**The Girl and the Graft**

O. Henry

The other day I ran across my old friend Ferguson Pogue. Pogue is a conscientious grafter of the highest type. His headquarters is the Western Hemisphere, and his line of business is anything from speculating in town lots on the Great Staked Plains to selling wooden toys in Connecticut, made by hydraulic pressure from nutmegs ground to a pulp.

Now and then when Pogue has made a good haul he comes to New York for a rest. He says the jug of wine and loaf of bread and Thou in the wilderness business is about as much rest and pleasure to him as sliding down the bumps at Coney would be to President Taft. “Give me,” says Pogue, “a big city for my vacation. Especially New York. I’m not much fond of New Yorkers, and Manhattan is about the only place on the globe where I don’t find any.”

While in the metropolis Pogue can always be found at one of two places. One is a little second-hand book-shop on Fourth Avenue, where he reads books about his hobbies, Mahometanism and taxidermy. I found him at the other—his hall bedroom in Eighteenth Street—where he sat in his stocking feet trying to pluck “The Banks of the Wabash” out of a small zither. Four years he has practised this tune without arriving near enough to cast the longest trout line to the water’s edge. On the dresser lay a blued-steel Colt’s forty-five and a tight roll of tens and twenties large enough around to belong to the spring rattlesnake-story class. A chambermaid with a room-cleaning air fluttered nearby in the hall, unable to enter or to flee, scandalized by the stocking feet, aghast at the Colt’s, yet powerless, with her metropolitan instincts, to remove herself beyond the magic influence of the yellow-hued roll.

I sat on his trunk while Ferguson Pogue talked. No one could be franker or more candid in his conversation. Beside his expression the cry of Henry James for lacteal nourishment at the age of one month would have seemed like a Chaldean cryptogram. He told me stories of his profession with pride, for he considered it an art. And I was curious enough to ask him whether he had known any women who followed it.

“Ladies?” said Pogue, with Western chivalry. “Well, not to any great extent. They don’t amount to much in special lines of graft, because they’re all so busy in general lines. What? Why, they have to. Who’s got the money in the world? The men. Did you ever know a man to give a woman a dollar without any consideration? A man will shell out his dust to another man free and easy and gratis. But if he drops a penny in one of the machines run by the Madam Eve’s Daughters’ Amalgamated Association and the pineapple chewing gum don’t fall out when he pulls the lever you can hear him kick to the superintendent four blocks away. Man is the hardest proposition a woman has to go up against. He’s the low-grade one, and she has to work overtime to make him pay. Two times out of five she’s salted. She can’t put in crushers and costly machinery. He’d notice ’em and be onto the game. They have to pan out what they get, and it hurts their tender hands. Some of ’em are natural sluice troughs and can carry out $1,000 to the ton. The dry-eyed ones have to depend on signed letters, false hair, sympathy, the kangaroo walk, cowhide whips, ability to cook, sentimental juries, conversational powers, silk underskirts, ancestry, rouge, anonymous letters, violet sachet powders, witnesses, revolvers, pneumatic forms, carbolic acid, moonlight, cold cream and the evening newspapers.”

“You are outrageous, Ferg,” I said. “Surely there is none of this ‘graft’ as you call it, in a perfect and harmonious matrimonial union!”

“Well,” said Pogue, “nothing that would justify you every time in calling Police Headquarters and ordering out the reserves and a vaudeville manager on a dead run. But it’s this way: Suppose you’re a Fifth Avenue millionaire, soaring high, on the right side of copper and cappers.

“You come home at night and bring a $9,000,000 diamond brooch to the lady who’s staked you for a claim. You hand it over. She says, ‘Oh, George!’ and looks to see if it’s backed. She comes up and kisses you. You’ve waited for it. You get it. All right. It’s graft.

“But I’m telling you about Artemisia Blye. She was from Kansas and she suggested corn in all of its phases. Her hair was as yellow as the silk; her form was as tall and graceful as a stalk in the low grounds during a wet summer; her eyes were as big and startling as bunions, and green was her favorite color.

“On my last trip into the cool recesses of your sequestered city I met a human named Vaucross. He was worth—that is, he had a million. He told me he was in business on the street. ‘A sidewalk merchant?’ says I, sarcastic. ‘Exactly,’ says he, ‘Senior partner of a paving concern.’

“I kind of took to him. For this reason, I met him on Broadway one night when I was out of heart, luck, tobacco and place. He was all silk hat, diamonds and front. He was all front. If you had gone behind him you would have only looked yourself in the face. I looked like a cross between Count Tolstoy and a June lobster. I was out of luck. I had—but let me lay my eyes on that dealer again.

“Vaucross stopped and talked to me a few minutes and then he took me to a high-toned restaurant to eat dinner. There was music, and then some Beethoven, and Bordelaise sauce, and cussing in French, and frangipangi, and some hauteur and cigarettes. When I am flush I know them places.

“I declare, I must have looked as bad as a magazine artist sitting there without any money and my hair all rumpled like I was booked to read a chapter from ‘Elsie’s School Days’ at a Brooklyn Bohemian smoker. But Vaucross treated me like a bear hunter’s guide. He wasn’t afraid of hurting the waiter’s feelings.

“‘Mr. Pogue,’ he explains to me, ‘I am using you.’

“‘Go on,’ says I; ‘I hope you don’t wake up.’

