**Rus in Urbe**

O. Henry

Considering men in relation to money, there are three kinds whom I dislike: men who have more money than they can spend; men who have more money than they do spend; and men who spend more money than they have. Of the three varieties, I believe I have the least liking for the first. But, as a man, I liked Spencer Grenville North pretty well, although he had something like two or ten or thirty millions—I’ve forgotten exactly how many.

I did not leave town that summer. I usually went down to a village on the south shore of Long Island. The place was surrounded by duck-farms, and the ducks and dogs and whippoorwills and rusty windmills made so much noise that I could sleep as peacefully as if I were in my own flat six doors from the elevated railroad in New York. But that summer I did not go. Remember that. One of my friends asked me why I did not. I replied:

“Because, old man, New York is the finest summer resort in the world.” You have heard that phrase before. But that is what I told him.

I was press-agent that year for Binkly & Bing, the theatrical managers and producers. Of course you know what a press-agent is. Well, he is not. That is the secret of being one.

Binkly was touring France in his new C. & N. Williamson car, and Bing had gone to Scotland to learn curling, which he seemed to associate in his mind with hot tongs rather than with ice. Before they left they gave me June and July, on salary, for my vacation, which act was in accord with their large spirit of liberality. But I remained in New York, which I had decided was the finest summer resort in—

But I said that before.

On July the 10th, North came to town from his camp in the Adirondacks. Try to imagine a camp with sixteen rooms, plumbing, eiderdown quilts, a butler, a garage, solid silver plate, and a long-distance telephone. Of course it was in the woods—if Mr. Pinchot wants to preserve the forests let him give every citizen two or ten or thirty million dollars, and the trees will all gather around the summer camps, as the Birnam woods came to Dunsinane, and be preserved.

North came to see me in my three rooms and bath, extra charge for light when used extravagantly or all night. He slapped me on the back (I would rather have my shins kicked any day), and greeted me with out-door obstreperousness and revolting good spirits. He was insolently brown and healthy-looking, and offensively well dressed.

“Just ran down for a few days,” said he, “to sign some papers and stuff like that. My lawyer wired me to come. Well, you indolent cockney, what are you doing in town? I took a chance and telephoned, and they said you were here. What’s the matter with that Utopia on Long Island where you used to take your typewriter and your villainous temper every summer? Anything wrong with the—er—swans, weren’t they, that used to sing on the farms at night?”

“Ducks,” said I. “The songs of swans are for luckier ears. They swim and curve their necks in artificial lakes on the estates of the wealthy to delight the eyes of the favorites of Fortune.”

“Also in Central Park,” said North, “to delight the eyes of immigrants and bummers. I’ve seen em there lots of times. But why are you in the city so late in the summer?”

“New York City,” I began to recite, “is the finest sum—”

“No, you don’t,” said North, emphatically. “You don’t spring that old one on me. I know you know better. Man, you ought to have gone up with us this summer. The Prestons are there, and Tom Volney and the Monroes and Lulu Stanford and the Miss Kennedy and her aunt that you liked so well.”

“I never liked Miss Kennedy’s aunt,” I said.

“I didn’t say you did,” said North. “We are having the greatest time we’ve ever had. The pickerel and trout are so ravenous that I believe they would swallow your hook with a Montana copper-mine prospectus fastened on it. And we’ve a couple of electric launches; and I’ll tell you what we do every night or two—we tow a rowboat behind each one with a big phonograph and a boy to change the discs in ’em. On the water, and twenty yards behind you, they are not so bad. And there are passably good roads through the woods where we go motoring. I shipped two cars up there. And the Pinecliff Inn is only three miles away. You know the Pinecliff. Some good people are there this season, and we run over to the dances twice a week. Can’t you go back with me for a week, old man?”

I laughed. “Northy,” said I—“if I may be so familiar with a millionaire, because I hate both the names Spencer and Grenville—your invitation is meant kindly, but—the city in the summer-time for me. Here, while the *bo* *ur* *ge* *o* *isie* is away, I can live as Nero lived-barring, thank heaven, the fiddling—while the city burns at ninety in the shade. The tropics and the zones wait upon me like handmaidens. I sit under Florida palms and eat pomegranates while Boreas himself, electrically conjured up, blows upon me his Arctic breath. As for trout, you know, yourself, that Jean, at Maurice’s, cooks them better than any one else in the world.”

“Be advised,” said North. “My chef has pinched the blue ribbon from the lot. He lays some slices of bacon inside the trout, wraps it all in corn-husks—the husks of green corn, you know—buries them in hot ashes and covers them with live coals. We build fires on the bank of the lake and have fish suppers.”

“I know,” said I. “And the servants bring down tables and chairs and damask cloths, and you eat with silver forks. I know the kind of camps that you millionaires have. And there are champagne pails set about, disgracing the wild flowers, and, no doubt, Madame Tetrazzini to sing in the boat pavilion after the trout.”

