

## CHAPTER IV

### THE WORLD OF FURNISHED ROOMS

Back of the ostentatious apartments, hotels, and homes of the Lake Shore Drive, and the quiet, shady streets of the Gold Coast lies an area of streets that have a painful sameness, with their old, soot-begrimed stone houses, their none-too-clean alleys, their shabby air of respectability. In the window of house after house along these streets one sees a black and white card with the words "Rooms To Rent." For this is the world of furnished rooms, a world of strangely unconventional customs and people, one of the most characteristic of the worlds that go to make up the life of the great city.<sup>1</sup>

This nondescript world, like every rooming-house district, has a long and checkered history.

The typical rooming-house is never built for the purpose; it is always an adaptation of a former private residence, a residence which has seen better days. At first, in its history as a rooming-house, it may be a very high-class rooming-house. Then, as the fashionable residence district moves farther and farther uptown, and as business comes closer and closer, the grade of the institution declines until it may become eventually nothing but a "bums' hotel" or a disorderly house.<sup>2</sup>

We have seen, in reading the history of the Near North Side, that after the fire this was a wealthy and fashionable residence district. But as business crossed the river and came

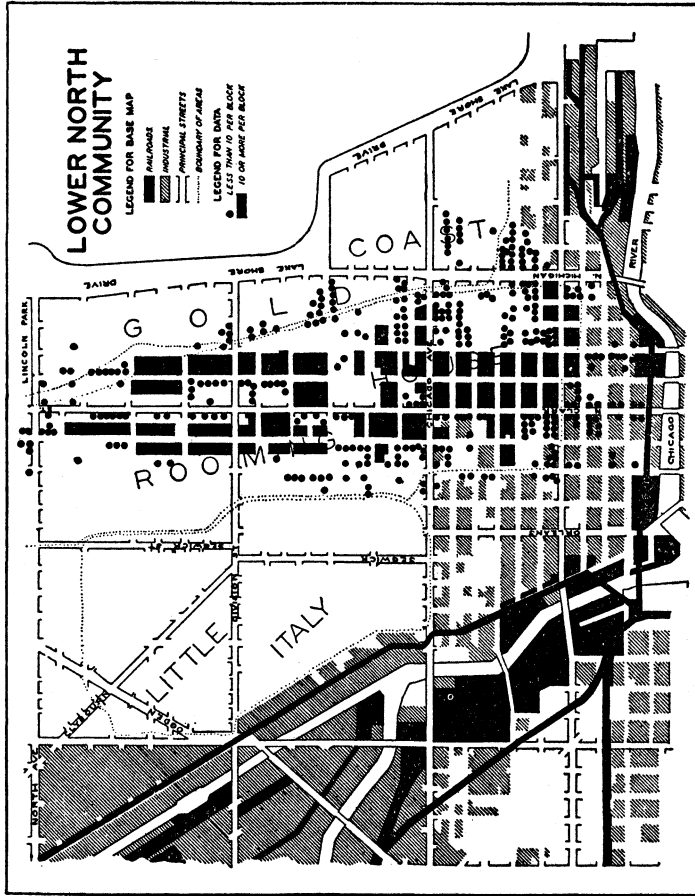
<sup>1</sup> This rooming-house district of the Near North Side is one of three such districts in Chicago. Similarly, on the South and West sides there are areas of furnished rooms, wedging their way along the focal lines of transportation, from the apartment areas into the slum and the business district. Rooming-house districts will be found similarly situated in every large city.

<sup>2</sup> Trotter, *The Housing of Non-Family Women in Chicago*, p. 5.

north it became less and less desirable as a place to live. Gradually the fashionable families moved out of their old homes. Less well-to-do, transient, and alien groups came in. As the city has marched northward, however, land values and rentals have been slowly rising, until now the families who would be willing to live in this district cannot pay the rentals asked. As a result the large old residences have been turned into rooming-houses—another chapter in the natural history of the city.

This lodging- and rooming-house district of the Near North Side lies between the Gold Coast on the east and Wells Street on the west, and extends northward from Grand Avenue and the business district to North Avenue. South of Chicago Avenue the district merges with the slum; its rooming- and lodging-houses sheltering the laborer, the hobo, the rooming-house family, the studios of the bohemian, the criminal, and all sorts of shipwrecked humanity, while some of its small hotels have a large number of theatrical people—and others the transient prostitute. The whole of the district is criss-crossed with business streets. The area north of Chicago Avenue, however, save for Clark Street, is not a slum area. And it is in this area, with its better-class rooming-houses in which live, for the most part, young and unmarried men and women, that we are interested in the present chapter.

