**A Dinner at ––-\***

O. Henry

The Adventures of an Author With His Own Hero

All that day—in fact from the moment of his creation—Van Sweller had conducted himself fairly well in my eyes. Of course I had had to make many concessions; but in return he had been no less considerate. Once or twice we had had sharp, brief contentions over certain points of behavior; but, prevailingly, give and take had been our rule.

His morning toilet provoked our first tilt. Van Sweller went about it confidently.

“The usual thing, I suppose, old chap,” he said, with a smile and a yawn. “I ring for a b. and s., and then I have my tub. I splash a good deal in the water, of course. You are aware that there are two ways in which I can receive Tommy Carmichael when he looks in to have a chat about polo. I can talk to him through the bathroom door, or I can be picking at a grilled bone which my man has brought in. Which would you prefer?”

I smiled with diabolic satisfaction at his coming discomfiture.

“Neither,” I said. “You will make your appearance on the scene when a gentleman should—after you are fully dressed, which indubitably private function shall take place behind closed doors. And I will feel indebted to you if, after you do appear, your deportment and manners are such that it will not be necessary to inform the public, in order to appease its apprehension, that you have taken a bath.”

Van Sweller slightly elevated his brows. “Oh, very well,” he said, a trifle piqued. “I rather imagine it concerns you more than it does me. Cut the ‘tub’ by all means, if you think best. But it has been the usual thing, you know.”

This was my victory; but after Van Sweller emerged from his apartments in the “Beaujolie” I was vanquished in a dozen small but well-contested skirmishes. I allowed him a cigar; but routed him on the question of naming its brand. But he worsted me when I objected to giving him a “coat unmistakably English in its cut.” I allowed him to “stroll down Broadway,” and even permitted “passers by” (God knows there’s nowhere to pass but by) to “turn their heads and gaze with evident admiration at his erect figure.” I demeaned myself, and, as a barber, gave him a “smooth, dark face with its keen, frank eye, and firm jaw.”

Later on he looked in at the club and saw Freddy Vavasour, polo team captain, dawdling over grilled bone No. 1.

“Dear old boy,” began Van Sweller; but in an instant I had seized him by the collar and dragged him aside with the scantiest courtesy.

“For heaven’s sake talk like a man,” I said, sternly. “Do you think it is manly to use those mushy and inane forms of address? That man is neither dear nor old nor a boy.”

To my surprise Van Sweller turned upon me a look of frank pleasure.

“I am glad to hear you say that,” he said, heartily. “I used those words because I have been forced to say them so often. They really are contemptible. Thanks for correcting me, dear old boy.”

Still I must admit that Van Sweller’s conduct in the park that morning was almost without flaw. The courage, the dash, the modesty, the skill, and fidelity that he displayed atoned for everything.

This is the way the story runs. Van Sweller has been a gentleman member of the “Rugged Riders,” the company that made a war with a foreign country famous. Among his comrades was Lawrence O’Roon, a man whom Van Sweller liked. A strange thing—and a hazardous one in fiction—was that Van Sweller and O’Roon resembled each other mightily in face, form, and general appearance. After the war Van Sweller pulled wires, and O’Roon was made a mounted policeman.

Now, one night in New York there are commemorations and libations by old comrades, and in the morning, Mounted Policeman O’Roon, unused to potent liquids—another premise hazardous in fiction—finds the earth bucking and bounding like a bronco, with no stirrup into which he may insert foot and save his honor and his badge.

Noblesse oblige? Surely. So out along the driveways and bridle paths trots Hudson Van Sweller in the uniform of his incapacitated comrade, as like unto him as one French pea is unto a petit pois.

It is, of course, jolly larks for Van Sweller, who has wealth and social position enough for him to masquerade safely even as a police commissioner doing his duty, if he wished to do so. But society, not given to scanning the countenances of mounted policemen, sees nothing unusual in the officer on the beat.

And then comes the runaway.

