

THE SKYLIGHT ROOM

BY O. HENRY

Because She was a Poor Little Working Girl, She Hid Away in a Garret Room, where She Would Have Starved if Her Star, "Billy Jackson," Had Not Found Her in the Nick of Time.

First Mrs. Parker would show you the double parlors. You would not dare to interrupt her description of their advantages and of the merits of the gentleman who had occupied them for eight years. Then you would manage to stammer forth the confession that you were neither a doctor nor a dentist. Mrs. Parker's manner or receiving the admission was such that you could never afterward entertain the same feeling towards your parents who had neglected to train you up in one of the professions that fitted Mrs. Parker's parlors.

Next you ascended one flight of stairs and looked at the second floor back at \$8. Convinced by her second floor manner that it was worth the \$12 that Mr. Toosenberry always paid for it until he left to take charge of his brother's orange plantation in Florida near Palm Beach, where Mrs. McIntyre always spent the winters, that had the double front room with private bath, you managed to babble that you wanted something still cheaper.

If you survived Mrs. Parker's scorn, you were taken to look at Mr. Skidder's large hall room on the third floor. Mr. Skidder's room was not vacant. He wrote plays and smoked cigarettes in it all day long. But every room hunter was made to visit the room to admire the lambrequins. After each visit Mr. Skidder, from the fright caused by possible eviction, would pay something on his rent.

Then—O, then—if you still stood on one foot, with your hot hand clutching the three moist dollars in your trousers' pocket, and hoarsely proclaimed your hideous and culpable poverty, nevermore would Mrs. Parker be cicerone of yours. She would honk loudly the word "Clara," she would show you her back, and march downstairs. Then Clara, the colored maid, would escort you up the carpeted ladder that served for the fourth flight, and show you the skylight room.

It occupied 7 x 8 feet of floor space at the middle of the hall. On each side of it was a dark lumber closet or store room.

In it was an iron cot, a washstand and a chair. A shelf was the dresser. Its four bare walls seemed to close in upon you like the sides of a coffin. Your hand crept to your throat, you gasped, you looked up as from a well—and breathed once more. Through the glass of the little skylight you saw a square of blue infinity.

"Two dollars, sub," Clara would say in her half contemptuous, half Tuskegeonian tone.

One day Miss Leeson came hunting for a room. She carried a typewriter made to be lugged around by a much larger lady. She was a little girl with eyes and hair that kept on growing after she had stopped and that always looked as if they were saying: "Goodness me! Why didn't you keep up with us?"

Mrs. Parker showed her the double parlors. "In this little closet," she said, "one could keep a skeleton, or anesthetic, or opal, or—"

"But I am neither a doctor nor a dentist," said Miss Leeson, with a shiver.

Mrs. Parker gave her the incredulous, pitying, sneering, icy stare that she kept for those who failed to qualify as doctors or dentists, and led the way to the second floor back.

"Eight dollars?" said Miss Leeson. "Dear me! I'm not Hetty if I do look green. I'm just a poor little working girl. Show me something higher and lower."

Mr. Skidder jumped and strewed the floor with cigarette stubs at the rap on his door.

"Excuse me, Mr. Skidder," said Mrs. Parker, with her demon's smile at his pale looks, "I didn't know you were in. I asked the lady to have a look at your lambrequins."

"They're too lovely for anything," said Miss Leeson, smiling in exactly the way the angels do.

After they had gone Mr. Skidder got busy erasing the tall, black haired heroine from his latest (unproduced) play and inserting a small, roughish one with heavy, bright hair and vivacious features.

"Anna Held'll jump at it," said Mr. Skidder to himself, putting his feet up against the lambrequins and disappearing in a cloud of smoke like an aerial cuttlefish.

Presently the tocsin call of "Clara!" sounded to the world the state of Miss Leeson's purse. A dark goblin seized her, mounted a stygian stairway, thrust her into a vault with a glimmer of light in its top and muttered the menacing and cabalistic words, "Two dollars."

"I'll take it!" sighed Miss Leeson, sinking down upon the squeaky iron bed.