An analysis of the *Illinois Lodging House Register* reveals the fact that there are 1,139 rooming- and lodging-houses on the Near North Side, and that in these houses 23,007 people are living in furnished rooms of one kind and another. Ninety blocks in the better rooming area north of Chicago Avenue were studied intensively, by means of a house-to-house census. This study revealed the additional facts that



THE WORLD OF FURNISHED ROOMS.—The addresses of proprietors of rooming and lodging houses (from the *Illinois Lodging House Register*, 1924, after Anderson). The Near North Side rooming-house area is one of three zones of mobile, anonymous life that follow focal lines of transportation from the Loop into the heart of the North, South, and West sides.

71 per cent of all the houses in this district keep roomers; and that of the people who live in these rooms, 52 per cent are single men, 10 per cent are single women, and 38 per cent are couples, "married," supposedly with "benefit of clergy."<sup>1</sup> The rooming-house area is a childless area.<sup>2</sup> Yet most of its population is in the productive ages of life, between twenty and thirty-five.<sup>3</sup>

The rooming-house is typically a large, old-fashioned residence, though many apartments are converted into rooming-houses as well.<sup>4</sup> And the population living in these rooming-houses is typically what the labor leader refers to as the "white collar" group—men and women filling various clerical positions—accountants, stenographers, and the like, office workers of various sorts. There are also students from the many music schools of the Near North Side. Most of them are living on a narrow margin, and here they can live cheaply, near enough to the Loop to walk to and from their work if they wish.<sup>5</sup>

The constant comings and goings of its inhabitants is the most striking and significant characteristic of this world of

<sup>1</sup> The schedules of this rooming census are filed with the Committee on Social Research of the University of Chicago.

<sup>2</sup> School census, 1920. The small number of children in this area is in striking contrast to the number in the slum area to the south and west; even to the number on the Gold Coast.

<sup>3</sup> This age grouping is based on the opinion of social workers, and on the findings of A. B. Wolfe, *The Lodging-House Problem in Boston*.

<sup>4</sup> Part of the story of the rooming-house is told in the fact that these great old residences can never be converted into tenements. See Breckinridge and Abbott, "Chicago's Housing Problem," *American Journal of Sociology*, XVI, 295-96.

<sup>5</sup> An accompaniment of the rooming-house is the cheap cafeteria and restaurant, scores of which are found along Clark and State streets, and Chicago Avenue, Division Street, and North Avenue.

furnished rooms. This whole population turns over every four months.<sup>1</sup> There are always cards in the windows, advertising the fact that rooms are vacant,<sup>2</sup> but these cards rarely have to stay up over a day, as people are constantly walking the streets looking for rooms. The keepers of the rooming-houses change almost as rapidly as the roomers themselves. At least half of the keepers of these houses have been at their present addresses six months or less.<sup>3</sup>

Most people on La Salle street are forever moving. The landlords move because they think they will do better in another house or on another street. I think many landlords might have been gamblers or inventors—they see visions, or are of the temperament which is always looking for a new stroke of luck. The tenants also keep moving, because they hope for something better in another house or on another street. They are always looking for a place more like home, or more comfortable, or cheaper.<sup>4</sup>

So the scenes shift and change in the drama of the rooming-house world—change with a cinema-like rapidity.

#### THE ROOMING-HOUSE

The rooming-house is not to be confused with the boarding-house.

<sup>1</sup> Census of Rooming Houses (see above). Of course there are people who have lived in the same room for years. But there are hundreds of others who live in a given house but a month, a week, or even a day. See Documents 14 and 15.

<sup>2</sup> As of November 1, 1923, 30 per cent of the houses in the district had cards in the windows. Census of Rooming Houses (see above).

<sup>3</sup> *Illinois Lodging House Register*. With respect to length of residence, 117 consecutive registrations for the Lower North Side were distributed as follows:

0-1 Mo.	1-3 Mo.	3 Mo.-6 Mo.	6 Mo.-1 Yr.	1-5 Yr.	5 Yr. and More
9	9	26	25	35	13

<sup>4</sup> Document 14: Interview with a resident of a rooming-house on La Salle Street.

