

THE SMART SET

A MAGAZINE OF
CLEVERNESS

Manuscripts, to receive prompt attention, should be addressed, "Editor of THE SMART SET."

CONTENTS

THE ASSAULT OF WINGS	Charles G. D. Roberts	1
VIRGIN ISLE	Florence Brooks	7
YOU NEVER CAN TELL	George Sterling	8
THE HOUSE IN DEMETRIUS ROAD. Part II	J. D. Beresford	9
UNDER THE SNOW	Richard Le Gallienne	42
PAS DE TROIS	Bias Casman and Mary Perry King	43
PRISON-MADE	Freeman Tilden	47
FORTY POUNDS OF GOLD	George Cutten	55
HOUSES	Ludwig Lewisohn	61
PERTINENT AND IMPERTINENT	Owen Hatteras	62
THE WIDOW OF WASDALE HEAD. Play in One Act	Arthur Wing Pinero	63
A SPRING SONG	Robert Loveman	82
ONE MAN TO EVERY FAMILY	Evelyn Gill Klahr	83
THE SEA	Louise Driscoll	88
THE JOKE TOWNS OF AMERICA. Essay	George Jayenne	89
DEAD DREAMS	Blanche Shoemaker Wagstaff	95
THE WOMAN-AT-ARMS	Victor Starbuck	96
A MENIAL	Louis Livingston	97
SUNDAY NIGHT	Louis Untermeyer	104
THE TRIBE ON VACATION	Basil Macdonald Hastings	105
DELICATESSEN	Joyce Kilmer	111
IN A CELLAR	Donn Byrne	113
THE CALL	Faith Baldwin	120
HAMLET AND THE AMERICAN STAGE	George Jean Nathan	121
V—FOR VERA	Cid Carr	124
IN THE CASE OF BRADNER	Hugh Irish	125
WHY HE DIVORCED HER	Paul Hervey Fox	133
THE SIGNOR SEEKS ADVENTURE	H. D. Couzens	135
WILD SWANS	Skipwith Cannell	141
THE MULE DRIVER	Henry Herbert Knibbs	142
LE JUSTICIER. In the Original French	Jean de Kerleog	143
THE MIRACLE IN THIRTY-NINTH STREET WEST	George Jean Nathan	145
THE HARP, THE SACKBUT AND THE PSALTERY	H. L. Mencken	153

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IN A CELLAR

By Donn Byrne

THEY remained in the room behind the shop until the third volley of rifery crackled on the other side of the bridge. Even then they might have stayed, but they heard several half-choked shrieks, and suddenly the shop door burst open and a woman rushed in. She took three little steps forward and tumbled headlong.

Then they knew they had better go downstairs at once.

The little woman on the floor made no movement. She was lying on her face. Her short, bushy black hair had become loosed from its net. The heavy red stain on her blouse, just beneath the shoulder blade, was widening rapidly. They knew she was dead.

Then suddenly the rifles began, and a dog out in the street howled in panic.

Sonia laid down her baby. She crossed to the sofa near the door and attempted to pick up the little withered body of the old shopkeeper. None of them made a move to help her. She found she couldn't lift him. She dragged him to the door and toward the cellar steps.

The red-bearded raggicker was past her in an instant. His iron-shod heels clattered on the stones. The fat woman who had the old clothes shop up the street hesitated a moment and came after her. The big black-bearded cantor picked up the child and followed.

She got him down at last and dragged him to the darkest corner. A sombre yellow light trickled through the grating. The raggicker crushed past her and squeezed himself between the walls.

The old man was very weak. Beyond a stifed groan and the wheezing in his

throat, he had uttered no sound for hours. He kept his eyes closed.

The second hand clothes dealer came down the stairs with the caution of a cat. She held her skirts up with her right hand. Her left clutched a little parcel of clothes. The cantor was stumbling down behind her. Sonia could see the child's white face against his big black beard.

Outside the streets were deserted. Only those who were old and helpless were left in the houses. Some were flying along the country roads. Others were hiding in the hedgerows. The rest were being shot and stabbed and clubbed and trampled to death in the alleyways.

