# Helping the Other Fellow

O. Henry

“But can thim that helps others help thimselves!” —Mulvaney.

This is the story that William Trotter told me on the beach at Aguas Frescas while I waited for the gig of the captain of the fruit steamer Andador which was to take me abroad. Reluctantly I was leaving the Land of Always Afternoon. William was remaining, and he favored me with a condensed oral autobiography as we sat on the sands in the shade cast by the Bodega Nacional.

As usual, I became aware that the Man from Bombay had already written the story; but as he had compressed it to an eight-word sentence, I have become an expansionist, and have quoted his phrase above, with apologies to him and best regards to Terence.

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# II

“Don’t you ever have a desire to go back to the land of derby hats and starched collars?” I asked him. “You seem to be a handy man and a man of action,” I continued, “and I am sure I could find you a comfortable job somewhere in the States.”

Ragged, shiftless, barefooted, a confirmed eater of the lotos, William Trotter had pleased me much, and I hated to see him gobbled up by the tropics.

“I’ve no doubt you could,” he said, idly splitting the bark from a section of sugar-cane. “I’ve no doubt you could do much for me. If every man could do as much for himself as he can for others, every country in the world would be holding millenniums instead of centennials.”

There seemed to be pabulum in W. T.‘s words. And then another idea came to me.

I had a brother in Chicopee Falls who owned manufactories—cotton, or sugar, or A.A. sheetings, or something in the commercial line. lie was vulgarly rich, and therefore reverenced art. The artistic temperament of the family was monopolized at my birth. I knew that Brother James would honor my slightest wish. I would demand from him a position in cotton, sugar, or sheetings for William Trotter—something, say, at two hundred a month or thereabouts. I confided my beliefs and made my large propositions to William. He had pleased me much, and he was ragged.

While we were talking, there was a sound of firing guns—four or five, rattlingly, as if by a squad. The cheerful noise came from the direction of the cuartel, which is a kind of makeshift barracks for the soldiers of the republic.

“Hear that?” said William Trotter. “Let me tell you about it.

“A year ago I landed on this coast with one solitary dollar. I have the same sum in my pocket to-day. I was second cook on a tramp fruiter; and they marooned me here early one morning, without benefit of clergy, just because I poulticed the face of the first mate with cheese omelette at dinner. The fellow had kicked because I’d put horseradish in it instead of cheese.

“When they threw me out of the yawl into three feet of surf, I waded ashore and sat down under a palm-tree. By and by a fine-looking white man with a red face and white clothes, genteel as possible, but somewhat under the influence, came and sat down beside me.

“I had noticed there was a kind of a village back of the beach, and enough scenery to outfit a dozen moving-picture shows. But I thought, of course, it was a cannibal suburb, and I was wondering whether I was to be served with carrots or mushrooms. And, as I say, this dressed-up man sits beside me, and we become friends in the space of a minute or two. For an hour we talked, and he told me all about it.

“It seems that he was a man of parts, conscientiousness, and plausibility, besides being educated and a wreck to his appetites. He told me all about it. Colleges had turned him out, and distilleries had taken him in. Did I tell you his name? It was Clifford Wainwright. I didn’t exactly catch the cause of his being cast away on that particular stretch of South America; but I reckon it was his own business. I asked him if he’d ever been second cook on a tramp fruiter, and he said no; so that concluded my line of surmises. But he talked like the encyclopedia from ‘A—Berlin’ to ‘Trilo—Zyria.’ And he carried a watch—a silver arrangement with works, and up to date within twenty-four hours, anyhow.

“‘I’m pleased to have met you,’ says Wainwright. ‘I’m a devotee to the great joss Booze; but my ruminating facilities are unrepaired,’ says he—or words to that effect. ‘And I hate,’ says he, ‘to see fools trying to run the world.’

“‘I never touch a drop,’ says I, ‘and there are many kinds of fools; and the world runs on its own apex, according to science, with no meddling from me.’

“‘I was referring,’ says he, ‘to the president of this republic. His country is in a desperate condition. Its treasury is empty, it’s on the verge of war with Nicamala, and if it wasn’t for the hot weather the people would be starting revolutions in every town. Here is a nation,’ goes on Wainwright, ‘on the brink of destruction. A man of intelligence could rescue it from its impending doom in one day by issuing the necessary edicts and orders. President Gomez knows nothing of statesmanship or policy. Do you know Adam Smith?’

“‘Lemme see,’ says I. ‘There was a one-eared man named Smith in Fort Worth, Texas, but I think his first name was—’

“‘I am referring to the political economist,’ says Wainwright.

“‘S’mother Smith, then,’ says I. ‘The one I speak of never was arrested.’

“So Wainwright boils some more with indignation at the insensibility of people who are not corpulent to fill public positions; and then he tells me he is going out to the president’s summer palace, which is four miles from Aguas Frescas, to instruct him in the art of running steam-heated republics.