The characteristics of the old-time boarding-house are too well known to need recounting here. With all its shortcomings, it will be admitted that there was in it something of the home element. Boarders knew each other; they met at table two or three times a day, and lingered a few moments in conversation after dinner in the evening. In summer they gathered on the front steps and piazzas, and in the winter often played euchre and whist in the landlady's parlor. Congenial temperaments had a chance to find each other. There was a public parlor where guests were received, and, in a reputable boarding-house at least, a girl would not have thought of taking a gentleman caller to her own room. The landlady of a good boarding-house took something of a personal interest, even if remote, in her boarders, and they often found themselves becoming a part of the family, even against their wills. There was a certain personal element in the relations between individuals; no one could be isolated and certainly shut up to himself.<sup>1</sup>

Here, at least, was a nucleus of opinion, set of personal relationships, which tended to define social situations. But the boarding-house has passed out of existence in the modern city. The rise of rents, the mechanization of life, and sharper definition of economic function resulting in the development of the café and restaurant business has reduced the former keeper of the boarding-house to the simpler employment of "taking lodgers." Not a dozen boarding-houses were found in this Near North Side district.

The rooming-house which has replaced the boarding-house is a very different sort of place to live. It has no dining-room, no parlor, no common meeting place. Few acquaintanceships spring up in a rooming-house.

One gets to know few people in a rooming-house. All told, in the year and a half I lived there, I didn't come to know over twenty well enough to speak to them. And there must have been nearly three hundred people in and out in that time—for there are constant comings and goings; someone is always moving out; there is always an ad in the paper, and a sign in the window. But rooms are never vacant

<sup>1</sup> A. B. Wolfe, *The Lodging-House Problem in Boston*, I, 46-47.

more than a few hours. There seems always to be someone walking the streets looking for a room, and someone is always moving in. People change so fast, and one is in so little—being at work all day, and out every evening as likely as not—that there is little chance to get acquainted if one wished. But one doesn't wish—there is a universal barrier of distrust in this rooming-house world. At first I couldn't comprehend it; but later I was to come to.<sup>1</sup>

The keeper of the rooming-house has no personal contact with, or interest in, his roomers. He is satisfied to collect his rents and to make a living. It is an entirely commercial consideration with him. Consequently the average keeper of a rooming-house is not too particular about who rooms in his house, or what goes on in it, as long as the other roomers are not disturbed.

Trotter, in her study of the housing of non-family women in Chicago, comments:

The question about entertaining men guests brought forth interesting varieties of standards. . . . A number stated that the privilege of entertaining in a girl's room would be allowed on condition the door was left open. Some said, "Yes, if two girls are entertaining." Others stated limitation of hours at 10 P.M. and 10:30 P.M. One man who showed the house and gave privileges of entertaining in rooms said, "We don't care what they do, just so they are quiet after 12 o'clock." To the question "Are men callers permitted in rooms?" the answer most often received from those who granted the privilege was "Yes, if girls are nice." One woman said, "Yes, but I don't have nothing but first-class carryings on." Almost half of the 300 places visited granted this privilege.<sup>2</sup>

A woman who was asked by one of the census workers how many married couples there were in her house said: "I don't know—I don't ask. I want to rent my rooms."

<sup>1</sup> Document 15: the life-story of a "charity girl." This "barrier of distrust" was run against by those taking the census of rooming-houses. Faces peered from windows; doors were opened a crack and often slammed; questions were met with suspicious glances, and non-committal replies.

<sup>2</sup> Trotter, *The Housing of Non-Family Women in Chicago*, p. 11.

The rooming-house is a place of anonymous relationships. One knows no one, and is known by no one. One comes and goes as one wishes, does very much as one pleases, and as long as one disturbs no one else, no questions are asked. How complete this anonymity may be is shown in the following document:

I had occasion to inquire for a man living in a rooming-house. He had roomed there about a week. There was no 'phone in the place, so I had to call at his address. I went there about 7:30. After I had rung the bell for some time, a woman about forty-five answered the door. She wore a house apron, and was evidently the landlady. I asked for Mr. X. She said "Who?" I repeated the name. She shook her head, and said that she didn't know anyone of that name. I looked at the address in my notebook, to see if I had the address correct. I told her that this was the address he had given, and went on to describe him. She knew of two men in the house who might answer to his description. I then told her that he did a lot of work on the typewriter in his room. Then she knew whom I meant. She told me to go to the third floor front and see if he was there. He was not in. I knocked at several other rooms, but no one knew anything about him. When I got downstairs the lady had disappeared, and I could not leave a message.

I came back a week later, and the same woman came to the door. I asked if Mr. X. was in. She said he had moved yesterday. I asked if she knew where he went, but she did not know. She said that he left when his week was up. He had left a note for her, saying he had to leave. I asked her if he might not have left a forwarding address for his mail. She said that he did not, that he never got any mail.<sup>1</sup>

Such complete anonymity could be found nowhere but in the city of today, and nowhere in the city save in the rooming-house.

