**Best-Seller**

O. Henry

###### I

One day last summer I went to Pittsburgh—well, I had to go there on business.

My chair-car was profitably well filled with people of the kind one usually sees on chair-cars. Most of them were ladies in brown-silk dresses cut with square yokes, with lace insertion, and dotted veils, who refused to have the windows raised. Then there was the usual number of men who looked as if they might be in almost any business and going almost anywhere. Some students of human nature can look at a man in a Pullman and tell you where he is from, his occupation and his stations in life, both flag and social; but I never could. The only way I can correctly judge a fellow-traveller is when the train is held up by robbers, or when he reaches at the same time I do for the last towel in the dressing-room of the sleeper.

The porter came and brushed the collection of soot on the window-sill off to the left knee of my trousers. I removed it with an air of apology. The temperature was eighty-eight. One of the dotted-veiled ladies demanded the closing of two more ventilators, and spoke loudly of Interlaken. I leaned back idly in chair No. 7, and looked with the tepidest curiosity at the small, black, bald-spotted head just visible above the back of No. 9.

Suddenly No. 9 hurled a book to the floor between his chair and the window, and, looking, I saw that it was “The Rose-Lady and Trevelyan,” one of the best-selling novels of the present day. And then the critic or Philistine, whichever he was, veered his chair toward the window, and I knew him at once for John A. Pescud, of Pittsburgh, travelling salesman for a plate-glass company—an old acquaintance whom I had not seen in two years.

In two minutes we were faced, had shaken hands, and had finished with such topics as rain, prosperity, health, residence, and destination. Politics might have followed next; but I was not so ill-fated.

I wish you might know John A. Pescud. He is of the stuff that heroes are not often lucky enough to be made of. He is a small man with a wide smile, and an eye that seems to be fixed upon that little red spot on the end of your nose. I never saw him wear but one kind of necktie, and he believes in cuff-holders and button-shoes. He is as hard and true as anything ever turned out by the Cambria Steel Works; and he believes that as soon as Pittsburgh makes smoke-consumers compulsory, St. Peter will come down and sit at the foot of Smithfield Street, and let somebody else attend to the gate up in the branch heaven. He believes that “our” plate-glass is the most important commodity in the world, and that when a man is in his home town he ought to be decent and law-abiding.

During my acquaintance with him in the City of Diurnal Night I had never known his views on life, romance, literature, and ethics. We had browsed, during our meetings, on local topics, and then parted, after Chateau Margaux, Irish stew, flannel-cakes, cottage-pudding, and coffee (hey, there!—with milk separate). Now I was to get more of his ideas. By way of facts, he told me that business had picked up since the party conventions, and that he was going to get off at Coketown.

###### II

“Say,” said Pescud, stirring his discarded book with the toe of his right shoe, “did you ever read one of these best-sellers? I mean the kind where the hero is an American swell—sometimes even from Chicago—who falls in love with a royal princess from Europe who is travelling under an alias, and follows her to her father’s kingdom or principality? I guess you have. They’re all alike. Sometimes this going-away masher is a Washington newspaper correspondent, and sometimes he is a Van Something from New York, or a Chicago wheat-broker worthy fifty millions. But he’s always ready to break into the king row of any foreign country that sends over their queens and princesses to try the new plush seats on the Big Four or the B. and O. There doesn’t seem to be any other reason in the book for their being here.

“Well, this fellow chases the royal chair-warmer home, as I said, and finds out who she is. He meets her on the *cor* *so* or the *stras* *se* one evening and gives us ten pages of conversation. She reminds him of the difference in their stations, and that gives him a chance to ring in three solid pages about America’s uncrowned sovereigns. If you’d take his remarks and set ’em to music, and then take the music away from ’em, they’d sound exactly like one of George Cohan’s songs.

“Well, you know how it runs on, if you’ve read any of ’em—he slaps the king’s Swiss body-guards around like everything whenever they get in his way. He’s a great fencer, too. Now, I’ve known of some Chicago men who were pretty notorious fences, but I never heard of any fencers coming from there. He stands on the first landing of the royal staircase in Castle Schutzenfestenstein with a gleaming rapier in his hand, and makes a Baltimore broil of six platoons of traitors who come to massacre the said king. And then he has to fight duels with a couple of chancellors, and foil a plot by four Austrian archdukes to seize the kingdom for a gasoline-station.

