## The Assessor of Success

O. Henry

Hastings Beauchamp Morley sauntered across Union Square with a pitying look at the hundreds that lolled upon the park benches. They were a motley lot, he thought; the men with stolid, animal, unshaven faces; the women wriggling and self-conscious, twining and untwining their feet that hung four inches above the gravelled walks.

Were I Mr. Carnegie or Mr. Rockefeller I would put a few millions in my inside pocket and make an appointment with all the Park Commissioners (around the corner, if necessary), and arrange for benches in all the parks of the world low enough for women to sit upon, and rest their feet upon the ground. After that I might furnish libraries to towns that would pay for ’em, or build sanitariums for crank professors, and call ’em colleges, if I wanted to.

Women’s rights societies have been laboring for many years after equality with man. With what result? When they sit on a bench they must twist their ankles together and uncomfortably swing their highest French heels clear of earthly support. Begin at the bottom, ladies. Get your feet on the ground, and then rise to theories of mental equality.

Hastings Beauchamp Morley was carefully and neatly dressed. That was the result of an instinct due to his birth and breeding. It is denied us to look further into a man’s bosom than the starch on his shirt front; so it is left to us only to recount his walks and conversation.

Morley had not a cent in his pockets; but he smiled pityingly at a hundred grimy, unfortunate ones who had no more, and who would have no more when the sun’s first rays yellowed the tall paper-cutter building on the west side of the square. But Morley would have enough by then. Sundown had seen his pockets empty before; but sunrise had always seen them lined.

First he went to the house of a clergyman off Madison avenue and presented a forged letter of introduction that holily purported to issue from a pastorate in Indiana. This netted him $5 when backed up by a realistic romance of a delayed remittance.

On the sidewalk, twenty steps from the clergyman’s door, a pale-faced, fat man huskily enveloped him with a raised, red fist and the voice of a bell buoy, demanding payment of an old score.

“Why, Bergman, man,” sang Morley, dulcetly, “is this you? I was just on my way up to your place to settle up. That remittance from my aunt arrived only this morning. Wrong address was the trouble. Come up to the corner and I’ll square up. Glad to see you. Saves me a walk.”

Four drinks placated the emotional Bergman. There was an air about Morley when he was backed by money in hand that would have stayed off a call loan at Rothschilds’. When he was penniless his bluff was pitched half a tone lower, but few are competent to detect the difference in the notes.

“You gum to mine blace and bay me to-morrow, Mr. Morley,” said Bergman. “Oxcuse me dat I dun you on der street. But I haf not seen you in dree mont’. Pros’t!”

Morley walked away with a crooked smile on his pale, smooth face. The credulous, drink-softened German amused him. He would have to avoid Twenty-ninth street in the future. He had not been aware that Bergman ever went home by that route.

At the door of a darkened house two squares to the north Morley knocked with a peculiar sequence of raps. The door opened to the length of a six-inch chain, and the pompous, important black face of an African guardian imposed itself in the opening. Morley was admitted.

In a third-story room, in an atmosphere opaque with smoke, he hung for ten minutes above a roulette wheel. Then downstairs he crept, and was out-sped by the important negro, jingling in his pocket the 40 cents in silver that remained to him of his five-dollar capital. At the corner he lingered, undecided.

Across the street was a drug store, well lighted, sending forth gleams from the German silver and crystal of its soda fountain and glasses. Along came a youngster of five, headed for the dispensary, stepping high with the consequence of a big errand, possibly one to which his advancing age had earned him promotion. In his hand he clutched something tightly, publicly, proudly, conspicuously.

Morley stopped him with his winning smile and soft speech.

“Me?” said the youngster. “I’m doin’ to the drug ’tore for mamma. She dave me a dollar to buy a bottle of med’cin.”

“Now, now, now!” said Morley. “Such a big man you are to be doing errands for mamma. I must go along with my little man to see that the cars don’t run over him. And on the way we’ll have some chocolates. Or would he rather have lemon drops?”

Morley entered the drug store leading the child by the hand. He presented the prescription that had been wrapped around the money.

On his face was a smile, predatory, parental, politic, profound.

“Aqua pura, one pint,” said he to the druggist. “Sodium chloride, ten grains. Fiat solution. And don’t try to skin me, because I know all about the number of gallons of H2O in the Croton reservoir, and I always use the other ingredient on my potatoes.”

“Fifteen cents,” said the druggist, with a wink after he had compounded the order. “I see you understand pharmacy. A dollar is the regular price.”

“To gulls,” said Morley, smilingly.

He settled the wrapped bottle carefully in the child’s arms and escorted him to the corner. In his own pocket he dropped the 85 cents accruing to him by virtue of his chemical knowledge.

“Look out for the cars, sonny,” he said, cheerfully, to his small victim.

Two street cars suddenly swooped in opposite directions upon the youngster. Morley dashed between them and pinned the infantile messenger by the neck, holding him in safety. Then from the corner of his street he sent him on his way, swindled, happy, and sticky with vile, cheap candy from the Italian’s fruit stand.

Morley went to a restaurant and ordered a sirloin and a pint of inexpensive Chateau Breuille. He laughed noiselessly, but so genuinely that the waiter ventured to premise that good news had come his way.

“Why, no,” said Morley, who seldom held conversation with any one. “It is not that. It is something else that amuses me. Do you know what three divisions of people are easiest to over-reach in transactions of all kinds?”