It had all started trivially. An officer of Cossacks had been riding through the Ghetto. His horse had stumbled on the cobbles and a group of schoolboys laughed. The officer lashed at them with his riding switch. A crowd gathered and he had to sabre his way out. In an hour the Black Hundreds had struck.

Sonia's district was far from the spot where the pogrom started, but the Hundred and the peasants were swarming in every street. Sonia's husband had gone over the bridge. She knew he would never come back. She never expected him. She hoped he had been shot clean through the forehead and had been thrown in the canal. Most of the victims would have their heads crushed like eggs and fall under the heavy iron-shod shoes of the peasants or under the hoofs of the dragoons' chargers.

There were now only Maxim Litvin, the old storekeeper, her father and the six-months-old child. The cantor and

the ragpicker and the woman from the second hand clothes shop had rushed in when the dragoons had thundered by the bank of the canal.

They had been together a half-hour in the back room before they moved downstairs, and no one had spoken. The ragpicker was the first to enter, and he snarled when the cantor came fussing in, and tried to bar the door against the old clothes dealer. He believed that the fewer there hid together, the more chance there would be for escape. None of them had been in a pogrom before. All had suffered the extortion of the Black Hundreds, the unscrupulous grafting of the police and the hatred of the Monjiks. They had read and heard of the massacres in Nijni Novgorod and in Odessa and they knew what to expect.

The ragpicker had scurried around and around the room, listening at the door, peering through the windows, looking even up the chimney; the cantor stood in a corner, motionless and eagle-eyed. The clothes dealer had plumped into a chair and rocked silently to and fro.

Sonia spent the time walking the floor with the child and watching the old man. She couldn't tell him what was happening, but she wondered if he knew.

They could hear sounds from the bridge faintly when the door was closed. The rumble was like very distant thunder. When the door was open, the gunshots and screams were quite distinct. The ragpicker had opened it once and shut it quickly. He would go over every few minutes and press his ear against a crack. Then he would run around the windows.

Back of the houses were the country roads. In front the canal crept in a half-moon. Along the canal bank a band of students lined up with rifles to pick out heads in the water. The rioters were shutting off any escape by the bridge. Companies of armed peasantry closed up the roads, urging their shaggy ponies along with long whining whips. Members of the Hundred flashed in and out of the surge, knifing, shooting and vanishing.

The six in the room knew little of what was going on at the bridge. They knew that there was killing, and that the Moldavian and Albanian peasants were at work in the alleyways. The door was closed when the rifle fire began.

The ragpicker opened the door, and they could hear shrieks and groans in the distance. Above the babble arose the angry chatter of a machine gun that had been captured from the infantry. The mob had covered a crowd of Jews in a *cul-de-sac*. Then a few flying figures had dashed down the street, and the little woman had tottered in. And they had gone downstairs.

In the cellar it was worse than upstairs. Through the grating to the street they could hear everything. One long shriek predominated. It began with a short sob and ended in a wild crescendo and paused, and then it began and ended and began and ended again.

The child woke up and commenced whimpering. Sonia took it from the cantor and nestled it close. It fell asleep again. The cantor squeezed himself back to the damp wall.

They heard steps flying down the pavement, followed by the drum of a horse's hoofs on the hardened clay. Two staccato cracks from a rifle, and the rider returned leisurely up the street.

Sonia stole up the cellar stairs and into the shop. She opened the door cautiously and looked out. The butcher from two doors down lay on his back in the sunlight with his big carving knife in his hand. His head was twisted curiously to one side, and his black beard was gray with dust. His sheepskin cap lay a few feet further on. Up the street a woman was crawling slowly on her hands and knees toward an open door, and as Sonia looked, the woman lay down and curled herself up like a child going to sleep. From the bridge there came a sound like the beating of waves on a strand.

She went back to the cellar. The cantor had taken the child up from where she had laid it, and was rocking it in his arms. The clothes dealer was muttering to herself. She went over and felt the old man's heart. It was beating

very faintly. She took off her knitted jacket and laid it under his head. His eyes flickered for a moment.