“Oh no,” said North, concernedly, “we were never as bad as that. We did have a variety troupe up from the city three or four nights, but they weren’t stars by as far as light can travel in the same length of time. I always like a few home comforts even when I’m roughing it. But don’t tell me you prefer to stay in the city during summer. I don’t believe it. If you do, why did you spend your summers there for the last four years, even sneaking away from town on a night train, and refusing to tell your friends where this Arcadian village was?”

“Because,” said I, “they might have followed me and discovered it. But since then I have learned that Amaryllis has come to town. The coolest things, the freshest, the brightest, the choicest, are to be found in the city. If you’ve nothing on hand this evening I will show you.”

“I’m free,” said North, “and I have my light car outside. I suppose, since you’ve been converted to the town, that your idea of rural sport is to have a little whirl between bicycle cops in Central Park and then a mug of sticky ale in some stuffy rathskeller under a fan that can’t stir up as many revolutions in a week as Nicaragua can in a day.”

“We’ll begin with the spin through the Park, anyhow,” I said. I was choking with the hot, stale air of my little apartment, and I wanted that breath of the cool to brace me for the task of proving to my friend that New York was the greatest—and so forth.

“Where can you find air any fresher or purer than this?” I asked, as we sped into Central’s boskiest dell.

“Air!” said North, contemptuously. “Do you call this air?—this muggy vapor, smelling of garbage and gasoline smoke. Man, I wish you could get one sniff of the real Adirondack article in the pine woods at daylight.”

“I have heard of it,” said I. “But for fragrance and tang and a joy in the nostrils I would not give one puff of sea breeze across the bay, down on my little boat dock on Long Island, for ten of your turpentine-scented tornadoes.”

“Then why,” asked North, a little curiously, “don’t you go there instead of staying cooped up in this Greater Bakery?”

“Because,” said I, doggedly, “I have discovered that New York is the greatest summer—”

“Don’t say that again,” interrupted North, “unless you’ve actually got a job as General Passenger Agent of the Subway. You can’t really believe it.”

I went to some trouble to try to prove my theory to my friend. The Weather Bureau and the season had conspired to make the argument worthy of an able advocate.

The city seemed stretched on a broiler directly above the furnaces of Avernus. There was a kind of tepid gayety afoot and awheel in the boulevards, mainly evinced by languid men strolling about in straw hats and evening clothes, and rows of idle taxicabs with their flags up, looking like a blockaded Fourth of July procession. The hotels kept up a specious brilliancy and hospitable outlook, but inside one saw vast empty caverns, and the footrails at the bars gleamed brightly from long disacquaintance with the sole-leather of customers. In the cross-town streets the steps of the old brownstone houses were swarming with “stoopers,” that motley race hailing from sky-light room and basement, bringing out their straw door-step mats to sit and fill the air with strange noises and opinions.

North and I dined on the top of a hotel; and here, for a few minutes, I thought I had made a score. An east wind, almost cool, blew across the roofless roof. A capable orchestra concealed in a bower of wistaria played with sufficient judgment to make the art of music probable and the art of conversation possible.

Some ladies in reproachless summer gowns at other tables gave animation and color to the scene. And an excellent dinner, mainly from the refrigerator, seemed to successfully back my judgment as to summer resorts. But North grumbled all during the meal, and cursed his lawyers and prated so of his confounded camp in the woods that I began to wish he would go back there and leave me in my peaceful city retreat.

After dining we went to a roof-garden vaudeville that was being much praised. There we found a good bill, an artificially cooled atmosphere, cold drinks, prompt service, and a gay, well-dressed audience. North was bored.

“If this isn’t comfortable enough for you on the hottest August night for five years,” I said, a little sarcastically, “you might think about the kids down in Delancey and Hester streets lying out on the fire-escapes with their tongues hanging out, trying to get a breath of air that hasn’t been fried on both sides. The contrast might increase your enjoyment.”

“Don’t talk Socialism,” said North. “I gave five hundred dollars to the free ice fund on the first of May. I’m contrasting these stale, artificial, hollow, wearisome ‘amusements’ with the enjoyment a man can get in the woods. You should see the firs and pines do skirt-dances during a storm; and lie down flat and drink out of a mountain branch at the end of a day’s tramp after the deer. That’s the only way to spend a summer. Get out and live with nature.”

“I agree with you absolutely,” said I, with emphasis.

For one moment I had relaxed my vigilance, and had spoken my true sentiments. North looked at me long and curiously.

“Then why, in the name of Pan and Apollo,” he asked, “have you been singing this deceitful pæan to summer in town?”

I suppose I looked my guilt.

“Ha,” said North, “I see. May I ask her name?”

“Annie Ashton,” said I, simply. “She played Nannette in Binkley & Bing’s production of ‘The Silver Cord.’ She is to have a better part next season.”

“Take me to see her,” said North.

Miss Ashton lived with her mother in a small hotel. They were out of the West, and had a little money that bridged the seasons. As press-agent of Binkley & Bing I had tried to keep her before the public. As Robert James Vandiver I had hoped to withdraw her; for if ever one was made to keep company with said Vandiver and smell the salt breeze on the south shore of Long Island and listen to the ducks quack in the watches of the night, it was the Ashton set forth above.

