “Johns” not to their liking and sent them packing with a haughty gesture of bejeweled hands. As it was, she only laid a plump, warm fist upon his wrist.

“My word!” she laughed half peevishly; “you’re an unsociable bird. You ain’t even told me your name yet.”

“It’s Charley.”

“Well, look here, Charley,” she went on, “kinda wise yourself to the fac’ that when I go out to dinner with a gentleman I like to hear somethin’ else besides the merry warble of the soup as it trickles down my lily throat. I kinda like to hear a little chin music from the other party.”

“Of course—I beg your pardon,” he stammered painfully.

“Never mind that. Just say somethin’. That’s all. Honest, none of the home folks is going to see you here; and I guess I won’t sue you for none of your millions with a breach of promise. Speak up and tell me how the wheat crop’s comin’ on in western Kansas. I’m crazy about wheat crops, Charley.”

The youth flushed slightly and shook off her hand. And when he looked into Miss Jason’s eyes there was a hint of hurt pride betrayed by his glance and the twitching of his mouth.

“You’ve guessed me—almost,” he answered softly, “but not quite. It’s not Kansas; it’s Indiana. But about the rest—about talking—you never gave me a chance. There were several things I wanted to say; but somehow, Miss Jason, you just kept talking away and I didn’t have the nerve to break in, Miss Jason—”

“Cut the Miss Jason, Charley,” she commanded sharply. “Call me Lou. An’ start

right in with the life story of Indiana. You gotta talk about somethin' when you take a lady out to supper, an' I guess I can stand as many stanzas of Indiana as any healthy girl of my accouterments. But don't you forget for a minnit, Charley, that I coulda bin out with Jimmy Lord who's feedin' Lomax in Lomax & Lord. Maybe you've seen 'em? Say, they knock the walls out! But Jimmy and me's quarreled; so go ahead and shoot, Charley."

The young man across the table shifted his chair and laid down his fork. Twice he started to speak, but his words, it seemed, would not come. And then, as if it aimed to help him, the orchestra swung into a soft, sentimental, exotic strain that halted the flutter of conversation all around them and wove a chain of silent memories in the minds of those who paused to listen.

"That makes it a little bit easier," he began with a gesture toward the players. "It makes it easier, Miss Jason—I mean, Lou—for me to say that it wasn't because I was crazy about you that I came around to the stage door tonight. That wasn't it at all—"

"Well, you surely got your nerve, Charley!" Louella drew back with a haughtiness that she almost felt. "You're the great little kidder, all right. What, may I presume to ask, did get you out?"

"It was a girl, Miss Lou," he resumed, leaning nearer across the table. "That's what I wanted to ask you about all along, but I didn't get the chance. But it was about a girl. Miss Ja—I mean Lou—and she was the prettiest girl you ever saw. She wasn't much bigger than a minute, but, say—there never was a girl like her!

"Maybe you've seen blue eyes that, when you get the light on them just right, look purple. Well, that was the kind of eyes she had. Great big ones, that looked like saucers when anything surprised her. And her hair, Lou! Why it was soft and brown and crinkled

around her temples just like little bronze strings, and mother used to say that she had the prettiest hair in town, and mother wasn't free with her compliments either. Sometimes she'd part it in the middle, and then that little, pale, oval face of hers would look just like one of those girls on the magazine covers—only more wistful."

"You're describin' some big-time doll, Charley," Lou put in. But Charley paid no attention, but went on as earnestly, as quietly, as before:

"I knew her all my life. When she was a little kid with brown pigtails I used to treat her as mean as I could sometimes; then I'd go home and feel sorry about it, and the next day I'd put a bunch of violets—the kind you pick down in the coolest part of the woods—in her desk and run away. And when she'd find them and would look at me, I'd blush all over!