Every day Miss Leeson went out to work. At night she brought home papers with handwriting on them and made copies with her typewriter. Sometimes she had no work at night, and then she would sit on the steps of the high stoop with the other roomers. Miss Leeson was not intended for a skylight room when the plans were drawn for creation. She was gay-hearted and full of tender, whimsical fancies. She was deeply human and sympathetic. Once she let Mr. Skidder read to her three acts of his great (unpublished) comedy, "It's No Kid; or, The Heir of the Subway."

If nature had ever peeped down into the skylight room and had seen Miss Leeson there she would have exclaimed: "Well, well, here's something wrong! There ought to be a miser or a poet or a wire tapper in that stuffy, dark room, instead of a poor little sociable girl like that."

There was rejoicing among the men roomers whenever Miss Leeson had time to sit on the steps for an hour or two. But Miss Longnecker, the tall blond who taught in a public school and said: "Well, really!" to everything you said, sat on the top step and sniffed. And Miss Dorn, who shot at the moving ducks at Coney every Sunday and worked in a department store, sat on the bottom step and sniffed. Miss Leeson sat on the middle step, and the men would quickly group around her.

Especially Mr. Skidder, who had cast her in his mind for the star part in a private, romantic (unspoken) drama in real life. And especially Mr. Hoover, who was 45, fat, flush and foolish. And especially young Mr. Evans, who set up a hollow cough to induce her to ask him to leave off cigarettes. The men voted her "the funniest and jolliest ever," but the sniffs on the top step and the lower step were implacable.

I pray you let the drama halt while Chorus stalks to the footlights and drops an epicurean tear upon the fatness of Mr. Hoover. Tune the pipes to the tragedy of tallow, the bare of bulk, the calamity of corpulence. Tried out, Falstaff would have rendered more romance to the ton than would have Romeo's rickety ribs to the ounce. A lover may sigh, but he must not puff. To the train of Momus are the fat men remanded. In vain beats the faithful heart above a fifty-two inch belt. Avaunt, Hoover! Hoover, 45, flush and foolish, might carry off Helen herself; Hoover, 45, flush, foolish and fat is meat for predication. There was never a chance for

you, anyhow, Hoover.

As Mrs. Parker's roomers sat thus one summer's evening, Miss Leeson looked up into the firmament and cried with her little gay laugh:

"Why, there's Billy Jackson! I can see him from down here, too."

All looked up—some at the windows of the skyscrapers, some casting about for an airship, Jackson guided.

"It's that star," explained Miss Leeson, pointing with a tiny finger. "Not the big one that twinkles—the steady blue one near it. I can see it every night through my skylight. I named it Billy Jackson."

"Well, really!" said Miss Longnecker. "I didn't know you were an astronomer, Miss Leeson."

"O, yes," said the small star gazer. "I know as much as any of them about the style of sleeves they're going to wear next fall in Mars."

"Well, really!" said Miss Longnecker, "the star you refer to is Gamma, of the constellation Cassiopeia. It is nearly of the second magnitude, and its meridian passage is—"

"O," said the young Mr. Evans, "I think Billy Jackson is a much better name for it."

"Same here," said Mr. Hoover, loudly breathing defiance to Miss Longnecker. "I think Miss Leeson has just as much right to name stars as any of those old astrologers had."

"Well, really!" said Miss Longnecker. "I wonder whether it's a shooting star," remarked Miss Dorn. "I hit nine ducks and a rabbit out of ten in the gallery at Coney Sunday."

"He doesn't show up well from down here," said Miss Leeson. "You ought to see him from my room. You know you can see stars even in the day time from the bottom of a well. At night my room is like the shaft of a coal mine, and it makes Billy Jackson look like the big diamond pin that Night fastens her kimono with."

"I'd like to see our sidereal friend, Mr. Jackson, from such a point of vantage," said Mr. Skidder.

"Let's all go up and have a look at him," laughed Miss Leeson. "None of the rest of you enjoy the advantages of a skylight room."

With little cries and giggles of acquiescence the whole stoop party clattered upstairs to Miss Leeson's room. Miss Longnecker and Miss Dorn were prominent in the rush, for they foresaw possibilities in the pursuit of astronomy.

