# Out of Nazareth

O. Henry

Okochee, in Georgia, had a boom, and J. Pinkney Bloom came out of it with a “wad.” Okochee came out of it with a half-million-dollar debt, a two and a half per cent. city property tax, and a city council that showed a propensity for traveling the back streets of the town. These things came about through a fatal resemblance of the river Cooloosa to the Hudson, as set forth and expounded by a Northern tourist. Okochee felt that New York should not be allowed to consider itself the only alligator in the swamp, so to speak. And then that harmless, but persistent, individual so numerous in the South—the man who is always clamoring for more cotton mills, and is ready to take a dollar’s worth of stock, provided he can borrow the dollar—that man added his deadly work to the tourist’s innocent praise, and Okochee fell.

The Cooloosa River winds through a range of small mountains, passes Okochee and then blends its waters trippingly, as fall the mellifluous Indian syllables, with the Chattahoochee.

Okochee rose, as it were, from its sunny seat on the post-office stoop, hitched up its suspender, and threw a granite dam two hundred and forty feet long and sixty feet high across the Cooloosa one mile above the town. Thereupon, a dimpling, sparkling lake backed up twenty miles among the little mountains. Thus in the great game of municipal rivalry did Okochee match that famous drawing card, the Hudson. It was conceded that nowhere could the Palisades be judged superior in the way of scenery and grandeur. Following the picture card was played the ace of commercial importance. Fourteen thousand horsepower would this dam furnish. Cotton mills, factories, and manufacturing plants would rise up as the green corn after a shower. The spindle and the flywheel and turbine would sing the shrewd glory of Okochee. Along the picturesque heights above the lake would rise in beauty the costly villas and the splendid summer residences of capital. The naphtha launch of the millionaire would spit among the romantic coves; the verdured hills would take formal shapes of terrace, lawn, and park. Money would be spent like water in Okochee, and water would be turned into money.

The fate of the good town is quickly told. Capital decided not to invest. Of all the great things promised, the scenery alone came to fulfilment. The wooded peaks, the impressive promontories of solemn granite, the beautiful green slants of bank and ravine did all they could to reconcile Okochee to the delinquency of miserly gold. The sunsets gilded the dreamy draws and coves with a minting that should charm away heart-burning. Okochee, true to the instinct of its blood and clime, was lulled by the spell. It climbed out of the arena, loosed its suspender, sat down again on the post-office stoop, and took a chew. It consoled itself by drawling sarcasms at the city council which was not to blame, causing the fathers, as has been said, to seek back streets and figure perspiringly on the sinking fund and the appropriation for interest due.

The youth of Okochee—they who were to carry into the rosy future the burden of the debt—accepted failure with youth’s uncalculating joy. For, here was sport, aquatic and nautical, added to the meagre round of life’s pleasures. In yachting caps and flowing neckties they pervaded the lake to its limits. Girls wore silk waists embroidered with anchors in blue and pink. The trousers of the young men widened at the bottom, and their hands were proudly calloused by the oft-plied oar. Fishermen were under the spell of a deep and tolerant Jjoy. Sailboats and rowboats furrowed the lenient waves, popcorn and ice-cream booths sprang up about the little wooden pier. Two small excursion steamboats were built, and plied the delectable waters. Okochee philosophically gave up the hope of eating turtle soup with a gold spoon, and settled back, not ill content, to its regular diet of lotus and fried hominy. And out of this slow wreck of great expectations rose up J. Pinkney Bloom with his “wad” and his prosperous, cheery smile.

Needless to say J. Pinkney was no product of Georgia soil. He came out of that flushed and capable region known as the “North.” He called himself a “promoter”; his enemies had spoken of him as a “grafter”; Okochee took a middle course, and held him to be no better nor no worse than a “Yank.”

Far up the lake—eighteen miles above the town—the eye of this cheerful camp-follower of booms had spied out a graft. He purchased there a precipitous tract of five hundred acres at forty-five cents per acre; and this he laid out and subdivided as the city of Skyland —the Queen City of the Switzerland of the South. Streets and avenues were surveyed; parks designed; corners of central squares reserved for the “proposed” opera house, board of trade, lyceum, market, public schools, and “Exposition Hall.” The price of lots ranged from five to five hundred dollars. Positively, no lot would be priced higher than five hundred dollars.

