**Roses, Ruses and Romance**

O. Henry

Ravenel — Ravenel, the traveller, artist and poet, threw his magazine to the floor. Sammy Brown, broker’s clerk, who sat by the window, jumped.

“What is it, Ravvy?” he asked. “The critics been hammering your stock down?”

“Romance is dead,” said Ravenel, lightly. When Ravenel spoke lightly be was generally serious. He picked up the magazine and fluttered its leaves.

“Even a Philistine, like you, Sammy,” said Ravenel, seriously (a tone that insured him to be speaking lightly), “ought to understand. Now, here is a magazine that once printed Poe and Lowell and Whitman and Bret Harte and Du Maurier and Lanier and — well, that gives you the idea. The current number has this literary feast to set before you: an article on the stokers and coal bunkers of battleships, an expose of the methods employed in making liver-wurst, a continued story of a Standard Preferred International Baking Powder deal in Wall Street, a ‘poem’ on the bear that the President missed, another ‘story’ by a young woman who spent a week as a spy making overalls on the East Side, another ‘fiction’ story that reeks of the ‘garage’ and a certain make of automobile. Of course, the title contains the words ‘Cupid’ and ‘Chauffeur’ — an article on naval strategy, illustrated with cuts of the Spanish Armada, and the new Staten Island ferry-boats; another story of a political boss who won the love of a Fifth Avenue belle by blackening her eye and refusing to vote for an iniquitous ordinance (it doesn’t say whether it was in the Street-Cleaning Department or Congress), and nineteen pages by the editors brag-ging about the circulation. The whole thing, Sammy, is an obituary on Romance.”

Sammy Brown sat comfortably in the leather armchair by the open window. His suit was a vehement brown with visible checks, beautifully matched in shade by the ends of four cigars that his vest pocket poorly concealed. Light tan were his shoes, gray his socks, sky-blue his apparent linen, snowy and high and adamantine his collar, against which a black butterfly had alighted and spread his wings. Sammy’s face — least important — was round and pleasant and pinkish, and in his eyes you saw no haven for fleeing Romance.

That window of Ravenel’s apartment opened upon an old garden full of ancient trees and shrubbery. The apartment-house towered above one side of it; a high brick wall fended it from the street; opposite Ravenel’s window an old, old mansion stood, half-hidden in the shade of the summer foliage. The house was a castle besieged. The city howled and roared and shrieked and beat upon its double doors, and shook white, fluttering checks above the wall, offering terms of surrender. The gray dust settled upon the trees; the siege was pressed hotter, but the draw-bridge was not lowered. No further will the language of chivalry serve. Inside lived an old gentleman who loved his home and did not wish to sell it. That is all the romance of the besieged castle.

Three or four times every week came Sammy Brown to Ravenel’s apartment. He belonged to the poet’s club, for the former Browns had been conspicuous, though Sammy bad been vulgarized by Business. He had no tears for departed Romance. The song of the ticker was the one that reached his heart, and when it came to matters equine and batting scores he was something of a pink edition. He loved to sit in the leather armchair by Ravenel’s window. And Ravenel didn’t mind particularly. Sammy seemed to enjoy his talk; and then the broker’s clerk was such a perfect embodiment of modernity and the day’s sordid practicality that Ravenel rather liked to use him as a scapegoat.

“I’ll tell you what’s the matter with you,” said Sammy, with the shrewdness that business had taught him. “The magazine has turned down some of your poetry stunts. That’s why you are sore at it.”

“That would be a good guess in Wall Street or in a campaign for the presidency of a woman’s club,” said Ravenel, quietly. “Now, there is a poem - if you will allow me to call it that - of my own in this number of the magazine.”

“Read it to me,” said Sammy, watching a cloud of pipe-smoke be had just blown out the window.

Ravenel was no greater than Achilles. No one is. There is bound to be a spot. The Somebody-or-Other must take bold of us somewhere when she dips us in the Something-or-Other that makes us invulnerable. He read aloud this verse in the magazine:

THE FOUR ROSES

‘One rose I twined within your hair —

(White rose, that spake of worth);

And one you placed upon your breast —

(Red rose, love’s seal of birth).

You plucked another from its stem —

(Tea rose, that means for aye);

And one you gave — that bore for me

The thorns of memory.”

“That’s a crackerjack,” said Sammy, admiringly.

There are five more verses,” said Ravenel, patiently sardonic. “One naturally pauses at the end of each. Of course — “

“Oh, let’s have the rest, old man,” shouted Sammy, contritely, ” I didn’t mean to cut you off. I’m not much of a poetry expert, you know. I never saw a poem that didn’t look like it ought to have terminal facilities at the end of every verse. Reel off the rest of it.”

