**Telemachus, Friend**

O. Henry

Returning from a hunting trip, I waited at the little town of Los Pinos, in New Mexico, for the south-bound train, which was one hour late. I sat on the porch of the Summit House and discussed the functions of life with Telemachus Hicks, the hotel proprietor.

Perceiving that personalities were not out of order, I asked him what species of beast had long ago twisted and mutilated his left ear. Being a hunter, I was concerned in the evils that may befall one in the pursuit of game.

“That ear,” says Hicks, “is the relic of true friendship.”

“An accident?” I persisted.

“No friendship is an accident,” said Telemachus; and I was silent.

“The only perfect case of true friendship I ever knew,” went on my host, “was a cordial intent between a Connecticut man and a monkey. The monkey climbed palms in Barranquilla and threw down cocoanuts to the man. The man sawed them in two and made dippers, which he sold for two reales each and bought rum. The monkey drank the milk of the nuts. Through each being satisfied with his own share of the graft, they lived like brothers.

“But in the case of human beings, friendship is a transitory art, subject to discontinuance without further notice.

“I had a friend once, of the entitlement of Paisley Fish, that I imagined was sealed to me for an endless space of time. Side by side for seven years we had mined, ranched, sold patent churns, herded sheep, took photographs and other things, built wire fences, and picked prunes. Thinks I, neither homocide nor flattery nor riches nor sophistry nor drink can make trouble between me and Paisley Fish. We was friends an amount you could hardly guess at. We was friends in business, and we let our amicable qualities lap over and season our hours of recreation and folly. We certainly had days of Damon and nights of Pythias.

“One summer me and Paisley gallops down into these San Andres mountains for the purpose of a month’s surcease and levity, dressed in the natural store habiliments of man. We hit this town of Los Pinos, which certainly was a roof-garden spot of the world, and flowing with condensed milk and honey. It had a street or two, and air, and hens, and a eating-house; and that was enough for us.

“We strikes the town after supper-time, and we concludes to sample whatever efficacy there is in this eating-house down by the railroad tracks. By the time we had set down and pried up our plates with a knife from the red oil-cloth, along intrudes Widow Jessup with the hot biscuit and the fried liver.

“Now, there was a woman that would have tempted an anchovy to forget his vows. She was not so small as she was large; and a kind of welcome air seemed to mitigate her vicinity. The pink of her face was the in hoc signo of a culinary temper and a warm disposition, and her smile would have brought out the dogwood blossoms in December.

“Widow Jessup talks to us a lot of garrulousness about the climate and history and Tennyson and prunes and the scarcity of mutton, and finally wants to know where we came from.

“‘Spring Valley,’ says I.

“‘Big Spring Valley,’ chips in Paisley, out of a lot of potatoes and knuckle-bone of ham in his mouth.

“That was the first sign I noticed that the old fidus Diogenes business between me and Paisley Fish was ended forever. He knew how I hated a talkative person, and yet he stampedes into the conversation with his amendments and addendums of syntax. On the map it was Big Spring Valley; but I had heard Paisley himself call it Spring Valley a thousand times.

“Without saying any more, we went out after supper and set on the railroad track. We had been pardners too long not to know what was going on in each other’s mind.

“‘I reckon you understand,’ says Paisley, ‘that I’ve made up my mind to accrue that widow woman as part and parcel in and to my hereditaments forever, both domestic, sociable, legal, and otherwise, until death us do part.’

“‘Why, yes,’ says I, ‘I read it between the lines, though you only spoke one. And I suppose you are aware,’ says I, ‘that I have a movement on foot that leads up to the widow’s changing her name to Hicks, and leaves you writing to the society column to inquire whether the best man wears a japonica or seamless socks at the wedding!’

“‘There’ll be some hiatuses in your program,’ says Paisley, chewing up a piece of a railroad tie. ‘I’d give in to you,’ says he, ‘in ‘most any respect if it was secular affairs, but this is not so. The smiles of woman,’ goes on Paisley, ‘is the whirlpool of Squills and Chalybeates, into which vortex the good ship Friendship is often drawn and dismembered. I’d assault a bear that was annoying you,’ says Paisley, ‘or I’d endorse your note, or rub the place between your shoulder-blades with opodeldoc the same as ever; but there my sense of etiquette ceases. In this fracas with Mrs. Jessup we play it alone. I’ve notified you fair.’

