**Past One at Rooney’s**

O. Henry

Only on the lower East Side of New York do the houses of Capulet and Montagu survive. There they do not fight by the book of arithmetic. If you but bite your thumb at an upholder of your opposing house you have work cut out for your steel. On Broadway you may drag your man along a dozen blocks by his nose, and he will only bawl for the watch; but in the domain of the East Side Tybalts and Mercutios you must observe the niceties of deportment to the wink of any eyelash and to an inch of elbow room at the bar when its patrons include foes of your house and kin.

So, when Eddie McManus, known to the Capulets as Cork McManus, drifted into Dutch Mike’s for a stein of beer, and came upon a bunch of Montagus making merry with the suds, he began to observe the strictest parliamentary rules. Courtesy forbade his leaving the saloon with his thirst unslaked; caution steered him to a place at the bar where the mirror supplied the cognizance of the enemy’s movements that his indifferent gaze seemed to disdain; experience whispered to him that the finger of trouble would be busy among the chattering steins at Dutch Mike’s that night. Close by his side drew Brick Cleary, his Mercutio, companion of his perambulations. Thus they stood, four of the Mulberry Hill Gang and two of the Dry Dock Gang, minding their P’s and Q’s so solicitously that Dutch Mike kept one eye on his customers and the other on an open space beneath his bar in which it was his custom to seek safety whenever the ominous politeness of the rival associations congealed into the shapes of bullets and cold steel.

But we have not to do with the wars of the Mulberry Hills and the Dry Docks. We must to Rooney’s, where, on the most blighted dead branch of the tree of life, a little pale orchid shall bloom.

Overstrained etiquette at last gave way. It is not known who first overstepped the bounds of punctilio; but the consequences were immediate. Buck Malone, of the Mulberry Hills, with a Dewey-like swiftness, got an eight-inch gun swung round from his hurricane deck. But McManus’s simile must be the torpedo. He glided in under the guns and slipped a scant three inches of knife blade between the ribs of the Mulberry Hill cruiser. Meanwhile Brick Cleary, a devotee to strategy, had skimmed across the lunch counter and thrown the switch of the electrics, leaving the combat to be waged by the light of gunfire alone. Dutch Mike crawled from his haven and ran into the street crying for the watch instead of for a Shakespeare to immortalize the Cimmerian shindy.

The cop came, and found a prostrate, bleeding Montagu supported by three distrait and reticent followers of the House. Faithful to the ethics of the gangs, no one knew whence the hurt came. There was no Capulet to be seen.

“Raus mit der interrogatories,” said Buck Malone to the officer. “Sure I know who done it. I always manages to get a bird’s eye view of any guy that comes up an’ makes a show case for a hardware store out of me. No. I’m not telling you his name. I’ll settle with um meself. Wow—ouch! Easy, boys! Yes, I’ll attend to his case meself. I’m not making any complaint.”

At midnight McManus strolled around a pile of lumber near an East Side dock, and lingered in the vicinity of a certain water plug. Brick Cleary drifted casually to the trysting place ten minutes later. “He’ll maybe not croak,” said Brick; “and he won’t tell, of course. But Dutch Mike did. He told the police he was tired of having his place shot up. It’s unhandy just now, because Tim Corrigan’s in Europe for a week’s end with Kings. He’ll be back on the *Ka* *iser Wil* *li* *ams* next Friday. You’ll have to duck out of sight till then. Tim’ll fix it up all right for us when he comes back.”

This goes to explain why Cork McManus went into Rooney’s one night and there looked upon the bright, stranger face of Romance for the first time in his precarious career.

Until Tim Corrigan should return from his jaunt among Kings and Princes and hold up his big white finger in private offices, it was unsafe for Cork in any of the old haunts of his gang. So he lay, perdu, in the high rear room of a Capulet, reading pink sporting sheets and cursing the slow paddle wheels of the *Ka* *iser Wil* *helm*.

