**The Rubber Plant’s Story**

O. Henry

We rubber plants form the connecting link between the vegetable kingdom and the decorations of a Waldorf-Astoria scene in a Third Avenue theatre. I haven’t looked up our family tree, but I believe we were raised by grafting a gum overshoe on to a 30-cent table d’hote stalk of asparagus. You take a white bulldog with a Bourke Cockran air of independence about him and a rubber plant and there you have the fauna and flora of a flat. What the shamrock is to Ireland the rubber plant is to the dweller in flats and furnished rooms. We get moved from one place to another so quickly that the only way we can get our picture taken is with a kinetoscope. We are the vagrant vine and the flitting fig tree. You know the proverb: “Where the rubber plant sits in the window the moving van draws up to the door.”

We are the city equivalent to the woodbine and the honeysuckle. No other vegetable except the Pittsburg stogie can withstand as much handling as we can. When the family to which we belong moves into a flat they set us in the front window and we become lares and penates, fly-paper and the peripatetic emblem of “Home Sweet Home.” We aren’t as green as we look. I guess we are about what you would call the soubrettes of the conservatory. You try sitting in the front window of a $40 flat in Manhattan and looking out into the street all day, and back into the flat at night, and see whether you get wise or not—hey? Talk about the tree of knowledge of good and evil in the garden of Eden—say! suppose there had been a rubber plant there when Eve—but I was going to tell you a story.

The first thing I can remember I had only three leaves and belonged to a member of the pony ballet. I was kept in a sunny window, and was generally watered with seltzer and lemon. I had plenty of fun in those days. I got cross-eyed trying to watch the numbers of the automobiles in the street and the dates on the labels inside at the same time.

Well, then the angel that was molting for the musical comedy lost his last feather and the company broke up. The ponies trotted away and I was left in the window ownerless. The janitor gave me to a refined comedy team on the eighth floor, and in six weeks I had been set in the window of five different flats I took on experience and put out two more leaves.

Miss Carruthers, of the refined comedy team—did you ever see her cross both feet back of her neck?—gave me to a friend of hers who had made an unfortunate marriage with a man in a store. Consequently I was placed in the window of a furnished room, rent in advance, water two flights up, gas extra after ten o’clock at night. Two of my leaves withered off here. Also, I was moved from one room to another so many times that I got to liking the odor of the pipes the expressmen smoked.

I don’t think I ever had so dull a time as I did with this lady. There was never anything amusing going on inside—she was devoted to her husband, and, besides leaning out the window and flirting with the iceman, she never did a thing toward breaking the monotony.

When the couple broke up they left me with the rest of their goods at a second-hand store. I was put out in front for sale along with the jobbiest lot you ever heard of being lumped into one bargain. Think of this little cornucopia of wonders, all for $1.89: Henry James’s works, six talking machine records, one pair of tennis shoes, two bottles of horse radish, and a rubber plant—that was me!

One afternoon a girl came along and stopped to look at me. She had dark hair and eyes, and she looked slim, and sad around the mouth.

“Oh, oh!” she says to herself. “I never thought to see one up here.”

She pulls out a little purse about as thick as one of my leaves and fingers over some small silver in it. Old Koen, always on the lockout, is ready, rubbing his hands. This girl proceeds to turn down Mr. James and the other commodities. Rubber plants or nothing is the burden of her song. And at last Koen and she come together at 39 cents, and away she goes with me in her arms.

She was a nice girl, but not my style. Too quiet and sober looking. Thinks I to myself: “I’ll just about land on the fire-escape of a tenement, six stories up. And I’ll spend the next six months looking at clothes on the line.”

But she carried me to a nice little room only three flights up in quite a decent street. And she put me in the window, of course. And then she went to work and cooked dinner for herself. And what do you suppose she had? Bread and tea and a little dab of jam! Nothing else. Not a single lobster, nor so much as one bottle of champagne. The Carruthers comedy team had both every evening, except now and then when they took a notion for pig’s knuckle and kraut.

After she had finished her dinner my new owner came to the window and leaned down close to my leaves and cried softly to herself for a while. It made me feel funny. I never knew anybody to cry that way over a rubber plant before. Of course, I’ve seen a few of ‘em turn on the tears for what they could get out of it, but she seemed to be crying just for the pure enjoyment of it. She touched my leaves like she loved ‘em, and she bent down her head and kissed each one of ‘em. I guess I’m about the toughest specimen of a peripatetic orchid on earth, but I tell you it made me feel sort of queer. Home never was like that to me before. Generally I used to get chewed by poodles and have shirt-waists hung on me to dry, and get watered with coffee grounds and peroxide of hydrogen.

This girl had a piano in the room, and she used to disturb it with both hands while she made noises with her mouth for hours at a time. I suppose she was practising vocal music.

One day she seemed very much excited and kept looking at the clock. At eleven somebody knocked and she let in a stout, dark man with towsled black hair. He sat down at once at the piano and played while she sang for him. When she finished she laid one hand on her bosom and looked at him. He shook his head, and she leaned against the piano. “Two years already,” she said, speaking slowly—“do you think in two more—or even longer?”

The man shook his head again. “You waste your time,” he said, roughly I thought. “The voice is not there.” And then he looked at her in a peculiar way. “But the voice is not everything,” he went on. “You have looks. I can place you, as I told you if—”

The girl pointed to the door without saying anything, and the dark man left the room. And then she came over and cried around me again. It’s a good thing I had enough rubber in me to be waterproof.

About that time somebody else knocked at the door. “Thank goodness,” I said to myself. “Here’s a chance to get the water-works turned off. I hope it’s somebody that’s game enough to stand a bird and a bottle to liven things up a little.” Tell you the truth, this little girl made me tired. A rubber plant likes to see a little sport now and then. I don’t suppose there’s another green thing in New York that sees as much of gay life unless it’s the chartreuse or the sprigs of parsley around the dish.

When the girl opens the door in steps a young chap in a traveling cap and picks her up in his arms, and she sings out “Oh, Dick!” and stays there long enough to—well, you’ve been a rubber plant too, sometimes, I suppose.

“Good thing!” says I to myself. “This is livelier than scales and weeping. Now there’ll be something doing.”

“You’ve got to go back with me,” says the young man. “I’ve come two thousand miles for you. Aren’t you tired of it yet. Bess? You’ve kept all of us waiting so long. Haven’t you found out yet what is best?”

“The bubble burst only to-day,” says the girl. “Come here, Dick, and see what I found the other day on the sidewalk for sale.” She brings him by the hand and exhibits yours truly. “How one ever got away up here who can tell? I bought it with almost the last money I had.”

He looked at me, but he couldn’t keep his eyes off her for more than a second. “Do you remember the night, Bess,” he said, “when we stood under one of those on the bank of the bayou and what you told me then?”

“Geewillikins!” I said to myself. “Both of them stand under a rubber plant! Seems to me they are stretching matters somewhat!”

“Do I not,” says she, looking up at him and sneaking close to his vest, “and now I say it again, and it is to last forever. Look, Dick, at its leaves, how wet they are. Those are my tears, and it was thinking of you that made them fall.”

“The dear old magnolias!” says the young man, pinching one of my leaves. “I love them all.”

Magnolia! Well, wouldn’t that—say! those innocents thought I was a magnolia! What the—well, wasn’t that tough on a genuine little old New York rubber plant?