

ROMANCE, REGULAR LODGER No. 5

by BERTON BRALEY



The Ring-Around-Rosie and the Boomerang.

"ARMEN" seemed wonderful enough to O'Neill. He heard it all, but saw little of it, because his eyes were busy most of the time watching the profile of Miss Jordan in the dusk of the theater and following the swift changes of expression it showed under the spell of the music and the stage. At any rate, O'Neill thought it was the spell of the music and fondly imagined that he was conducting his scrutiny of Miss Jordan unnoticed. The fact is that she knew he was watching her and thrilled deliciously at the thought. Once or twice she turned and their eyes met—and they neither of them knew just what happened on the stage for a few minutes afterward. But O'Neill knew very well what was happening to him.

They had supper afterward at a place with soft lights and no noisy cabaret, and as he sat across the table from Miss Jordan O'Neill realized not only that he wanted this girl to sit across the table at his meals always but that the bare possibility of not having her share those meals was too horrible to contemplate. A little sick fear of what life would mean without her passed through him like a shudder.

And so it was Arthur O'Neill discovered—what he had never believed before, though he had read it enough, heaven knows—that love is an obsession that grips body and brain and soul, an inescapable enchantment woven of desire and longing and tenderness and hope, a thing of joy and despair, tears and laughter, sunshine and black gloom—a fire in the veins, a glory and a magic in the mind, a catch in the throat.

They rode back to the boarding house in a taxicab—final extravagance of O'Neill's evening, for which Miss Jordan reproached him. He liked that, too, but he also liked the opportunity it gave him for swinging masterfully into the vehicle and giving the address to the chauffeur. But the instant he was in the cab his masterfulness deserted him.

It was dark in the cab, the chauffeur was oblivious and well trained, Miss Jordan was very near, and the fragrance of her came maddeningly to his nostrils. But he sat properly beside her and talked of many things while his heart was pounding so he felt sure she could hear it, and his tongue was trying to run away with the words he actually wanted to say. He was afraid of being too impetuous—as if women ever disliked an impetuous lover.

Miss Jordan had been in taxicabs with men before and nearly always men had tried to kiss her. They hadn't succeeded. She quite expected O'Neill to try it too—with this difference, that he would have succeeded. But he didn't know that, poor lack heart. And so they drove up to the boarding house and he helped her out—with a distinct feeling of disappointment at himself. And Miss Jordan, too, was a little disappointed.

He bade her good night and went to his room, there to sit down at his desk and put on paper some of the things he'd meant to say in the taxicab. He didn't know what he would do with the letter when he'd written it, but he wanted to express what was burning within him, somehow.

A light knock on the door interrupted him.

"Hello, who is it?" he called, testily.

"It's I—Barton," came the reply; "can I

see you for a minute—if you haven't gone to bed?"

"Sure thing, come in."

The floorwalker entered.

"Sit down, won't you?" O'Neill invited. "What's on your mind?"

Barton dropped into a chair, then jumped to his feet and began to pace the floor.

His usual attitude of suave serenity combined with calm lordliness was gone. His face was haggard and drawn and his eyes a little strained.

"I couldn't sleep, I couldn't sit still," he cried, pacing back and forth, "and I simply have got to talk to some one. You are a writer and a thinking man and perhaps you can help me out of this situation. Anyhow it will do me good to talk about it to you."

"Fire away," said O'Neill.

"I love Miss Parks," the floorwalker said, suddenly, "and I have loved her for ten years—ten years, sir. Ever since I first saw her in this boarding house I admired and respected her for her intellect and her education.

"But—" he paused a second—"but I was not earning much salary then and, while I desired to marry, I could not ask a woman who was getting greater emoluments than I to share my pay. I resolved to work very hard, however, and thus raise myself to her level—at least financially.

"And for ten years I've been trying to do that—but Miss Parks is a very capable teacher and whenever I got a raise in my position or salary she received one in hers—and for ten years she had been ahead of me.

"That sounds like a trivial thing to you, Mr. O'Neill," he said as O'Neill smiled, "but it isn't to me. Every man has his one particular form of pride—and mine takes this form: I feel that I cannot in honor ask a woman to marry me unless I am earning more money than she is.