It was on Thursday evening that Cork’s seclusion became intolerable to him. Never a hart panted for water fountain as he did for the cool touch of a drifting stein, for the firm security of a foot-rail in the hollow of his shoe and the quiet, hearty challenges of friendship and repartee along and across the shining bars. But he must avoid the district where he was known. The cops were looking for him everywhere, for news was scarce, and the newspapers were harping again on the failure of the police to suppress the gangs. If they got him before Corrigan came back, the big white finger could not be uplifted; it would be too late then. But Corrigan would be home the next day, so he felt sure there would be small danger in a little excursion that night among the crass pleasures that represented life to him.

At half-past twelve McManus stood in a darkish cross-town street looking up at the name “Rooney’s,” picked out by incandescent lights against a signboard over a second-story window. He had heard of the place as a tough “hang-out"; with its frequenters and its locality he was unfamiliar. Guided by certain unerring indications common to all such resorts, he ascended the stairs and entered the large room over the café.

Here were some twenty or thirty tables, at this time about half-filled with Rooney’s guests. Waiters served drinks. At one end a human pianola with drugged eyes hammered the keys with automatic and furious unprecision. At merciful intervals a waiter would roar or squeak a song—songs full of “Mr. Johnsons” and “babes” and “coons”—historical word guaranties of the genuineness of African melodies composed by red waistcoated young gentlemen, natives of the cotton fields and rice swamps of West Twenty-eighth Street.

For one brief moment you must admire Rooney with me as he receives, seats, manipulates, and chaffs his guests. He is twenty-nine. He has Wellington’s nose, Dante’s chin, the cheek-bones of an Iroquois, the smile of Talleyrand, Corbett’s foot work, and the poise of an eleven-year-old East Side Central Park Queen of the May. He is assisted by a lieutenant known as Frank, a pudgy, easy chap, swell-dressed, who goes among the tables seeing that dull care does not intrude. Now, what is there about Rooney’s to inspire all this pother? It is more respectable by daylight; stout ladies with children and mittens and bundles and unpedigreed dogs drop up of afternoons for a stein and a chat. Even by gaslight the diversions are melancholy i’ the mouth-drink and rag-time, and an occasional surprise when the waiter swabs the suds from under your sticky glass. There is an answer. Transmigration! The soul of Sir Walter Raleigh has traveled from beneath his slashed doublet to a kindred home under Rooney’s visible plaid waistcoat. Rooney’s is twenty years ahead of the times. Rooney has removed the embargo. Rooney has spread his cloak upon the soggy crossing of public opinion, and any Elizabeth who treads upon it is as much a queen as another. Attend to the revelation of the secret. In Rooney’s ladies may smoke!

McManus sat down at a vacant table. He paid for the glass of beer that he ordered, tilted his narrow-brimmed derby to the back of his brick-dust head, twined his feet among the rungs of his chair, and heaved a sigh of contentment from the breathing spaces of his innermost soul; for this mud honey was clarified sweetness to his taste. The sham gaiety, the hectic glow of counterfeit hospitality, the self-conscious, joyless laughter, the wine-born warmth, the loud music retrieving the hour from frequent whiles of awful and corroding silence, the presence of well-clothed and frank-eyed beneficiaries of Rooney’s removal of the restrictions laid upon the weed, the familiar blended odors of soaked lemon peel, flat beer, and *pe* *au d’Espag* *ne*—all these were manna to Cork McManus, hungry for his week in the desert of the Capulet’s high rear room.

A girl, alone, entered Rooney’s, glanced around with leisurely swiftness, and sat opposite McManus at his table. Her eyes rested upon him for two seconds in the look with which woman reconnoitres all men whom she for the first time confronts. In that space of time she will decide upon one of two things—either to scream for the police, or that she may marry him later on.

Her brief inspection concluded, the girl laid on the table a worn red morocco shopping bag with the inevitable top-gallant sail of frayed lace handkerchief flying from a corner of it. After she had ordered a small beer from the immediate waiter she took from her bag a box of cigarettes and lighted one with slightly exaggerated ease of manner. Then she looked again in the eyes of Cork McManus and smiled.

Instantly the doom of each was sealed.