That is a fine scene—the swaying victoria, the impetuous, daft horses plunging through the line of scattering vehicles, the driver stupidly holding his broken reins, and the ivory-white face of Amy Ffolliott, as she clings desperately with each slender hand. Fear has come and gone: it has left her expression pensive and just a little pleading, for life is not so bitter.

And then the clatter and swoop of Mounted Policeman Van Sweller! Oh, it was—but the story has not yet been printed. When it is you shall learn bow he sent his bay like a bullet after the imperilled victoria. A Crichton, a Croesus, and a Centaur in one, he hurls the invincible combination into the chase.

When the story is printed you will admire the breathless scene where Van Sweller checks the headlong team. And then he looks into Amy Ffolliott’s eyes and sees two things—the possibilities of a happiness he has long sought, and a nascent promise of it. He is unknown to her; but he stands in her sight illuminated by the hero’s potent glory, she his and he hers by all the golden, fond, unreasonable laws of love and light literature.

Ay, that is a rich moment. And it will stir you to find Van Sweller in that fruitful nick of time thinking of his comrade O’Roon, who is cursing his gyrating bed and incapable legs in an unsteady room in a West Side hotel while Van Sweller holds his badge and his honor.

Van Sweller hears Miss Ffolliott’s voice thrillingly asking the name of her preserver. If Hudson Van Sweller, in policeman’s uniform, has saved the life of palpitating beauty in the park—where is Mounted Policeman O’Roon, in whose territory the deed is done? How quickly by a word can the hero reveal himself, thus discarding his masquerade of ineligibility and doubling the romance! But there is his friend!

Van Sweller touches his cap. “It’s nothing, Miss,” he says, sturdily; “that’s what we are paid for—to do our duty.” And away he rides. But the story does not end there.

As I have said, Van Sweller carried off the park scene to my decided satisfaction. Even to me he was a hero when he foreswore, for the sake of his friend, the romantic promise of his adventure. It was later in the day, amongst the more exacting conventions that encompass the society hero, when we had our liveliest disagreement. At noon he went to O’Roon’s room and found him far enough recovered to return to his post, which he at once did.

At about six o’clock in the afternoon Van Sweller fingered his watch, and flashed at me a brief look full of such shrewd cunning that I suspected him at once.

“Time to dress for dinner, old man,” he said, with exaggerated carelessness.

“Very well,” I answered, without giving him a clew to my suspicions; “I will go with you to your rooms and see that you do the thing properly. I suppose that every author must be a valet to his own hero.”

He affected cheerful acceptance of my somewhat officious proposal to accompany him. I could see that he was annoyed by it, and that fact fastened deeper in my mind the conviction that he was meditating some act of treachery.

When he had reached his apartments he said to me, with a too patronizing air: “There are, as you perhaps know, quite a number of little distinguishing touches to be had out of the dressing process. Some writers rely almost wholly upon them. I suppose that I am to ring for my man, and that he is to enter noiselessly, with an expressionless countenance.”

“He may enter,” I said, with decision, “and only enter. Valets do not usually enter a room shouting college songs or with St. Vitus’s dance in their faces; so the contrary may be assumed without fatuous or gratuitous asseveration.”

“I must ask you to pardon me,” continued Van Sweller, gracefully, “for annoying you with questions, but some of your methods are a little new to me. Shall I don a full-dress suit with an immaculate white tie—or is there another tradition to be upset?”

“You will wear,” I replied, “evening dress, such as a gentleman wears. If it is full, your tailor should be responsible for its bagginess. And I will leave it to whatever erudition you are supposed to possess whether a white tie is rendered any whiter by being immaculate. And I will leave it to the consciences of you and your man whether a tie that is not white, and therefore not immaculate, could possibly form any part of a gentleman’s evening dress. If not, then the perfect tie is included and understood in the term ‘dress,’ and its expressed addition predicates either a redundancy of speech or the spectacle of a man wearing two ties at once.”