While the boom was growing in Okochee, J. Pinkney’s circulars, maps, and prospectuses were flying through the mails to every part of the country. Investors sent in their money by post, and the Skyland Real Estate Company (J. Pinkney Bloom) returned to each a deed, duly placed on record, to the best lot, at the price, on hand that day. All this time the catamount screeched upon the reserved lot of the Skyland Board of Trade, the opossum swung by his tail over the site of the exposition hall, and the owl hooted a melancholy recitative to his audience of young squirrels in opera house square. Later, when the money was coming in fast, J. Pinkney caused to be erected in the coming city half a dozen cheap box houses, and persuaded a contingent of indigent natives to occupy them, thereby assuming the role of “poulation” in subsequent prospectuses, which became, accordingly, more seductive and remunerative.

So, when the dream faded and Okochee dropped back to digging bait and nursing its two and a half per cent. tax, J. Pinkney Bloom (unloving of checks and drafts and the cold interrogatories of bankers) strapped about his fifty-two-inch waist a soft leather belt containing eight thousand dollars in big bills, and said that all was very good.

One last trip he was making to Skyland before departing to other salad fields. Skyland was a regular post-office, and the steamboat, Dixie Belle, under contract, delivered the mail bag (generally empty) twice a week. There was a little business there to be settled —the postmaster was to be paid off for his light but lonely services, and the “inhabitants” had to be furnished with another month’s homely rations, as per agreement. And then Skyland would know J. Pinkney Bloom no more. The owners of these precipitous, barren, useless lots might come and view the scene of their invested credulity, or they might leave them to their fit tenants, the wild hog and the browsing deer. The work of the Skyland Real Estate Company was finished.

The little steamboat Dixie Belle was about to shove off on her regular up-the-lake trip, when a rickety hired carriage rattled up to the pier, and a tall, elderly gentleman, in black, stepped out, signaling courteously but vivaciously for the boat to wait. Time was of the least importance in the schedule of the Dixie Belle; Captain MacFarland gave the order, and the boat received its ultimate two passengers. For, upon the arm of the tall, elderly gentleman, as he crossed the gangway, was a little elderly lady, with a gray curl depending quaintly forward of her left ear.

Captain MacFarland was at the wheel; therefore it seemed to J. Pinkney Bloom, who was the only other passenger, that it should be his to play the part of host to the boat’s new guests, who were, doubtless, on a scenery-viewing expedition. He stepped forward, with that translucent, child-candid smile upon his fresh, pink countenance, with that air of unaffected sincerity that was redeemed from bluffness only by its exquisite calculation, with that promptitude and masterly decision of manner that so well suited his calling—with all his stock in trade well to the front; he stepped forward to receive Colonel and Mrs. Peyton Blaylock. With the grace of a grand marshal or a wedding usher, he escorted the two passengers to a side of the upper deck, from which the scenery was supposed to present itself to the observer in increased quantity and quality. There, in comfortable steamer chairs, they sat and began to piece together the random lines that were to form an intelligent paragraph in the big history of little events.

“Our home, sir,” said Colonel Blaylock, removing his wide-brimmed, rather shapeless black felt hat, “is in Holly Springs—Holly Springs, Georgia. I am very proud to make your acquaintance, Mr. Bloom. Mrs. Blaylock and myself have just arrived in Okochee this morning, sir, on business—business of importance in connection with the recent rapid march of progress in this section of our state.”

The Colonel smoothed back, with a sweeping gesture, his long, smooth, locks. His dark eyes, still fiery under the heavy black brows, seemed inappropriate to the face of a business man. He looked rather to be an old courtier handed down from the reign of Charles, and re-attired in a modern suit of fine, but raveling and seam-worn, broadcloth.

“Yes, sir,” said Mr. Bloom, in his heartiest prospectus voice, “things have been whizzing around Okochee. Biggest industrial revival and waking up to natural resources Georgia ever had. Did you happen to squeeze in on the ground floor in any of the gilt-edged grafts, Colonel?”

