

# Free Soul

By Anne McDonnell

It was a very warm, soft spring afternoon. In the newly green park Miss Harvey felt quite pleased with herself. She had been really daring at the store today. Her replies to the sallies of her companions had smacked of the woman of the world spirit that she so admired and of which she felt herself mistress. She tossed her thin shoulder in a poorly executed gesture of bold daring.

She repeated over to herself some of the more choice of her remarks. **Matter-of-factly.** "Well, personally I prefer straight whiskey to anything else, but brandy is all right." Half a bottle of beer sent Miss Harvey into tearful giggles.

**Blase.** "I think the younger generation should know the facts of life early and thoroughly. I don't like this false modesty." Miss Harvey could count the "affairs" of her whole forty-one years on the fingers of one meager, veined hand.

**Challengingly.** "Just simply tell the section manager you don't like the way he's running things around here. You'll never get any where if you don't fight for it." Miss Harvey had been selling ladies gloves and scarfs for the past thirteen years at the same obscure dingy little counter of Davis and Carter's Dept. Store.

There had been other remarks quite as brave and quite as free, but she would save those triumphs to taste again later when she had gone home to her dull little room into which the bleared eye of a street light shone night after night.

She suddenly noticed a park bench just ahead of her. The leaves of a medium sized maple tree made a lacy pattern on the littered walk. On the end of the bench a very, very ordinary man sat reading yesterday's paper. He did not look up as Miss Harvey sat down—on the other end of the bench. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, then began to paw through her worn purse. Finally she found the cardboard packet of extra-long cigarettes that she smoked. Of course she didn't inhale but the cloud of smoke curling from her mouth and around her tightly crimped hair added intrigue to her personality, she thought. She sat for a moment holding one of the rather limp white tubes, the tobacco straggling out at both ends. She had had the package for over two weeks. Finally she leaned toward the man at the other end of the bench.

"Have you got a match?" Miss Harvey had two books of matches in her purse. He did not look up. She moved a little closer to him and repeated her question more loudly. He looked up vaguely then focused his eyes on Miss Harvey's veil swathed face and at the limp cigarette in her bony hand.

"What? What did you say?"

She waggled the cigarette and some of the tobacco straggled out.

"A match?"

"Oh yeah." He rummaged in his pocket and presently brought out a kitchen match. He flipped the head off with his thumbnail. Miss Harvey liked that strong masculine gesture. As she bent toward the flame she caught the odor of whiskey about him. The smoke stung her eyes but she smiled archly at him.

"Thanks."

"O.K."

He settled back into his paper but Miss Harvey did not move back to her end of the bench. She sat smoking and furtively studying the man. She wove a fantastic tale of lost wealth and debonair decadence about the very ordinary figure next to her. The ash from her cigarette rolled into her lap as she hastily glanced at her watch. She carefully took a last puff at the cigarette, dropped it onto the walk and ground it out with her thin-soled slipper, then gathered up her bag and gloves, and, glancing once more at the man, arose.

"Thanks for the light."

He muttered something, his face still buried in the paper. Miss

Harvey started off on her high heels, her shoulders straight, her thin hips swinging with each jerking step.

“What an intriguing creature. I must tell the kids about him on my relief.”

She hunched her thin shoulders in anticipation at what as yet unknown daring and original story she would tell of this afternoon's encounter. She minced onward in her precarious shoes toward the store.