The peculiar social relationships of the world of furnished rooms are reflected in the behavior of the people who live in this world. Nothing could bring this out more clearly and

<sup>1</sup> Document 16.



significantly than the story which follows, the life-story of a "charity girl."

Emporia, Kansas, was my home until I was twenty-two. My father had a small business there. He was an upright, God-fearing man. . . . He taught us to obey the Ten Commandments, to go to church on Sunday, to do all the things the "respectable" do in a small, gossiping place.

We were a large family but father managed to save enough to send me, the oldest, to a small college in the state. And from the time I was a little girl I had music lessons. It is about these music lessons that the story of my life revolves.

I was always looked upon as something of a prodigy about the town. At ten I played at Chopin and Bach. I played my little pieces at church recitals, at firemen's benefits, when mother entertained the Ladies' Aid Society, and at our high school graduating exercises. I was told that I had talent, "wonderful feeling for the soul of the masters," that I ought to go to New York, or abroad, where I could have competent instruction; that some day I would be a concert star.

Through my four years of college this ambition slumbered, but never died. And the day I got my diploma I wrote home that instead of going back to Emporia to marry a "Babbitt" and live on "Main Street," I was going to Chicago to study music. I went home for a stormy week. Father was amazed that I should suggest living alone in Chicago, and sternly forbade my going, saying that if I did he would send me no money—indeed, he had little to send. Mother said little, but when I left she put into my hand fifty dollars which she had been saving for a new dress. All told, when my ticket was bought, I had less than one hundred dollars on which to begin the conquest of a career.

Never shall I forget the time of the night that I arrived at the Northwestern Station, my purse clutched tightly in one hand, and my bag in the other, shaking my head at redcaps, confused and dazzled by the glare of the lights—but my heart singing, my ambition aflame it was the gate to the promised land. I went to the Travelers' Aid Bureau and inquired how to get to the Y.W.C.A. I walked uptown, carrying my bag, too excited to be tired. I still remember the romantic appeal the sluggish blackness of the river made, gleaming in the lights of the great electric signs. How differently it was to look two short years later!

The first few weeks went by like magic. It was all so strange and maddeningly stimulating to my small-town soul. The "Y" was a pleasant enough place to live—not at all the institutional sort of place I had expected it to be. But even in these first weeks I began to know what loneliness is. Most of my evenings were spent sitting in corners of the sitting-room, watching the old girls playing the piano and victrola, or entertaining their beaux. I got acquainted with a few other newcomers—a girl from Indiana who came to study, like myself, a girl who came from Alabama to get work as stenographer, and four or five others, from small towns in Illinois. All but myself seemed to have acquaintances or connections of some sort in Chicago. And sometimes, when I felt too unbearably lonely, I would go back to the big station in the evening, at the time when the train I came on would be coming in, and watch the faces in the crowd for a face from Emporia.

It was at the "Y" that I had my first acquaintance with that most pitiable figure of the rooming-house world—the old and unmarried woman who works. They were conspicuous in either the cafeteria or the upstairs sitting-room, because of their loneliness—eating lunch at a solitary table, sitting by themselves knitting, with shabby and unbecoming clothes, care-worn faces, and toil-worn hands. I was to learn later some of the tragedies their mute lips harbored.

After six weeks at the "Y" I moved to the Near North Side, to be nearer my music school. And during the next few months I lived at a dozen rooming-houses and homes for girls. The boarding-homes were more comfortable and pleasant, but I was working all day and taking lessons at night. I was out late, and this conflicted with their rules. I soon found a rooming-house was the only place I could live. But it was hard to find a rooming-house where I wanted to live. The rooms I could afford were in gloomy old houses on La Salle Street, bleak and bare, and so large that usually I had to share them with one or two other girls. The beds were hard, and often vermin-infested. The landladies were queer-looking and dowdy, tight-lipped and suspicious of eye, ignorant and coarse. They rarely took any other interest in you than to see that you paid your week in advance. The men and women living in the house were mostly a tough lot. There were goings on that shocked me then—though I would pay scant attention to them now.

My first year is a nightmare as I look back upon it. In order to keep clothes on my back and to pay for my lessons I had to work

seven days in the week. My college education had fitted me for nothing. I tried one thing after another—salesgirl at Marshall Field's, milliner's helper, running a simple machine in a garment factory, ushering at a movie, and finally waiting at a "white tile" restaurant. Somehow I never held any of the positions very long.