“Sure,” said the waiter, calculating the size of the tip promised by the careful knot of Morley’s tie; “there’s the buyers from the dry goods stores in the South during August, and honeymooners from Staten Island, and”—

“Wrong!” said Morley, chuckling happily. “The answer is just—men, women and children. The world—well, say New York and as far as summer boarders can swim out from Long Island—is full of greenhorns. Two minutes longer on the broiler would have made this steak fit to be eaten by a gentleman, Francois.”

“If yez t’inks it’s on de bum,” said the waiter, “Oi’ll”—

Morley lifted his hand in protest—slightly martyred protest.

“It will do,” he said, magnanimously. “And now, green Chartreuse, frappe and a demi-tasse.”

Morley went out leisurely and stood on a corner where two tradeful arteries of the city cross. With a solitary dime in his pocket, he stood on the curb watching with confident, cynical, smiling eyes the tides of people that flowed past him. Into that stream he must cast his net and draw fish for his further sustenance and need. Good Izaak Walton had not the half of his self-reliance and bait-lore.

A joyful party of four—two women and two men—fell upon him with cries of delight. There was a dinner party on—where had he been for a fortnight past?—what luck to thus run upon him! They surrounded and engulfed him—he must join them—tra la la—and the rest.

One with a white hat plume curving to the shoulder touched his sleeve, and cast at the others a triumphant look that said: “See what I can do with him?” and added her queen’s command to the invitations.

“I leave you to imagine,” said Morley, pathetically, “how it desolates me to forego the pleasure. But my friend Carruthers, of the New York Yacht Club, is to pick me up here in his motor car at 8.”

The white plume tossed, and the quartet danced like midges around an arc light down the frolicsome way.

Morley stood, turning over and over the dime in his pocket and laughing gleefully to himself. “‘Front,’” he chanted under his breath; “‘front’ does it. It is trumps in the game. How they take it in! Men, women and children—forgeries, water-and-salt lies—how they all take it in!”

An old man with an ill-fitting suit, a straggling gray beard and a corpulent umbrella hopped from the conglomeration of cabs and street cars to the sidewalk at Morley’s side.

“Stranger,” said he, “excuse me for troubling you, but do you know anybody in this here town named Solomon Smothers? He’s my son, and I’ve come down from Ellenville to visit him. Be darned if I know what I done with his street and number.”

“I do not, sir,” said Morley, half closing his eyes to veil the joy in them. “You had better apply to the police.”

“The police!” said the old man. “I ain’t done nothin’ to call in the police about. I just come down to see Ben. He lives in a five-story house, he writes me. If you know anybody by that name and could”—

“I told you I did not,” said Morley, coldly. “I know no one by the name of Smithers, and I advise you to”—

“Smothers not Smithers,” interrupted the old man hopefully. “A heavy-set man, sandy complected, about twenty-nine, two front teeth out, about five foot”—

“Oh, ‘Smothers!’” exclaimed Morley. “Sol Smothers? Why, he lives in the next house to me. I thought you said ‘Smithers.’”

Morley looked at his watch. You must have a watch. You can do it for a dollar. Better go hungry than forego a gunmetal or the ninety-eight-cent one that the railroads—according to these watchmakers—are run by.

“The Bishop of Long Island,” said Morley, “was to meet me here at 8 to dine with me at the Kingfishers’ Club. But I can’t leave the father of my friend Sol Smothers alone on the street. By St. Swithin, Mr. Smothers, we Wall street men have to work! Tired is no name for it! I was about to step across to the other corner and have a glass of ginger ale with a dash of sherry when you approached me. You must let me take you to Sol’s house, Mr. Smothers. But, before we take the car I hope you will join me in”—

An hour later Morley seated himself on the end of a quiet bench in Madison Square, with a twenty-five-cent cigar between his lips and $140 in deeply creased bills in his inside pocket. Content, light-hearted, ironical, keenly philosophic, he watched the moon drifting in and out amidst a maze of flying clouds. An old, ragged man with a low-bowed head sat at the other end of the bench.

Presently the old man stirred and looked at his bench companion. In Morley’s appearance he seemed to recognize something superior to the usual nightly occupants of the benches.

“Kind sir,” he whined, “if you could spare a dime or even a few pennies to one who”—

Morley cut short his stereotyped appeal by throwing him a dollar.

“God bless you!” said the old man. “I’ve been trying to find work for”—

“Work!” echoed Morley with his ringing laugh. “You are a fool, my friend. The world is a rock to you, no doubt; but you must be an Aaron and smite it with your rod. Then things better than water will gush out of it for you. That is what the world is for. It gives to me whatever I want from it.”

“God has blessed you,” said the old man. “It is only work that I have known. And now I can get no more.”

“I must go home,” said Morley, rising and buttoning his coat. “I stopped here only for a smoke. I hope you may find work.”

“May your kindness be rewarded this night,” said the old man.

“Oh,” said Morley, “you have your wish already. I am satisfied. I think good luck follows me like a dog. I am for yonder bright hotel across the square for the night. And what a moon that is lighting up the city to-night. I think no one enjoys the moonlight and such little things as I do. Well, a good-night to you.”

Morley walked to the corner where he would cross to his hotel. He blew slow streams of smoke from his cigar heavenward. A policeman passing saluted to his benign nod. What a fine moon it was.

The clock struck nine as a girl just entering womanhood stopped on the corner waiting for the approaching car. She was hurrying as if homeward from employment or delay. Her eyes were clear and pure, she was dressed in simple white, she looked eagerly for the car and neither to the right nor the left.

Morley knew her. Eight years before he had sat on the same bench with her at school. There had been no sentiment between them—nothing but the friendship of innocent days.

But he turned down the side street to a quiet spot and laid his suddenly burning face against the cool iron of a lamp-post, and said dully:

“God! I wish I could die.”