Miss Leeson lit the lamp until all had packed themselves in the little room. Then she turned out the light, and they were in inky blackness. Miss Longnecker suddenly cried out: "Well, really!" without any visible reason for doing so. Down through the skylight Billy Jackson turned upon them his bright, full, blue, unwinking eye. And then the door was opened and downstairs again they scurried. It was no more than a piece of light frolic such as amuses the drifting transients in hired homes.

There came a time after that when Miss Leeson brought no formidable papers home to copy. And when she went out in the morning, instead of working she went from office to office and let her heart melt in the drip of cold refusals transmitted through insolent office boys. This went on.

There came an evening when she wearily climbed Mrs. Parker's stoop at the hour when she always returned from her dinner at the restaurant. But she had had no dinner.

As she stepped into the hall Mr. Hoover met her and seized his chance. He asked her to marry him, and his fatness hovered above her like an avalanche. She dodged and caught the balustrade. He tried for her hand, and she raised it and smote him weakly in the face. Step by step she went up, dragging herself by the railing. She passed Mr. Skidder's door as he was red-inking a stage direction for Myrtle Delore (Miss Leeson) in his (unaccepted) comedy, to "pirouette across the stage from L to the side of the count."

Up the carpeted ladder she crawled at last and opened the door of the skylight room.

She was too weak to light the lamp or to undress. She fell upon the iron cot, her fragile body scarcely hollowing the worn springs. And in that Erebus of a room she slowly raised her heavy eyelids and smiled.

For Billy Jackson was shining down on her calm and bright and constant through the skylight. There was no world about her. She was sunk in a pit of blackness, with but that small square of pallid light framing the star that she had so whimsically and O! so ineffectually named. Miss Longnecker must be right; it was Gamma, of the constellation Cassiopeia, and not Billy Jackson. And yet she could not let it be Gamma!

As she lay on her back she tried twice to raise her arm. The third time she got two thin fingers to her lips and blew a kiss out of the black pit to Billy Jackson. Her arm fell back limply.

"Good-by, Billy," she murmured faintly. "You're millions of miles away and you won't even twinkle once. But you kept where I could see you most of the time up there when there wasn't anything else but darkness to look at, didn't you. . . . Millions of miles. . . . Good-by, Billy Jackson."

Clara, the colored maid, found the door locked at ten the next day, and they forced it open. Vinegar and the slapping of wrists and burned feathers proving of no avail some one ran to phone for an ambulance.

In due time it backed up to the door, with much gong clanging and the capable young medico, in his white linen coat, ready, active, confident, with his smooth face half debonaire, half grin, danced up the steps.

"Ambulance call to 49," he said briefly. "What's the trouble?"

"O, yes, doctor," sniffed Mrs. Parker, as though her trouble that there should be trouble in the house was the greater. "I can't think what can be the matter with her. Nothing we could do would bring her to. It's a young woman, a Miss Elsie—yes, a Miss Elsie Leeson. Never before in my house—"

"What room?" cried the doctor in an impatient voice, to which Mrs. Parker was a stranger.

"The skylight room. It—"

Evidently the ambulance doctor was familiar with the location of skylight rooms. He was gone up the stairs, four at a time. Mrs. Parker followed slowly, as her dignity demanded.

On the first landing she met him coming back bearing the astronomer in his arms. He stopped and let loose the practiced scalp of his tongue, not loudly. Gradually Mrs. Parker crumpled as a stiff garment that slips down from a nail. Even afterward there remained crumples in her mind and body. Sometimes her curious roomers would ask her what the doctor said to her.

"Let that be," she would answer. "If I can get forgiveness for having heard it I will be satisfied."

The ambulance physician strode with his burden through the pack of hounds that follow the curiosity chase, and even they fell back along the sidewalk abashed, for his face was that of one who bears his own dead.

They noticed that he did not lay down upon the bed prepared for it in the ambulance the form that he carried, and all that he said was: "Drive like h—l, Wilson," to the driver.

That is all. Is it a story? In the next morning's paper I saw a little news item, and the last sentence of it may help you (as it helped me) to weld the incidents together.

It recounted the reception into Bellevue hospital of a young woman who had been removed from No. 49 East—street, suffering from debility induced by starvation. It concluded with these words:

"Dr. William Jackson, the ambulance physician who attended the case, says the patient will recover."