The days were long and exhausting—up at six, a bath, a cup of coffee on a "sterno" stove, tidy my room a bit, and in the Loop by seven-thirty or eight. Then a long steady grind until five; a mile walk out to my rooming-house; supper in a nearby restaurant—and a plain supper at that; the evening devoted to my lesson or practicing; back to my room at ten-thirty or eleven, often too tired to undress until I had slept an hour or so.

I had come to the city in June. By Christmas my loneliness amounted almost to desperation. I had made no friends—a girl brought up on the Commandments doesn't make friends in rooming-houses or as a waitress very readily. I didn't talk the same language as the girls I worked with. At the theater or the restaurant men often came up to me and said things in a way that made me blush, though often I had no idea what they meant, unsophisticated little fool that I was. Mother was ill, and letters from home came less and less frequently. Shortly after Christmas she died, and the last tie that bound me to Emporia was gone. I was "on my own," and very nearly "on my uppers" as well. But I still had my ambition—I would some day be a great *artiste*, and all this loneliness and hardship would be forgotten. . . .

In February, I think it was, I met a girl from Tennessee at the music school, with whom I became quite friendly. Within a few weeks we decided to get a room together, and we moved over to a house on Dearborn, just north of Division. The house consists of several large old residences thrown together. It has perhaps forty rooms, and there have been as many as seventy roomers in it at one time. It is cleaner than the run of rooming-houses, and quieter, and the man and the woman who run it are decent enough. But you would never mistake it for anything else than a rooming-house. Somehow, one gets to loathe that card in the window—"Rooms"! And the life and people were not much different from those on La Salle Street.

One gets to know few people in a rooming-house, for there are constant comings and goings, and there is little chance to get acquaint-

ed if one wished. But one doesn't wish. . . . There were occasional little dramas—as when a baby was found in the alley, and when the woman in “the third floor back” took poison after a quarrel with her husband, or when police came to arrest a man who had eloped from Pittsburg with his wife's sister, and a new trio of roomers robbed most of the “guests” on the second floor; there were these occasional little dramas when the halls and bathrooms were the scenes of a few minutes' hurries and curious gossip. But the next day these same people would hurry past each other on the stairs without speaking.

As the months went by, my lessons cost more and more; I had to work shorter hours to get in my practice; our room was costing more; and I found myself always a week or so behind. It was a humiliating experience to have to cajole the landlady into giving me credit—humiliating to a girl who had been brought up to believe it wrong to have debts. But I got so that I could invent a reason for putting it off as brazenly as the “gold digger” in the next room.

[A year of this had gone by, when one day her music teacher told her there was no hope of her ever realizing her ambitions.] I turned dazedly from the piano . . . I scarcely heard him. I picked up my music and tossed it into a waste-basket in the corner; and then I walked out of the room.

It was late afternoon, and I walked the streets, neither noticing nor caring where, until late that night I ended up along the embankment in Lincoln Park, and sat down exhausted, on the stone wall by the lake. My head was a bit clearer by now, and I began to take stock of myself. . . .

The ambition for which I had sacrificed, which had kept me alive and going, was dead. There was nothing to hold me to home and family. Mother was dead. No one ever wrote. And my oldest brother, in Chicago a few months before, had told me that father never allowed my name to be mentioned about the house, save to use me as a horrible example of the wilful daughter gone wrong—he once referred to me as a street-walker. Those words kept repeating themselves in my mind—“street-walker, street-walker!” And a great bitterness burned in my heart, turning to ashes every love, every tie, every ideal that had held me at home.

Then I began to look at my life in Chicago. What was there in it, after all? My music was gone. I had neither family nor friends. In

Emporia there would at least have been neighborhood clubs or the church. But here there was neither. Oh, for someone or something to belong to!

My room-mate had been going to Sunday night services at the Fourth Presbyterian Church, over on the Lake Shore Drive. She told them about me, and one day some pastor's assistant's assistant came to call on me. I went one night after that. I was greeted with ostentatious and half-hearted civility. It was all so impersonal. . . . I never went back; and no other church ever took an interest in me. The only other group I had had anything to do with, outside of my work, had been a social agency from which I had tried to get a little help in the spring. They treated me as impersonally as though I had been a rag doll. There was ringing of buzzers, long documents with endless questionings to be filled out—and not a human touch in it all.