The unqualified desire of a man to buy clothes and build fires for a woman for a whole lifetime at first sight of her is not uncommon among that humble portion of humanity that does not care for Bradstreet or coats-of-arms or Shaw’s plays. Love at first sight has occurred a time or two in high life; but, as a rule, the extempore mania is to be found among unsophisticated creatures such as the dove, the blue-tailed dingbat, and the ten-dollar-a-week clerk. Poets, subscribers to all fiction magazines, and schatchens, take notice.

With the exchange of the mysterious magnetic current came to each of them the instant desire to lie, pretend, dazzle and deceive, which is the worst thing about the hypocritical disorder known as love.

“Have another beer?” suggested Cork. In his circle the phrase was considered to be a card, accompanied by a letter of introduction and references.

“No, thanks,” said the girl, raising her eyebrows and choosing her conventional words carefully. “I—merely dropped in for—a slight refreshment.” The cigarette between her fingers seemed to require explanation. “My aunt is a Russian lady,” she concluded, “and we often have a post perannual cigarette after dinner at home.”

“Cheese it!” said Cork, whom society airs oppressed. “Your fingers are as yellow as mine.”

“Say,” said the girl, blazing upon him with low-voiced indignation, “what do you think I am? Say, who do you think you are talking to? What?”

She was pretty to look at. Her eyes were big, brown, intrepid and bright. Under her flat sailor hat, planted jauntily on one side, her crinkly, tawny hair parted and was drawn back, low and massy, in a thick, pendant knot behind. The roundness of girlhood still lingered in her chin and neck, but her cheeks and fingers were thinning slightly. She looked upon the world with defiance, suspicion, and sullen wonder. Her smart, short tan coat was soiled and expensive. Two inches below her black dress dropped the lowest flounce of a heliotrope silk underskirt.

“Beg your pardon,” said Cork, looking at her admiringly. “I didn’t mean anything. Sure, it’s no harm to smoke, Maudy.”

“Rooney’s,” said the girl, softened at once by his amends, “is the only place I know where a lady can smoke. Maybe it ain’t a nice habit, but aunty lets us at home. And my name ain’t Maudy, if you please; it’s Ruby Delamere.”

“That’s a swell handle,” said Cork approvingly. “Mine’s McManus—Cor—er—Eddie McManus.”

“Oh, you can’t help that,” laughed Ruby. “Don’t apologize.”

Cork looked seriously at the big clock on Rooney’s wall. The girl’s ubiquitous eyes took in the movement.

“I know it’s late,” she said, reaching for her bag; “but you know how you want a smoke when you want one. Ain’t Rooney’s all right? I never saw anything wrong here. This is twice I’ve been in. I work in a bookbindery on Third Avenue. A lot of us girls have been working overtime three nights a week. They won’t let you smoke there, of course. I just dropped in here on my way home for a puff. Ain’t it all right in here? If it ain’t, I won’t come any more.”

“It’s a little bit late for you to be out alone anywhere,” said Cork. “I’m not wise to this particular joint; but anyhow you don’t want to have your picture taken in it for a present to your Sunday School teacher. Have one more beer, and then say I take you home.”

“But I don’t know you,” said the girl, with fine scrupulosity. “I don’t accept the company of gentlemen I ain’t acquainted with. My aunt never would allow that.”

“Why,” said Cork McManus, pulling his ear, “I’m the latest thing in suitings with side vents and bell skirt when it comes to escortin’ a lady. You bet you’ll find me all right, Ruby. And I’ll give you a tip as to who I am. My governor is one of the hottest cross-buns of the Wall Street push. Morgan’s cab horse casts a shoe every time the old man sticks his head out the window. Me! Well, I’m in trainin’ down the Street. The old man’s goin’ to put a seat on the Stock Exchange in my stockin’ my next birthday. But it all sounds like a lemon to me. What I like is golf and yachtin’ and—er—well, say a corkin’ fast ten-round bout between welter-weights with walkin’ gloves.”

“I guess you can walk to the door with me,” said the girl hesitatingly, but with a certain pleased flutter. “Still I never heard anything extra good about Wall Street brokers, or sports who go to prize fights, either. Ain’t you got any other recommendations?”

“I think you’re the swellest looker I’ve had my lamps on in little old New York,” said Cork impressively.

