

THE WAY OUT

By **Tom M. Brown**

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FRIEDA HALSE was a—how do you say it?—member of the unemployed.

A disgusted, disillusioned little stenographer, out of work, trudged wearily up the three flights of creaking stairs that led to her "light-housekeeping" room after a day since she had been "fired" from Berk's office staff.

Frieda had not merely been "let out," but fired, with accompanying sound effects of a stormy boss and snickers from the office boy. Embarrassment, humiliation, tears, and despair had followed Mr. Berk's ungentlemanly behavior of threatening to throw her from the offices if she did not cease arguing an impossible case to him. He had been irritable for weeks, difficult to get along with. And to make it worse he caught cold in his weak system so readily that he demanded perfect hermetic sealing of the room wherein he worked. In this room also worked Frieda, the healthy young girl on her own.

There would not have been the conflict if Frieda had not been so "cold-natured." She payed no heed to drafts, chills, or dampness. In fact she was a fiend for fresh air, sunshine, and all invigorating processes of nature and the elements. Consequently, all windows were raised the limits when she hung her hat upon the rack and started into a day's typewriting of letters. Then when Mr. Berk came grumbling and snarling in, two hours later, like an orge from some unclean den, the first thing he did was to order the windows down. The windows went down.

Another feature of Frieda, this one probably not so commendable, was her carelessness, forgetfulness. And as she was the hired girl of the private office, she was responsible for those windows, which were seldom ever put down when she had her way about it. A cold spell had hit the town, and with the first hint of dropping temperature the boss had thundered demands that the windows be immediately shut tight. Frieda looked up from her typewriter long enough to see him disappear towards his private washroom, and then shrugged her shoulders and promptly forgot what the old wheezer had said. He talked so much anyway that one could not possibly be expected to remember all the worthless things he said.

Then he returned and sat at his heavy desk, as he always did. The window at his back was admitting a brisk little breeze of snappy chill, and letting it down the back of his scrawny neck. He shuddered as the cold air hit him, and whirled around to see the window open. He looked at Frieda who had finished her work and was glancing at a magazine.

"Young lady," he said almost as icily as the wind was blowing outside, "do you realize that I have reasons for every order I give?"

"Yessir," disinterestedly from Frieda.

"And still you blazently refuse to obey them, although I pay you for those expected services?"

Frieda's ire began to rise, and she made some impertinent remark that turned Mr. Berk's face to a crimson rage.

"You're fired. Get out! Right now; go draw your pay and get out."

Then when the girl had realized what her foolishness had done she tried to make atonement as best she could, which was not good enough. Mr. Berk stormed and swore, slammed the windows down and broke a pane in his rage. After he had mortified her to his utmost ability, she had departed, crying in anger and self-pity. That was that.

That night she consoled herself that she could easily get another position. She was an expert typist, and a superlative stenographer. There must be a demand for a girl such as that, to say nothing of her good looks, of which she had an over-share of. Optimism is a heartening thing, but not quite practical. Frieda found that out in the three days of tireless contacting and vain but energy-draining efforts for a job. She found that in jobs, as in everything else, there was a mountain of supply to a pin-point of demand. She was disgusted.

When one gets thoroughly disgusted, his actions may adhere to many formulas, according to the character of the subject. Frieda was not of very staunch stuff. She admitted defeat too quickly. In the language of the moderns, she "could not take it." It was the first time she had ever been in this plight, and it sapped her of courage. Many others are likewise defeated. It is not something new. What do they do?

They commit suicide, arguing to themselves that their courage is so boundless that they can actually do it. In truth, this is not courage, but an admission of defeat. Frieda had made up her mind.

Rags, sleeping powder, and gas from the range. The rags to stuff under the door; the sleeping powder to lull her into dreamless oblivion before the dry pangs of asphyxiation came; and the gas to . . .

Drearily she hung her hat neatly on the peg by the door to her one room. Why had she done that? What did she care whether they found her hat on the floor or on the peg? She knocked it to the floor. She turned on the gas; it gave a queer little hiss, and sounded very different from the lighted fire. Kind of soothing purr, just right to sing one to sleep. She shut it off again.

The rags she pulled from the bottom drawer of her dresser, and stuffed conscientiously under the wide crack in the door's threshold. No gas could escape from under there now. Cotton