The city is like that. In all my work there had been the same lack of any personal touch. In all this city of three million souls I knew no one, cared for no one, was cared for by no one. In a popular science story in the evening newspaper a few days before I had read how the universe is composed of millions of stars whirling about. I looked up at the sky. I was just like that—an atom whirled about with three million other atoms, day after day, month after month, year after year.

What *did* I have? I had no clothes, no shows, no leisure—none of the things all girls are supposed to love. My health was breaking under the strain. I was in debt. The answer was, Nothing—absolutely nothing! And there stretched ahead of me long years of nothing, until I married an honest but poor clerk or salesman and tried to make ends meet for a brood of hungry mouths, or until I became one of those broken-down, old working women that I had patronizingly pitied that first week at the Y.W.C.A.

Of course, there were two ways out: I might slip into the lake, there, and end it all. But somehow I didn't think seriously of that. Or I might do as some of the girls in the house, become a "gold digger," play life for what there was in it, pay with what there was in me. The idea half-sickened me, yet I played with it for a while—for so long that I drew up startled at the unknown possibilities that lurked within me, cold at the thought that there was neither person nor thing to hold me back.

I never went back to music school. I had been working as a waitress of late, . . . and I kept on with it. But the days and nights were empty now—and at last I knew to the full what loneliness could be. One night a nice boy came into the restaurant—it was one of the larger downtown restaurants—and sat down at my table. He talked to me, as they all did; told me he was from a small town in Oklahoma, that he'd made money, and had come to see the big city. He was friendly, and ended by asking me to a show. I accepted, and we went to a cabaret afterward. In a spirit of reckless bravado, to show the small-town boy I was a city-wise woman, I smoked my first cigarette and took my first drink.

There's no use in making a story of it. He had an engaging smile, and was in search of adventure. I was unutterably lonely—and tired. He said that he loved me, and I was willing not to question too closely. I left the rooming-house, and we took a little flat out near Rogers Park. For a month I played at being respectable, got acquainted with young wives in other apartments, had lovely clothes, lazy hours, ate at the best restaurants, saw the best shows, shopped in smart shops, drove my own car. Then, one day, B. came home and told me he was going back to Oklahoma, and that I wasn't going with him. I said little; I had known it must come, of course, though I had hoped it wouldn't come so soon. There was a generous check. And I moved back into the rooming-house.

No, I felt no remorse. Life had cheated me. There was no one to care. Why slave and work when I might have the things I wanted? And not the least of these was the intimate touch and glance of a man—even if it were half make-believe. Someone to talk intimately with, someone to come home to, someone to ask where you've been—these, too, are things one can't live without.

Not every man or woman who lives in the world of furnished rooms is so articulate as this "charity girl." But most of their stories, however common-place they may seem in the telling, reveal the same isolation, loneliness and tendency to personal disorganization.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Document 15: the life-story of a "charity girl."

## THE ROOMING-HOUSE AS A SOCIAL WORLD

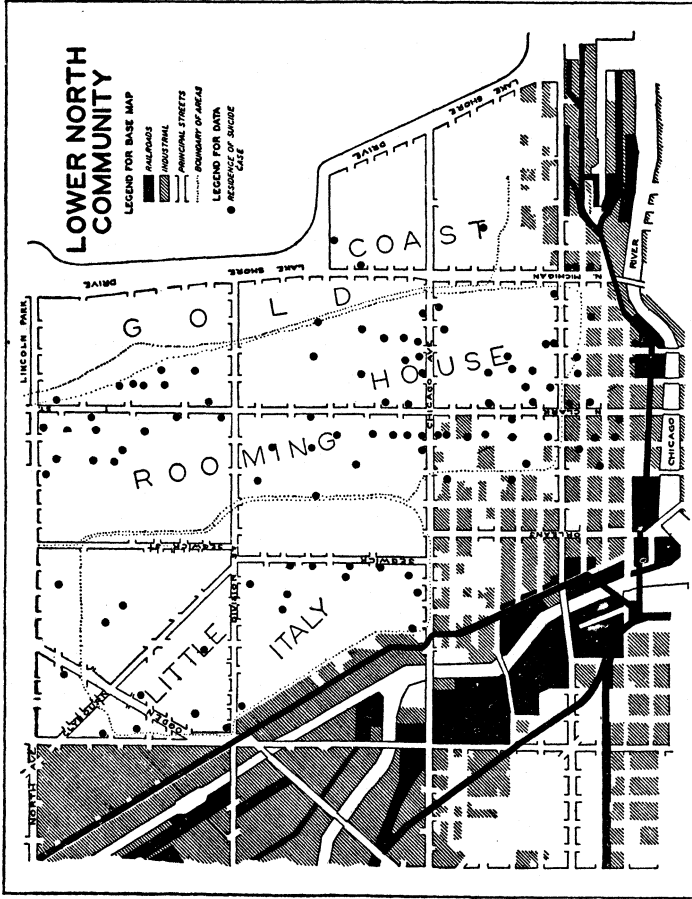
The conditions of life in the world of furnished rooms are the direct antithesis of all we are accustomed to think of as normal in society. The exaggerated mobility and astonishing anonymity of this world have significant implications for the life of the community. Where people are constantly coming and going; where they live at best but a few months in a given place; where no one knows anyone else in his own house, to say nothing of his own block<sup>1</sup> (children are the real neighbors, and it is a childless world); where there are no groups of any sort—where all these things are true it is obvious that there can be no community tradition or common definition of situations, no public opinion, no informal social control. As a result, the rooming-house world is a world of political indifference,<sup>2</sup> of laxity of conventional standards, of personal and social disorganization.