Ravenel sighed, and laid the magazine down. “All right,” said Sammy, cheerfully, “we’ll have it next time. I’ll be off now. Got a date at five o’clock.”

He took a last look at the shaded green garden and left, whistling in an off key an untuneful air from a roofless farce comedy.

The next afternoon Ravenel, while polishing a ragged line of a new sonnet, reclined by the window overlooking the besieged garden of the unmercenary baron. Suddenly he sat up, spilling two rhymes and a syllable or two.,

Through the trees one window of the old mansion could be seen clearly. In its window, draped in flowing white, leaned the angel of all his dreams of romance and poesy. Young, fresh as a drop of dew, graceful as a spray of clematis, conferring upon the garden hemmed in by the roaring traffic the air of a princess’s bower, beautiful as any flower sung by poet — thus Ravenel saw her for the first time. She lingered for a while, and then disappeared within, leaving a few notes of a birdlike ripple of song to reach his entranced ears through the rattle of cabs and the snarling of the electric cars.

Thus, as if to challenge the poet’s flaunt at romance and to punish him for his recreancy to the undying spirit of youth and beauty, this vision bad dawned upon him with a thrilling and accusive power. And so metabolic was the power that in an instant the atoms of Ravenel’s entire world were redistrib-uted. The laden drays that passed the house in which she lived rumbled a deep double-bass to the tune of love. The newsboys’ shouts were the notes of singing birds; that garden was the pleasance of the Capulets; the janitor was an ogre; himself a knight, ready with sword, lance or lute.

Thus does romance show herself amid forests of brick and stone when she gets lost in the city, and there has to be sent out a general alarm to find her again.

At four in the afternoon Ravenel looked out across the garden. In the window of his hopes were set four small vases, each containing a great, full-blown rose - red and white. And, as he gazed, she leaned above them, shaming them with her loveliness and seeming to direct her eyes pensively toward his own window. And then, as though she had caught his respectful but ardent regard, she melted away, leaving the fragrant emblems on the window-sill.

“Yes, emblems! — he would be unworthy if be had not understood. She had read his poem, “The Four Roses”; it had reached her heart; and this was its romantic answer. Of course she must know that Ravenel, the poet, lived there across her garden. His picture, too, she must have seen in the magazines. The delicate, tender, modest, flattering message could not be ignored.

Ravenel noticed beside the roses a small flowering-pot containing a plant. Without shame be brought his opera-glasses and employed them from the cover of his window-curtain. A nutmeg geranium!

With the true poetic instinct be dragged a book of useless information from his shelves, and tore open the leaves at “The Language of Flowers.”

“Geranium, Nutmeg - I expect a meeting.”

So! Romance never does things by halves. If she comes back to you she brings gifts and her knitting, and will sit in your chimney-corner if you will let her.

And now Ravenel smiled. The lover smiles when be thinks he has won. The woman who loves ceases to smile with victory. He ends a battle; she begins hers. What a pretty idea to set the four roses in her window for him to see! She must have a sweet, poetic soul. And now to contrive the meeting.

A whistling and slamming of doors preluded the coming of Sammy Brown.

Ravenel smiled again. Even Sammy Brown was shone upon by the far-flung rays of the renaissance. Sammy, with his ultra clothes, his horseshoe pin, his plump face, his trite slang, his uncomprehending admiration of Ravenel — the broker’s clerk made an excellent foil to the new, bright unseen visitor to the poet’s sombre apartment.

Sammy went to his old seat by the window, and looked out over the dusty green foliage in the garden. Then he looked at his watch, and rose hastily.

“By grabs!” he exclaimed. “Twenty after four! I can’t stay, old man; I’ve got a date at 4:30.”

“Why did you come, then?” asked Ravenel, with sarcastic jocularity, “if you had an engagement at that time. I thought you business men kept better account of your minutes and seconds than that.”

Sammy hesitated in the doorway and turned pinker.

“Fact is, Ravvy,” be explained, as to a customer whose margin is exhausted, “I didn’t know I had it till I came. I’ll tell you, old man - there’s a dandy girl in that old house next door that I’m dead gone on. I put it straight — we’re engaged. The old man says ‘nit’ but that don’t go. He keeps her pretty close. I can see Edith’s window from yours here. She gives me a tip when she’s going shopping, and I meet her. It’s 4:30 to-day. Maybe I ought to have explained sooner, but I know it’s all right with you — so long.”

“How do you get your ‘tip,’ as you call it?” asked Ravenel, losing a little spontaneity from his smile.

“Roses,” said Sammy, briefly. Four of ‘em to-day. Means four o’clock at the corner of Broadway and Twenty-third.”

“But the geranium?” persisted Ravenel, clutch-ing at the end of flying Romance’s trailing robe.

“Means half-past 5,” shouted Sammy from the hall. “See you to-morrow.”