“And then he tells me, you know, the kind of man he was. He was a New Yorker. His whole ambition was to be noticed. He wanted to be conspicuous. He wanted people to point him out and bow to him, and tell others who he was. He said it had been the desire of his life always. He didn’t have but a million, so he couldn’t attract attention by spending money. He said he tried to get into public notice one time by planting a little public square on the east side with garlic for free use of the poor; but Carnegie heard of it, and covered it over at once with a library in the Gaelic language. Three times he had jumped in the way of automobiles; but the only result was five broken ribs and a notice in the papers that an unknown man, five feet ten, with four amalgam-filled teeth, supposed to be the last of the famous Red Leary gang had been run over.

“‘Ever try the reporters,’ I asked him.

“‘Last month,’ says Mr. Vaucross, ‘my expenditure for lunches to reporters was $124.80.’

“‘Get anything out of that?’ I asks.

“‘That reminds me,’ says he; ‘add $8.50 for pepsin. Yes, I got indigestion.’

“‘How am I supposed to push along your scramble for prominence?’ I inquires. ‘Contrast?’

“‘Something of that sort to-night,’ says Vaucross. ‘It grieves me; but I am forced to resort to eccentricity.’ And here he drops his napkin in his soup and rises up and bows to a gent who is devastating a potato under a palm across the room.

“‘The Police Commissioner,’ says my climber, gratified. ‘Friend’, says I, in a hurry, ‘have ambitions but don’t kick a rung out of your ladder. When you use me as a stepping stone to salute the police you spoil my appetite on the grounds that I may be degraded and incriminated. Be thoughtful.’

“At the Quaker City squab en casserole the idea about Artemisia Blye comes to me.

“‘Suppose I can manage to get you in the papers,’ says I—‘a column or two every day in all of ’em and your picture in most of ’em for a week. How much would it be worth to you?’

“‘Ten thousand dollars,’ says Vaucross, warm in a minute. ‘But no murder,’ says he; ‘and I won’t wear pink pants at a cotillon.’

“‘I wouldn’t ask you to,’ says I. ‘This is honorable, stylish and uneffeminate. Tell the waiter to bring a demi tasse and some other beans, and I will disclose to you the opus moderandi.’

“We closed the deal an hour later in the rococo rouge et noise room. I telegraphed that night to Miss Artemisia in Salina. She took a couple of photographs and an autograph letter to an elder in the Fourth Presbyterian Church in the morning, and got some transportation and $80. She stopped in Topeka long enough to trade a flashlight interior and a valentine to the vice-president of a trust company for a mileage book and a package of five-dollar notes with $250 scrawled on the band.

“The fifth evening after she got my wire she was waiting, all décolletée and dressed up, for me and Vaucross to take her to dinner in one of these New York feminine apartment houses where a man can’t get in unless he plays bezique and smokes depilatory powder cigarettes.

“‘She’s a stunner,’ says Vaucross when he saw her. ‘They’ll give her a two-column cut sure.’

“This was the scheme the three of us concocted. It was business straight through. Vaucross was to rush Miss Blye with all the style and display and emotion he could for a month. Of course, that amounted to nothing as far as his ambitions were concerned. The sight of a man in a white tie and patent leather pumps pouring greenbacks through the large end of a cornucopia to purchase nutriment and heartsease for tall, willowy blondes in New York is as common a sight as blue turtles in delirium tremens. But he was to write her love letters—the worst kind of love letters, such as your wife publishes after you are dead—every day. At the end of the month he was to drop her, and she would bring suit for $100,000 for breach of promise.

“Miss Artemisia was to get $10,000. If she won the suit that was all; and if she lost she was to get it anyhow. There was a signed contract to that effect.

“Sometimes they had me out with ’em, but not often. I couldn’t keep up to their style. She used to pull out his notes and criticize them like bills of lading.

“‘Say, you!’ she’d say. ‘What do you call this—letter to a Hardware Merchant from His Nephew on Learning that His Aunt Has Nettlerash? You Eastern duffers know as much about writing love letters as a Kansas grasshopper does about tugboats. “My dear Miss Blye!”—wouldn’t that put pink icing and a little red sugar bird on your bridal cake? How long do you expect to hold an audience in a court-room with that kind of stuff? You want to get down to business, and call me “Tweedlums Babe” and “Honeysuckle,” and sign yourself “Mama’s Own Big Bad Puggy Wuggy Boy” if you want any limelight to concentrate upon your sparse gray hairs. Get sappy.’

“After that Vaucross dipped his pen in the indelible tabasco. His notes read like something or other in the original. I could see a jury sitting up, and women tearing one another’s hats to hear ’em read. And I could see piling up for Mr. Vaucross as much notoriousness as Archbishop Cranmer or the Brooklyn Bridge or cheese-on-salad ever enjoyed. He seemed mighty pleased at the prospects.

“They agreed on a night; and I stood on Fifth Avenue outside a solemn restaurant and watched ’em. A process-server walked in and handed Vaucross the papers at his table. Everybody looked at ’em; and he looked as proud as Cicero. I went back to my room and lit a five-cent cigar, for I knew the $10,000 was as good as ours.

“About two hours later somebody knocked at my door. There stood Vaucross and Miss Artemisia, and she was clinging—yes, sir, clinging—to his arm. And they tells me they’d been out and got married. And they articulated some trivial cadences about love and such. And they laid down a bundle on the table and said ‘Good night’ and left.

“And that’s why I say,” concluded Ferguson Pogue, “that a woman is too busy occupied with her natural vocation and instinct of graft such as is given her for self-preservation and amusement to make any great success in special lines.”

“What was in the bundle that they left?” I asked, with my usual curiosity.

“Why,” said Ferguson, “there was a scalper’s railroad ticket as far as Kansas City and two pairs of Mr. Vaucross’s old pants.”