“‘Come along with me, Trotter,’ says he, ‘and I’ll show you what brains can do.’

“‘Anything in it?’ I asks.

“‘The satisfaction,’ says he, ‘of redeeming a country of two hundred thousand population from ruin back to prosperity and peace.’

“Great,’ says I. ‘I’ll go with you. I’d prefer to eat a live broiled lobster just now; but give me liberty as second choice if I can’t be in at the death.’

“Wainwright and me permeates through the town, and he halts at a rum-dispensary.

“‘Have you any money?’ he asks.

“‘I have,’ says I, fishing out my silver dollar. ‘I always go about with adequate sums of money.’

“‘Then we’ll drink,’ says Wainwright.

“‘Not me,” says I. ‘Not any demon ruin or any of its ramifications for mine. It’s one of my non-weaknesses.’

“‘It’s my failing,’ says he. ‘What’s your particular soft point?’

“‘Industry,’ says I, promptly. ‘I’m hard-working, diligent, industrious, and energetic.’

“‘My dear Mr. Trotter,’ says he, ‘surely I’ve known you long enough to tell you you are a liar. Every man must have his own particular weakness, and his own particular strength in other things. Now, you will buy me a drink of rum, and we will call on President Gomez.’”

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# III

“Well, sir,” Trotter went on, “we walks the four miles out, through a virgin conservatory of palms and ferns and other roof-garden products, to the president’s summer White House. It was blue, and reminded you of what you see on the stage in the third act, which they describe as ‘same as the first’ on the programs.

“There was more than fifty people waiting outside the iron fence that surrounded the house and grounds. There was generals and agitators and epergnes in gold-laced uniforms, and citizens in diamonds and Panama hats—all waiting to get an audience with the Royal Five-Card Draw. And in a kind of a summer-house in front of the mansion we could see a burnt-sienna man eating breakfast out of gold dishes and taking his time. I judged that the crowd outside had come out for their morning orders and requests, and was afraid to intrude.

“But C. Wainwright wasn’t. The gate was open, and he walked inside and up to the president’s table as confident as a man who knows the head waiter in a fifteen-cent restaurant. And I went with him, because I had only seventy-five cents, and there was nothing else to do.

“The Gomez man rises from his chair, and looks, colored man as he was, like he was about to call out for corporal of the guard, post number one. But Wainwright says some phrases to him in a peculiarly lubricating manner; and the first thing you know we was all three of us seated at the table, with coffee and rolls and iguana cutlets coming as fast as about ninety peons could rustle ‘em.

“And then Wainwright begins to talk; but the president interrupts him.

“‘You Yankees,’ says he, polite, ‘assuredly take the cake for assurance, I assure you’—or words to that effect. He spoke English better than you or me. ‘You’ve had a long walk,’ says he, ‘but it’s nicer in the cool morning to walk than to ride. May I suggest some refreshments?’ says he.

“‘Rum,’ says Wainwright.

“‘Gimme a cigar,’ says I.

“Well, sir, the two talked an hour, keeping the generals and equities all in their good uniforms waiting outside the fence. And while I smoked, silent, I listened to Clifford Wainwright making a solid republic out of the wreck of one. I didn’t follow his arguments with any special collocation of international intelligibility; but he had Mr. Gomez’s attention glued and riveted. He takes out a pencil and marks the white linen tablecloth all over with figures and estimates and deductions. He speaks more or less disrespectfully of import and export duties and custom-house receipts and taxes and treaties and budgets and concessions and such truck that politics and government require; and when he gets through the Gomez man hops up and shakes his hand and says he’s saved the country and the people.

“‘You shall be rewarded,’ says the president.

“‘Might I suggest another—rum?’ says Wainwright.

“‘Cigar for me—darker brand,’ says I.

“Well, sir, the president sent me and Wainwright back to the town in a victoria hitched to two flea-bitten selling-platers—but the best the country afforded.

“I found out afterward that Wainwright was a regular beachcomber—the smartest man on the whole coast, but kept down by rum. I liked him.

“One day I inveigled him into a walk out a couple of miles from the village, where there was an old grass hut on the bank of a little river. While he was sitting on the grass, talking beautiful of the wisdom of the world that he had learned in books, I took hold of him easy and tied his hands and feet together with leather thongs that I had in my pocket.

“‘Lie still,’ says I, ‘and meditate on the exigencies and irregularities of life till I get back.’

