## Brickdust Row

O. Henry

Blinker was displeased. A man of less culture and poise and wealth would have sworn. But Blinker always remembered that he was a gentleman—a thing that no gentleman should do. So he merely looked bored and sardonic while he rode in a hansom to the center of disturbance, which was the Broadway office of Lawyer Oldport, who was agent for the Blinker estate.

“I don’t see,” said Blinker, “why I should be always signing confounded papers. I am packed, and was to have left for the North Woods this morning. Now I must wait until to-morrow morning. I hate night trains. My best razors are, of course, at the bottom of some unidentifiable trunk. It is a plot to drive me to bay rum and a monologueing, thumb-handed barber. Give me a pen that doesn’t scratch. I hate pens that scratch.”

“Sit down,” said double-chinned, gray Lawyer Oldport. “The worst has not been told you. Oh, the hardships of the rich! The papers are not yet ready to sign. They will be laid before you to-morrow at eleven. You will miss another day. Twice shall the barber tweak the helpless nose of a Blinker. Be thankful that your sorrows do not embrace a haircut.”

“If,” said Blinker, rising, “the act did not involve more signing of papers I would take my business out of your hands at once. Give me a cigar, please.”

“If,” said Lawyer Oldport, “I had cared to see an old friend’s son gulped down at one mouthful by sharks I would have ordered you to take it away long ago. Now, let’s quit fooling, Alexander. Besides the grinding task of signing your name some thirty times to-morrow, I must impose upon you the consideration of a matter of business—of business, and I may say humanity or right. I spoke to you about this five years ago, but you would not listen—you were in a hurry for a coaching trip, I think. The subject has come up again. The property—”

“Oh, property!” interrupted Blinker. “Dear Mr. Oldport, I think you mentioned to-morrow. Let’s have it all at one dose to-morrow—signatures and property and snappy rubber bands and that smelly sealing-wax and all. Have luncheon with me? Well, I’ll try to remember to drop in at eleven to-morrow. Morning.”

The Blinker wealth was in lands, tenements and hereditaments, as the legal phrase goes. Lawyer Oldport had once taken Alexander in his little pulmonary gasoline runabout to see the many buildings and rows of buildings that he owned in the city. For Alexander was sole heir. They had amused Blinker very much. The houses looked so incapable of producing the big sums of money that Lawyer Oldport kept piling up in banks for him to spend.

In the evening Blinker went to one of his clubs, intending to dine. Nobody was there except some old fogies playing whist who spoke to him with grave politeness and glared at him with savage contempt. Everybody was out of town. But here he was kept in like a schoolboy to write his name over and over on pieces of paper. His wounds were deep.

Blinker turned his back on the fogies, and said to the club steward who had come forward with some nonsense about cold fresh salmon roe:

“Symons, I’m going to Coney Island.” He said it as one might say: “All’s off; I’m going to jump into the river.”

The joke pleased Symons. He laughed within a sixteenth of a note of the audibility permitted by the laws governing employees.

“Certainly, sir,” he tittered. “Of course, sir, I think I can see you at Coney, Mr. Blinker.”

Blinker got a paper and looked up the movements of Sunday steamboats. Then he found a cab at the first corner and drove to a North River pier. He stood in line, as democratic as you or I, and bought a ticket, and was trampled upon and shoved forward until, at last, he found himself on the upper deck of the boat staring brazenly at a girl who sat alone upon a camp stool. But Blinker did not intend to be brazen; the girl was so wonderfully good looking that he forgot for one minute that he was the prince incog, and behaved just as he did in society.

She was looking at him, too, and not severely. A puff of wind threatened Blinker’s straw hat. He caught it warily and settled it again. The movement gave the effect of a bow. The girl nodded and smiled, and in another instant he was seated at her side. She was dressed all in white, she was paler than Blinker imagined milkmaids and girls of humble stations to be, but she was as tidy as a cherry blossom, and her steady, supremely frank gray eyes looked out from the intrepid depths of an unshadowed and untroubled soul.

“How dare you raise your hat to me?” she asked, with a smile-redeemed severity.

“I didn’t,” Blinker said, but he quickly covered the mistake by extending it to “I didn’t know how to keep from it after I saw you.”

“I do not allow gentlemen to sit by me to whom I have not been introduced,” she said, with a sudden haughtiness that deceived him. He rose reluctantly, but her clear, teasing laugh brought him down to his chair again.

“I guess you weren’t going far,” she declared, with beauty’s magnificent self-confidence.

“Are you going to Coney Island?” asked Blinker.

“Me?” She turned upon him wide-open eyes full of bantering surprise. “Why, what a question! Can’t you see that I’m riding a bicycle in the park?” Her drollery took the form of impertinence.