“That’ll be about enough of that, now. Ain’t you the kidder!” She modified her chiding words by a deep, long, beaming, smile-embellished look at her cavalier. “We’ll drink our beer before we go, ha?”

A waiter sang. The tobacco smoke grew denser, drifting and rising in spirals, waves, tilted layers, cumulus clouds, cataracts and suspended fogs like some fifth element created from the ribs of the ancient four. Laughter and chat grew louder, stimulated by Rooney’s liquids and Rooney’s gallant hospitality to Lady Nicotine.

One o’clock struck. Down-stairs there was a sound of closing and locking doors. Frank pulled down the green shades of the front windows carefully. Rooney went below in the dark hall and stood at the front door, his cigarette cached in the hollow of his hand. Thenceforth whoever might seek admittance must present a countenance familiar to Rooney’s hawk’s eye—the countenance of a true sport.

Cork McManus and the bookbindery girl conversed absorbedly, with their elbows on the table. Their glasses of beer were pushed to one side, scarcely touched, with the foam on them sunken to a thin white scum. Since the stroke of one the stale pleasures of Rooney’s had become renovated and spiced; not by any addition to the list of distractions, but because from that moment the sweets became stolen ones. The flattest glass of beer acquired the tang of illegality; the mildest claret punch struck a knockout blow at law and order; the harmless and genial company became outlaws, defying authority and rule. For after the stroke of one in such places as Rooney’s, where neither bed nor board is to be had, drink may not be set before the thirsty of the city of the four million. It is the law.

“Say,” said Cork McManus, almost covering the table with his eloquent chest and elbows, “was that dead straight about you workin’ in the bookbindery and livin’ at home—and just happenin’ in here—and—and all that spiel you gave me?”

“Sure it was,” answered the girl with spirit. “Why, what do you think? Do you suppose I’d lie to you? Go down to the shop and ask ’em. I handed it to you on the level.”

“On the dead level?” said Cork. “That’s the way I want it; because—”

“Because what?”

“I throw up my hands,” said Cork. “You’ve got me goin’. You’re the girl I’ve been lookin’ for. Will you keep company with me, Ruby?”

“Would you like me to—Eddie?”

“Surest thing. But I wanted a straight story about—about yourself, you know. When a fellow had a girl—a steady girl—she’s got to be all right, you know. She’s got to be straight goods.”

“You’ll find I’ll be straight goods, Eddie.”

“Of course you will. I believe what you told me. But you can’t blame me for wantin’ to find out. You don’t see many girls smokin’ cigarettes in places like Rooney’s after midnight that are like you.”

The girl flushed a little and lowered her eyes. “I see that now,” she said meekly. “I didn’t know how bad it looked. But I won’t do it any more. And I’ll go straight home every night and stay there. And I’ll give up cigarettes if you say so, Eddie—I’ll cut ’em out from this minute on.”

Cork’s air became judicial, proprietary, condemnatory, yet sympathetic. “A lady can smoke,” he decided, slowly, “at times and places. Why? Because it’s bein’ a lady that helps her pull it off.”

“I’m going to quit. There’s nothing to it,” said the girl. She flicked the stub of her cigarette to the floor.

“At times and places,” repeated Cork. “When I call round for you of evenin’s we’ll hunt out a dark bench in Stuyvesant Square and have a puff or two. But no more Rooney’s at one o’clock—see?”

“Eddie, do you really like me?” The girl searched his hard but frank features eagerly with anxious eyes.

“On the dead level.”

“When are you coming to see me—where I live?”

“Thursday—day after to-morrow evenin’. That suit you?”

“Fine. I’ll be ready for you. Come about seven. Walk to the door with me to-night and I’ll show you where I live. Don’t forget, now. And don’t you go to see any other girls before then, mister! I bet you will, though.”

“On the dead level,” said Cork, “you make ’em all look like rag-dolls to me. Honest, you do. I know when I’m suited. On the dead level, I do.”

