

A Poor Rule

O Henry

I have always maintained, and asserted ime to time, that woman is no mystery; that man can foretell, construe, subdue, comprehend, and interpret her. That she is a mystery has been foisted by herself upon credulous mankind. Whether I am right or wrong we shall see. As "Harper's Drawer" used to say in bygone years: "The following good story is told of Miss --, Mr. --, Mr. --and Mr. --."

We shall have to omit "Bishop X" and "the Rev. --," for they do not belong.

In those days Paloma was a new town on the line of the Southern Pacific. A reporter would have called it a "mushroom" town; but it was not. Paloma was, first and last, of the toadstool variety.

The train stopped there at noon for the engine to drink and for the passengers both to drink and to dine. There was a new yellow-pine hotel, also a wool warehouse, and perhaps three dozen box residences. The rest was composed of tents, cow ponies, "black-waxy" mud, and mesquite-trees, all bound round by a horizon. Paloma was an about-to- be city. The houses represented faith; the tents hope; the twice-a- day train by which you might leave, creditably sustained the role of charity.

The Parisian Restaurant occupied the muddiest spot in the town while it rained, and the warmest when it shone. It was operated, owned, and perpetrated by a citizen known as Old Man Hinkle, who had come out of Indiana to make his fortune in this land of condensed milk and sorghum.

There was a four-room, unpainted, weather-boarded box house in which the family lived. From the kitchen extended a "shelter" made of poles covered with chaparral brush. Under this was a table and two benches, each twenty feet long, the product of Paloma home carpentry. Here was set forth the roast mutton, the stewed apples, boiled beans, soda-biscuits, puddinorpie, and hot coffee of the Parisian menu.

Ma Hinkle and a subordinate known to the ears as "Betty," but denied to the eyesight, presided at the range. Pa Hinkle himself, with salamandrous thumbs, served the scalding viands. During rush hours a Mexican youth, who rolled and smoked cigarettes between courses, aided him in waiting on the guests. As is customary at Parisian banquets, I place the sweets at the end of my wordy menu.

Ileen Hinkle!

The spelling is correct, for I have seen her write it. No doubt she had been named by ear; but she so splendidly bore the orthography that Tom Moore himself (had he seen her) would have indorsed the phonography.

Ileen was the daughter of the house, and the first Lady Cashier to invade the territory south of an east-and-west line drawn through Galveston and Del Rio. She sat on a high stool in a

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rough pine grand-stand--or was it a temple?--under the shelter at the door of the kitchen. There was a barbed-wire protection in front of her, with a little arch under which you passed your money. Heaven knows why the barbed wire; for every man who dined Parisianly there would have died in her service. Her duties were light; each meal was a dollar; you put it under the arch, and she took it.

I set out with the intent to describe Ileen Hinkle to you. Instead, I must refer you to the volume by Edmund Burke entitled: *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. It is an exhaustive treatise, dealing first with the primitive conceptions of beauty--roundness and smoothness, I think they are, according to Burke. It is well said. Rotundity is a patent charm; as for smoothness--the more new wrinkles a woman acquires, the smoother she becomes.

Ileen was a strictly vegetable compound, guaranteed under the Pure Ambrosia and Balm-of-Gilead Act of the year of the fall of Adam. She was a fruit-stand blonde-strawberries, peaches, cherries, etc. Her eyes were wide apart, and she possessed the calm that precedes a storm that never comes. But it seems to me that words (at any rate per) are wasted in an effort to describe the beautiful. Like fancy, "It is engendered in the eyes." There are three kinds of beauties--I was foreordained to be homiletic; I can never stick to a story.

The first is the freckle-faced, snub-nosed girl whom you like. The second is Maud Adams. The third is, or are, the ladies in Bouguereau's paintings. Ileen Hinkle was the fourth. She was the mayoress of Spotless Town. There were a thousand golden apples coming to her as Helen of the Troy laundries.

The Parisian Restaurant was within a radius. Even from beyond its circumference men rode in to Paloma to win her smiles. They got them. One meal--one smile--one dollar. But, with all her impartiality, Ileen seemed to favor three of her admirers above the rest. According to the rules of politeness, I will mention myself last.

The first was an artificial product known as Bryan Jacks--a name that had obviously met with reverses. Jacks was the outcome of paved cities. He was a small man made of some material resembling flexible sandstone. His hair was the color of a brick Quaker meeting-house; his eyes were twin cranberries; his mouth was like the aperture under a drop-letters-here sign.