“Well, sir,” said the Colonel, hesitating in courteous doubt, “if I understand your question, I may say that I took the opportunity to make an investment that I believe will prove quite advantageous—yes, sir, I believe it will result in both pecuniary profit and agreeable occupation.”

“Colonel Blaylock,” said the little edlerly lady, shaking her gray curl and smiling indulgent explanation at J. Pinkney Bloom, “is so devoted to businesss. He has such a talent for financiering and markets and investments and those kind of things. I think myself extremely fortunate in having secured him for a partner on life’s journey—I am so unversed in those formidable but very useful branches of learning.”

Colonel Blaylock rose and made a bow—a bow that belonged with silk stockings and lace ruffles and velvet.

“Practical affairs,” he said, with a wave of his hand toward the promoter, “are, if I may use the comparison, the garden walks upon which we tread through life, viewing upon either side of us the flowers which brighten that journey. It is my pleasure to be able to lay out a walk or two. Mrs. Blaylock, sir, is one of those fortunate higher spirits whose mission it is to make the flowers grow. Perhaps, Mr. Bloom, you have perused the lines of Lorella, the Southern poetess. That is the name above which Mrs. Blaylock has contributed to the press of the South for many years.”

“Unfortunately,” said Mr. Bloom, with a sense of the loss clearly written upon his frank face, “I’m like the Colonel—in the walk-making business myself—and I haven’t had time to even take a sniff at the flowers. Poetry is a line I never dealt in. It must be nice, though —quite nice.”

“It is the region,” smiled Mrs. Blaylock, “in which my soul dwells. My shawl, Peyton, if you please—the breeze comes a little chilly from yon verdured hills.”

The Colonel drew from the tail pocket of his coat a small shawl of knitted silk and laid it solicitously about the shoulders of the lady. Mrs. Blaylock sighed contentedly, and turned her expressive eyes— still as clear and unworldly as a child’s—upon the steep slopes that were slowly slipping past. Very fair and stately they looked in the clear morning air. They seemed to speak in familiar terms to the responsive spirit of Lorella. “My native hills!” she murmured, dreamily. “See how the foliage drinks the sunlight from the hollows and dells.”

“Mrs. Blaylock’s maiden days,” said the Colonel, interpreting her mood to J. Pinkney Bloom, “were spent among the mountains of northern Georgia. Mountain air and mountain scenery recall to her those days. Holly Springs, where we have lived for twenty years, is low and flat. I fear that she may have suffered in health and spirits by so long a residence there. That is one portent reason for the change we are making. My dear, can you not recall those lines you wrote—entitled, I think, ‘The Georgia Hills’—the poem that was so extensively copied by the Southern press and praised so highly by the Atlanta critics?”

Mrs. Blaylock turned a glance of speaking tenderness upon the Colonel, fingered for a moment the silvery curl that drooped upon her bosom, then looked again toward the mountains. Without preliminary or affectation or demurral she began, in rather thrilling and more deeply pitched tones to recite these lines:

“The Georgia hills, the Georgia hills!— Oh, heart, why dost thou pine? Are not these sheltered lowlands fair With mead and bloom and vine? Ah! as the slow-paced river here Broods on its natal rills My spirit drifts, in longing sweet, Back to the Georgia hills.

“And through the close-drawn, curtained night I steal on sleep’s slow wings Back to my heart’s ease—slopes of pine— Where end my wanderings. Oh, heaven seems nearer from their tops— And farther earthly ills— Even in dreams, if I may but Dream of my Georgia hills.

The grass upon their orchard sides Is a fine couch to me; The common note of each small bird Passes all minstrelsy. It would not seem so dread a thing If, when the Reaper wills, He might come there and take my hand Up in the Georgia hills.”

Thats great stuff, ma’am,” said J. Pinkney Bloom, enthusiastically, when the poetess had concluded. “I wish I had looked up poetry more than I have. I was raised in the pine hills myself.”