“And then I collaborates with myself, and offers the following resolutions and by-laws:

“‘Friendship between man and man,’ says I, ‘is an ancient historical virtue enacted in the days when men had to protect each other against lizards with eighty-foot tails and flying turtles. And they’ve kept up the habit to this day, and stand by each other till the bellboy comes up and tells them the animals are not really there. I’ve often heard,’ I says, ‘about ladies stepping in and breaking up a friendship between men. Why should that be? I’ll tell you, Paisley, the first sight and hot biscuit of Mrs. Jessup appears to have inserted a oscillation into each of our bosoms. Let the best man of us have her. I’ll play you a square game, and won’t do any underhanded work. I’ll do all of my courting of her in your presence, so you will have an equal opportunity. With that arrangement I don’t see why our steamboat of friendship should fall overboard in the medicinal whirlpools you speak of, whichever of us wins out.’

“‘Good old hoss!’ says Paisley, shaking my hand. ‘And I’ll do the same,’ says he. ‘We’ll court the lady synonymously, and without any of the prudery and bloodshed usual to such occasions. And we’ll be friends still, win or lose.’

“At one side of Mrs. Jessup’s eating-house was a bench under some trees where she used to sit in the breeze after the south-bound had been fed and gone. And there me and Paisley used to congregate after supper and make partial payments on our respects to the lady of our choice. And we was so honorable and circuitous in our calls that if one of us got there first we waited for the other before beginning any gallivantery.

“The first evening that Mrs. Jessup knew about our arrangement I got to the bench before Paisley did. Supper was just over, and Mrs. Jessup was out there with a fresh pink dress on, and almost cool enough to handle.

“I sat down by her and made a few specifications about the moral surface of nature as set forth by the landscape and the contiguous perspective. That evening was surely a case in point. The moon was attending to business in the section of sky where it belonged, and the trees was making shadows on the ground according to science and nature, and there was a kind of conspicuous hullabaloo going on in the bushes between the bullbats and the orioles and the jack-rabbits and other feathered insects of the forest. And the wind out of the mountains was singing like a Jew’s-harp in the pile of old tomato-cans by the railroad track.

“I felt a kind of sensation in my left side—something like dough rising in a crock by the fire. Mrs. Jessup had moved up closer.

“‘Oh, Mr. Hicks,’ says she, ‘when one is alone in the world, don’t they feel it more aggravated on a beautiful night like this?’

“I rose up off the bench at once.

“‘Excuse me, ma’am,’ says I, ‘but I’ll have to wait till Paisley comes before I can give a audible hearing to leading questions like that.’

“And then I explained to her how we was friends cinctured by years of embarrassment and travel and complicity, and how we had agreed to take no advantage of each other in any of the more mushy walks of life, such as might be fomented by sentiment and proximity. Mrs. Jessup appears to think serious about the matter for a minute, and then she breaks into a species of laughter that makes the wildwood resound.

“In a few minutes Paisley drops around, with oil of bergamot on his hair, and sits on the other side of Mrs. Jessup, and inaugurates a sad tale of adventure in which him and Pieface Lumley has a skinning-match of dead cows in ‘95 for a silver-mounted saddle in the Santa Rita valley during the nine months’ drought.

“Now, from the start of that courtship I had Paisley Fish hobbled and tied to a post. Each one of us had a different system of reaching out for the easy places in the female heart. Paisley’s scheme was to petrify ‘em with wonderful relations of events that he had either come across personally or in large print. I think he must have got his idea of subjugation from one of Shakespeare’s shows I see once called ‘Othello.’ There is a coloured man in it who acquires a duke’s daughter by disbursing to her a mixture of the talk turned out by Rider Haggard, Lew Dockstader, and Dr. Parkhurst. But that style of courting don’t work well off the stage.

“Now, I give you my own recipe for inveigling a woman into that state of affairs when she can be referred to as ‘nee Jones.’ Learn how to pick up her hand and hold it, and she’s yours. It ain’t so easy. Some men grab at it so much like they was going to set a dislocation of the shoulder that you can smell the arnica and hear ‘em tearing off bandages. Some take it up like a hot horseshoe, and hold it off at arm’s length like a druggist pouring tincture of asafoetida in a bottle. And most of ‘em catch hold of it and drag it right out before the lady’s eyes like a boy finding a baseball in the grass, without giving her a chance to forget that the hand is growing on the end of her arm. Them ways are all wrong.

“I’ll tell you the right way. Did you ever see a man sneak out in the back yard and pick up a rock to throw at a tomcat that was sitting on a fence looking at him? He pretends he hasn’t got a thing in his hand, and that the cat don’t see him, and that he don’t see the cat. That’s the idea. Never drag her hand out where she’ll have to take notice of it. Don’t let her know that you think she knows you have the least idea she is aware you are holding her hand. That was my rule of tactics; and as far as Paisley’s serenade about hostilities and misadventure went, he might as well have been reading to her a time-table of the Sunday trains that stop at Ocean Grove, New Jersey.