"And it was the same way when we grew older, when we were in high school, only she didn't wear the brown pigtails any more and I didn't blush so badly. But every Wednesday I'd go up there to call, and she'd play the piano—she was a mighty clever girl that way—and on Sundays we'd go for a long walk, maybe three or four miles along the river when the days were fine and the bluebirds were singing to each other in the maples. Of course, I used to see her every day at school and help her with her arithmetic, which pretty near drove her wild.

"You see, Lou, she wasn't cut out for such things as axioms and theorems and figures. But, say—give her a chance to speak a piece or something like that, and there wasn't anybody in school that was half so good.

" 'Course, it was only natural that she'd take part in the school plays. There wasn't a year that she didn't get into one or two of them, and she enjoyed them more than anything else in school, I guess, because when she was studying for them it seemed like her

smile was brighter than ever before. The year we graduated we were both in the class play, and she had the leading part. She prepared for it for weeks and weeks, three months almost in all, and I never saw a girl so interested as she was in those rehearsals! It sort of seemed like she just lived for 'em!

"Of course, she had always been interested, mighty interested, in the smaller things, but this was the biggest thing she'd ever had a chance at, and she was bound that she'd do it right. And she did. When the play was given she was great. Everybody said so. And I was just as tickled as the rest and a whole lot prouder."

"Once in a while a good amatchoor does show," Louella whispered in her napkin in the begrudging and skeptical manner of the professional.

"After the performance we walked home together, and I told her how proud I was of her, and I told her, too, what people were saying—that they were wondering if we were going to get married—and I just asked her if she didn't think she wanted to. I won't forget that night—*ever*. Probably you never lived down in Indiana, and so you can't tell how warm and balmy those June nights are, when everything seems to be in tune with everything else, and the moon sheds a kind of silver light over it all, and the whippoorwills are singing down by the river. Well, that was the kind of night it was, Lou, one of those nights when you feel blue yet happy. And she seemed to feel it, too, because when I asked her what she thought about our getting married, she just drew me to her and held me close, and then she cried a little—an' I did, too—and then we both laughed because we were so happy.

"Of course, when we told the people about it, they all said that it was what they'd been expecting right along, and that we'd make a fine couple. Everybody was congratulating me for quite a while afterward, and I was the proudest fellow in the world and the happiest,

too, I guess. But it was 'long about then that I began to worry a little bit. It was about her. The doctor discovered that she had worked too hard on this play that she loved so well, and he said it was a case of weak lungs and a run-down, nervous condition. But nothing so awfully serious, he said—"

"Gosh, Charley, I bet that scared you, huh?" Lou's eyes were warm with true sympathy. The boy felt it instantly and went on:

"But he told her father, and me, too, that a year in the West would be the best thing for her. But she—why, she just laughed at him, Lou! They always do. She never felt better in her life, she said; but I could see the tired little lines about her eyes, and so that didn't stop me worrying, and I used to lay awake nights wondering what I could do to help her, because, Lou, if I couldn't have her with me I wouldn't be happy. Finally it dawned on me that maybe I could use that thousand dollars I'd saved from work outside of school to buy or rent a little patch up in the mountains of Montana somewhere, marry her, take her up there to live for a while, then come home—with her all well and strong again.

"The day I told her about my plan she kicked like everything. She laughed at me; she laughed at the doctor, and she laughed at her mother for scolding her for staying in the house reading books and plays when she ought to have been outdoors. But if she must have air, the air at home was just as good as that in the mountains any day, she said.

"You can see, Lou, that she didn't want to go; but finally, after we all had argued for days, she consented just to please me and her parents, she said. But after she'd consented, Lou, it seemed that she kind of thought I was to blame for it all; that I was asking her to do something that she didn't want to do, and that there was no sense in doing; and sometimes she said such things—things that hurt—that I believed she was growing tired of me; that

maybe, after all, she didn't want to marry me like we'd planned right along.