Against the front door down-stairs repeated heavy blows were delivered. The loud crashes resounded in the room above. Only a trip-hammer or a policeman’s foot could have been the author of those sounds. Rooney jumped like a bullfrog to a corner of the room, turned off the electric lights and hurried swiftly below. The room was left utterly dark except for the winking red glow of cigars and cigarettes. A second volley of crashes came up from the assaulted door. A little, rustling, murmuring panic moved among the besieged guests. Frank, cool, smooth, reassuring, could be seen in the rosy glow of the burning tobacco, going from table to table.

“All keep still!” was his caution. “Don’t talk or make any noise! Everything will be all right. Now, don’t feel the slightest alarm. We’ll take care of you all.”

Ruby felt across the table until Cork’s firm hand closed upon hers. “Are you afraid, Eddie?” she whispered. “Are you afraid you’ll get a free ride?”

“Nothin’ doin’ in the teeth-chatterin’ line,” said Cork. “I guess Rooney’s been slow with his envelope. Don’t you worry, girly; I’ll look out for you all right.”

Yet Mr. McManus’s ease was only skin- and muscle-deep. With the police looking everywhere for Buck Malone’s assailant, and with Corrigan still on the ocean wave, he felt that to be caught in a police raid would mean an ended career for him. He wished he had remained in the high rear room of the true Capulet reading the pink extras.

Rooney seemed to have opened the front door below and engaged the police in conference in the dark hall. The wordless low growl of their voices came up the stairway. Frank made a wireless news station of himself at the upper door. Suddenly he closed the door, hurried to the extreme rear of the room and lighted a dim gas jet.

“This way, everybody!” he called sharply. “In a hurry; but no noise, please!”

The guests crowded in confusion to the rear. Rooney’s lieutenant swung open a panel in the wall, overlooking the back yard, revealing a ladder already placed for the escape.

“Down and out, everybody!” he commanded. “Ladies first! Less talking, please! Don’t crowd! There’s no danger.”

Among the last, Cork and Ruby waited their turn at the open panel. Suddenly she swept him aside and clung to his arm fiercely.

“Before we go out,” she whispered in his ear—“before anything happens, tell me again, Eddie, do you l—do you really like me?”

“On the dead level,” said Cork, holding her close with one arm, “when it comes to you, I’m all in.”

When they turned they found they were lost and in darkness. The last of the fleeing customers had descended. Half way across the yard they bore the ladder, stumbling, giggling, hurrying to place it against an adjoining low building over the roof of which their only route to safety.

“We may as well sit down,” said Cork grimly. “Maybe Rooney will stand the cops off, anyhow.”

They sat at a table; and their hands came together again.

A number of men then entered the dark room, feeling their way about. One of them, Rooney himself, found the switch and turned on the electric light. The other man was a cop of the old régime—a big cop, a thick cop, a fuming, abrupt cop—not a pretty cop. He went up to the pair at the table and sneered familiarly at the girl.

“What are youse doin’ in here?” he asked.

“Dropped in for a smoke,” said Cork mildly.

“Had any drinks?”

“Not later than one o’clock.”

“Get out—quick!” ordered the cop. Then, “Sit down!” he countermanded.

He took off Cork’s hat roughly and scrutinized him shrewdly. “Your name’s McManus.”

“Bad guess,” said Cork. “It’s Peterson.”

“Cork McManus, or something like that,” said the cop. “You put a knife into a man in Dutch Mike’s saloon a week ago.”

“Aw, forget it!” said Cork, who perceived a shade of doubt in the officer’s tones. “You’ve got my mug mixed with somebody else’s.”

“Have I? Well, you’ll come to the station with me, anyhow, and be looked over. The description fits you all right.” The cop twisted his fingers under Cork’s collar. “Come on!” he ordered roughly.

Cork glanced at Ruby. She was pale, and her thin nostrils quivered. Her quick eye danced from one man’s face to the other as they spoke or moved. What hard luck! Cork was thinking—Corrigan on the briny; and Ruby met and lost almost within an hour! Somebody at the police station would recognize him, without a doubt. Hard luck!

But suddenly the girl sprang up and hurled herself with both arms extended against the cop. His hold on Cork’s collar was loosened and he stumbled back two or three paces.

