**From Each According to His Ability**

O. Henry

Vuyning left his club, cursing it softly, without any particular anger. From ten in the morning un-til eleven it had bored him immeasurably. Kirk with his fish story, Brooks with his Porto Rico cigars, old Morrison with his anecdote about the widow, Hep-burn with his invariable luck at billiards — all these afflictions had been repeated without change of bill or scenery. Besides these morning evils Miss Allison had refused him again on the night before. But that was a chronic trouble. Five times she had laughed at his offer to make her Mrs. Vuyning. He intended to ask her again the next Wednesday evening.

Vuyning walked along Forty-fourth Street to Broadway, and then drifted down the great sluice that washes out the dust of the gold-mines of Gotham. He wore a morning suit of light gray, low, dull kid shoes, a plain, finely woven straw hat, and his visible linen was the most delicate possible shade of belio-trope. His necktie was the blue-gray of a Novem-ber sky, and its knot was plainly the outcome of a lordly carelessness combined with an accurate conception of the most recent dictum of fashion.

Now, to write of a man’s haberdashery is a worse thing than to write a historical novel “around” Paul Jones, or to pen a testimonial to a hay-fever cure.

Therefore, let it be known that the description of Vuyning’s apparel is germane to the movements of the story, and not to make room for the new fall stock of goods.

Even Broadway that morning was a discord in Vuyning’s ears; and in his eyes it paralleled for a few dreamy, dreary minutes a certain howling, scorching, seething, malodorous slice of street that he remembered in Morocco. He saw the struggling mass of dogs, beggars, fakirs, slave-drivers and veiled women in carts without horses, the sun blazing brightly among the bazaars, the piles of rubbish from ruined temples in the street — and then a lady, passing, jabbed the ferrule of a parasol in his side and brought him back to Broadway.

Five minutes of his stroll brought him to a certain corner, where a number of silent, pale-faced men are accustomed to stand, immovably, for hours, busy with the file blades of their penknives, with their hat brims on a level with their eyelids. Wall Street speculators, driving home in their carriages, love to point out these men to their visiting friends and tell them of this rather famous lounging-place of the “crooks.” On Wall Street the speculators never use the file blades of their knives.

Vuyning was delighted when one of this company stepped forth and addressed him as he was passing. He was hungry for something out of the ordinary, and to be accosted by this smooth-faced, keen-eyed, low-voiced, athletic member of the under world, with his grim, yet pleasant smile, had all the taste of an adventure to the convention-weary Vuyning.

“Excuse me, friend,” said be. “Could I have a few minutes’ talk with you — on the level?”

“Certainly,” said Vuyning, with a smile. “But, suppose we step aside to a quieter place. There is a divan — a cafe over here that will do. Schrumm will give us a private corner.”

Schrumm established them under a growing palm, with two seidls between them. Vuyning made a pleasant reference to meteorological conditions, thus forming a binge upon which might be swung the door leading from the thought repository of the other.

“In the first place,” said his companion, with the air of one who presents his credentials, “I want you to understand that I am a crook. Out West I am known as Rowdy the Dude. Pickpocket, supper man, second-story man, yeggman, boxman, all-round burglar, cardsharp and slickest con man west of the Twenty-third Street ferry landing — that’s my history. That’s to show I’m on the square — with you. My name’s Emerson.”

“Confound old Kirk with his fish stories” said Vuyning to himself, with silent glee as he went through his pockets for a card. “It’s pronounced ‘Vining,’” he said, as he tossed it over to the other. “And I’ll be as frank with you. I’m just a kind of a loafer, I guess, living on my daddy’s money. At the club they call me ‘Left-at-the-Post.’ I never did a day’s work in my life; and I haven’t the heart to run over a chicken when I’m motoring. It’s a pretty shabby record, altogether.”

“There’s one thing you can do,” said Emerson, admiringly; “you can carry duds. I’ve watched you several times pass on Broadway. You look the best dressed man I’ve seen. And I’ll bet you a gold mine I’ve got $50 worth more gent’s furnishings on my frame than you have. That’s what I wanted to see you about. I can’t do the trick. Take a look at me. What’s wrong?”