With this mild but deserved rebuke I left Van Sweller in his dressing-room, and waited for him in his library.

About an hour later his valet came out, and I heard him telephone for an electric cab. Then out came Van Sweller, smiling, but with that sly, secretive design in his eye that was puzzling me.

“I believe,” he said easily, as he smoothed a glove, “that I will drop in at –—\* [Footnote: See advertising column, “Where to Dine Well,” in the daily newspapers.] for dinner.”

I sprang up, angrily, at his words. This, then, was the paltry trick he had been scheming to play upon me. I faced him with a look so grim that even his patrician poise was flustered.

“You will never do so,” I exclaimed, “with my permission. What kind of a return is this,” I continued, hotly, “for the favors I have granted you? I gave you a ‘Van’ to your name when I might have called you ‘Perkins’ or ‘Simpson.’ I have humbled myself so far as to brag of your polo ponies, your automobiles, and the iron muscles that you acquired when you were stroke-oar of your ‘varsity eight,’ or ‘eleven,’ whichever it is. I created you for the hero of this story; and I will not submit to having you queer it. I have tried to make you a typical young New York gentleman of the highest social station and breeding. You have no reason to complain of my treatment to you. Amy Ffolliott, the girl you are to win, is a prize for any man to be thankful for, and cannot be equalled for beauty—provided the story is illustrated by the right artist. I do not understand why you should try to spoil everything. I had thought you were a gentleman.”

“What it is you are objecting to, old man?” asked Van Sweller, in a surprised tone.

“To your dining at–,” I answered. [FOOTNOTE: See advertising column, “Where to Dine Well,” in the daily newspapers.] “The pleasure would be yours, no doubt, but the responsibility would fall upon me. You intend deliberately to make me out a tout for a restaurant. Where you dine tonight has not the slightest connection with the thread of our story. You know very well that the plot requires that you be in front of the Alhambra Opera House at 11:30 where you are to rescue Miss Ffolliott a second time as the fire engine crashes into her cab. Until that time your movements are immaterial to the reader. Why can’t you dine out of sight somewhere, as many a hero does, instead of insisting upon an inapposite and vulgar exhibition of yourself?”

“My dear fellow,” said Van Sweller, politely, but with a stubborn tightening of his lips, “I’m sorry it doesn’t please you, but there’s no help for it. Even a character in a story has rights that an author cannot ignore. The hero of a story of New York social life must dine at –-\* [\*See advertising column, “Where to Dine Well,” in the daily newspapers.] at least once during its action.”

“‘Must,’” I echoed, disdainfully; “why ‘must’? Who demands it?”

“The magazine editors,” answered Van Sweller, giving me a glance of significant warning.

“But why?” I persisted.

“To please subscribers around Kankakee, Ill.,” said Van Sweller, without hesitation.

“How do you know these things?” I inquired, with sudden suspicion. “You never came into existence until this morning. You are only a character in fiction, anyway. I, myself, created you. How is it possible for you to know anything?”

“Pardon me for referring to it,” said Van Sweller, with a sympathetic smile, “but I have been the hero of hundreds of stories of this kind.”

I felt a slow flush creeping into my face.

“I thought…” I stammered; “I was hoping …that is… Oh, well, of course an absolutely original conception in fiction is impossible in these days.”

“Metropolitan types,” continued Van Sweller, kindly, “do not offer a hold for much originality. I’ve sauntered through every story in pretty much the same way. Now and then the women writers have made me cut some rather strange capers, for a gentleman; but the men generally pass me along from one to another without much change. But never yet, in any story, have I failed to dine at –-.\*” [\*Footnote: See advertising column, “Where to Dine Well,” in the daily newspapers.]

“You will fail this time,” I said, emphatically.

“Perhaps so,” admitted Van Sweller, looking out of the window into the street below, “but if so it will be for the first time. The authors all send me there. I fancy that many of them would have liked to accompany me, but for the little matter of the expense.”

