**The Poet and the Peasant**

O. Henry

The other day a poet friend of mine, who has lived in close communion with nature all his life, wrote a poem and took it to an editor.

It was a living pastoral, full of the genuine breath of the fields, the song of birds, and the pleasant chatter of trickling streams.

When the poet called again to see about it, with hopes of a beefsteak dinner in his heart, it was handed back to him with the comment:

“Too artificial.”

Several of us met over spaghetti and Dutchess County chianti, and swallowed indignation with slippery forkfuls.

And there we dug a pit for the editor. With us was Conant, a well-arrived writer of fiction—a man who had trod on asphalt all his life, and who had never looked upon bucolic scenes except with sensations of disgust from the windows of express trains.

Conant wrote a poem and called it “The Doe and the Brook.” It was a fine specimen of the kind of work you would expect from a poet who had strayed with Amaryllis only as far as the florist’s windows, and whose sole ornithological discussion had been carried on with a waiter. Conant signed this poem, and we sent it to the same editor.

But this has very little to do with the story.

Just as the editor was reading the first line of the poem, on the next morning, a being stumbled off the West Shore ferryboat, and loped slowly up Forty-second Street.

The invader was a young man with light blue eyes, a hanging lip and hair the exact color of the little orphan’s (afterward discovered to be the earl’s daughter) in one of Mr. Blaney’s plays. His trousers were corduroy, his coat short-sleeved, with buttons in the middle of his back. One bootleg was outside the corduroys. You looked expectantly, though in vain, at his straw hat for ear holes, its shape inaugurating the suspicion that it had been ravaged from a former equine possessor. In his hand was a valise—description of it is an impossible task; a Boston man would not have carried his lunch and law books to his office in it. And above one ear, in his hair, was a wisp of hay—the rustic’s letter of credit, his badge of innocence, the last clinging touch of the Garden of Eden lingering to shame the gold-brick men.

Knowingly, smilingly, the city crowds passed him by. They saw the raw stranger stand in the gutter and stretch his neck at the tall buildings. At this they ceased to smile, and even to look at him. It had been done so often. A few glanced at the antique valise to see what Coney “attraction” or brand of chewing gum he might be thus dinning into his memory. But for the most part he was ignored. Even the newsboys looked bored when he scampered like a circus clown out of the way of cabs and street cars.

At Eighth Avenue stood “Bunco Harry,” with his dyed mustache and shiny, good-natured eyes. Harry was too good an artist not to be pained at the sight of an actor overdoing his part. He edged up to the countryman, who had stopped to open his mouth at a jewelry store window, and shook his head.

“Too thick, pal,” he said, critically—“too thick by a couple of inches. I don’t know what your lay is; but you’ve got the properties too thick. That hay, now—why, they don’t even allow that on Proctor’s circuit any more.”

“I don’t understand you, mister,” said the green one. “I’m not lookin’ for any circus. I’ve just run down from Ulster County to look at the town, bein’ that the hayin’s over with. Gosh! but it’s a whopper. I thought Poughkeepsie was some punkins; but this here town is five times as big.”

“Oh, well,” said “Bunco Harry,” raising his eyebrows, “I didn’t mean to butt in. You don’t have to tell. I thought you ought to tone down a little, so I tried to put you wise. Wish you success at your graft, whatever it is. Come and have a drink, anyhow.”

“I wouldn’t mind having a glass of lager beer,” acknowledged the other.

They went to a café frequented by men with smooth faces and shifty eyes, and sat at their drinks.

“I’m glad I come across you, mister,” said Haylocks. “How’d you like to play a game or two of seven-up? I’ve got the keerds.”

He fished them out of Noah’s valise—a rare, inimitable deck, greasy with bacon suppers and grimy with the soil of cornfields.

“Bunco Harry” laughed loud and briefly.

“Not for me, sport,” he said, firmly. “I don’t go against that make-up of yours for a cent. But I still say you’ve overdone it. The Reubs haven’t dressed like that since ‘79. I doubt if you could work Brooklyn for a key-winding watch with that layout.”

“Oh, you needn’t think I ain’t got the money,” boasted Haylocks. He drew forth a tightly rolled mass of bills as large as a teacup, and laid it on the table.

“Got that for my share of grandmother’s farm,” he announced. “There’s $950 in that roll. Thought I’d come to the city and look around for a likely business to go into.”

“Bunco Harry” took up the roll of money and looked at it with almost respect in his smiling eyes.

“I’ve seen worse,” he said, critically. “But you’ll never do it in them clothes. You want to get light tan shoes and a black suit and a straw hat with a colored band, and talk a good deal about Pittsburg and freight differentials, and drink sherry for breakfast in order to work off phony stuff like that.”

“What’s his line?” asked two or three shifty-eyed men of “Bunco Harry” after Haylocks had gathered up his impugned money and departed.

“The queer, I guess,” said Harry. “Or else he’s one of Jerome’s men. Or some guy with a new graft. He’s too much hayseed. Maybe that his—I wonder now—oh, no, it couldn’t have been real money.”

Haylocks wandered on. Thirst probably assailed him again, for he dived into a dark groggery on a side street and bought beer. At first sight of him their eyes brightened; but when his insistent and exaggerated rusticity became apparent their expressions changed to wary suspicion.

Haylocks swung his valise across the bar.

“Keep that a while for me, mister,” he said, chewing at the end of a virulent claybank cigar. “I’ll be back after I knock around a spell. And keep your eye on it, for there’s $950 inside of it, though maybe you wouldn’t think so to look at me.”