"But she never said it in so many words, only kept on packing her things, getting ready to go to this place that I'd fixed up in the mountains. Pretty soon she had finished, and the day came for us to go. We were to be married that evening, and were going to catch the eleven-ten. That was a month ago to-night—"

The pale young man stopped short, his voice breaking at the end of his sentence. Behind the palms the music droned and died to a lingering echo. There was a hush, as if the others there felt in some manner the same emotions as the speaker. For a moment his shoulders drooped, then raised slightly.

"She was gone," he added with a hopeless gesture. Louella bent forward.

"Then they told me. It pretty near broke my heart, Lou, when they told me that she had cried all the night before, and that she had gone for a walk in the afternoon and had never come back. But it was worse when I learned that she had skipped with a vaudeville act. Perhaps you remember—"

His eyes searched those of the girl before him. She fidgeted and flung back her surprise.

"Gosh, Charley!" she cried nervously. "Why pick on me? What have I gotta do with it?"

"Because," he added shortly, "it was with Sweeney's Seven Minstrels that she went."

Louella sat bolt upright in the rosewood chair, a faint gasp escaping her too-red lips, her eyes widening with astonishment.

"Gosh, Charley! Let me inside—quick! What was her name?"

"Faith—" he answered—"Faith McGrane. Rather old fashioned, isn't it? Maybe you can tell me something about her. I thought maybe you could tell me where she's gone, what she's doing—where I can find her—"

He leaned forward hungrily, and Louella,

tallest and best looking and hardest working of the Sweeneys, was about to answer, when a silent-footed waiter thrust into Charley's hands the bill for the dinner, the remains of which had but a moment before been whisked away by a greasy looking bus-boy. As Charley took it he winced. From a worn bill-case he drew out several bills and counted them carefully with growing alarm.

They were insufficient.

"Miss Jason—Lou—" he stammered, flushing deeply, "I wonder—I wonder if you've got—got a dollar; that you can spare. I'm sorry—mighty sorry, Miss Jason—but I haven't enough to pay the bill! I know—maybe you'll never forgive me—I'm sorry, but—"

With a gasp of amazement that silenced him, Louella manipulated the silver bag that had dangled at her wrist, and drew forth a wrinkled and folded, but nevertheless real, strip of currency. With an air of infinite contempt, shaded with disgust, she tossed it across the table into the hands of the silent-footed waiter, who smiled broadly and departed as he came. And then Louella exploded.

"My Gawd!" she cried shrilly, "What's the world comin' to when an actress goes out with a fella an' has to pay her own bills! It's the limit! An' me pickin' a piker! Say, Charley, you may be the demon in Indiana, but you're runnin' in first when you're in the big town. Gosh! Makin' me pay—but go on!"

"I'll pay you back," he promised shamefacedly; "you needn't worry." And then as if the incident were closed, as if his apology were sufficient to calm the outraged feelings of Miss Jason, he took up his queries again more eagerly than before.

"Tell me if you know of her," he begged. "Where is she?"

"And it's right there, Charley, that you got me," Louella retorted, half smiling as if at

some sudden fancy or inner thought. "You see, I never started with this ack until it played Lima—an' that's only a short circuit ago. We got a coupla Helens and a Maizie or two, but no Faith. You sure it was the Seven Sweeneys she skipped with?"

"I know it, Lou! The station-agent saw her go. And when I learned, I tried to find out where she would play next, but it seems the route was changed and the act didn't go to the town it was scheduled for. And so I lost track. I was nearly crazy. Lou, because I knew if I could see her just once and could talk to her a while and show her what a mistake she was making, telling her that she wasn't strong enough to buck the stage game that she'd sort of jumped into, she'd listen to me and maybe she'd think it all over and come back with me. That was all I wanted—just to talk to her.

"And so I went everywhere I could think of—that is, where she'd be likely to play. I watched bill-boards and hung around the theaters in neighboring towns, hoping that maybe the act would come to one of them. But it never came. I kind of lost heart when my money ran low, and then I saw an advertisement in one of the theatrical papers that I picked up that Sweeney's Seven Minstrel Girls was billed for this week over at the theater where I met you. And it made me mighty hopeful, Lou, because I thought maybe after all I was going to see her. So I came here just as fast as I could.

