

# "Next to Reading Matter."

By O. HENRY.

HE compelled my interest as he stepped from the ferry at Desbrosses-street. He had the air of being familiar with hemispheres and worlds, and of entering New York as the lord of a demesne who revisited it after years of absence. But I thought that with all his air, he had never before set foot on the slippery cobblestones of the City of Too Many Canals.

He wore loose clothes of a strange bluish-drab colour, and a conservative, round, Panama hat without the cock-a-hoop indentations and cants with which Northern fanciers disfigure the tropic head-gear. Moreover, he was the homeliest man I have ever seen. His ugliness was less repellent than startling—arising from a sort of Lincolnian ruggedness and irregularity of feature that spellbound you with wonder and dismay. So may have looked arites or the shapes metamorphosed from the vapour of the fisherman's vase. As he afterward told me, his name was Judson Tate; and he may as well be called so at once. He wore his green silk tie

listen to such a world-old hypothesis—to such a time-worn, long-ago-refuted, bald, feeble, illogical, vicious, patent sophistry—to an ancient, baseless, wearisome, ragged, unfounded, insidious falsehood originated by women themselves, and by them insinuated, foisted, thrust, spread, and ingeniously promulgated into the ears of mankind by underhanded, secret, and deceptive methods, for the purpose of augmenting, furthering, and reinforcing their own charms and designs.

"Oh, I don't know!" said I vernacularly.

"Have you ever heard of Oratama?" he asked.

"Possibly," I answered. "I seem to recall a toe dancer—or a suburban addition—or was it a perfume?—of some such name."

"It is a town," said Judson Tate, "on the coast of a foreign country of which you know nothing and could understand less. It is a country governed by a dictator and controlled by revolutions and insubordination. It was there that a great life-drama was played, with my-

of interest anywhere between the colour line and the parallels of latitude. It was three throws, horses, whether he was to wind up in the Hall of Fame or the Bureau of Combustibles. He'd have been sure called the Roosevelt of the Southern Continent if it hadn't been that Grover Cleveland was President at the time. He'd hold office a couple of terms, then he'd sit out for a hand—always after appointing his own successor for the interim.

"But it was not Benavides, the Liberator, who was making all this fame for himself. Not him. It was Judson Tate. Benavides was only the chip over the bug. I gave him the tip when to declare war and increase import duties and wear his state trousers. But that wasn't what I wanted to tell you. How did I get to be it? I'll tell you. Because I'm the most gifted talker that ever made vocal sounds since Adam first opened his eyes, pushed aside the smelting-salts, and asked: 'Where am I?'"

"As you observe, I am about the ugliest man you ever saw outside of the gallery of photographs of the New England Early Christian Scientists. So, at an early age, I perceived that what I lacked in looks I must make up in eloquence. That I've done. I get what I go after. As the back-stop and still small voice of old Benavides I made all the great historical powers-behind-the-throne, such as Talleyrand, Mrs. de Pompadour, and Loeb, look as small as the minority report of a Duma. I could talk nations into or out of debt, harangue armies to sleep on the battlefield, reduce insurrections, inflammations, taxes, appropriations, or surpluses with a few words, and call up the dogs of war or the dove of peace with the same birdlike whistle. Beauty and epaulettes and curly mustaches and Grecian profiles in other men were never in my way. When people first look at me they shudder. Unless they are in the last stages of angina pectoris they are mine in ten minutes after I begin to talk. Women and men—I win 'em as they come. Now, you wouldn't think women would fancy a man with a face like mine, would you?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Tate," said I. "History is bright and fiction dull with homely men who have charmed women. There seems—"

"Pardon me," interrupted Judson Tate; "but you don't quite understand. You have yet to hear my story."

"Fergus McMahan was a friend of mine in the capital. For handsome man I'll admit he was the duty-free merchandise. He had blonde curls and laughing blue eyes and was featured regular. They said he was a ringer for the statue they call Her Mees, the god of speech and eloquence resting in some museum at Rome. Some German anarchist, I suppose. They are always resting and talking."

"But Fergus was no talker. He was brought up with the idea that to be beautiful was to make good. His conversation was about as edifying as listening to a leak dropping in a tin dish-pan at the head of the bed when you want to go to sleep. But he and me got to be friends—maybe because we was so opposite, don't you think? Looking at the Halloween mask that I call my face when I'm shaving seemed to give Fergus pleasure; and I'm sure that whenever I heard the feeble output of throat noises that he called conversation I felt contented to be a gargoyle with a silver tongue."

"One time I found it necessary to go down to this coast town of Oratama to straighten out a lot of political unrest and chop off a few heads in the customs and military departments. Fergus, who owned the ice and sulphur-march concessions of the republic, says he'll keep me company."

"So, in a jangle of male-train bells, we gallops into Oratama, and the town belonged to us as much as Long Island South doesn't belong to Japan when I.B. is at Oyster Bay. I say us; but I mean me. Everybody for four nations, two oceans, one bay and isthmus, and five archipelagoes around had heard of Judson Tate, God-blessed adventurer, they called me. I had been written up in five columns of the yellow journal's 4,000 words (with marginal decorations), in a monthly magazine, and a stickler on the twelfth page of the New York Times. If the beauty of Fergus McMan gamed any part of our reception in Oratama, I'll eat the price-tag in my Panama. It was me that they hung out paper flowers and palm branches for. I am not a jealous man; I am stating facts. The people were Nebuchadnezzars; they hit

the grass before me; there was no ~~dead~~ in the town for them to bite. They bowed down to Judson Tate. They knew that I was the power behind Sancho Benavides. A word from me was more to them than a whole deckle-edged library from East Aurora in sectional bookcases was from anybody else. And yet there are people who spend hours fixing their faces—rubbing in cold cream and massaging the muscles (always toward the eyes) and taking in the slack with tincture of benzoin, and electrolyzing moles—to what end? Looking handsome. Oh, what a mistake! It's the larynx that the beauty doctors ought to work on. It's words more than works, talk more than talcum, player more than powder, blarney more than bloom that counts—the phonograph instead of the photograph. But I was going to tell you."