The ragpicker roamed about the cellar as he had about the room above. He stood under the grating and looked up. In the light his short red beard and skinny neck above his filthy gray muffler showed in a saturnine silhouette.

Sonia felt a rising anger against her husband. Why had he gone out when he could have stayed in and perhaps saved them? He might have hit upon some plan to foil the rioters. Even if they did escape, what could she do, with the child and the old man?

She stole upstairs again and looked out. The sounds seemed somewhat fainter. She thought of venturing the two streets to the canal bank, but she remembered the child.

The cantor had again taken it up. He seemed to get comfort from the little body.

He gave it back to her reluctantly. The ragpicker looked up the grating again.

"Is it over yet?" asked the cantor.

"Don't talk to me, you! Do you hear?"

The cantor sank back in his corner. He gave a sudden sob.

Nobody paid any attention to the clothes dealer. She lay huddled up against the wall. The child slept peacefully. Sonia put her hand over its mouth to feel if it breathed.

They heard staggering footsteps somewhere. Sounds appeared to magnify in the house. Sonia could hear the ticking of the clock two flights above. She put down the child again and ran upstairs.

Little Mendel Husik, the tailor, was reeling down the street. His cap was awry and his caftan open. He was drunk. Suddenly he saw her and began singing: "There once was a widow in Little Russia. She had eighteen children." He took off his cap and bowed grotesquely to her.

Sonia slammed the door and ran downstairs. She could hear him reeling along and singing. He would go along like that, she knew, until he walked into the waiting Hundreds.

"Is it over yet?" asked the cantor.

"I don't know, little father," she answered. He looked so white that she left the child with him.

People came running down the street. There were a few shots. Some passed the house. They heard a scramble in the next house, followed by crashing blows. Steps went out again. Something groaned next door, with a rattle in the throat. Then more fugitives and cracks like the lashing of whips. A body fell over the grating and obscured the light. There was a drip, drip, drip, to the cellar floor.

A pause, and the dog outside began a long heartbroken howling. Sonia felt a shiver in her breast and cold on her cheekbones. Her breath seemed to stop.

Sonia knew the Christians better than the others, and she couldn't conceive how they could take part in the butchery—they seemed so gentle and good-natured. She had once met a sergeant of Grodno Hussars while on a visit to her grandmother. He would come around to the kitchen and sit and look at her. He seldom said a word except "Good afternoon" and "Good-bye." He drank huge quantities of tea from the samovar and sat stroking the hilt of his sabre. When her grandmother's cow foundered, he tramped seven miles for a veterinary surgeon. When she went to the well for water, he would take the pail from her and walk beside her, never saying a word. When she was returning to the city he caught her hand and said: "Become a Christian and I will marry you," but she laughed. He seemed a nice, heavy kind of fellow who wouldn't hurt a fly. She had also known two Cossacks who always laughed to her when they passed the door, and they seemed much too good-natured to be real soldiers.

And now they were massacring her kinfolk in the alleys. She couldn't understand it.

The little old clothes dealer stirred against the wall and began whining.

"Fifteen years ago we came here, Yetta Gersten and myself, and fifteen years we worked by daylight and candlelight. Every Friday when we closed up, I put a ruble into a bowl, and it's all gone now.

Who will marry me now with my bowl gone?"

The ragpicker spat at her in disgust. The noises seemed further off. In the distance a bell began tolling with deep, sonorous notes.

"What is that for?" asked the cantor.

Nobody answered.

The old man began to stir. Sonia turned him on his side. The movement wakened the child, and it cried fitfully. In the distance the bell gave another rich, reverberant note. Someone ran down the street.

The darkness and noise were frightening the child. It cried louder than ever. The old man's heel scraped along the floor. The child began to scream.

"Damn you! Can't you keep her quiet?" snapped the ragpicker.

Sonia said nothing but held the child close and rocked it. The screaming gave way to explosive sobs. Every time the bell clanged they shuddered and waited and held their breath for the next stroke. The clang affected them like a heavy blow.

