LOVE IN THE LOOP

Aldis, Mary, 1872-1949

They sat by the fountain at a table for two,
The traditional couple—
An awkward, ill-dressed girl,
With a lovely skin and a country smile,
And the man who was paying for her dinner.
There they were—
Exploiter and Exploited.

I could see only his back, clad in grey tweed.
His neck rolled over his collar
In a thick red fold,
And his hands, which he waved about,
Were fat and white with shiny nails
And diamond rings.

I wondered if he was offering her better clothes
For the girl looked troubled.
Her shirt-waist wasn't fresh,
Her skirt was draggled,
And her feet, curled up under the chair,
Shifted themselves uneasily, seeking cover
For most lamentable shoes;
But oh, her skin!
Soft rose and the delicate white of summer mist.
Her hair was the brown of hazelnuts after a frost,
Glinting to saffron as she turned her head
Quickly from side to side
Like an enquiring dove.

Soon oysters came;
She eyed them with distrust,
Then ate one thoughtfully and made a face.
He seemed concerned
And beckoned the waiter to remove the dish,
Asking if she'd rather have a "country sausage."
She showed her baby teeth in a happy smile
And sausages were brought.
She ate them all while he watched her enviously,
Putting a little white pellet in some water
For his second course.
Champagne was set before them and he filled her glass
While he turned his bottom side up.
She sipped, and made another face, and choked,
Then tried again and laughed.
"I do believe it's good," she said,
And finished the glass,
Holding it out for more.
"You'd best look out," I heard him say
As he slid his hand along the table-cloth.
She cringed away.
"Oh, please, please don't!" she said;
But he hitched his chair softly around the table.
I watched it all,
Wondering miserably if it was my duty
To warn the girl,
And whether she would prove clinging if I did.

Finally to secure her hands he turned himself.
My God, what a mug!
His beady eyes over his glistening cheeks
Blinked like a hurrying pig's:
His protuberent lips wiggled themselves
In amorous expectancy
While little beads of ecstasy bedewed his brow.
I turned my chair around and raised my paper.

Suddenly I heard her cry, "Oh, Mister!
That fuzzy stuff you made me drink—my head!"
And she grabbed her coat and slithered along the floor
To the front door, calling over her shoulder.
"Don't come. I want some air,
I'll be back in a minute or two."

After a startled forward step
He settled back and called the waiter,
Who hurried to busy himself expectantly
With the inevitable reckoning.
By the time it was ready, Mr. Amourous-One
Was deep in the stock reports and dead to the world.
The waiter stood on one foot and then on the other,
Finally wandering off.

After some twenty minutes of troubled scrutiny
The paper was laid down,
And Mr. Amourous
Looked at his watch and jumped,  
Then turned the bill and burrowed in his pocket,  
Pulling out change.  
Next came a leather wallet—  
And then what a bellowing rent the astonished air!

"Eight hundred dollars gone!" he yelled.  
"Hi! get that girl, I tell you, GET THAT GIRL!"
But nobody stirred.  
Exploiter and Exploited—