“One night when I beat Paisley to the bench by one pipeful, my friendship gets subsidised for a minute, and I asks Mrs. Jessup if she didn’t think a ‘H’ was easier to write than a ‘J.’ In a second her head was mashing the oleander flower in my buttonhole, and I leaned over and—but I didn’t.

“‘If you don’t mind,’ says I, standing up, ‘we’ll wait for Paisley to come before finishing this. I’ve never done anything dishonourable yet to our friendship, and this won’t be quite fair.’

“‘Mr. Hicks,’ says Mrs. Jessup, looking at me peculiar in the dark, ‘if it wasn’t for but one thing, I’d ask you to hike yourself down the gulch and never disresume your visits to my house.’

“‘And what is that, ma’am?’ I asks.

“‘You are too good a friend not to make a good husband,’ says she.

“In five minutes Paisley was on his side of Mrs. Jessup.

“‘In Silver City, in the summer of ‘98,’ he begins, ‘I see Jim Batholomew chew off a Chinaman’s ear in the Blue Light Saloon on account of a crossbarred muslin shirt that—what was that noise?’

“I had resumed matters again with Mrs. Jessup right where we had left off.

“‘Mrs. Jessup,’ says I, ‘has promised to make it Hicks. And this is another of the same sort.’

“Paisley winds his feet round a leg of the bench and kind of groans.

“‘Lem,’ says he, ‘we been friends for seven years. Would you mind not kissing Mrs. Jessup quite so loud? I’d do the same for you.’

“‘All right,’ says I. ‘The other kind will do as well.’

“‘This Chinaman,’ goes on Paisley, ‘was the one that shot a man named Mullins in the spring of ‘97, and that was—’

“Paisley interrupted himself again.

“‘Lem,’ says he, ‘if you was a true friend you wouldn’t hug Mrs. Jessup quite so hard. I felt the bench shake all over just then. You know you told me you would give me an even chance as long as there was any.’

“‘Mr. Man,’ says Mrs. Jessup, turning around to Paisley, ‘if you was to drop in to the celebration of mine and Mr. Hicks’s silver wedding, twenty-five years from now, do you think you could get it into that Hubbard squash you call your head that you are nix cum rous in this business? I’ve put up with you a long time because you was Mr. Hicks’s friend; but it seems to me it’s time for you to wear the willow and trot off down the hill.’

“‘Mrs. Jessup,’ says I, without losing my grasp on the situation as fiance, ‘Mr. Paisley is my friend, and I offered him a square deal and a equal opportunity as long as there was a chance.’

“‘A chance!’ says she. ‘Well, he may think he has a chance; but I hope he won’t think he’s got a cinch, after what he’s been next to all the evening.’

“Well, a month afterwards me and Mrs. Jessup was married in the Los Pinos Methodist Church; and the whole town closed up to see the performance.

“When we lined up in front and the preacher was beginning to sing out his rituals and observances, I looks around and misses Paisley. I calls time on the preacher. ‘Paisley ain’t here,’ says I. ‘We’ve got to wait for Paisley. A friend once, a friend always—that’s Telemachus Hicks,’ says I. Mrs. Jessup’s eyes snapped some; but the preacher holds up the incantations according to instructions.

“In a few minutes Paisley gallops up the aisle, putting on a cuff as he comes. He explains that the only dry-goods store in town was closed for the wedding, and he couldn’t get the kind of a boiled shirt that his taste called for until he had broke open the back window of the store and helped himself. Then he ranges up on the other side of the bride, and the wedding goes on. I always imagined that Paisley calculated as a last chance that the preacher might marry him to the widow by mistake.

“After the proceedings was over we had tea and jerked antelope and canned apricots, and then the populace hiked itself away. Last of all Paisley shook me by the hand and told me I’d acted square and on the level with him and he was proud to call me a friend.

“The preacher had a small house on the side of the street that he’d fixed up to rent; and he allowed me and Mrs. Hicks to occupy it till the ten-forty train the next morning, when we was going on a bridal tour to El Paso. His wife had decorated it all up with hollyhocks and poison ivy, and it looked real festal and bowery.

“About ten o’clock that night I sets down in the front door and pulls off my boots a while in the cool breeze, while Mrs. Hicks was fixing around in the room. Right soon the light went out inside; and I sat there a while reverberating over old times and scenes. And then I heard Mrs. Hicks call out, ‘Ain’t you coming in soon, Lem?’

“‘Well, well!’ says I, kind of rousing up. ‘Durn me if I wasn’t waiting for old Paisley to—’

“But when I got that far,” concluded Telemachus Hicks, “I thought somebody had shot this left ear of mine off with a forty-five. But it turned out to be only a lick from a broomhandle in the hands of Mrs. Hicks.”