“I say I will be touting for no restaurant,” I repeated, loudly. “You are subject to my will, and I declare that you shall not appear of record this evening until the time arrives for you to rescue Miss Ffolliott again. If the reading public cannot conceive that you have dined during that interval at some one of the thousands of establishments provided for that purpose that do not receive literary advertisement it may suppose, for aught I care, that you have gone fasting.”

“Thank you,” said Van Sweller, rather coolly, “you are hardly courteous. But take care! it is at your own risk that you attempt to disregard a fundamental principle in metropolitan fiction—one that is dear alike to author and reader. I shall, of course attend to my duty when it comes time to rescue your heroine; but I warn you that it will be your loss if you fail to send me tonight to dine at –-.\*” [Footnote: \* See advertising column, “Where to Dine Well,” in the daily newspapers.]

“I will take the consequences if there are to be any,” I replied. “I am not yet come to be sandwich man for an eating-house.”

I walked over to a table where I had left my cane and gloves. I heard the whirr of the alarm in the cab below and I turned quickly. Van Sweller was gone.

I rushed down the stairs and out to the curb. An empty hansom was just passing. I hailed the driver excitedly.

“See that auto cab halfway down the block?” I shouted. “Follow it. Don’t lose sight of it for an instant, and I will give you two dollars!”

If I only had been one of the characters in my story instead of myself I could easily have offered $10 or $25 or even $100. But $2 was all I felt justified in expending, with fiction at its present rates.

The cab driver, instead of lashing his animal into a foam, proceeded at a deliberate trot that suggested a by-the-hour arrangement.

But I suspected Van Sweller’s design; and when we lost sight of his cab I ordered my driver to proceed at once to –-.\* [\* See advertising column, “Where to Dine Well,” in the daily newspapers.]

I found Van Sweller at a table under a palm, just glancing over the menu, with a hopeful waiter hovering at his elbow.

“Come with me,” I said, inexorably. “You will not give me the slip again. Under my eye you shall remain until 11:30.”

Van Sweller countermanded the order for his dinner, and arose to accompany me. He could scarcely do less. A fictitious character is but poorly equipped for resisting a hungry but live author who comes to drag him forth from a restaurant. All he said was: “You were just in time; but I think you are making a mistake. You cannot afford to ignore the wishes of the great reading public.”

I took Van Sweller to my own rooms—to my room. He had never seen anything like it before.

“Sit on that trunk,” I said to him, “while I observe whether the landlady is stalking us. If she is not, I will get things at a delicatessen store below, and cook something for you in a pan over the gas jet. It will not be so bad. Of course nothing of this will appear in the story.”

“Jove! old man!” said Van Sweller, looking about him with interest, “this is a jolly little closet you live in! Where the devil do you sleep?—Oh, that pulls down! And I say—what is this under the corner of the carpet?—Oh, a frying pan! I see—clever idea! Fancy cooking over the gas! What larks it will be!”

“Think of anything you could eat?” I asked; “try a chop, or what?”

“Anything,” said Van Sweller, enthusiastically, “except a grilled bone.”

Two weeks afterward the postman brought me a large, fat envelope. I opened it, and took out something that I had seen before, and this typewritten letter from a magazine that encourages society fiction:

Your short story, “The Badge of Policeman O’Roon,” is herewith returned.

We are sorry that it has been unfavorably passed upon; but it seems to lack in some of the essential requirements of our publication.

The story is splendidly constructed; its style is strong and inimitable, and its action and character-drawing deserve the highest praise. As a story per se it has merit beyond anything that we have read for some time. But, as we have said, it fails to come up to some of the standards we have set.

Could you not re-write the story, and inject into it the social atmosphere, and return it to us for further consideration? It is suggested to you that you have the hero, Van Sweller, drop in for luncheon or dinner once or twice at –-\* or at the –-\* [\* See advertising column, “Where to Dine Well,” in the daily newspapers.] which will be in line with the changes desired. Very truly yours, THE EDITORS.