“Don’t go so fast, Maguire!” she cried in shrill fury. “Keep your hands off my man! You know me, and you know I’m givin’ you good advice. Don’t you touch him again! He’s not the guy you are lookin’ for—I’ll stand for that.”

“See here, Fanny,” said the Cop, red and angry, “I’ll take you, too, if you don’t look out! How do you know this ain’t the man I want? What are you doing in here with him?”

“How do I know?” said the girl, flaming red and white by turns. “Because I’ve known him a year. He’s mine. Oughtn’t I to know? And what am I doin’ here with him? That’s easy.”

She stooped low and reached down somewhere into a swirl of flirted draperies, heliotrope and black. An elastic snapped, she threw on the table toward Cork a folded wad of bills. The money slowly straightened itself with little leisurely jerks.

“Take that, Jimmy, and let’s go,” said the girl. “I’m declarin’ the usual dividends, Maguire,” she said to the officer. “You had your usual five-dollar graft at the usual corner at ten.”

“A lie!” said the cop, turning purple. “You go on my beat again and I’ll arrest you every time I see you.”

“No, you won’t,” said the girl. “And I’ll tell you why. Witnesses saw me give you the money to-night, and last week, too. I’ve been getting fixed for you.”

Cork put the wad of money carefully into his pocket, and said: “Come on, Fanny; let’s have some chop suey before we go home.”

“Clear out, quick, both of you, or I’ll—”

The cop’s bluster trailed away into inconsequentiality.

At the corner of the street the two halted. Cork handed back the money without a word. The girl took it and slipped it slowly into her hand-bag. Her expression was the same she had worn when she entered Rooney’s that night—she looked upon the world with defiance, suspicion and sullen wonder.

“I guess I might as well say good-bye here,” she said dully. “You won’t want to see me again, of course. Will you—shake hands—Mr. McManus.”

“I mightn’t have got wise if you hadn’t give the snap away,” said Cork. “Why did you do it?”

“You’d have been pinched if I hadn’t. That’s why. Ain’t that reason enough?” Then she began to cry. “Honest, Eddie, I was goin’ to be the best girl in the world. I hated to be what I am; I hated men; I was ready almost to die when I saw you. And you seemed different from everybody else. And when I found you liked me, too, why, I thought I’d make you believe I was good, and I was goin’ to be good. When you asked to come to my house and see me, why, I’d have died rather than do anything wrong after that. But what’s the use of talking about it? I’ll say good—by, if you will, Mr. McManus.”

Cork was pulling at his ear. “I knifed Malone,” said he. “I was the one the cop wanted.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” said the girl listlessly. “It didn’t make any difference about that.”

“That was all hot air about Wall Street. I don’t do nothin’ but hang out with a tough gang on the East Side.”

“That was all right, too,” repeated the girl. “It didn’t make any difference.”

Cork straightened himself, and pulled his hat down low. “I could get a job at O’Brien’s,” he said aloud, but to himself.

“Good-by,” said the girl.

“Come on,” said Cork, taking her arm. “I know a place.”

Two blocks away he turned with her up the steps of a red brick house facing a little park.

“What house is this?” she asked, drawing back. “Why are you going in there?”

A street lamp shone brightly in front. There was a brass nameplate at one side of the closed front doors. Cork drew her firmly up the steps. “Read that,” said he.

She looked at the name on the plate, and gave a cry between a moan and a scream. “No, no, no, Eddie! Oh, my God, no! I won’t let you do that—not now! Let me go! You shan’t do that! You can’t—you mus’n’t! Not after you know! No, no! Come away quick! Oh, my God! Please, Eddie, come!”

Half fainting, she reeled, and was caught in the bend of his arm. Cork’s right hand felt for the electric button and pressed it long.

Another cop—how quickly they scent trouble when trouble is on the wing!—came along, saw them, and ran up the steps. “Here! What are you doing with that girl?” he called gruffly.

“She’ll be all right in a minute,” said Cork. “It’s a straight deal.”

“Reverend Jeremiah Jones,” read the cop from the door-plate with true detective cunning.

“Correct,” said Cork. “On the dead level, we’re goin’ to get married.”