Weekly Short Story

By ELLA CLINE

TEA IN A TUMBLER

Mr. Seligman sat at his dining room table one evening, the voluminous sections of the Sunday papers covering all of the table's darkly shining mahogany. Invariably, whenever the four young Seligmans entertained, their father retreated, with book or papers, to the dining room.

The long living room had been cleared for dancing. Card tables, each with its quota of chairs, tallies, ash trays, et cetera, filled the music room and the sunroom. Gloria and Irma were arranging flowers and attending to the final details of the party; their brothers, Harold and Albert, had gone in the car to fetch some of the guests. Mrs. Seligman, handsome and still youthful, an apron over her black lace dress, was in the kitchen giving directions to the maid and the extra waitress about the preparation and serving of refreshments.

Yet in the midst of these festive activities, soft lights and appetizing odors, Mr. Seligman sat, frowning slightly, looking at the paper before him, but not seeing it. Instead he saw, more clearly than anything in that comfortable home, a slender young man—a boy really—with despairing eyes that looked hurt and hopeless from his lean unhappy face, while the long, thin fingers of his hand held his coat collar close about his throat as if he tried to hide as much of himself as possible. Mr. Seligman sighed deeply.

A slender girl in rose chiffon came with dancing step from the living room on some errand to the kitchen. Mr. Seligman stopped her.

"Irma, are you too busy to get me some tea?"

"Of course not, darling. I shall tell—"

"Please don't tell anyone—get it yourself. You know how I like it —"

"I should by this time, dad," her blue eyes nlled with mischievous laughter. She put her white hands, rosy tipped, on her slender hips and recited, "In a glass, a slice of lemon, raspberry or cherry jam, thin cookies—" Then, with a quick change of voice, "I wish you would confess, Mr. Samuel Seligman, senior partner of Seligman and Traube, Importers, why you must have your tea in a tumbler. The most devoted adherent to the accepted forms of etiquette could find no fault with your behaviour otherwise. Perhaps we should have you psychoanalyzed?"

"Bring the tea, professor," Mr. Seligman replied, smiling, "and I shall tell you all. It concerns a—ghost."

"Splendid! How thrilling! I go but to return."

Irma brought a silver tray filled with the tea essentials she had men-

"One day a kindly woman answered his ring, gave him a silver from his basket. With a pitying coin but would not take anything look, she closed the door in the boy's face. Suddenly, overwhelmingly, the truth came to him: He had not been peddling, he had been begging . . . .

"He rang the bell of that house again, violently, angrily, and when the woman came hurriedly to see what was wanted, he thrust a package into her hand, something worth more than the coin she had given him, and ran back to the miserable tenement his relative called home and waited for him to return from the tailor shop where he worked.

"The man laughed at the boy's bitter disillusionment. 'Nu, when you will have enough saved up, then you can become a regular merchant. And till then, better put your pride in your pocket.'

"There was nothing the boy could say. He, who cherished such high ambitions, such pride of race, who dreamt so nobly for the future, a beggar . . . He left the basket of goods and his relative's home and walked the streets of New York until he was exhausted. At midnight he found himself in a market place, crawled into a wagon and fell asleep among the bags and bundles it contained. He awoke on a country road, near a farmhouse, when the driver stopped for breakfast next morning, not knowing where he was or how long he had been traveling.

"When the driver returned, the boy explained, and offered to work his way. He carried bundles and crates, took care of the horses, cleaned the driver's boots, sharing the driver's meals, sleeping in the wagon, and so was brought to Boston. From that first honest job to a partnership in an importing business, is a long story, so let's return to the tea and the ghost.

"He worked unbelievably hard every waking hour; his evenings in night school being his only diversion. Driven by the ambition to bring his mother and sister to America before he was demanded for military service in Poland. His mother being widowed, his military period might be short, or he might be altogether exempt, but he would have to be in the place of his birth to prove his claims.

"Sometimes, when I hear your brothers discussing their careers, see your sister so busy with social affairs and beaux; yourself, Irma, a student in Wellesley, and so wise in social welfare work, I wonder what that boy might have accomplished with like opportunities. I have little time to dream of what never has been, but with tea before me she did, why didn't you come?' an looked displeased. To the boy' misery was added the probable dis aster of losing his job.

"In a flood of words he told Mi Traube about his mother, his youn sister, the menace of the militar draft, unexpected expenses, workin clothes, his humiliation at seein the fine garments of the arrivin guests. Mr. Traube listened, sti frowning. But when he glanced a the boy's shoes, shining with polish at his trousers so carefully pressed his frown changed to a smile of un derstanding, and he said:

" 'Well—too bad. My Ralchen wa hurt that you did not come. Thi evening we expect no guests an you must come home with me fo the evening meal so you can ex plain matters to her yourself.'

"After that the boy's perplexin worries seemed to melt away, fo Mr. Traube's advice proved ver helpful. Mr. Traube advanced hin enough so that he no longer de layed in bringing his mother an sister to America. Mrs. Traube als was most friendly in helping th strangers establish their littl home—"

"O, yes," Irma took up the tale "and in a few years the boy becam such an elegant and well dresse gentleman, and held such an impor tant position in the Traube Import ing Company, that dear Ralche had to propose marriage to him les some other girl grab him away fron her—"

"No, no, Irma. Your mamma i just joking when she says that. I loved her so much I did not dare say so for I was not good enough— such a lovely girl and with such fine parents, so she helped me a little, as she has been doing right along ever since.

"Now you know why I prefer tea in a glass, and why I become thoughtful every time the home is gay with young folk. It's that boy with the unhappy eyes hiding his blue shirt. Maybe talking about him—when he does come again his eyes will not be so gloomy—maybe that way I can reach him—reassure him — Anyway, some more tea, please, hot!"

