

The Sealed Room

In Which Doubt is Ended and Love Comes to Its Own

By Edwin Baird

PART IV.

Yocum, throughout the recital, had stood as if carved from stone; and now the recital was finished, he did not immediately speak.

At length he cleared his throat and said, with a sorry attempt at jocularity:

"Well, old son, I reckon this means 'good night' for me. Our partnership's busted—or soon will be. Your wife'll be handin' me my passports—"

"She's not my wife yet, and never will be, perhaps," said Tom. "She no more imagines that I want to marry her than a woman living on the planet Mars. I'll probably make an everlasting fool of myself when I pop the question, and she'll laugh at me, no doubt, and then say, in that sweet way of hers: 'Thank you kindly, sir, but I'm not in the market to-day for a farmer.'"

"If she does," flared Yocum, "she's not fittin' to marry Tom McKay."

Tom knitted his brows over that. He wasn't quite sure of its meaning, but he knew what Yocum was trying to say, and this somehow enheartened him.

He was not a bad sort of man. He had always tried to live a clean, decent life, and he was generous, good-natured, and slow to anger. And he would do anything beneath heaven—for her. Would she have him on those conditions?

With a world of anxious longing he asked himself the question, and could not answer it. Reason told him that she would; but in another moment he was afraid she wouldn't.

And at this psychological moment Yocum contributed orally to the adverse supposition.

"Tom," said he, in a sorrowful voice, abating activities with the dapple-gray mare, "marriage is a serious question."

"No is a proposal of marriage," said Tom.

"It's one time in your life," pursued the gloomy Yocum, "when you gotta go slow. You hadn't oughta rush in heedless, like as if you was askin' a gal to go with you on a Sunday-school picnic. Ought you, Tom?"

"Yes, I guess that's so. But—"

"And another thing: Matrimony's committed just once in a man's life, or leastways is s'posed to be, and if you—"

"Yes, yes," cut in Tom, a trifle irritably; "I've known all that since Pete was a pup. But I tell you—"

"Now looky here, Tom," said Yocum, moving toward his employer in a brotherly fashion, "you're goin' altogether too swift in this matter. You wouldn't buy a stud horse or a brood sow without you took your time and made sure you was gettin' full value for your money. Then why do you wanta make the greatest deal in your life without even stoppin' to think?"

"Think! As if I hadn't been thinking! I've thought of nothing else since I first laid eyes on her!"

"In other words, since eight o'clock last night. About twenty hours, all told."

"Twenty hours or twenty years, it would be all the same," said Tom. "I tell you, my mind's made up. It'll be just the same next week, next month, or next year, as it is now."

"Well, just to prove that," said Yocum, his unruffled voice contrasting with Tom's nettled tone, "why not wait a few weeks?"

There was further discussion in this vein, waxing more and more specific; and the upshot was that Tom didn't catch the four-fifty train.

A myriad things thereafter claimed his time—for the full tide of the mid-summer rush was now upon him—and the hours lengthened into days, the days into weeks, and the weeks into a month, and he did not go back to her.

There were moments when he, forgetting her, was content with his lot, unwilling to think of matrimony and satisfied all was well; but just as often there came times—times of solitude in the fields, or lonely times in the farmhouse—when he was visited by a nameless longing, when a vision of her face appeared before his mind's eye, alluring, enticing, strangely appealing; and on these occasions he was persuaded that his life was incomplete, and this bred a desire to return to her and scale the citadel of her heart.

This desire, nebulous for a space, crystallized one day in late July. It was a blazing hot Sunday, and Tom was seeking relief from the heat in the shade of the front porch, when he saw an automobile coming from the direction of the Zuckermans' farm; and then he saw the occupants were Mrs.

Adolph Zuckerman, Dora Kirk, Miss Plum, and Winifred. He also saw they were headed straight for his house.

His first thought was that he was in his shirt sleeves and collarless, and his next that he must speedily make himself presentable. But escape was hopeless. He had scarcely risen from his chair before Mrs. Zuckerman hailed him from the road, and before he could gain the front door she was tooling the car up the driveway toward the steps.

And now, putting a brave face on the matter, he was cordially extending an invitation to his unexpected callers to "come up out of the hot sun and keep cool on the porch."

Yocum, newly returned from church and therefore garbed in his best, sauntered out, was introduced to Miss Plum, and presently strolled away with her, "to show her around the ranch." A little later Dora and Mrs. Zuckerman also departed, nobody knew where.

Tom, alone with Winifred, became acutely conscious that he had neglected to shave that morning.



Starting on the First Stage of the Long Road to Berlin

Memory of this omitted duty contributed generously to his discomfiture.

A small silence, not devoid of embarrassment, promptly ensued on the vine-clad porch. It was ended by Winifred's telling him, as he had already been told by the others, that she and Miss Plum had visited the country to-day to see Dora.