“The mountains ever call to their children,” murmured Mrs. Blaylock. “I feel that life will take on the rosy hue of hope again in among these beautiful hills. Peyton—a little taste of the currant wine, if you will be so good. The journey, though delightful in the extreme, slightly fatigues me.” Colonel Blaylock again visited the depths of his prolific coat, and produced a tightly corked, rough, black bottle. Mr. Bloom was on his feet in an instant.

“Let me bring a glass, ma’am. You come along, Colonel—there’s a little table we can bring, too. Maybe we can scare up some fruit or a cup of tea on board. I’ll ask Mac.”

Mrs. Blaylock reclined at ease. Few royal ladies have held their royal prerogative with the serene grace of the petted Southern woman. The Colonel, with an air as gallant and assiduous as in the days of his courtship, and J. Pinkney Bloom, with a ponderous agility half professional and half directed by some resurrected, unnamed, long-forgotten sentiment, formed a diversified but attentive court. The currant wine—wine home made from the Holly Springs fruit—went round, and then J. Pinkney began to hear something of Holly Springs life.

It seemed (from the conversation of the Blaylocks) that the Springs was decadent. A third of the population had moved away. Business— and the Colonel was an authority on business—had dwindled to nothing. After carefully studying the field of opportunities open to capital he had sold his little property there for eight hundred dollars and invested it in one of the enterprises opened up by the book in Okochee.

“Might I inquire, sir,” said Mr. Bloom, “in what particular line of business you inserted your coin? I know that town as well as I know the regulations for illegal use of the mails. I might give you a hunch as to whether you can make the game go or not.”

J. Pinkney, somehow, had a kindly feeling toward these unsophisticated representatives of by-gone days. They were so simple, impractical, and unsuspecting. He was glad that he happened not to have a gold brick or a block of that western Bad Boy Silver Mine stock along with him. He would have disliked to unload on people he liked so well as he did these; but there are some temptations toe enticing to be resisted.

“No, sir,” said Colonel Blaylock. pausing to arrange the queen’s wrap. “I did not invest in Okochee. I have made an exhaustive study of business conditions, and I regard old settled towns as unfavorable fields in which to place capital that is limited in amount. Some months ago, through the kindness of a friend, there came into my hands a map and description of this new town of Skyland that has been built upon the lake. The description was so pleasing, the future of the town set forth in such convincing arguments, and its increasing prosperity portrayed in such an attractive style that I decided to take advantage of the opportunity it offered. I carefully selected a lot in the centre of the business district, although its price was the highest in the schedule—five hundred dollars—and made the purchase at once.”

“Are you the man—I mean, did you pay five hundred dollars for a lot in Skyland” asked J. Pinkney Bloom.

“I did, sir,” answered the Colonel, with the air of a modest millionaire explaining his success; “a lot most excellently situated on the same square with the opera house, and only two squares from the board of trade. I consider the purchase a most fortuitous one. It is my intention to erect a small building upon it at once, and open a modest book and stationery store. During past years I have met with many pecuniary reverses, and I now find it necessary to engage in some commercial occupation that will furnish me with a livelihood. The book and stationery business, though an humble one, seems to me not inapt nor altogether uncongenial. I am a graduate of the University of Virginia; and Mrs. Blaylock’s really wonderful acquaintance with belles-lettres and poetic literature should go far toward insuring success. Of course, Mrs. Blaylock would not personally serve behind the counter. With the nearly three hundred dollars I have remaining I can manage the building of a house, by giving a lien on the lot. I have an old friend in Atlanta who is a partner in a large book store, and he has agreed to furnish me with a stock of goods on credit, on extremely easy terms. I am pleased to hope, sir, that Mrs. Blaylock’s health and happiness will be increased by the change of locality. Already I fancy I can perceive the return of those roses that were once the hope and despair of Georgia cavaliers.”

Again followed that wonderful bow, as the Colonel lightly touched the pale cheek of the poetess. Mrs. Blaylock, blushing like a girl, shook her curl and gave the Colonel an arch, reproving tap. Secret of eternal youth—where art thou? Every second the answer comes—“Here, here, here.” Listen to thine own heartbeats, 0 weary seeker after external miracles.