"But tonight I began to ponder on the years I had known Miss Parks, and on the fact that we were both getting toward middle age. And I thought of the long years ahead—with no apparent prospect of ever being able to marry her—or even ask her, if I stuck to my pride and—

"Damn it, man," he cried, with a sharp change of tone and speech, "I've got to marry her! I don't know, even now, whether she'll have me or not, but I can't stand life without her any more, and I've been walking the floor trying to figure out a way to keep my pride and get her. And yet I know if I ask her to marry me now and she does so I'll feel all my life that she has made a sacrifice she shouldn't have made—and that I've caused her to give up more than I can give her. What shall I do?"

Barton was so evidently sincere in his little problem, so palpably a great problem to him, that O'Neill lost all desire or thought of laughter.

"I'll tell you what you can do," he said at last. "You can go to bed and let me worry over this thing for you. Possibly by tomorrow night I can dig up a plan that will work out satisfactorily. Maybe I'll hire you as my secretary, or give you a tip on stocks, or find a fairy godfather to leave you a million dollars. Don't think I'm flippant, Barton," he said, rising and putting his hand on the other man's shoulder. "I can see your point of view on this and maybe I can help you.

"This is like working out the plot of a story, you know; it takes a little time. The trouble is that, while in fiction you make a tangle yourself and then untangle it, in real life fate makes a tangle and you haven't any idea where the ends are for you to untangle. But go to bed and leave your troubles to old Dr. O'Neill, the healer of hearts."

He shook hands with Barton cordially, said "good night," and returned to his letter, forgetting Barton's problem immediately. And when he'd finished the letter and read it over he tore it up and went to bed.

Usually the luncheon table at Mrs. Harrison's was attended only by Mrs. Beacon and Miss Parks, whose school was so near by that she found it easy to get back. O'Neill himself ordinarily took his midday meal downtown somewhere, but on this particular day he lunched at the house, and, as Mrs. Beacon was downtown shopping, he and the school teacher were the only ones to sit down.

He noticed at once that Miss Parks looked very tired and worn.

"Aren't you glad it's near the end of the school year?" he ventured.

"Glad!" she exclaimed. "Every summer when the term ends I feel like giving a great yell and rushing out on the street crying, I'm free, I'm free!"

"Don't you like teaching?" queried the writer.

"I hate it," said Miss Parks. "I've always hated it. I hate it worse the older I grow. And I'm getting older every minute."

"You don't look—" politely began O'Neill.

"I'm 40 and I look every bit of it," snapped the teacher, "so don't say polite things to me." She stabbed viciously at a cutlet with her fork. "I'm tired of teaching and boarding, I want to keep house in a nice little flat or a cottage, and—and—" her lips trembled, "O, she said, 'you're a lot younger than I am and you won't think this is a hint for a proposal—the honest truth is I want to be married. You can talk all the feminist stuff you want to—but a woman unmarried is a thing for laughter.'"

She stopped her tirade a moment and gazed at O'Neill with a quizzical look in her eyes. "I'm an awful fool, talking this way to you as if you were my dearest guardian uncle," she said, "but I've had all this boiling inside me for weeks—and you turned the valve and let it out when you asked me if I was tired. Please don't mind a sour old maid's snarl."

"Miss Parks," said O'Neill, very earnestly, "Mr. Barton came to me late last night and said he'd been pacing his room for hours and just had to talk to somebody. And he talked. He told me he'd been in love with you for ten years, but wouldn't ask you to marry him because, in spite of his hard work and his endeavors to rise, you always were making a little more salary than he was. And he said he couldn't stand it to live without you, but knew it was wrong to ask you to sacrifice a good position to share his. I promised him I'd think up some nice subtle plan to help him out, but the subtlest plan I can think of is to tell you what he said."

O'Neill had imagined that this bald and brutal way of putting the case might perhaps offend Miss Parks and was prepared to soothe her with apologies, and even to excuse himself for repeating Barton's story. But he needn't have worried. Her eyes grew radiant and her face pink as he talked, and when he had finished she said:

"You say he—loves me?"

O'Neill nodded gravely.

Miss Parks sighed and shook her head.

"Ten years," she said; "ten years spent on a hateful job—and the man I loved 'too proud' to ask me. Ten years teaching other people's children when I might have had—my own. What fools, what silly fools men are!"

She paused—then, "Tell Mr. Barton that I handed in my resignation to the school board this afternoon and I'll be out of a job at the close of school," she said.

"You've resigned, then?" said O'Neill.

"No," Miss Parks responded, "but I will. Ten years is enough to lose."