“Stand up,” said Vuyning.

Emerson arose, and slowly revolved.

“You’ve been ‘outfitted,’” declared the clubman. “Some Broadway window-dresser has misused you.”

“That’s an expensive suit, though, Emerson.”

“A hundred dollars,” said Emerson.

“Twenty too much,” said Vuyning. “Six months old in cut, one inch too long, and half an inch to-much lapel. Your hat is plainly dated one year ago, although there’s only a sixteenth of an inch lacking in the brim to tell the story. That English poke in your collar is too short by the distance between Troy and London. A plain gold link cuff-button would take all the shine out of those pearl ones with diamond settings. Those tan shoes would be exactly the articles to work into the heart of a Brooklyn school-ma’am on a two weeks’ visit to Lake Ronkon-koma. I think I caught a glimpse of a blue silk sock embroidered with russet lilies of the valley when you — improperly — drew up your trousers as you sat down. There are always plain ones to be had in the stores. Have I hurt your feelings, Emerson?”

“Double the ante!” cried the criticised one, greed-ily. “Give me more of it. There’s a way to tote the haberdashery, and I want to get wise to it. Say, you’re the right kind of a swell. Anything else to the queer about me?”

“Your tie,” said Vuyning, “is tied with absolute precision and correctness.”

“Thanks,” gratefully — “I spent over half an hour at it before I — “

“Thereby,” interrupted Vuyning, “completing your resemblance to a dummy in a Broadway store window.”

“Yours truly,” said Emerson, sitting down again.

“It’s bully of you to put me wise. I knew there was something wrong, but I couldn’t just put my finger on it. I guess it comes by nature to know how to wear clothes.”

“Oh, I suppose,” said Vuyning, with a laugh, “that my ancestors picked up the knack while they were peddling clothes from house to house a couple of hundred years ago. I’m told they did that.”

“And mine,” said Emerson, cheerfully, “were making their visits at night, I guess, and didn’t have a chance to catch on to the correct styles.”

“I tell you what,” said Vuyning, whose ennui had taken wings, “I’ll take you to my tailor. He’ll eliminate the mark of the beast from your exterior. That is, if you care to go any further in the way of expense.”

“Play ‘em to the ceiling,” said Emerson, with a boyish smile of joy. “I’ve got a roll as big around as a barrel of black-eyed peas and as loose as the wrapper of a two-for-fiver. I don’t mind telling you that I was not touring among the Antipodes when the burglar-proof safe of the Farmers’ National Bank of Butterville, Ia., flew open some moonless nights ago to the tune of $16,000.”

“Aren’t you afraid,” asked Vuyning, “that I’ll call a cop and hand you over?”

“You tell me,” said Emerson, coolly, “why I didn’t keep them.”

He laid Vuyning’s pocketbook and watch — the Vuyning 100-year-old family watch on the table.

“Man,” said Vuyning, revelling, “did you ever hear the tale Kirk tells about the six-pound trout and the old fisherman?”

“Seems not,” said Emerson, politely. “I’d like to.”

“But you won’t,” said Vuyning. “I’ve heard it scores of times. That’s why I won’t tell you. I was just thinking how much better this is than a club. Now, shall we go to my tailor?”

“Boys, and elderly gents,” said Vuyning, five days later at his club, standing up against the window where his coterie was gathered, and keeping out the breeze, “a friend of mine from the West will dine at our table this evening.”

“Will he ask if we have heard the latest from Denver?” said a member, squirming in his chair.

“Will he mention the new twenty-three-story Ma-sonic Temple, in Quincy, Ill.?” inquired another, dropping his nose-glasses.

“Will he spring one of those Western Mississippi River catfish stories, in which they use yearling calves for bait?” demanded Kirk, fiercely.

“Be comforted,” said Vuyning. “He has none of the little vices. He is a burglar and safe-blower, and a pal of mine.”

“Oh, Mary Ann!” said they. “Must you always adorn every statement with your alleged humor?”