"Never in all my life," she pursued, facing him animatedly, "have I seen such a wonderful change in a person. Why, Dora's another girl—not the girl I used to know, at all. And it's all due to you."

"Not to me," denied Tom, trying to hide his slipped feet beneath his chair, "but to the sunshine and her wholesome environment, and the pure country air."

"Well, anyway, it was you who gave these things to her, or at least made it possible for her to enjoy them. And we'll never be able to thank you sufficiently. I was with her that day at the hospital when your telephone message came, and if you could only have seen her, if you could only know how happy she was, how she almost wept with joy at the thought of going back to the green growing things, and the cows and chickens, and the great outdoors, you'd feel repaid for your kindness to her a thousand times over."

More talk followed, chiefly of a similar sort, and all of it distressing to Tom. Embarrassed by her encomiums, mortified by his appearance, convinced he was making a sorry impression, he could not but feel relief when, at last she rose to go.

An unlooked-for delay attended her departure. Miss Plum and Yocum had wandered far afield, and only the most imperative summons—the need of haste to avoid missing the next train for Chicago—could coax them back to the automobile. Yocum, blissfully unaware of the fuss he had occasioned, stood talking with her, in a lowered tone, till the car was moving; and there was an unaccustomed

look in his eye as he watched it disappear with her toward the railway station.

Early on the following morning Tom conceived a satisfactory excuse for absenting himself for a day or two, and straightway looked up Yocum, whom he was so carefully planning to deceive. It soon became evident, though, that the deception was unnecessary.

Yocum, discovered in the barnyard, began the conversation by saying:

"Boss, if it's all the same to you, I'd like to get off for t'day. I wanta visit my folks in Springfield."

The alacrity with which the request was granted apparently delighted Yocum. At any rate, he immediately started for the railway station.

A few hours later Tom started too.

Around six o'clock on that genial evening Tom entered the gaudy "parlor" of Mrs. Stookey's rooming house, preceded by that affable woman, all friendly smiles and graciousness.

"Help yerself to the red-plush rocker, Mr. McKay. And pa-ard'n me, please, for my mistake whin last we met. 'Twas comie, sure, me callin' ye Patrick Henneberry whin yer rale name's Tom McKay, but not onnat'ural, as Winifred will tell ye. I'll jist run up and tell her ye're here." She hustled importantly away.

Avoiding the red-plush rocker, he moved uneasily about the room, pausing to frown at a gay chrome or a cheap statuette of calcined gypsum. He was acutely conscious of nervous fright, and was half inclined to flee.

A feminine footstep crossed the threshold behind him, and his heart leaped and ponded riotously. Desiring to hide his perturbation, he blindly opened a book on the table and, not looking toward the door, feigned an absorption in the volume. He would let her speak first. Thus he would have the initial advantage.

However, it was only Mrs. Stookey, come to inform him with delicious tact:

"Miss Winifred's dressin' herself for to see ye, and ye're in for a bit of a wait, I'm thinkin'. She's takin' sich ilygant pains with her toilette. She wants to look her best for ye. I lift the pair of 'em—her and Miss Plum—chatterin' away like Tomtits. I niver seen 'em so excited."

Tom, who had turned as the landlady spoke, became aware that his hands still held the book, and now, for the first time he read the gold lettering thereon: "The Trimmed Lamp—By O. Henry," and promptly he was visited by a pleasurable inner glow, such as one feels upon meeting a beloved friend in a strange country.

"Have you read the stories in this book, Mrs. Stookey?"

"I have not," said she. "It b'longs to one o' me roomers, a young shippin' clerk named Marx."

"You ought to read them. They're simply immense. My foreman, George Yocum, and I have read them through, again and again. We read them aloud to each other. They deal with the romance and adventure in a city, and we agreed that the next time one of us came to Chicago—"

Mrs. Stookey, seating herself on the piano stool, ruthlessly interrupted:

"'Tis the devil's own stampin' ground—the city. Jist see what it done to poor Dora. And she so sweet and trustful whin first she came to ut. . . Did ye know, Mr. McKay, that Winifred came from the country too?"

Mr. McKay, not knowing that, nor ever dreaming it could be true, abruptly dropped O. Henry's book, all interest in it gone, and the expression on his virile face and in his sparkling eyes persuaded Mrs. Stookey—who needed slight persuasion—to tell him the story of Winifred Snow.

How Winifred was born on an Indiana farm, and how she lived there till her mother died, and her father sold out and went to Texas, and how she had come to Chicago for a course in a business college—these and kindred matters were related by the garrulous woman with pleasure as deep as the delight of her hearer.

During this time Winifred and her room-mate were happily employed with the "ilygant" toilette, and the furnished room presented a chaotic aspect.

And now at last she stood before the crinkly mirror and, slowly turning her slender body, surveyed the finished result. Miss Plum, kneeling beside her to contribute a final touch to the skirt, now rose, removed three pins from her mouth, and

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