“But the great scene is when his rival for the princess’ hand, Count Feodor, attacks him between the portcullis and the ruined chapel, armed with a mitrailleuse, a yataghan, and a couple of Siberian bloodhounds. This scene is what runs the best-seller into the twenty-ninth edition before the publisher has had time to draw a check for the advance royalties.

“The American hero shucks his coat and throws it over the heads of the bloodhounds, gives the mitrailleuse a slap with his mitt, says ‘Yah?’ to the yataghan, and lands in Kid McCoy’s best style on the count’s left eye. Of course, we have a neat little prize-fight right then and there. The count—in order to make the go possible—seems to be an expert at the art of self-defence, himself; and here we have the Corbett-Sullivan fight done over into literature. The book ends with the broker and the princess doing a John Cecil Clay cover under the linden-trees on the Gorgonzola Walk. That winds up the love-story plenty good enough. But I notice that the book dodges the final issue. Even a best-seller has sense enough to shy at either leaving a Chicago grain broker on the throne of Lobsterpotsdam or bringing over a real princess to eat fish and potato salad in an Italian chalet on Michigan Avenue. What do you think about ’em?”

“Why,” said I, “I hardly know, John. There’s a saying: ‘Love levels all ranks,’ you know.”

“Yes,” said Pescud, “but these kind of love-stories are rank—on the level. I know something about literature, even if I am in plate-glass. These kind of books are wrong, and yet I never go into a train but what they pile ’em up on me. No good can come out of an international clinch between the Old-World aristocracy and one of us fresh Americans. When people in real life marry, they generally hunt up somebody in their own station. A fellow usually picks out a girl that went to the same high-school and belonged to the same singing-society that he did. When young millionaires fall in love, they always select the chorus-girl that likes the same kind of sauce on the lobster that he does. Washington newspaper correspondents always many widow ladies ten years older than themselves who keep boarding-houses. No, sir, you can’t make a novel sound right to me when it makes one of C. D. Gibson’s bright young men go abroad and turn kingdoms upside down just because he’s a Taft American and took a course at a gymnasium. And listen how they talk, too!”

Pescud picked up the best-seller and hunted his page.

“Listen at this,” said he. “Trevelyan is chinning with the Princess Alwyna at the back end of the tulip-garden. This is how it goes:

“‘Say not so, dearest and sweetest of earth’s fairest flowers. Would I aspire? You are a star set high above me in a royal heaven; I am only—myself. Yet I am a man, and I have a heart to do and dare. I have no title save that of an uncrowned sovereign; but I have an arm and a sword that yet might free Schutzenfestenstein from the plots of traitors.’

“Think of a Chicago man packing a sword, and talking about freeing anything that sounded as much like canned pork as that! He’d be much more likely to fight to have an import duty put on it.”

“I think I understand you, John,” said I. “You want fiction-writers to be consistent with their scenes and characters. They shouldn’t mix Turkish pashas with Vermont farmers, or English dukes with Long Island clam-diggers, or Italian countesses with Montana cowboys, or Cincinnati brewery agents with the rajahs of India.”

“Or plain business men with aristocracy high above ’em,” added Pescud. “It don’t jibe. People are divided into classes, whether we admit it or not, and it’s everybody’s impulse to stick to their own class. They do it, too. I don’t see why people go to work and buy hundreds of thousands of books like that. You don’t see or hear of any such didoes and capers in real life.”

###### III

“Well, John,” said I, “I haven’t read a best-seller in a long time. Maybe I’ve had notions about them somewhat like yours. But tell me more about yourself. Getting along all right with the company?”

“Bully,” said Pescud, brightening at once. “I’ve had my salary raised twice since I saw you, and I get a commission, too. I’ve bought a neat slice of real estate out in the East End, and have run up a house on it. Next year the firm is going to sell me some shares of stock. Oh, I’m in on the line of General Prosperity, no matter who’s elected!”

“Met your affinity yet, John?” I asked.