"The local Harry-lehra put me and Fergus up at the Centipede Club, a frame building built on posts sunk in the surf. The tide's only nine inches. The Little Big High Low Jack-in-the-game of the town came round and kowtowed. Oh, it wasn't to Herr Mees. They had heard about Judson Tate."

"One afternoon me and Fergus McMahan was sitting on the seaward gallery of the Centipede, drinking iced rum and talking."

"Judson," says Fergus, "there's an angel in Oratama."

"So long," says I, "as it ain't Gabriel, why talk as if you had heard a trump blow?"

"It's the Senorita Anabela Zamora," says Fergus. "She—she—she's as lovely as—ah hell!"

"Bravo!" says I, laughing heartily. "You have a true lover's eloquence to point the beauties of your innamorata. You remind me," says I, "of Faust's wooing of Marguerite—that is, if he wooed her after he went down the trap-door of the stage."

"Judson," says Fergus, "you know you are as beautiful as a rhinoceros. You can't have any interest in women, I'm awfully gone on Miss Anabela. And that's why I'm telling you."

"Oh, seguramente," says I. "I know I have a front elevation like an Aztec god that guards a buried treasure that never did exist in Jefferson County, Yucatan. But there are compensations. For instance, I am it in this country as far as the eye can reach, and then a few perches and poles. And again," says I, "when I engage people in a scint of oral, vocal, and laryngeal utterances, I do not usually conceal my side of the argument to what may be likened to a cheap photographic reproduction of the ravings of a jellyfish."

"Oh, I know," says Fergus, amiably, "that I'm not handy at small talk. Or large either. That's why I'm telling you. I want you to help me."

"How can I do it?" I asked. "I have subsidized," says Fergus, "the serfless of Senorita Anabela's duenna, whose name is Francesa. You have a reputation in this country. Judson," says Fergus, "of being a great man and a hero."

"I have," says I. "And I deserve it." "And I," says Fergus, "am the best looking man between the arctic circle and the antarctic ice pack."

"With limitations," says I, "as to physiognomy and geography, I freely concede you to be."

"Between the two of us," says Fergus, "we ought to land the Senorita Anabela Zamora. This July, as



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through a topaz ring; and he carried a cane made of the vertebrae of a shark.

Judson Tate accosted me with some large and casual inquiries about the city's streets and hotels, in the manner of one who had but for the moment forgotten the trifling details. I could think of no reason for dispraising my own quiet hotel in the down-town district; so the mid-morning of the night found us already victualled and drinked (at my expense), and ready to be chaired and tobaccoed in a quiet corner of the lobby.

There was something in Judson Tate's mind, and, such as it was, he tried to convey it to me. Already he had accepted me as his friend; and when I looked at his great snuff-brown, first-mate's hand, with which he brought emphasis to his periods, within six inches of my nose, I wondered if, by any chance, he was as sudden in convincing enmity against strangers.

When this man began to talk I perceived in him a certain power. His voice was a persuasive instrument upon which he played with a somewhat species but effective art. He did not try to make you forget his ugliness; he flouted it in your face and made it part of the charm of his speech. Shutting your eyes, you would have trailed after this rat-chatter's pipes at least to the walls of Hameln. Beyond that you would have had to be more childish to follow. But let him play his own tune to the words set down, so that it all is too dull, the art of music may bear the blame.

"Women," said Judson Tate, "are mysterious creatures."

My spirits sank. I was not there to

self, Judson Tate, the homeliest man in America, and Fergus McMahan, the handsomest adventurer in history or fiction, and Senorita Anabela Zamora, the beautiful daughter of the alcalde of Oratama, as chief actors. And, another thing—nowhere else on the globe except in the department of Treinta y tres in Uruguay does the chubula plant grow. The products of the country I speak of are valuable woods, dyestuffs, gold, rubber, ivory, and cocoa."

"I was not aware," said I, "that South America produced any ivory."

"There you are twice mistaken," said Judson Tate, distributing the words over at least an octave of his wonderful voice. "I did not say that the country I spoke of was in South America—I must be careful, my dear man; I have been in politics there, you know. But, even so—I have played chess against its president with a set carved from the nasal bones of the tapir—one of our perissodactyl ungulates, inhabiting the native specimens of the order of Corderillas—which was as pretty ivory as you would care to see."

"But it was of romance and adventure and the ways of woman that I was going to tell you, and not of zoological animals."

"For fifteen years I was the ruling power behind old Sancho Benavides, the Royal High Thumbscrew of the republic. You've seen his picture in the papers—a mushy black man with whiskers like the notes on a Swiss music-box cylinder, and a scroll in his right hand like the ones they write births on in the family Bible. Well, that chocolate potentate used to be the biggest item



The alcalde leads me up to Anabela.

you know, is of an old know, is of an old Spanish family, and further than looking at her driving in the family carriage of afternoons around the plaza, or catching a glimpse of her through a barred window of evenings, she is as unapproachable as a star."

"And her for which one of us?" says I.

"For me, of course," says Fergus.