The cantor moved in his corner. A piece of mortar became detached and fell on the floor. They all jumped.

"It's over, perhaps," said he.

The bell gave another stroke. Sonia wished she knew what it was about. She thought there was a faint smell of smoke somewhere.

She was very tired now. The child was heavy, but she felt she oughtn't to sit down. The thought of her helplessness sent tears rolling down her cheeks. They splashed on the child's face. She wiped them off and turned her head to one side so that the tears could fall to the ground.

She felt a tug at her dress. The old man had turned over on his face. She turned him back on his side. She knew that he wanted to tell her something, but she couldn't understand. His eyes opened and shut spasmodically. Only husky sounds came from his throat. She arranged the jacket under his head again and felt his lips. They were moving rapidly. She put her ear to his mouth, but could not distinguish what he was whispering.

The clothes dealer was still whimpering in her corner. The ragpicker flitted in and out of the murky light that came from the grating. He found a stick and began pushing through the bars at the body lying there. He managed to move it on its side several times but it fell back with a dull thud. Something splashed and squelched under his boots.

The cantor crouched in his corner. Every few minutes he gave a gasping sob. Sonia remembered the last time she had heard him in the synagogue. His long black beard had stood out in sharp relief against his white surplice, and the worshipers found themselves in tears as he chanted the Kaddash in his sonorous baritone.

Sonia felt they had been there for years. She had seen the ragpicker only once before, but it seemed as if they had been intimate from birth. The husband who had gone out that morning and never came back was like a figure in an old history. She wondered why the child slept so long. They had been only twenty minutes there but a cycle of days and nights appeared to have passed. What life remained to them, she felt, would be spent in the cellar.

Outside the clamor grew worse. The bell's ringing was faster. shrieks were louder. She could hear sharp crackling reports, which were of rifles, and more muffled ones, which were of automatics and revolvers. There was an angry murmuring and a faint, thin cheering, and some were singing a song she didn't recognize. The machine gun's chatter had ceased.

She couldn't picture to herself what was happening. She thought of an illustration in a school book of men in armor cutting down men in white garments with short, heavy swords.

Someone had opened the door upstairs and was moving around with cautious steps. The fugitives in the cellar crept close to the wall and cowered against it. Sonia could hear the beating of the hearts in the stillness. The old man did not stir. The steps moved from the shop to the back room and stayed there a minute; then they ascended the stairs. They came down, down again and passed

the door to the cellar. They heard them going to and fro in the shop. The front door swung open; there was a sound as of a match struck against the lintel of the door. Then the steps moved up the street. Everyone breathed with a sobbing catch in the throat.

The ragpicker darted up the cellar steps and barred the door. Sonia felt as if that ended things. The outer world was cast off. They were doomed irrevocably to the darkness and the dank smell. She wanted to dash upstairs and out in the streets and give herself up to the mob around the corner. She smothered a wild desire to scream. As the bar slammed to, the cantor dropped on the floor and buried his face in his arms.

The mob was coming closer. They could hear the cries of, "Kill the Jews!" in the distance. Yells of rage rose like the bellow of angry cattle. Occasionally there was a tinkle of broken window glass. Dust began to filter through the grating. They saw each separate particle flicker in the sunlight.

Their terror was more acute now. Sonia remembered tales of the pogrom at Kishineff. A cantor's head had been carried around on a pole, and they had struck the face, asking it to sing. The ragpicker would be torn to pieces before their eyes. The child would be thrown about from one to the other. The old man would get the easiest death of all—one blow would kill him. But what would happen to herself and the old clothes woman?

The Russian artisans were bad enough, but the rioters were in the main Moldavian and Albanian peasants, with wild rolling eyes and crowbars in their hands.

They were turning the corner to the street. Shrieks of agony split the air. A child was screaming. The trample of the feet overhead was like hammers pounding on a hundred anvils.

