

Handmade Rainbows

By MRS. HARRY PUGH SMITH
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INSTALLMENT SEVENTEEN—The Story So Far

Laura Maguire is wife of happy-go-lucky Mike, editor and mayor of Covington, whom banker Mays is trying to ruin for criticizing his banking methods. She is the mother of four children, hit by the depression.

Tom, who has separated from Mary Etta when she had a job and he earned no money. She starts divorce action. Alec, who takes a job as grocery clerk

CHAPTER XXVI

Down at the curb Tom stood at the door of Mary Etta's car. They stared at each other, unable to speak. And then suddenly he picked her up in his arms.

"I love you! I love you!" His voice was ragged and broken. His lips quivered. She lifted her mouth to his. For the first time she gave him all of herself in a kiss that was as raw as their hearts.

Laura did not mention Alec to Mike either that night or the next morning. With all his tolerance, Mike was himself fanatically honorable. Above everything he loathed treachery. To learn that a son of his was engaged in something that would not stand the light of day was certain to hit Mike where he lived.

It was just nine when she put on her hat, backed the old sedan out of the garage and set out. Her face in graven lines. She did not mean to return without the truth if it killed her. She went first to the drug store where Alec's old gang hung out, and inquired. No one had seen Alec. Not that day nor for a month of days.

She spent a nickel in the telephone booth at the hotel to call Myra Boone, and Laura's heart hammered so she could scarcely speak when she heard the other woman's shrill nasal voice. But Alec was not there. Indeed the blonde widow went on tartly to explain that she hadn't seen him in weeks and hoped she never would again.

As a last resort Laura visited the grocery store where Alec had found employment for one day. The grocer sourly informed her that he had not seen her son since his flash in the pan at taking on a regular job. Laura suddenly remembered that Alec had obtained a five-dollar advance on his week's salary. But when she apologetically offered to make up the difference, she learned that Alec himself had done so. Where had he found the money?

She was walking blindly out the door toward her car when a hand plucked at her sleeve. She glanced down. It was Joey, Bess Wilkins' little crippled boy. The child looked up at Laura curiously.

"Lou says you'd be furious if you knew," he whispered. "And when Alec isn't there she cries. I don't like to see Lou cry. She's awfully happy. Except when she remembers about you. That's when she cries. Why do you do that to Lou?"

The sidewalk seemed to rise up and hit Laura in the face. All at once she knew.

"Where are they, sonny?" she asked.

The child hesitated. Laura's clear brown eyes met his squarely. The child whispered an address.

The house, when she finally located it, was a small weather-beaten shanty at the far end of an empty block which dwindled into open woods beyond. It had a tiny yard neatly mown, and a broken-down fence to separate it from the cotton fields. Somebody had planted morning glories and trained them on strings along the narrow front porch.

Someone was singing at the back of the house in a low, breathlessly sweet voice like the faint twittering of young birds in a nest. At Laura's knock, the song ceased. She could almost hear the singer holding her breath. It seemed an age before the girl came to the door. Silently she held it open. Laura entered, feeling exactly like an executioner.

There were only three rooms. A small square parlor, a little bedroom glimpsed through an open door, a kitchen and a back porch on which stood a painted breakfast table set with a blue and white cloth. There was a milk bottle in the center which held a spray of wild roses. Wild roses! Laura gazed at the girl before her who did not speak, who only stood there, small hands quivering with nervousness. And Laura paid tribute to the alchemy of love.

"I knew you'd find out some day," said Lou in a quivering voice. "I shouldn't have done it. I deserve to be sorry the rest of my life. But I've always loved Alec. I always will. I know you could kill me. But when Alec asked me to marry him it was like all the dreams I ever dreamed come true."

Lou's small tormented hands twisted a cheap gold band on her finger.

"We took the bus and went over to Lincoln so no one would know. We had to lie about our ages before they'd sell us a license. When we came back we rented this little house. We hadn't any furniture. Just a cot and a cook stove that someone had left behind because they were all to pieces. But Alec mended them. Everything was awful dirty. But I scrubbed and scrubbed. And the first radio Alec sold, we

when he becomes interested in Lou Knight, the town drunk's daughter whom he brought to his mother's house when her father died rescuing a crippled boy in a fire. But Lou leaves the house thinking she is not wanted. Alec doesn't stay home nights.