There was one vacant place at the landlady's table that evening at dinner. The place was Miss Wiggins'. A young man had called for her, Mrs. Musser said, in a taxicab, and Miss Wiggins had been very much excited when she went away. She didn't see the young man because he was inside the cab, but she knew Miss Wiggins was mighty glad to see him. She didn't know whether she approved of young women riding around in taxicabs with young men in New York. Miss Wiggins, though, was a nice girl, even if a little frivolous, and would probably come to no harm.

Whereupon Miss Jordan leaped to her feet and proposed a toast to the bride.

"Miss Wiggins went away in a taxicab this afternoon with the man she has loved for years—and they're married by now. And it's true love that has met the test and survived. We needn't wish them happiness, only long life."

As the guests rose under the spell of the excitement and held glasses aloft O'Neill whispered to Barton the news that Miss Parks had resigned, and, greatly to his astonishment, saw that repressed and impeccably correct young man kick back his chair, rush around to Miss Parks, and whisper something in her ear. She blushed, she nodded, whereupon Barton shouted, "Toast us, too, folks! Miss Parks and I are going to be married as soon as school closes."

By this time the people from the other tables had gathered about laughing, eager, and interested—but when the toast to Barton and Miss Parks had been drunk the excitement subsided; the boarders resumed their places and ate their dessert. Except Barton and Miss Parks, 42 and 40 respectively, who sat and gazed at each other as though they had never seen each other before. And it is possible they really hadn't.

Like guests at a banquet, the boarders at Mrs. Harrison's table rose in concert and sauntered out of the dining room, flustered and not a little thrilled with the sudden glamour of unheralded romance. Barton and Miss Parks disappeared in the parlor—and, as if by arrangement, everybody else veered away from there. It was obviously only fair. O'Neill and Miss Jordan made for the front steps, for the evening was hot. Old Graham followed O'Neill and his companion, Mr. and Mrs. Beacon went to their room, Nelson hung about undecidedly in the hall.

Sharply, imperiously, the telephone bell rang.

"That's for me," he said, and dived into the booth.

It was about a moment afterward that he rushed out again, grabbed his hat off the rack, and dashed out of the house.

As he half jumped over O'Neill on the steps he called back. "Mamie planted two fly cops at the other end of a dictograph and got Slinky McGrew to tell her he croaked that guy. And they're takin' him to the Tombs now. That phone ring was wedding bells for me. I'm beating it for Mamie."

Laughing, Nelson sped down the street and dove into the subway kiosk.

Graham, puzzled, looked to O'Neill for an explanation of the remark and the mad rush. O'Neill told him, briefly.

"Well," said the wanderer, "it comes to different men in different ways—what does it matter how, so long as it comes." He rose.

"Coming down to the weinstube for o' little evenin's evenin'?" he asked O'Neill.

"N-not tonight, Mr. Graham," replied the writer, with an almost imperceptible movement closer to Miss Jordan. "I—I don't feel like it. But maybe Mr. Beacon—" he paused and glanced up at that worthy little man, who had just come out and stood at the top of the steps.

"Come and have a drink with me, Beacon," called Graham.

Mr. Beacon looked apprehensively back toward the house longingly at Mr. Graham. He poised undecidedly on the brink of the step. Then, with a sudden straightening of his shoulders and a new gleam in his eye, he marched down the steps and joined Graham on the sidewalk.

"Thanks, I don't care if I do," he declared, and the two old men walked away together. And no one would know that it was the first time in his life Beacon had said those words.

Up and down the asphalt street the autos purred, now and then a team clacked ahead of a delivery wagon. Lovers ambled along the walks, families—mother, father, and various offspring of different sizes—moved by. Young men, briskly walking toward their hearts' desire, added to the stream flowing by in two directions. On the steps of the long row of identical brown stone houses of which Mrs. Harrison's was one, sat groups of people enjoying the air. The groups were oddly similar, for this was a boarding house block and the mortals on such steps run to type. And, except for the difference in clothes that fashion decrees every few years, they will be the same a thousand years hence—unless we have abolished boarding houses.

Dusk fell, the house windows began to gleam, the lamp lighter came on his round. Over the sky in the direction of Broadway the reflection of the lights turned the gray clouds gold. And as O'Neill sat beside Miss Jordan his hand sought hers and all his skies turned also to gold. For she did not take the hand away, she turned it upward and clasped his frankly.

"Let's—let's go into the park," suggested O'Neill. "I—I've got something I want to tell you."

"All right," said Miss Jordan. Her eyes glowed warmly in the dim twilight. "Help me up." He took her two hands in his and lifted her to her feet. Almost he kissed her—but not quite.

"But I will when we are in the park," he said.

She took his arm and they went down the street.