Mrs. Seligman came into the dining room, minus the apron, as Irma brought in fresh tea.

"How many times must I tell you, Irma, to serve papa tea in a cup when we have company? It seems outlandish in glass, and I don't like it."

"Your tough luck, darling," her youngest answered lightly. "From now on I too shall imbibe my tea, if ever I take any, from a glass, and see visions."

Just then the door bell rang and there was the hilarious commotion of incoming guests. Irma went to greet them.

Mrs. Seligman sat down near her husband. He put his hand over hers and said:

"I've been telling Irma about your birthday party, when you were eighteen, do you remember?"

And she answered, "Can I ever forget it? I cried all night because my father's shipping clerk did not come! It was my first great sorrow. Every time the children have company I think of that party."

bit to return."

Irma brought a silver tray filled with the tea essentials she had mentioned and daintily arranged them before her father; then said:

"The gang will not be here for some time yet, dad darling. Unburden your soul. Your child is listening."

Mr. Seligman dropped a slice of lemon into his hot, tragrant tea and slowly stirred the amber liquid until a few dark leaves danced in the tumbler. Then slowly, thoughtfully, chosing his words as one who is not certain he can tell what is in his mind, he began:

"I was fifteen when I left Poland, I am nearly fifty now. In my home, in my business, in scarcely any of my contacts, is there much to remind me of my birthplace, or of the conditions I faced when I came to this country. Tea in a glass always reminds me of my father's study, books everywhere, of the black skull cap he used to wear, of the pride he took in his son who was soon to be Bar Mitzvah—asking the boy to bring him tea—to have tea with him. And often when you children entertain, I see again an unhappy youth, whom I never may hope to see otherwise—"

"Never? And you a pillar of the synagogue?"

"Never, child. So long as a person is alive, one may hope to get into communication. Our religion gives us assurance that death is not the final parting. Yet there is one I wish to comfort whom I may never reach—"

"Not living, not dead—how intriguing!" But laughter had vanished from Irma's sweet eyes as she felt her father's earnestness.

"Just a haunting memory of myself at twenty when the world was suddenly bereft of all happiness. It had to do with the joyous sounds of a young folks' party—a sort of ghost of a desperate state of mind that tested my courage to continue to live at all—If I could but reach to him across the years—"

"That is poetic, dad, honey. Has a poet lost his way into the importing business?"

"That other, he was a poet. His teachers encouraged him, praised his compositions. For nearly a year he worked on a poem, in Hebrew, that he was to read at his Bar Mitzvah, as a surprise to his father, whom he loved dearly. But his father died a week before the boy was thirteen, and never knew that the poem had been written. Something vital in the boy died then too. He never wrote poetry again.

"Two years later he was in New York, having stolen out of Poland one gray dawn, traveling steerage, coming to indifferent, distant relatives, bewildered; a stranger in a terrifying world. Knowing that somewhere, somehow, he must earn money for his widowed mother and orphaned sister; a child shouldering the responsibilities of a man.

"His relative gave him a basket filled with an assortment of merchandise and told him to go from door to door, point to the basket and smile pleasantly. For a beginner, the boy did very well, and he smiled delightedly at his customers as he thought of the profits, and the money he would send to his mother, until—

that boy might have accomplished with like opportunities. I have little time to dream of what never has been, but with tea before me, memories crowd in, not very gay ones either—"Mr. Seligman sighed lightly and slowly sipped his cooling tea.

"But, dad darling," Irma asked, "couldn't this account be somewhat brightened by romance? Did not a lovely lady appear upon the scene and make the young man happy?"

"Yes; the lovely lady did appear and was very kind, but it did not make him happy. He was a slave, tied with chains of responsibility, ate and dressed cheaply, fearful of spending a penny more than he had to, while she was the indulged daughter of his wealthy employer. The distance between the shipping clerk, who sometimes helped in the office, and the dainty girl was too great.

"And in Poland there were expenses that neither the boy nor his mother had foreseen. He was twenty; and already certain petty officials, aware of his absence, had to be bribed. He was barely eating enough in order to save, and to send.

"And at this crucial time Miss Ralchen Traube, the only child of his boss, came into the office, sweet as a bouquet of spring flowers, and invited him graciously to a party; she was celebrating her eighteenth birthday, and he must come!"

"Of course you should have gone, your poor darling. Did a gift worry you? Mother would not have minded, even at eighteen," Irma ventured sympathetically.

"To attend he should have had new shoes, a white shirt, a new tie—but could not spend that much on luxuries. He had only work clothes, and decided not to go. But his desire to see his dream girl, to obey her slightest wish, overcame his sense of values. He brushed his one suit and pressed it—O, yes, one can if one must!—Polished his shoes until he fancied the black gloss hid the patch and the somewhat crooked heels, and decided it warm enough to go without an overcoat.

"But when he reached the Traube home, his heart beating high with expectation, and saw the couples entering, the young men in full dress with gleaming white linen, he realized, overwhelmingly, that he was but a shipping clerk, fit to tend the furnace in that home. Ralchen was an angel to ask him, but her guests were just ordinary people, and would laugh.

"He kept out of sight till after the last guest came. Then, holding his coat collar tight about his throat—to keep out the evening chill, or to hide that hated blue shirt—he walked up and down before that house, listening to the gay tumult of music and laughter, wondering which dancing shadow on the window shades was made by Ralchen; trying to distinguish her voice among that happy chorus.

"At last he tore himself away, went to his old little room and spent the most miserable night since he lost his father. It took courage to rise in the morning; to go to work. He was packing cases when Mr. Traube came in and said to him:

"'I was not aware my daughter asked you to her party. But since

my father's slipping away [illegible] come! It was my first great sorrow. Every time the children have company I think of that party."

(The End)