“And I am laying brick on a tall factory chimney,” said Blinker. “Mayn’t we see Coney together? I’m all alone and I’ve never been there before.”

“It depends,” said the girl, “on how nicely you behave. I’ll consider your application until we get there.”

Blinker took pains to provide against the rejection of his application. He strove to please. To adopt the metaphor of his nonsensical phrase, he laid brick upon brick on the tall chimney of his devoirs until, at length, the structure was stable and complete. The manners of the best society come around finally to simplicity; and as the girl’s way was that naturally, they were on a mutual plane of communication from the beginning.

He learned that she was twenty, and her name was Florence; that she trimmed hats in a millinery shop; that she lived in a furnished room with her best chum Ella, who was cashier in a shoe store; and that a glass of milk from the bottle on the window-sill and an egg that boils itself while you twist up your hair makes a breakfast good enough for any one. Florence laughed when she heard “Blinker.”

“Well,” she said. “It certainly shows that you have imagination. It gives the ‘Smiths’ a chance for a little rest, anyhow.”

They landed at Coney, and were dashed on the crest of a great human wave of mad pleasure-seekers into the walks and avenues of Fairyland gone into vaudeville.

With a curious eye, a critical mind and a fairly withheld judgment Blinker considered the temples, pagodas and kiosks of popularized delights. Hoi polloi trampled, hustled and crowded him. Basket parties bumped him; sticky children tumbled, howling, under his feet, candying his clothes. Insolent youths strolling among the booths with hard-won canes under one arm and easily won girls on the other, blew defiant smoke from cheap cigars into his face. The publicity gentlemen with megaphones, each before his own stupendous attraction, roared like Niagara in his ears. Music of all kinds that could be tortured from brass, reed, hide or string, fought in the air to gain space for its vibrations against its competitors. But what held Blinker in awful fascination was the mob, the multitude, the proletariat shrieking, struggling, hurrying, panting, hurling itself in incontinent frenzy, with unabashed abandon, into the ridiculous sham palaces of trumpery and tinsel pleasures. The vulgarity of it, its brutal overriding of all the tenets of repression and taste that were held by his caste, repelled him strongly.

In the midst of his disgust he turned and looked down at Florence by his side. She was ready with her quick smile and upturned, happy eyes, as bright and clear as the water in trout pools. The eyes were saying that they had the right to be shining and happy, for was their owner not with her (for the present) Man, her Gentleman Friend and holder of the keys to the enchanted city of fun?

Blinker did not read her look accurately, but by some miracle he suddenly saw Coney aright.

He no longer saw a mass of vulgarians seeking gross joys. He now looked clearly upon a hundred thousand true idealists. Their offenses were wiped out. Counterfeit and false though the garish joys of these spangled temples were, he perceived that deep under the gilt surface they offered saving and apposite balm and satisfaction to the restless human heart. Here, at least, was the husk of Romance, the empty but shining casque of Chivalry, the breath-catching though safe-guarded dip and flight of Adventure, the magic carpet that transports you to the realms of fairyland, though its journey be through but a few poor yards of space. He no longer saw a rabble, but his brothers seeking the ideal. There was no magic of poesy here or of art; but the glamour of their imagination turned yellow calico into cloth of gold and the megaphones into the silver trumpets of joy’s heralds.

Almost humbled, Blinker rolled up the shirt sleeves of his mind and joined the idealists.

“You are the lady doctor,” he said to Florence. “How shall we go about doing this jolly conglomeration of fairy tales, incorporated?”

“We will begin there,” said the Princess, pointing to a fun pagoda on the edge of the sea, “and we will take them all in, one by one.”

They caught the eight o’clock returning boat and sat, filled with pleasant fatigue, against the rail in the bow, listening to the Italians’ fiddle and harp. Blinker had thrown off all care. The North Woods seemed to him an uninhabitable wilderness. What a fuss he had made over signing his name—pooh! he could sign it a hundred times. And her name was as pretty as she was—“Florence,” he said it to himself a great many times.

As the boat was nearing its pier in the North River a two-funnelled, drab, foreign-looking sea-going steamer was dropping down toward the bay. The boat turned its nose in toward its slip. The steamer veered as if to seek midstream, and then yawed, seemed to increase its speed and struck the Coney boat on the side near the stern, cutting into it with a terrifying shock and crash.

While the six hundred passengers on the boat were mostly tumbling about the decks in a shrieking panic the captain was shouting at the steamer that it should not back off and leave the rent exposed for the water to enter. But the steamer tore its way out like a savage sawfish and cleaved its heartless way, full speed ahead.

The boat began to sink at its stern, but moved slowly toward the slip. The passengers were a frantic mob, unpleasant to behold.