It came to pass that at eight in the evening a calm, smooth, brilliant, affable man sat at Vuyning’s right hand during dinner. And when the ones who pass their lives in city streets spoke of skyscrapers or of the little Czar on his far, frozen throne, or of insignificant fish from inconsequential streams, this big, deep-chested man, faultlessly clothed, and eyed like an Emperor, disposed of their Lilliputian chatter with a wink of his eyelash.

And then he painted for them with hard, broad strokes a marvellous lingual panorama of the West. He stacked snow-topped mountains on the table, freezing the hot dishes of the waiting diners. With a wave of his hand he swept the clubhouse into a pine-crowned gorge, turning the waiters into a grim posse, and each listener into a blood-stained fugitive, climbing with torn fingers upon the ensanguined rocks. He touched the table and spake, and the five panted as they gazed on barren lava beds, and each man took his tongue between his teeth and felt his mouth bake at the tale of a land empty of water and food. As simply as Homer sang, while he dug a tine of his fork leisurely into the tablecloth, he opened a new world to their view, as does one who tells a child of the Looking-Glass Country.

As one of his listeners might have spoken of tea too strong at a Madison Square “afternoon,” so he depicted the ravages of redeye in a border town when the caballeros of the lariat and “forty-five” reduced ennui to a minimum.

And then, with a sweep of his white, unringed hands, be dismissed Melpomene, and forthwith Diana and Amaryllis footed it before the mind’s eyes of the clubmen.

The savannas of the continent spread before them. The wind, humming through a hundred leagues of sage brush and mesquite, closed their ears to the city’s staccato noises. He told them of camps, of ranches marooned in a sea of fragrant prairie blossoms, of gallops in the stilly night that Apollo would have forsaken his daytime steeds to enjoy; he read them the great, rough epic of the cattle and the hills that have not been spoiled by the band of man, the mason. His words were a telescope to the city men, whose eyes had looked upon Youngstown, O., and whose tongues had called it “West.”

In fact, Emerson had them “going.”

The next morning at ten he met Vuyning, by appointment, at a Forty-second Street cafe.

Emerson was to leave for the West that day. He wore a suit of dark cheviot that looked to have been draped upon him by an ancient Grecian tailor who was a few thousand years ahead of the styles.

“Mr. Vuyning,” said he, with the clear, ingenuous smile of the successful “crook,” it’s up to me to go the limit for you any time I can do so. You’re the real thing; and if I can ever return the favor, you bet your life I’ll do it.”

“What was that cow-puncher’s name?” asked Vuyning, “who used to catch a mustang by the nose and mane, and throw him till he put the bridle on?”

“Bates,” said Emerson.

“Thanks,” said Vuyning. “I thought it was Yates. Oh, about that toggery business — I’d forgotten that.”

“I’ve been looking for some guy to put me on the right track for years,” said Emerson. “You’re the goods, duty free, and half-way to the warehouse in a red wagon.”

“Bacon, toasted on a green willow switch over red coals, ought to put broiled lobsters out of business,” said Vuyning. “And you say a horse at the end of a thirty-foot rope can’t pull a ten-inch stake out of wet prairie? Well, good-bye, old man, if you must be off.”

At one o’clock Vuyning had luncheon with Miss Allison by previous arrangement.

For thirty minutes be babbled to her, unaccount-ably, of ranches, horses, cations, cyclones, round-ups, Rocky Mountains and beans and bacon. She looked at him with wondering and half-terrified eyes.

“I was going to propose again to-day,” said Vuyning, cheerily, but I won’t. I’ve worried you often enough. You know dad has a ranch in Colorado. What’s the good of staying here? Jumping jonquils! but it’s great out there. I’m going to start next Tuesday.”

“No, you won’t,” said Miss Allison.

“What?” said Vuyning.

“Not alone,” said Miss Allison, dropping a tear upon her salad. “What do you think?”

“Betty!” exclaimed Vuyning, “what do you mean?

“I’ll go too,” said Miss Allison, forcibly. Vuyning filled her glass with Apollinaris.

“Here’s to Rowdy the Dude!” he gave — a toast mysterious.

“Don’t know him,” said Miss Allison; “but if he’s your friend, Jimmy — here goes!”