Shirley, whose long engagement to Jaid Newsom ends in marriage when the two decide to buy a hamburger got the couch. And last week we bought the dinette set. And Alec made me that dressing table out of goods boxes. They're very handy. We had to use them to eat on at first."

Laura regarded the small downcast face. "Why are you so afraid of me, Lou?"

"Because you'll take Alec away from me," said the girl simply.

"What makes you think I can?"

"We aren't of age, either of us. We lied about the license. You can have the marriage annulled."

CHAPTER XXVII

"That's why you haven't wanted me to know?" asked Laura.

"Yes."

"You said something about a radio which Alec sold. I don't believe I understand."

Lou's blue eyes opened wide.

"But didn't you know? He buys parts from old radios and fixes them up so they work better than they did at first. And then he peddles them out in the country to anyone who'll buy. And he's done awfully well because he's worked so hard and he's so clever."

Her small face flooded with color. "Alec can do anything. Just yesterday a man at the big electrical store down town was so interested in Alec's new selector he asked him to come down today and demonstrate it. He says he believes Alec has stumbled onto something that may be worth money. But you see," said Lou, her eyes starry, "I couldn't be surprised because I've

All the way down to the office, Kathleen fumed inwardly. Her nerves had been in a highly irritated state for weeks.

She discovered the Clarion's staff, which had unconsciously absorbed Ritchie Graham, gathered in an agitated huddle in one corner of the room. "What's the newest bad news?" she inquired, almost without a sneer.

Roger Whyte's palsied finger shakily pointed to the editorial prominently displayed on the first page of the current issue. Kathleen skimmed through it hurriedly. Mike had released all brakes. He informed those interested that he had indisputable proof that Banker Eugene Mays was becoming heavily involved with the Donahue interests. According to Mike, the Donahue Investments were a gigantic bubble, doomed to burst. He admitted the concern had floated a number of handsome deals and paid swollen dividends. But that was merely to pull in the suckers, Mike insisted. He declared that if Eugene Mays was not stopped from playing with matches over an open gasoline tank, everybody in Covington would live to curse the day he ever heard the word Donahue.

From behind the closed door of Mike's private office came a bellow like the roar of an infuriated crocodile.

"Did you never hear of libel?" shouted the irate gentleman in the inner room.

"Yes," came Mike's cool delighted voice. "But you'll never sue me for libel on the strength of this article, Mays. You see, I warned you that I had the dope. And I have. In the shape of photostatic copies of letters with your signature on them. I know you are on the point of closing a deal with Donahue. A deal you think will double your fortune. Maybe it will. But Donahue is going to collapse. You may get out before the crack-up. You may not. If you don't, your bank's done for. Ruined. You haven't any right to take a chance like that with other people's money. And I'm here to tell them so."

The wind had blown the dividing door open a tiny crack, but neither man noticed.

"Haven't we played at cross purposes long enough, Maguire?" demanded Mays in a curiously altered voice, a voice which had become almost benign.

"What are you driving at?"

"I realize you haven't had it too easy all these years, and of course we all know you've done a lot for the old town."

"I'm afraid I trust your insults more than your compliments, Mays."

"I've been thinking for a long time that I ought to do something toward the debt we owe you."

"What's this thing?"

"It looks to me like a cashier's check for ten thousand dollars."

"You're offering me this to keep my mouth shut about the Donahue deal?"

"My dear fellow, of course not! It's merely a small token of my esteem."

"You'll never learn, will you?" asked Mike. "You've tried to buy me before. Remember the block of street railway stock you offered me if I'd get the Town Council to ratify your franchise? And the nice bundle of securities you waved under my nose the time you wanted the mayor to purchase your acreage for the City Hospital? I told you then I couldn't be bought. I still can't. I'm tearing this check of yours across twice. See? And—our interview's at an end. I'll go broke. And you can laugh yourself to death when I do. But I won't be bought off and I can't be intimidated. And now you get out of here before I soil my hands on your rotten carcass."

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Lou shivered in his arms and drew slowly away. "Your mother's here, Alec," she said huskily.

Alec whirled. "Laura!" he whispered. He went quite white and instinctively his right arm tightened about his little wife's small trembling body.

"Lou seems to think I will do everything in my power to break up the happiness you two have found together," said Laura with a throb of pain in her voice. "Do you think that, Alec?"

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MANY are called—and many will be chosen. At least 400 football head coaches, not to overlook more than 2,500 assistants are scanning the present and future draft lists with anxious eyes.

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