Blinker held Florence tightly until the boat had righted itself. She made no sound or sign of fear. He stood on a camp stool, ripped off the slats above his head and pulled down a number of the life preservers. He began to buckle one around Florence. The rotten canvas split and the fraudulent granulated cork came pouring out in a stream. Florence caught a handful of it and laughed gleefully.

“It looks like breakfast food,” she said. “Take it off. They’re no good.”

She unbuckled it and threw it on the deck. She made Blinker sit down and sat by his side and put her hand in his. “What’ll you bet we don’t reach the pier all right?” she said and began to hum a song.

And now the captain moved among the passengers and compelled order. The boat would undoubtedly make her slip, he said, and ordered the women and children to the bow, where they could land first. The boat, very low in the water at the stern, tried gallantly to make his promise good.

“Florence,” said Blinker, as she held him close by an arm and hand, “I love you.”

“That’s what they all say,” she replied, lightly.

“I am not one of ‘they all,’” he persisted. “I never knew any one I could love before. I could pass my life with you and be happy every day. I am rich. I can make things all right for you.”

“That’s what they all say,” said the girl again, weaving the words into her little, reckless song.

“Don’t say that again,” said Blinker in a tone that made her look at him in frank surprise.

“Why shouldn’t I say it?” she asked calmly. “They all do.”

“Who are ‘they’?” he asked, jealous for the first time in his existence.

“Why, the fellows I know.”

“Do you know so many?”

“Oh, well, I’m not a wall flower,” she answered with modest complacency.

“Where do you see these—these men? At your home?”

“Of course not. I meet them just as I did you. Sometimes on the boat, sometimes in the park, sometimes on the street. I’m a pretty good judge of a man. I can tell in a minute if a fellow is one who is likely to get fresh.”

“What do you mean by ‘fresh?’”

“Why, try to kiss you—me, I mean.”

“Do any of them try that?” asked Blinker, clenching his teeth.

“Sure. All men do. You know that.”

“Do you allow them?”

“Some. Not many. They won’t take you out anywhere unless you do.”

She turned her head and looked searchingly at Blinker. Her eyes were as innocent as a child’s. There was a puzzled look in them, as though she did not understand him.

“What’s wrong about my meeting fellows?” she asked, wonderingly.

“Everything,” he answered, almost savagely. “Why don’t you entertain your company in the house where you live? Is it necessary to pick up Tom, Dick and Harry on the streets?”

She kept her absolutely ingenuous eyes upon his. “If you could see the place where I live you wouldn’t ask that. I live in Brickdust Row. They call it that because there’s red dust from the bricks crumbling over everything. I’ve lived there for more than four years. There’s no place to receive company. You can’t have anybody come to your room. What else is there to do? A girl has got to meet the men, hasn’t she?”

“Yes,” he said, hoarsely. “A girl has got to meet a—has got to meet the men.”

“The first time one spoke to me on the street,” she continued, “I ran home and cried all night. But you get used to it. I meet a good many nice fellows at church. I go on rainy days and stand in the vestibule until one comes up with an umbrella. I wish there was a parlor, so I could ask you to call, Mr. Blinker—are you really sure it isn’t ‘Smith,’ now?”

The boat landed safely. Blinker had a confused impression of walking with the girl through quiet crosstown streets until she stopped at a corner and held out her hand.

“I live just one more block over,” she said. “Thank you for a very pleasant afternoon.”

Blinker muttered something and plunged northward till he found a cab. A big, gray church loomed slowly at his right. Blinker shook his fist at it through the window.

“I gave you a thousand dollars last week,” he cried under his breath, “and she meets them in your very doors. There is something wrong; there is something wrong.”

At eleven the next day Blinker signed his name thirty times with a new pen provided by Lawyer Oldport.

“Now let me go to the woods,” he said surlily.

“You are not looking well,” said Lawyer Oldport. “The trip will do you good. But listen, if you will, to that little matter of business of which I spoke to you yesterday, and also five years ago. There are some buildings, fifteen in number, of which there are new five-year leases to be signed. Your father contemplated a change in the lease provisions, but never made it. He intended that the parlors of these houses should not be sub-let, but that the tenants should be allowed to use them for reception rooms. These houses are in the shopping district, and are mainly tenanted by young working girls. As it is they are forced to seek companionship outside. This row of red brick—”

Blinker interrupted him with a loud, discordant laugh.

“Brickdust Row for an even hundred,” he cried. “And I own it. Have I guessed right?”

“The tenants have some such name for it,” said Lawyer Oldport.

Blinker arose and jammed his hat down to his eyes.

“Do what you please with it,” he said harshly. “Remodel it, burn it, raze it to the ground. But, man, it’s too late I tell you. It’s too late. It’s too late. It’s too late.”