Somewhere outside a phonograph struck up a band piece, and Haylocks was off for it, his coat-tail buttons flopping in the middle of his back.

“Divvy, Mike,” said the men hanging upon the bar, winking openly at one another.

“Honest, now,” said the bartender, kicking the valise to one side. “You don’t think I’d fall to that, do you? Anybody can see he ain’t no jay. One of McAdoo’s come—on squad, I guess. He’s a shine if he made himself up. There ain’t no parts of the country now where they dress like that since they run rural free delivery to Providence, Rhode Island. If he’s got nine-fifty in that valise it’s a ninety-eight cent Waterbury that’s stopped at ten minutes to ten.”

When Haylocks had exhausted the resources of Mr. Edison to amuse he returned for his valise. And then down Broadway he gallivanted, culling the sights with his eager blue eyes. But still and evermore Broadway rejected him with curt glances and sardonic smiles. He was the oldest of the “gags” that the city must endure. He was so flagrantly impossible, so ultra rustic, so exaggerated beyond the most freakish products of the barnyard, the hayfield and the vaudeville stage, that he excited only weariness and suspicion. And the wisp of hay in his hair was so genuine, so fresh and redolent of the meadows, so clamorously rural that even a shell-game man would have put up his peas and folded his table at the sight of it.

Haylocks seated himself upon a flight of stone steps and once more exhumed his roll of yellow-backs from the valise. The outer one, a twenty, he shucked off and beckoned to a newsboy.

“Son,” said he, “run somewhere and get this changed for me. I’m mighty nigh out of chicken feed. I guess you’ll get a nickel if you’ll hurry up.”

A hurt look appeared through the dirt on the newsy’s face.

“Aw, watchert’ink! G’wan and get yer funny bill changed yerself. Dey ain’t no farm clothes yer got on. G’wan wit yer stage money.”

On a corner lounged a keen-eyed steerer for a gambling-house. He saw Haylocks, and his expression suddenly grew cold and virtuous.

“Mister,” said the rural one. “I’ve heard of places in this here town where a fellow could have a good game of old sledge or peg a card at keno. I got $950 in this valise, and I come down from old Ulster to see the sights. Know where a fellow could get action on about $9 or $10? I’m goin’ to have some sport, and then maybe I’ll buy out a business of some kind.”

The steerer looked pained, and investigated a white speck on his left forefinger nail.

“Cheese it, old man,” he murmured, reproachfully. “The Central Office must be bughouse to send you out looking like such a gillie. You couldn’t get within two blocks of a sidewalk crap game in them Tony Pastor props. The recent Mr. Scotty from Death Valley has got you beat a crosstown block in the way of Elizabethan scenery and mechanical accessories. Let it be skiddoo for yours. Nay, I know of no gilded halls where one may bet a patrol wagon on the ace.”

Rebuffed once again by the great city that is so swift to detect artificialities, Haylocks sat upon the curb and presented his thoughts to hold a conference.

“It’s my clothes,” said he; “durned if it ain’t. They think I’m a hayseed and won’t have nothin’ to do with me. Nobody never made fun of this hat in Ulster County. I guess if you want folks to notice you in New York you must dress up like they do.”

So Haylocks went shopping in the bazaars where men spake through their noses and rubbed their hands and ran the tape line ecstatically over the bulge in his inside pocket where reposed a red nubbin of corn with an even number of rows. And messengers bearing parcels and boxes streamed to his hotel on Broadway within the lights of Long Acre.

At 9 o’clock in the evening one descended to the sidewalk whom Ulster County would have foresworn. Bright tan were his shoes; his hat the latest block. His light gray trousers were deeply creased; a gay blue silk handkerchief flapped from the breast pocket of his elegant English walking coat. His collar might have graced a laundry window; his blond hair was trimmed close; the wisp of hay was gone.

For an instant he stood, resplendent, with the leisurely air of a boulevardier concocting in his mind the route for his evening pleasures. And then he turned down the gay, bright street with the easy and graceful tread of a millionaire.

But in the instant that he had paused the wisest and keenest eyes in the city had enveloped him in their field of vision. A stout man with gray eyes picked two of his friends with a lift of his eyebrows from the row of loungers in front of the hotel.

“The juiciest jay I’ve seen in six months,” said the man with gray eyes. “Come along.”

It was half-past eleven when a man galloped into the West Forty-seventh Street Police Station with the story of his wrongs.

“Nine hundred and fifty dollars,” he gasped, “all my share of grandmother’s farm.”

The desk sergeant wrung from him the name Jabez Bulltongue, of Locust Valley farm, Ulster County, and then began to take descriptions of the strong-arm gentlemen.

When Conant went to see the editor about the fate of his poem, he was received over the head of the office boy into the inner office that is decorated with the statuettes by Rodin and J. G. Brown.

“When I read the first line of ‘The Doe and the Brook,’” said the editor, “I knew it to be the work of one whose life has been heart to heart with Nature. The finished art of the line did not blind me to that fact. To use a somewhat homely comparison, it was as if a wild, free child of the woods and fields were to don the garb of fashion and walk down Broadway. Beneath the apparel the man would show.”

“Thanks,” said Conant. “I suppose the check will be round on Thursday, as usual.”

The morals of this story have somehow gotten mixed. You can take your choice of “Stay on the Farm” or “Don’t Write Poetry.”