“Those years,” said Mrs. Blaylock, “in Holly Springs were long, long, long. But now is the promised land in sight. Skyland!—a lovely name.”

“Doubtless,” said the Colonel, “we shall be able to secure comfortable accommodations at some modest hotel at reasonable rates. Our trunks are in Okochee, to be forwarded when we shall have made permanent arrangements.”

J. Pinkney Bloom excused himself, went forward, and stood by the captain at the wheel.

“Mac,” said he, “do you remember my telling you once that I sold one of those five-hundred-dollar lots in Skyland?”

“Seems I do,” grinned Captain MacFarland.

“I’m not a coward, as a general rule,” went on the promoter, “but I always said that if I ever met the sucker that bought that lot I’d run like a turkey. Now, you see that old babe-in-the-wood over there? Well, he’s the boy that drew the prize. That was the only five-hundred-dollar lot that went. The rest ranged from ten dollars to two hundred. His wife writes poetry. She’s invented one about the high grounds of Georgia, that’s way up in G. They’re going to Skyland to open a book store.”

“Well,” said MacFarland, with another grin, “it’s a good thing you are along, J. P.; you can show ‘em around town until they begin to feel at home.”

“He’s got three hundred dollars left to build a house and store with,” went on J. Pinkney, as if he were talking to himself. “And he thinks there’s an open house up there.”

Captain MacFarland released the wheel long enough to give his leg a roguish slap.

“You old fat rascal!” he chuckled, with a wink.

“Mac, you’re a fool,” said J. Pinkney Bloom, coldly. He went back and joined the Blaylocks, where he sat, less talkative, with that straight furrow between his brows that always stood as a signal of schemes being shaped within.

“There’s a good many swindles connected with these booms,” he said presently. “What if this Skyland should turn out to be one—that is, suppose business should be sort of dull there, and no special sale for books?”

“My dear sir,” said Colonel Blaylock, resting his hand upon the back of his wife’s chair, “three times I have been reduced to almost penury by the duplicity of others, but I have not yet lost faith in humanity. If I have been deceived again, still we may glean health and content, if not worldly profit. I am aware that there are dishonest schemers in the world who set traps for the unwary, but even they are not altogether bad. My dear, can you recall those verses entitled ‘He Giveth the Increase,’ that you composed for the choir of our church in Holly Springs?”

“That was four years ago,” said Mrs. Blaylock; “perhans I can repeat a verse or two.

“The lily springs from the rotting mould; Pearls from the deep sea slime; Good will come out of Nazareth All in God’s own time.

“To the hardest heart the softening grace Cometh, at last, to bless; Guiding it right to help and cheer And succor in distress.

“I cannot remember the rest. The lines were not ambitious. They were written to the music composed by a dear friend.”

“It’s a fine rhyme, just the same,” declared Mr. Bloom. “It seems to ring the bell, all right. I guess I gather the sense of it. It means that the rankest kind of a phony will give you the best end of it once in a while.”

Mr. Bloom strayed thoughtfully back to the captain, and stood meditating.

“Ought to be in sight of the spires and gilded domes of Skyland now in a few minutes,” chirruped MacFarland, shaking with enjoyment.

“Go to the devil,” said Mr. Bloom, still pensive.

And now, upon the left bank, they caught a glimpse of a white village, high up on the hills, smothered among green trees. That was Cold Branch—no boom town, but the slow growth of many years. Cold Branch lay on the edge of the grape and corn lands. The big country road ran just back of the heights. Cold Branch had nothing in common with the frisky ambition of Okochee with its impertinent lake.

“Mac,” said J. Pinkney suddenly, “I want you to stop at Cold Branch. There’s a landing there that they made to use sometimes when the river was up.”

“Can’t,” said the captain, grinning more broadly. “I’ve got the United States mails on board. Right to-day this boat’s in the government service. Do you want to have the poor old captain keelhauled by Uncle Sam? And the great city of Skyland, all disconsolate, waiting for its mail? I’m ashamed of your extravagance, J. P.”