The rooming-house world is in no sense a social world, a set of group relationships through which the person's wishes are realized. In this situation of mobility and anonymity, rather, social distances are set up, and the person is isolated. His social contacts are more or less completely cut off. His wishes are thwarted; he finds in the rooming-house neither security, response, nor recognition. His physical impulses are curbed. He is restless, and he is lonely.

The charity girl, in her foregoing story, exclaims "There was no one to care! Why should I slave and work, when I might have the things I wanted? And not the least of these was the intimate touch and glance of a man—even if it were

<sup>1</sup> As one woman put it, when asked if she knew her next-door neighbors, "No; it don't pay to know your neighbors on La Salle Street" (Census of Rooming Houses).

<sup>2</sup> A precinct captain in a rooming-house precinct said it was useless to try to get the people from rooming-houses to go to the polls (Document 17).



SUICIDES.—Suicide often seems the only escape from the isolation of rooming-house life. Suicide tends to concentrate in rooming-house areas, as this map of the addresses of Near North Side residents who committed suicide within a four-year period indicates (data, after Earle and Cavan, from the coroner's reports for 1919-22).



only half make-believe; someone to talk intimately with, someone to come home to, someone to ask where you've been; these, too, are things one can't live without." A man who lived in a North Side rooming-house wrote: "I found myself totally alone. There were evenings when I went out of my way to buy a paper, or an article at a drug store—just for the sake of talking a few minutes with someone." He goes on:

Worse, if possible, than the loneliness was the sex hunger. I had had a regular and satisfying sex experience with my wife. I began to grow restless without it. I thought of marriage—but the only girls I had met were office stenographers I never would have considered marrying. The constant stimulation of the city began to tell, adding tremendously to this sexual restlessness, lights, well-dressed women, billboards advertising shows.

It got so posters showing women in *négligée* or women's silk-clad legs excited me unbearably. Many times I followed an attractive woman for blocks, with no thought of accosting her, but to watch the movements of her body. Though my office work was over at four, I frequently put off coming home until four-thirty or five, so I could get in the rush hour crowd on the street cars and feel myself crushed against the warm body of some woman. A girl in the next house used to undress without pulling down her shade, and I literally spent hours watching her. I had fantasies of sexual intercourse with every attractive woman I saw on the street.<sup>1</sup>

The emotional tensions of thwarted wishes force the person to act somehow in this situation. His behavior may take one of three directions: He may find himself unable to cope with the situation, and attempt to withdraw from it. This withdrawal frequently takes the form of suicide. There was a bridge over the lagoon in Lincoln Park, in the heart of the North Side rooming-house district, which was nicknamed Suicide Bridge because of the number of people who

<sup>1</sup> Document 18.

threw themselves from it into the lagoon. Because of its sinister reputation the city tore it down. The map facing page 83 showing the distribution of suicides on the Near North Side indicates how frequently this seems the only way out to the persons of the rooming-house world.

Or, again, the person may build up an ideal or dream world in which are satisfied the wishes that find no realization in the harsher life without.

There were two girls in a room across the hall who worked as shopgirls in the Loop. They came from some town in southern Illinois. They weren't good-looking—and, besides, like myself, they had had good homes, so they were lonesome. They used to go often to the movies, and sometimes to a dance, but the celluloid heroes proved more satisfying to these plain but heart-hungry children than did the neglect of the dance hall "sheiks." Other evenings they spent reading *True Romance*, *Experience*, *True Story Magazine*, and other such magazines devoted to stories of the adventures of girls in the city. One of them kept an intermittent diary, filled with stories—fictitious, I always was sure—of street flirtations and adventure. We used to spend evenings writing letters to Doris Blake, asking what a young girl should do if a man she liked but didn't love tried to kiss her. It was all a make-believe, a peopling our workaday world with adventure and heroes.