“Oh, I didn’t tell you about that, did I?” said Pescud with a broader grin.

“O-ho!” I said. “So you’ve taken time enough off from your plate-glass to have a romance?”

“No, no,” said John. “No romance—nothing like that! But I’ll tell you about it.

“I was on the south-bound, going to Cincinnati, about eighteen months ago, when I saw, across the aisle, the finest-looking girl I’d ever laid eyes on. Nothing spectacular, you know, but just the sort you want for keeps. Well, I never was up to the flirtation business, either handkerchief, automobile, postage-stamp, or door-step, and she wasn’t the kind to start anything. She read a book and minded her business, which was to make the world prettier and better just by residing on it. I kept on looking out of the side doors of my eyes, and finally the proposition got out of the Pullman class into a case of a cottage with a lawn and vines running over the porch. I never thought of speaking to her, but I let the plate-glass business go to smash for a while.

“She changed cars at Cincinnati, and took a sleeper to Louisville over the L. and N. There she bought another ticket, and went on through Shelbyville, Frankfort, and Lexington. Along there I began to have a hard time keeping up with her. The trains came along when they pleased, and didn’t seem to be going anywhere in particular, except to keep on the track and the right of way as much as possible. Then they began to stop at junctions instead of towns, and at last they stopped altogether. I’ll bet Pinkerton would outbid the plate-glass people for my services any time if they knew how I managed to shadow that young lady. I contrived to keep out of her sight as much as I could, but I never lost track of her.

“The last station she got off at was away down in Virginia, about six in the afternoon. There were about fifty houses and four hundred niggers in sight. The rest was red mud, mules, and speckled hounds.

“A tall old man, with a smooth face and white hair, looking as proud as Julius Cæsar and Roscoe Conkling on the same post-card, was there to meet her. His clothes were frazzled, but I didn’t notice that till later. He took her little satchel, and they started over the plank-walks and went up a road along the hill. I kept along a piece behind ’em, trying to look like I was hunting a garnet ring in the sand that my sister had lost at a picnic the previous Saturday.

“They went in a gate on top of the hill. It nearly took my breath away when I looked up. Up there in the biggest grove I ever saw was a tremendous house with round white pillars about a thousand feet high, and the yard was so full of rose-bushes and box-bushes and lilacs that you couldn’t have seen the house if it hadn’t been as big as the Capitol at Washington.

“‘Here’s where I have to trail,’ says I to myself. I thought before that she seemed to be in moderate circumstances, at least. This must be the Governor’s mansion, or the Agricultural Building of a new World’s Fair, anyhow. I’d better go back to the village and get posted by the postmaster, or drug the druggist for some information.

“In the village I found a pine hotel called the Bay View House. The only excuse for the name was a bay horse grazing in the front yard. I set my sample-case down, and tried to be ostensible. I told the landlord I was taking orders for plate-glass.

“‘I don’t want no plates,’ says he, ‘but I do need another glass molasses-pitcher.’

“By-and-by I got him down to local gossip and answering questions.

“‘Why,’ says he, ‘I thought everybody knowed who lived in the big white house on the hill. It’s Colonel Allyn, the biggest man and the finest quality in Virginia, or anywhere else. They’re the oldest family in the State. That was his daughter that got off the train. She’s been up to Illinois to see her aunt, who is sick.’

“I registered at the hotel, and on the third day I caught the young lady walking in the front yard, down next to the paling fence. I stopped and raised my hat—there wasn’t any other way.

“‘Excuse me,’ says I, ‘can you tell me where Mr. Hinkle lives?’

“She looks at me as cool as if I was the man come to see about the weeding of the garden, but I thought I saw just a slight twinkle of fun in her eyes.

“‘No one of that name lives in Birchton,’ says she. ‘That is,’ she goes on, ‘as far as I know. Is the gentleman you are seeking white?’

“Well, that tickled me. ‘No kidding,’ says I. ‘I’m not looking for smoke, even if I do come from Pittsburgh.’

“‘You are quite a distance from home,’ says she.

“‘I’d have gone a thousand miles farther,’ says I.