"When I bought my ticket at the office my hands trembled so I could hardly hold the change that the woman gave me, and when I went in and sat down right there in the sixth row I was faint. Then when the lights flashed up and you and all the others came on, and she wasn't with you, it seemed like something snapped inside of me. You see, I'd counted on seeing her so much. And when she wasn't there it took the heart right out of me. For a minute it seemed like there was no use of thinking of anything any more. But I won't

give up! I'll wire home for more money and go on and on until I find her—"

"Gosh! You sure are crazy about that doll, aren't you?" murmured Louella in admiration; "even if she wasn't no bigger than a pony. I wonder where she did go? Maybe she joined—but wait a second! That reminds me of somethin'. This doll of yours didn't wear a little black cross, did she—a little black cross with a coral back—"

"Of course she did!" The pale young man almost rose out of his chair in his eagerness. "That's her! That's her! Where—"

"Gosh, Charley!" Louella interrupted, shaking her head sadly. "Then you're certainly out of luck. An' it's too bad, too; a nice boy like you—"

"Why? Tell me, quick! Is she ill?"

"Worse 'n that, Charley. She's eloped. She met him in St. Louis when we made the jump to three a day. She never gave no notice, either—just blew! I'm a lot sorry, Charley; on the level I am."

She stopped.

For across the table she saw that Charley's head was buried hopelessly in his arms, and that his thin shoulders were trembling pitifully; and once, when the music softened, she could hear the dry sobs in his throat. A waiter passed, a woman laughed noisily at a near-by table, the orchestra struck up the latest blatant air; but they were unnoticed, for Charley's thoughts were carried back to a drowsy night—a drowsy night in June—back in Indiana when everything seemed to be in tune with everything else and the whippoorwills were singing down by the river.

Presently he lifted his head, and Louella saw that his face was gray and drawn, and that his eyes had grown old with sorrow.

"Maybe," he whispered huskily—"maybe it's for the best. And if you ever see her, Lou, you tell her for me that it's all right, just say that: 'It's all right.' That is, if she's happy. And to-morrow I'll go back to Indiana and try

to forget.”

And then it was that Miss Louella Jason, best looking and hardest working of Sweeney’s Seven Minstrel Girls, rose from her chair, leaned over, and took her companion by the arm and urged—aye, jerked!—him to his feet.

“Put on your hat!” she commanded, almost fiercely. “An’ stand up an’ let me look at you! I want to see if you got any red blood in your veins. An’, Charley, I believe you have. Why don’t you say you’ll hunt this dog down to the ends of the earth an’ chop him up for tiger meat? Why don’t you do battle with this rival a yours? Why don’t you, Charley? Answer me, why don’t you?”

“If she’s happy with him—” the boy muttered uncertainly.

“But she ain’t, Charley. An’ she never will be!”

“Why, Lou, you oughtn’t say—”

“Ring that stuff down, Charley, an’ listen to me while I tell you that this doll a yours ain’t hooked to anybody, an’ that she’s still No. 6 in Sweeney’s Seven Minstrels; an’ that all this mortal agony I been puttin’ you through in the last few minutes was just my way a teachin’ you that you oughtn’t to never go out to be a demon spender unless you got enough to buy a lady’s dinner. It was my way of payin’ back, Charley—”

“Then she didn’t elope! She’s here! Tell me—where?”

“Mercy Hospital. An’ she’s sick, Charley—sick for the sight of you.”

“Gee! Lou, I’m going—sick—”

“Yes, sick!” cried Miss Louella Jason petulantly; “an’ that means a seven-o’clock rehearsal to-morrow mornin’! Darn her! And, Chas—you’d better patter. The curfew rings! at nine.”