“Mac,” almost whispered J. Pinkney, in his danger-line voice, “I looked into the engine room of the Dixie Belle a while ago. Don’t you know of somebody that needs a new boiler? Cement and black Japan can’t hide flaws from me. And then, those shares of building and loan that you traded for repairs—they were all yours, of course. I hate to mention these things, but—”

“Oh, come now, J. P.,” said the captain. “You know I was just fooling. I’ll put you off at Cold Branch, if you say so.”

“The other passengers get off there, too,” said Mr. Bloom.

Further conversation was held, and in ten minutes the Dixie Belle turned her nose toward a little, cranky wooden pier on the left bank, and the captain, relinquishing the wheel to a roustabout, came to the passenger deck and made the remarkable announcement: “All out for Skyland.”

The Blaylocks and J. Pinkney Bloom disembarked, and the Dixie Belle proceeded on her way up the lake. Guided by the indefatigable promoter, they slowly climbed the steep hillside, pausing often to rest and admire the view. Finally they entered the village of Cold Branch. Warmly both the Colonel and his wife praised it for its homelike and peaceful beauty. Mr. Bloom conducted them to a two-story building on a shady street that bore the legend, “Pinetop Inn.” Here he took his leave, receiving the cordial thanks of the two for his attentions, the Colonel remarking that he thought they would spend the remainder of the day in rest, and take a look at his purchase on the morrow.

J.Pinkney Bloom walked down Cold Branch’s main street. He did not know this town, but he knew towns, and his feet did not falter. Presently he saw a sign over a door: “Frank E. Cooly, Attorney-at-Law and Notary Public.” A young man was Mr. Cooly, and awaiting business.

“Get your hat, son,” said Mr. Bloom, in his breezy way, “and a blank deed, and come along. It’s a job for you.”

“Now,” he continued, when Mr. Cooly had responded with alacrity, “is there a bookstore in town?”

“One,” said the lawyer. “Henry Williams’s.”

“Get there,” said Mr. Bloom. “We’re going to buy it.”

Henry Williams was behind his counter. His store was a small one, containing a mixture of books, stationery, and fancy rubbish. Adjoining it was Henry’s home—a decent cottage, vine-embowered and cosy. Henry was lank and soporific, and not inclined to rush his business.

“I want to buy your house and store,” said Mr. Bloom. “I haven’t got time to dicker—name your price.”

“It’s worth eight hundred,” said Henry, too much dazed to ask more than its value.

“Shut that door,” said Mr. Bloom to the lawyer. Then he tore off his coat and vest, and began to unbutton his shirt.

“Wanter fight about it, do yer?” said Henry Williams, jumping up and cracking his heels together twice. “All right, hunky—sail in and cut yer capers.”

“Keep your clothes on,” said Mr. Bloom. “I’m only going down to the bank.”

He drew eight one-hundred-dollar bills from his money belt and planked them down on the counter. Mr. Cooly showed signs of future promise, for he already had the deed spread out, and was reaching across the counter for the ink bottle. Never before or since was such quick action had in Cold Branch.

“Your name, please?” asked the lawyer.

“Make it out to Peyton Blaylock,” said Mr. Bloom. “God knows how to spell it.”

Within thirty minutes Henry Williams was out of business, and Mr. Bloom stood on the brick sidewalk with Mr. Cooly, who held in his hand the signed and attested deed.

“You’ll find the party at the Pinetop Inn,” said J. Pinkney Bloom. “Get it recorded, and take it down and give it to him. He’ll ask you a hell’s mint of questions; so here’s ten dollars for the trouble you’ll have in not being able to answer ‘em. Never run much to poetry, did you, young man?”

“Well,” said the really talented Cooly, who even yet retained his right mind, “now and then.”

“Dig into it,” said Mr. Bloom, “it’ll pay you. Never heard a poem, now, that run something like this, did you?—

A good thing out of Nazareth Comes up sometimes, I guess, On hand, all right, to help and cheer A sucker in distress.”

“I believe not,” said Mr. Cooly.

“It’s a hymn,” said J. Pinkney Bloom. “Now, show me the way to a livery stable, son, for I’m going to hit the dirt road back to Okochee.”