“‘Not if you hadn’t waked up when the train started in Shelbyville,’ says she; and then she turned almost as red as one of the roses on the bushes in the yard. I remembered I had dropped off to sleep on a bench in the Shelbyville station, waiting to see which train she took, and only just managed to wake up in time.

“And then I told her why I had come, as respectful and earnest as I could. And I told her everything about myself, and what I was making, and how that all I asked was just to get acquainted with her and try to get her to like me.

“She smiles a little, and blushes some, but her eyes never get mixed up. They look straight at whatever she’s talking to.

“‘I never had any one talk like this to me before, Mr. Pescud,’ says she. ‘What did you say your name is—John?’

“‘John A.,’ says I.

“‘And you came mighty near missing the train at Powhatan Junction, too,’ says she, with a laugh that sounded as good as a mileage-book to me.

“‘How did you know?’ I asked.

“‘Men are very clumsy,’ said she. ‘I knew you were on every train. I thought you were going to speak to me, and I’m glad you didn’t.’

“Then we had more talk; and at last a kind of proud, serious look came on her face, and she turned and pointed a finger at the big house.

“‘The Allyns,’ says she, ‘have lived in Elmcroft for a hundred years. We are a proud family. Look at that mansion. It has fifty rooms. See the pillars and porches and balconies. The ceilings in the reception-rooms and the ball-room are twenty-eight feet high. My father is a lineal descendant of belted earls.’

“‘I belted one of ’em once in the Duquesne Hotel, in Pittsburgh,’ says I, ‘and he didn’t offer to resent it. He was there dividing his attentions between Monongahela whiskey and heiresses, and he got fresh.’

“‘Of course,’ she goes on, ‘my father wouldn’t allow a drummer to set his foot in Elmcroft. If he knew that I was talking to one over the fence he would lock me in my room.’

“‘Would *you* let me come there?’ says I. ‘Would *you* talk to me if I was to call? For,’ I goes on, ‘if you said I might come and see you, the earls might be belted or suspendered, or pinned up with safety-pins, as far as I am concerned.’

“‘I must not talk to you,’ she says, ‘because we have not been introduced. It is not exactly proper. So I will say good-bye, Mr.—‘

“‘Say the name,’ says I. ‘You haven’t forgotten it.’

“‘Pescud,’ says she, a little mad.

“‘The rest of the name?’ I demands, cool as could be.

“‘John,’ says she.

“‘John—what?’ I says.

“‘John A.,’ says she, with her head high. ‘Are you through, now?’

“‘I’m coming to see the belted earl to-morrow,’ I says.

“‘He’ll feed you to his fox-hounds,’ says she, laughing.

“‘If he does, it’ll improve their running,’ says I. ‘I’m something of a hunter myself.’

“‘I must be going in now,’ says she. ‘I oughtn’t to have spoken to you at all. I hope you’ll have a pleasant trip back to Minneapolis—or Pittsburgh, was it? Good-bye!’

“‘Good-night,’ says I, ‘and it wasn’t Minneapolis. What’s your name, first, please?’

“She hesitated. Then she pulled a leaf off a bush, and said:

“‘My name is Jessie,’ says she.

“‘Good-night, Miss Allyn,’ says I.

“The next morning at eleven, sharp, I rang the door-bell of that World’s Fair main building. After about three-quarters of an hour an old nigger man about eighty showed up and asked what I wanted. I gave him my business card, and said I wanted to see the colonel. He showed me in.

“Say, did you ever crack open a wormy English walnut? That’s what that house was like. There wasn’t enough furniture in it to fill an eight-dollar flat. Some old horsehair lounges and three-legged chairs and some framed ancestors on the walls were all that met the eye. But when Colonel Allyn comes in, the place seemed to light up. You could almost hear a band playing, and see a bunch of old-timers in wigs and white stockings dancing a quadrille. It was the style of him, although he had on the same shabby clothes I saw him wear at the station.