But she had a soul above ducks—above nightingales; aye, even above birds of paradise. She was very beautiful, with quiet ways, and seemed genuine. She had both taste and talent for the stage, and she liked to stay at home and read and make caps for her mother. She was unvaryingly kind and friendly with Binkley & Bing’s press-agent. Since the theatre had closed she had allowed Mr. Vandiver to call in an unofficial rôle. I had often spoken to her of my friend, Spencer Grenville North; and so, as it was early, the first turn of the vaudeville being not yet over, we left to find a telephone.

Miss Ashton would be very glad to see Mr. Vandiver and Mr. North.

We found her fitting a new cap on her mother. I never saw her look more charming.

North made himself disagreeably entertaining. He was a good talker, and had a way with him. Besides, he had two, ten, or thirty millions, I’ve forgotten which. I incautiously admired the mother’s cap, whereupon she brought out her store of a dozen or two, and I took a course in edgings and frills. Even though Annie’s fingers had pinked, or ruched, or hemmed, or whatever you do to ’em, they palled upon me. And I could hear North drivelling to Annie about his odious Adirondack camp.

 Two days after that I saw North in his motor-car with Miss Ashton and her mother. On the next afternoon he dropped in on me.

“Bobby,” said he, “this old burg isn’t such a bad proposition in the summer-time, after all. Since I’ve keen knocking around it looks better to me. There are some first-rate musical comedies and light operas on the roofs and in the outdoor gardens. And if you hunt up the right places and stick to soft drinks, you can keep about as cool here as you can in the country. Hang it! when you come to think of it, there’s nothing much to the country, anyhow. You get tired and sunburned and lonesome, and you have to eat any old thing that the cook dishes up to you.”

“It makes a difference, doesn’t it?” said I.

“It certainly does. Now, I found some whitebait yesterday, at Maurice’s, with a new sauce that beats anything in the trout line I ever tasted.”

“It makes a difference, doesn’t it?” I said.

“Immense. The sauce is the main thing with whitebait.”

“It makes a difference, doesn’t it?” I asked, looking him straight in the eye. He understood.

“Look here, Bob,” he said, “I was going to tell you. I couldn’t help it. I’ll play fair with you, but I’m going in to win. She is the ‘one particula?’ for me.”

“All right,” said I. “It’s a fair field. There are no rights for you to encroach upon.”

On Thursday afternoon Miss Ashton invited North and myself to have tea in her apartment. He was devoted, and she was more charming than usual. By avoiding the subject of caps I managed to get a word or two into and out of the talk. Miss Ashton asked me in a make-conversational tone something about the next season’s tour.

“Oh,” said I, “I don’t know about that. I’m not going to be with Binkley & Bing next season.”

“Why, I thought,” said she, “that they were going to put the Number One road company under your charge. I thought you told me so.”

“They were,” said I, “but they won’t... I’ll tell you what I’m going to do. I’m going to the south shore of Long Island and buy a small cottage I know there on the edge of the bay. And I’ll buy a catboat and a rowboat and a shotgun and a yellow dog. I’ve got money enough to do it. And I’ll smell the salt wind all day when it blows from the sea and the pine odor when it blows from the land. And, of course, I’ll write plays until I have a trunk full of ’em on hand.

“And the next thing and the biggest thing I’ll do will be to buy that duck-farm next door. Few people understand ducks. I can watch ’em for hours. They can march better than any company in the National Guard, and they can play ‘follow my leade?’ better than the entire Democratic party. Their voices don’t amount to much, but I like to hear ’em. They wake you up a dozen times a night, but there’s a homely sound about their quacking that is more musical to me than the cry of ‘Fresh strawber-rees?’ under your window in the morning when you want to sleep.

“And,” I went on, enthusiastically, “do you know the value of ducks besides their beauty and intelligence and order and sweetness of voice? Picking their feathers gives you an unfailing and never-ceasing income. On a farm that I know the feathers were sold for $400 in one year. Think of that! And the ones shipped to the market will bring in more money than that. Yes, I am for the ducks and the salt breeze coming over the bay. I think I shall get a Chinaman cook, and with him and the dog and the sunsets for company I shall do well. No more of this dull, baking, senseless, roaring city for me.”

Miss Ashton looked surprised. North laughed.

“I am going to begin one of my plays tonight,” I said, “so I must be going.” And with that I took my departure.

A few days later Miss Ashton telephoned to me, asking me to call at four in the afternoon.

I did.

“You have been very good to me,” she said, hesitatingly, “and I thought I would tell you. I am going to leave the stage.”

“Yes,” said I, “I suppose you will. They usually do when there’s so much money.”

“There is no money,” she said, “or very little. Our money is almost gone.”

“But I am told,” said I, “that he has something like two or ten or thirty millions—I have forgotten which.”

“I know what you mean,” she said. “I will not pretend that I do not. I am not going to marry Mr. North.”

“Then why are you leaving the stage?” I asked, severely. “What else can you do to earn a living?”

She came closer to me, and I can see the look in her eyes yet as she spoke.

“I can pick ducks,” she said.

We sold the first year’s feathers for $350.