**The Caliph and the Cad**

O. Henry

Surely there is no pastime more diverting than that of mingling, incognito, with persons of wealth and station. Where else but in those circles can one see life in its primitive, crude state unhampered by the conventions that bind the dwellers in a lower sphere?

There was a certain Caliph of Bagdad who was accustomed to go down among the poor and lowly for the solace obtained from the relation of their tales and histories. Is it not strange that the humble and poverty-stricken have not availed themselves of the pleasure they might glean by donning diamonds and silks and playing Caliph among the haunts of the upper world?

There was one who saw the possibilities of thus turning the tables on Haroun al Raschid. His name was Corny Brannigan, and he was a truck driver for a Canal Street importing firm. And if you read further you will learn how he turned upper Broadway into Bagdad and learned something about himself that he did not know before.

Many people would have called Corny a snob—preferably by means of a telephone. His chief interest in life, his chosen amusement, and his sole diversion after working hours, was to place himself in juxtaposition—since he could not hope to mingle—with people of fashion and means.

Every evening after Corny had put up his team and dined at a lunch-counter that made immediateness a specialty, he would clothe himself in evening raiment as correct as any you will see in the palm rooms. Then he would betake himself to that ravishing, radiant roadway devoted to Thespis, Thais, and Bacchus.

For a time he would stroll about the lobbies of the best hotels, his soul steeped in blissful content. Beautiful women, cooing like doves, but feathered like birds of Paradise, flicked him with their robes as they passed. Courtly gentlemen attended them, gallant and assiduous. And Corny’s heart within him swelled like Sir Lancelot’s, for the mirror spoke to him as he passed and said: “Corny, lad, there’s not a guy among ’em that looks a bit the sweller than yerself. And you drivin’ of a truck and them swearin’ off their taxes and playin’ the red in art galleries with the best in the land!”

And the mirrors spake the truth. Mr. Corny Brannigan had acquired the outward polish, if nothing more. Long and keen observation of polite society had gained for him its manner, its genteel air, and—most difficult of acquirement—its repose and ease.

Now and then in the hotels Corny had managed conversation and temporary acquaintance with substantial, if not distinguished, guests. With many of these he had exchanged cards, and the ones he received he carefully treasured for his own use later. Leaving the hotel lobbies, Corny would stroll leisurely about, lingering at the theatre entrance, dropping into the fashionable restaurants as if seeking some friend. He rarely patronized any of these places; he was no bee come to suck honey, but a butterfly flashing his wings among the flowers whose calyces held no sweets for him. His wages were not large enough to furnish him with more than the outside garb of the gentleman. To have been one of the beings he so cunningly imitated, Corny Brannigan would have given his right hand.

One night Corny had an adventure. After absorbing the delights of an hour’s lounging in the principal hotels along Broadway, he passed up into the stronghold of Thespis. Cab drivers hailed him as a likely fare, to his prideful content. Languishing eyes were turned upon him as a hopeful source of lobsters and the delectable, ascendant globules of effervescence. These overtures and unconscious compliments Corny swallowed as manna, and hoped Bill, the off horse, would be less lame in the left forefoot in the morning.

Beneath a cluster of milky globes of electric light Corny paused to admire the sheen of his low-cut patent leather shoes. The building occupying the angle was a pretentious *café*. Out of this came a couple, a lady in a white, cobwebby evening gown, with a lace wrap like a wreath of mist thrown over it, and a man, tall, faultless, assured—too assured. They moved to the edge of the sidewalk and halted. Corny’s eye, ever alert for “pointers” in “swell” behaviour, took them in with a sidelong glance.

“The carriage is not here,” said the lady. “You ordered it to wait?”

“I ordered it for nine-thirty,” said the man. “It should be here now.”

A familiar note in the lady’s voice drew a more especial attention from Corny. It was pitched in a key well known to him. The soft electric shone upon her face. Sisters of sorrow have no quarters fixed for them. In the index to the book of breaking hearts you will find that Broadway follows very soon after the Bowery. This lady’s face was sad, and her voice was attuned with it. They waited, as if for the carriage. Corny waited too, for it was out of doors, and he was never tired of accumulating and profiting by knowledge of gentlemanly conduct.

“Jack,” said the lady, “don’t be angry. I’ve done everything I could to please you this evening. Why do you act so?”

“Oh, you’re an angel,” said the man. “Depend upon woman to throw the blame upon a man.”

“I’m not blaming you. I’m only trying to make you happy.”

“You go about it in a very peculiar way.”

“You have been cross with me all the evening without any cause.”

“Oh, there isn’t any cause except—you make me tired.”

Corny took out his card case and looked over his collection. He selected one that read: “Mr. R. Lionel Whyte-Melville, Bloomsbury Square, London.” This card he had inveigled from a tourist at the King Edward Hotel. Corny stepped up to the man and presented it with a correctly formal air.

“May I ask why I am selected for the honour?” asked the lady’s escort.

Now, Mr. Corny Brannigan had a very wise habit of saying little during his imitations of the Caliph of Bagdad. The advice of Lord Chesterfield: “Wear a black coat and hold your tongue,” he believed in without having heard. But now speech was demanded and required of him.

“No gent,” said Corny, “would talk to a lady like you done. Fie upon you, Willie! Even if she happens to be your wife you ought to have more respect for your clothes than to chin her back that way. Maybe it ain’t my butt-in, but it goes, anyhow—you strike me as bein’ a whole lot to the wrong.”

The lady’s escort indulged in more elegantly expressed but fetching repartee. Corny, eschewing his truck driver’s vocabulary, retorted as nearly as he could in polite phrases. Then diplomatic relations were severed; there was a brief but lively set-to with other than oral weapons, from which Corny came forth easily victor.

A carriage dashed up, driven by a tardy and solicitous coachman.

“Will you kindly open the door for me?” asked the lady. Corny assisted her to enter, and took off his hat. The escort was beginning to scramble up from the sidewalk.

“I beg your pardon, ma’am,” said Corny, “if he’s your man.”

“He’s no man of mine,” said the lady. “Perhaps he—but there’s no chance of his being now. Drive home, Michael. If you care to take this—with my thanks.”

Three red roses were thrust out through the carriage window into Corny’s hand. He took them, and the hand for an instant; and then the carriage sped away.

Corny gathered his foe’s hat and began to brush the dust from his clothes.

“Come along,” said Corny, taking the other man by the arm.

His late opponent was yet a little dazed by the hard knocks he had received. Corny led him carefully into a saloon three doors away.

“The drinks for us,” said Corny, “me and my friend.”

“You’re a queer feller,” said the lady’s late escort—“lick a man and then want to set ’em up.”

“You’re my best friend,” said Corny exultantly. “You don’t understand? Well, listen. You just put me wise to somethin’. I been playin’ gent a long time, thinkin’ it was just the glad rags I had and nothin’ else. Say—you’re a swell, ain’t you? Well, you trot in that class, I guess. I don’t; but I found out one thing—I’m a gentleman, by—and I know it now. What’ll you have to drink?”