“For about nine seconds he had me rattled, and I came mighty near getting cold feet and trying to sell him some plate-glass. But I got my nerve back pretty quick. He asked me to sit down, and I told him everything. I told him how I followed his daughter from Cincinnati, and what I did it for, and all about my salary and prospects, and explained to him my little code of living—to be always decent and right in your home town; and when you’re on the road, never take more than four glasses of beer a day or play higher than a twenty-five-cent limit. At first I thought he was going to throw me out of the window, but I kept on talking. Pretty soon I got a chance to tell him that story about the Western Congressman who had lost his pocket-book and the grass widow—you remember that story. Well, that got him to laughing, and I’ll bet that was the first laugh those ancestors and horsehair sofas had heard in many a day.

“We talked two hours. I told him everything I knew; and then he began to ask questions, and I told him the rest. All I asked of him was to give me a chance. If I couldn’t make a hit with the little lady, I’d clear out, and not bother any more. At last he says:

“‘There was a Sir Courtenay Pescud in the time of Charles I, if I remember rightly.’

“‘If there was,’ says I, ‘he can’t claim kin with our bunch. We’ve always lived in and around Pittsburgh. I’ve got an uncle in the real-estate business, and one in trouble somewhere out in Kansas. You can inquire about any of the rest of us from anybody in old Smoky Town, and get satisfactory replies. Did you ever run across that story about the captain of the whaler who tried to make a sailor say his prayers?’ says I.

“‘It occurs to me that I have never been so fortunate,’ says the colonel.

“So I told it to him. Laugh! I was wishing to myself that he was a customer. What a bill of glass I’d sell him! And then he says:

“‘The relating of anecdotes and humorous occurrences has always seemed to me, Mr. Pescud, to be a particularly agreeable way of promoting and perpetuating amenities between friends. With your permission, I will relate to you a fox-hunting story with which I was personally connected, and which may furnish you some amusement.’

“So he tells it. It takes forty minutes by the watch. Did I laugh? Well, say! When I got my face straight he calls in old Pete, the superannuated darky, and sends him down to the hotel to bring up my valise. It was Elmcroft for me while I was in the town.

“Two evenings later I got a chance to speak a word with Miss Jessie alone on the porch while the colonel was thinking up another story.

“‘It’s going to be a fine evening,’ says I.

“‘He’s coming,’ says she. ‘He’s going to tell you, this time, the story about the old negro and the green watermelons. It always comes after the one about the Yankees and the game rooster. There was another time,’ she goes on, ‘that you nearly got left—it was at Pulaski City.’

“‘Yes,’ says I, ‘I remember. My foot slipped as I was jumping on the step, and I nearly tumbled off.’

“‘I know,’ says she. ‘And—and I—*I was af* *ra* *id you had, John A. I was af* *ra* *id you had.* ‘

“And then she skips into the house through one of the big windows.”

###### IV

“Coketown!” droned the porter, making his way through the slowing car.

Pescud gathered his hat and baggage with the leisurely promptness of an old traveller.

“I married her a year ago,” said John. “I told you I built a house in the East End. The belted—I mean the colonel—is there, too. I find him waiting at the gate whenever I get back from a trip to hear any new story I might have picked up on the road.”

I glanced out of the window. Coketown was nothing more than a ragged hillside dotted with a score of black dismal huts propped up against dreary mounds of slag and clinkers. It rained in slanting torrents, too, and the rills foamed and splashed down through the black mud to the railroad-tracks.

“You won’t sell much plate-glass here, John,” said I. “Why do you get off at this end-o’-the-world?”

“Why,” said Pescud, “the other day I took Jessie for a little trip to Philadelphia, and coming back she thought she saw some petunias in a pot in one of those windows over there just like some she used to raise down in the old Virginia home. So I thought I’d drop off here for the night, and see if I could dig up some of the cuttings or blossoms for her. Here we are. Good-night, old man. I gave you the address. Come out and see us when you have time.”

The train moved forward. One of the dotted brown ladies insisted on having windows raised, now that the rain beat against them. The porter came along with his mysterious wand and began to light the car.

I glanced downward and saw the best-seller. I picked it up and set it carefully farther along on the floor of the car, where the rain-drops would not fall upon it. And then, suddenly, I smiled, and seemed to see that life has no geographical metes and bounds.

“Good-luck to you, Trevelyan,” I said. “And may you get the petunias for your princess!”