The crowd swept into the street. Noise seemed to cover noise. Sonia was deafened. The clothes dealer shrieked at the top of her voice. The cantor cried with loud insistent chokes. The ragpicker clawed nervously at the wall. The old man lay on his back with his eye-

balls fixed. The child was sticking her nails into Sonia's neck. Sonia pressed it closer. She wanted to shriek, too, but was afraid of terrifying the child more.

How long the uproar lasted she did not know. She could hear people rushing into the house. Other people followed them. Someone banged at the cellar door. Then there was the sound of something falling loosely and heavily, and the banging stopped. There was a long-drawn shuddering groan.

The grating was darkened by running feet. They paid no attention to the figure on the bars. The window of the shop broke with an ear-splitting crash.

Above the turmoil, one insistent shriek rose in a sharp soprano: "Kill them! Kill them! Kill them!"

Down the street further a woman cried: "Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God!" Her voice was hoarse from shouting.

Several feet dashed up the staircase and into Sonia's bedroom. They were moving something heavy. Sonia thought it was her big iron chest. They staggered with it to the window and hoisted it over. The window panes tinkled and the box fell with a dull thud. Billows of rags filled the street. Someone cheered faintly.

There was no light in the cellar now. Sonia heard a scuffle and dull blows like kicks somewhere near the wall. The ragpicker was attempting to stop the crying of the clothes dealer. God, she felt, if that ragpicker should lay a finger on her, or on the child, or on the old man! She would tear him limb from limb.

The trampling became faster. The feet on the grating moved with the tapping of step dancers. The mob seemed to heave and surge overhead. Then light flashed through the mass of legs and into the cellar. Sonia could see the white face of the ragpicker moving convulsively. A deafening explosion followed. Someone had thrown a bomb.

The noises that had filled the street before were nothing to the babble now. It seemed as if everything had crystallized into one malignant sound. She wished she could close her ears with her

fingers, but she couldn't lay down the child.

She thought she was fainting. She wanted them to come into the cellar and finish it at once.

Her knees were growing weaker and weaker. The sound of the explosion seemed to have cut her heart adrift and it was floating around on air. Cold sweat was pouring from her forehead into her eyes. She felt perspiration from her whole body saturate her clothes and dampen the child's clothes. Her teeth clicked together with a rapid clatter.

The feet moved off little by little from the grating and light began to trickle through. She could distinguish the other forms in the cellar. The old man was still rigid. Only for a slight wheeze she heard when she bent down, she might have thought him dead. The cantor was taut against the wall. The clothes dealer's eyes protruded like those of a fish. The ragpicker's face dilated in a horrible grin. Every time a noise was made their bodies quivered.

Each of them would have preferred certain death in the street to uncertain safety in the cellar. Their eardrums were tingling. Their hearts were thumping with the boom of bass drums. They conjured up grotesque visions of the fight in the street. Red spots flickered to and fro and around and up and down before their eyes.

God! how long would it last? Was there no chance of the troops coming? And Sonia brought up for herself a vision of blue-coated Cossacks advancing down the street, three abreast at a gallop, with their knouts swinging and whistling, their shaggy mounts dashing against the rioters. The mob would give way like a flock of sheep. But the troops were in their barracks. They had no orders to act. They would stay there.

The mob had nearly passed now. Sonia felt they were dragging bodies along with them. Thick, drunken voices yelled: "Crucify them! Crucify them!"

Then a sort of rearguard swept by, howling like wolves.

The street was deserted again. Sonia

found herself half sitting, half lying, on the floor. The child was wide awake. Nervous shivers ran up and down its body. Its heart was fluttering. Sonia scrambled to her feet and ran over to the light under the grating. Its face was white and its eyes closed. Its teeth chattered convulsively. A slight froth was on its lips.

If she could only get it warm somehow, she thought. If she could get upstairs and light the stove!

Up the street doors were banging. A shiver of broken glass, and something struck the street with a thud. Somebody laughed.

Sonia felt her skin prickle suddenly. Something mysterious and terrifying was happening up there.

She pressed the child as close to her as she could, and hurried back to the wall. As she ran a rifle shot cracked, followed by two others. The mob was still murmuring angrily in the distance. They were several streets away.