“I went to a shack in Aguas Frescas where a mighty wise girl named Timotea Carrizo lived with her mother. The girl was just about as nice as you ever saw. In the States she would have been called a brunette; but she was better than a brunette—I should say she was what you might term an ecru shade. I knew her pretty well. I told her about my friend Wainwright. She gave me a double handful of bark—calisaya, I think it was—and some more herbs that I was to mix with it, and told me what to do. I was to make tea of it and give it to him, and keep him from rum for a certain time. And for two weeks I did it. You know, I liked Wainwright. Both of us was broke; but Timotea sent us goat-meat and plantains and tortillas every day; and at last I got the curse of drink lifted from Clifford Wainwright. He lost his taste for it. And in the cool of the evening him and me would sit on the roof of Timotea’s mother’s hut, eating harmless truck like coffee and rice and stewed crabs, and playing the accordion.

“About that time President Gomez found out that the advice of C. Wainwright was the stuff he had been looking for. The country was pulling out of debt, and the treasury bad enough boodle in it for him to amuse himself occasionally with the night-latch. The people were beginning to take their two-hour siestas again every day—which was the surest sign of prosperity.

“So down from the regular capital he sends for Clifford Wainwright and makes him his private secretary at twenty thousand Peru dollars a year. Yes, sir—so much. Wainwright was on the water-wagon—thanks to me and Timotea—and he was soon in clover with the government gang. Don’t forget what done it—calisaya bark with them other herbs mixed—make a tea of it, and give a cupful every two hours. Try it yourself. It takes away the desire.

“As I said, a man can do a lot more for another party than he can for himself. Wainwright, with his brains, got a whole country out of trouble and on its feet; but what could he do for himself? And without any special brains, but with some nerve and common sense, I put him on his feet because I never had the weakness that he did—nothing but a cigar for mine, thanks. And–—”

Trotter paused. I looked at his tattered clothes and at his deeply sunburnt, hard, thoughtful face.

“Didn’t Cartright ever offer to do anything for you?” I asked.

“Wainwright,” corrected Trotter. “Yes, he offered me some pretty good jobs. But I’d have bad to leave Aguas Frescas; so I didn’t take any of ‘em up. Say, I didn’t tell you much about that girl—Timotea. We rather hit it off together. She was as good as you find ‘em anywhere—Spanish, mostly, with just a twist of lemon-peel on top. What if they did live in a grass hut and went bare-armed?

“A month ago,” went on Trotter, “she went away. I don’t know where to. But—”

“You’d better come back to the States,” I insisted. “I can promise you positively that my brother will give you a position in cotton, sugar, or sheetings—I am not certain which.”

“I think she went back with her mother,” said Trotter, “to the village in the mountains that they come from. Tell me, what would this job you speak of pay?”

“Why,” said I, hesitating over commerce, “I should say fifty or a hundred dollars a month—maybe two hundred.”

“Ain’t it funny,” said Trotter, digging his toes in the sand, “what a chump a man is when it comes to paddling his own canoe? I don’t know. Of course, I’m not making a living here. I’m on the bum. But—well, I wish you could have seen that Timotea. Every man has his own weak spot.”

The gig from the Andador was coming ashore to take out the captain, purser, and myself, the lone passenger.

“I’ll guarantee,” said I confidently, “that my brother will pay you seventy-five dollars a month.”

“All right, then,” said William Trotter. “I’ll—”

But a soft voice called across the blazing sands. A girl, faintly lemon-tinted, stood in the Calle Real and called. She was bare-armed—but what of that?

“It’s her!” said William Trotter, looking. “She’s come back! I’m obliged; but I can’t take the job. Thanks, just the same. Ain’t it funny how we can’t do nothing for ourselves, but we can do wonders for the other fellow? You was about to get me with your financial proposition; but we’ve all got our weak points. Timotea’s mine. And, say!” Trotter had turned to leave, but he retraced the step or two that he had taken. “I like to have left you without saying good-bye,” said he. “It kind of rattles you when they go away unexpected for a month and come back the same way. Shake hands. So long! Say, do you remember them gunshots we heard a while ago up at the cuartel? Well, I knew what they was, but I didn’t mention it. It was Clifford Wainwright being shot by a squad of soldiers against a stone wall for giving away secrets of state to that Nicamala republic Oh, yes, it was rum that did it. He backslided and got his. I guess we all have our weak points, and can’t do much toward helping ourselves. Mine’s waiting for me. I’d have liked to have that job with your brother, but—we’ve all got our weak points. So long!”

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# IV

A big black Carib carried me on his back through the surf to the ship’s boat. On the way the purser handed me a letter that he had brought for me at the last moment from the post-office in Aguas Frescas. It was from my brother. He requested me to meet him at the St. Charles Hotel in New Orleans and accept a position with his house—in either cotton, sugar, or sheetings, and with five thousand dollars a year as my salary.

When I arrived at the Crescent City I hurried away—far away from the St. Charles to a dim chambre garnie in Bienville Street. And there, looking down from my attic window from time to time at the old, yellow, absinthe house across the street, I wrote this story to buy my bread and butter.

“Can thim that helps others help thimselves?”