Upstairs was an old maid, who was somebody's secretary, who still wore nipped-in corsets, and a curl hanging at the side of her head. She had a picture of a handsome man on her dresser, in a big frame, before which she used to powder and primp. She told a different story about him to everybody in the house who would listen. She was the only talkative person I ever found in the house.<sup>1</sup>

Or perhaps a substitution is made, and the person finds satisfaction for his thwarted wishes in symbols which represent old associations, or lavishes his affection on a dog or a parrot.

Her almost complete isolation brought her to a point where the few whom she saw occasionally feared for her sanity. Then something

<sup>1</sup> Document 15: the life-story of a charity girl.

happened which she said later saved her life. One day a well-dressed man, holding a parrot in his hands, rushed up to her and pushed the bird into her arms, saying earnestly, "Take care of it." He disappeared before she could remonstrate. She 'phoned at once to police headquarters, asking to be relieved of the bird. Meantime she put the bird in a box and tried to forget it. After some time a voice said, "Hello!" The greeting was repeated at intervals. She went on with her work. Presently a boy came to relieve her of her charge. "I think," she said, "that I will keep it myself if no one puts in a claim for it."

She lavished attention, thenceforth, on the parrot. She bought it the best cage she could find, cared for it according to the best parrot lore, and returned home after work to give it food and exercise. It ate its supper with her, perched outside the cage on a basket handle, being fed now and then from her spoon. In the morning it flew to the side of the cage to greet her, and talked to her while she dressed. When she came home after work it was filled with joy; if she lay down to rest and moaned a little with weariness, the parrot made sad, sympathetic sounds. Anyone with whom it was left was asked to say certain words of greeting to it morning and night. It was her child. She sacrificed herself for it. "You can't imagine," she would say, "what it means to have Polly in my room—it makes all the difference. . . ."

There are thirty-seven things on the wall, mostly pictures, among them a photograph of her grandfather's old stone house, the picture showing the country in which she had lived; a cheap print of a child in its nightgown descending the stairs; a colored print of a man and woman sitting in the firelight; some family pictures. There is a newspaper cartoon of a homeless man on Thanksgiving Day, shabby and alone at a cheap restaurant, seeing a vision of a pleasant family group about a generously laden table. There are thirty-nine articles on the bureau, two small stands, and a melodion—including a tiny doll and a tiny cradle. I have urged her to cast away nine-tenths of these things, in the interest of her time budget, to make cleaning simpler. "I have to have these things," she responds, "you have your home and family and friends and leisure and everything—you can't possibly understand." She plays hymns and the old songs of the countryside on the melodion—"Darling, I am growing old!" The parrot tries to sing after her.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Document 19.

More frequently, though, the person accommodates himself to the life of the rooming-house world, as did the "charity girl." Old associations and ties are cut. Under the strain of isolation, with no group associations or public opinion to hold one, living in complete anonymity, old standards disintegrate, and life is reduced to a more nearly individual basis. The person has to live, and comes to live in ways strange to the conventional world.

I get along fairly well, now. I am no longer lonely. I am surprised to find that I can actually enjoy the girls I pick up at public dance halls, at restaurants, along the lake front, in the park. I know a great many of them now—many of them pretty and clever, and good companions for a night. I no longer go with prostitutes. I soon found that was unnecessary. For the city is full of women who are just as lonely as I was, or who draw on their sex as I would on my bank to pay for the kind of clothes they want to wear, the kinds of shows they want to see. Then, too, there are the "emancipated" women, who don't want to marry, who are not "gold diggers," but who feel the need of a man and a normal sex life.<sup>1</sup>

Such is the world of furnished rooms—a mobile, anonymous, individual world, a world of thwarted wishes, of unsatisfied longings, of constant restlessness; a world in which people, in the effort to live, are building up a body of ideas that free them from a conventional tradition that has become fixed, hard, and oppressive; a world in which individuation, so typical of the life of the city, is carried to the extreme of personal and social disorganization. People behave in strange and incalculable ways; quick and intimate relationships spring up in the most casual way, and dissolve as quickly and as casually. Behavior is impulsive rather than social. It is a world of atomized individuals, of spiritual nomads.

<sup>1</sup> Document 18.