The cantor staggered to his feet. "I think it's over now," he said. His voice sounded thin and weak. It was like the voice of the child. It cracked on the last word. He fell forward on his knees and crumpled up. Neither the ragpicker nor the clothes dealer moved.

Sonia blew softly in the child's face. She thought that might warm it. She opened the front of her bodice and nestled it.

There was a curious smell of smoke in the air. She had noticed it before, but it was stronger now. She wondered if the others had smelt it.

The doors were banging again. A scream rang out, and broke off with a catch.

Cold, deadly fear seized her. She was in a panic when the mob had rushed down the street, but this was something sinister. She felt the fear she had often felt in the dark, of having a dead hand touch her in the night.

The smell of smoke was becoming more noticeable. Little rasping wheezes came from the old man's throat. The others seemed not to have noticed it. She suddenly saw the ragpicker cross the floor. He looked around.

"Over now, I think," he cackled. "Well, I think I'll be going."

Sonia rushed forward and clutched his arm. A door slammed to. Footsteps came along the street. There was the rasping sound of rifle butts being dragged along the pavement. The raggicker scurried back to the corner.

Little wisps of smoke crept through the grating. There was an acrid taste in the air. Faint far-off mumbles sounded in the old man's throat.

The steps stopped in front of the house. They turned into the shop. They were in the back room. The floor creaked under heavy boots. There were four or five men there, Sonia thought. They worked around silently except for the falling of their feet. One knelt down and poked under the sofa. Then they went upstairs.

The smoke was thicker now. It seemed to fall into the cellar. It hung halfway between the grating and the floor in gray whorls. It spun in and out in figures of eight, and took the shape of faces Sonia knew. The old man moved from side to side. His breathing was very heavy, with little snorts he attempted to control.

The men upstairs were moving from room to room. They could hear them distinctly in the cellar. They were arguing. Objects were being kicked about and tables and chairs overturned. Curtains were torn down with whining zips. When they went, Sonia thought, she could get the child where it was warm.

The old man's chest moved up and down in spasms. Smoke was getting into his throat. He began short, feeble, staccato coughs. Sonia's heart stopped beating. She knew his coughing attacks. They began like that. If the men above should hear!

She knew who they were. They were the jackals of the Black Hundred who cleared up what the mob had left. They spied out the fugitives. She knew the meaning of the slammed doors and of the choked screams and of the rifle shots. The mob were peasants in fanatical exaltation; these were the demons, the executioners, the plotters of pogroms in the night time. The mob were the ar-

tisans; these were the masters of the craft. There was something horribly workmanlike in their brusque steps and in the silence in which they went about.

The old man began to cough violently. Sonia felt her hair quiver. God, if there were only some way to make him stop! For herself she didn't care; they could do what they liked with her. The others could take care of themselves; two of them were strong men, and the other woman was better off than she. But if she didn't get the child upstairs and warm it it would die.

The steps shuffled about upstairs. They were preparing to come down.

She put the child down on the floor, and knelt by the old man. His coughing was more frequent now. It came in short, rattling gasps. She put her hand over his mouth.

Something was delaying them. They were perhaps looking in one last hiding place. She pressed her hand closer.

The old man was squirming from side to side. He tried to shake the hand off. His eyeballs dilated. His body grew rigid. He beat at her with his hands. His knees moved up and down with spasmodic jerks.

They were coming down the stairs. They were talking in grumbling whispers. They would have passed in a moment.

The old man arched his body. Then he suddenly went limp. Sonia felt numb and dazed. She took the jacket from under his head and put it over his face.

She went over and picked up the child. The smoke had darkened the cellar more and she had to grope for it. It seemed warmer.

The steps were passing the cellar door. She knew they would overlook that. In a few moments she could bring the child upstairs. She wondered if the store had been injured, and if anybody had taken the matches.

The child suddenly broke into loud sobs.

The footsteps upstairs paused for a moment.

The sobbing grew louder.

Then the rifle butts began to smash the panels of the door.