He knew every city from Bangor to San Francisco, thence north to Portland, thence S. 45 E. to a given point in Florida. He had mastered every art, trade, game, business, profession, and sport in the world, had been present at, or hurrying on his way to, every head-line event that had ever occurred between oceans since he was five years old. You might open the atlas, place your finger at random upon the name of a town, and Jacks would tell you the front names of three prominent citizens before you could close it again. He spoke patronizingly and even disrespectfully of Broadway, Beacon Hill, Michigan, Euclid, and Fifth avenues, and the St. Louis Four Courts. Compared with him as a cosmopolite, the Wandering Jew would have seemed a mere hermit. He had learned everything the world could teach him, and he would tell you about it.

I hate to be reminded of Pollock's Course of Time, and so do you; but every time I saw Jacks I would think of the poet's description of another poet by the name of G. G. Byron

who "Drank early; deeply drank--drank draughts that common millions might have quenched; then died of thirst because there was no more to drink."

That fitted Jacks, except that, instead of dying, he came to Paloma, which was about the same thing. He was a telegrapher and station- and express-agent at seventy-five dollars a month. Why a young man who knew everything and could do everything was content to serve in such an obscure capacity I never could understand, although he let out a hint once that it was as a personal favor to the president and stockholders of the S. P. Ry. Co.

One more line of description, and I turn Jacks over to you. He wore bright blue clothes, yellow shoes, and a bow tie made of the same cloth as his shirt.

My rival No.2 was Bud Cunningham, whose services had been engaged by a ranch near Paloma to assist in compelling refractory cattle to keep within the bounds of decorum and order. Bud was the only cowboy off the stage that I ever saw who looked like one on it. He wore the sombrero, the chaps, and the handkerchief tied at the back of his neck.

Twice a week Bud rode in from the Val Verde Ranch to sup at the Parisian Restaurant. He rode a many-high-handed Kentucky horse at a tremendously fast lope, which animal he would rein up so suddenly under the big mesquite at the corner of the brush shelter that his hoofs would plough canals yards long in the loam.

Jacks and I were regular boarders at the restaurant, of course.

The front room of the Hinkle House was as neat a little parlor as there was in the black-waxy country. It was all willow rocking- chairs, and home-knit tidies, and albums, and conch shells in a row. And a little upright piano in one corner.

Here Jacks and Bud and I--or sometimes one or two of us, according to our good-luck--used to sit of evenings when the tide of trade was over, and "visit" Miss Hinkle.

Ileen was a girl of ideas. She was destined for higher things (if there can be anything higher) than taking in dollars all day through a barbed-wire wicket. She had read and listened and thought. Her looks would have formed a career for a less ambitious girl; but, rising superior to mere beauty, she must establish something in the nature of a salon--the only one in Paloma.

"Don't you think that Shakespeare was a great writer?" she would ask, with such a pretty little knit of her arched brows that the late Ignatius Donnelly, himself, had he seen it, could scarcely have saved his Bacon.

Ileen was of the opinion, also, that Boston is more cultured than Chicago; that Rosa Bonheur was one of the greatest of women painters; that Westerners are more spontaneous and open-hearted than Easterners; that London must be a very foggy city, and that California must be quite lovely in the springtime. And of many other opinions indicating a keeping up with the world's best thought.

These, however, were but gleaned from hearsay and evidence: Ileen had theories of her own. One, in particular, she disseminated to us untiringly. Flattery she detested. Frankness

and honesty of speech and action, she declared, were the chief mental ornaments of man and woman. If ever she could like any one, it would be for those qualities.

"I'm awfully weary," she said, one evening, when we three musketeers of the mesquite were in the little parlor, "of having compliments on my looks paid to me. I know I'm not beautiful."

(Bud Cunningham told me afterward that it was all he could do to keep from calling her a liar when she said that.)

"I'm only a little Middle-Western girl," went on Ileen, "who just wants to be simple and neat, and tries to help her father make a humble living."

(Old Man Hinkle was shipping a thousand silver dollars a month, clear profit, to a bank in San Antonio.[]]

Bud twisted around in his chair and bent the rim of his hat, from which he could never be persuaded to separate. He did not know whether she wanted what she said she wanted or what she knew she deserved. Many a wiser man has hesitated at deciding. Bud decided.

"Why--ah, Miss Ileen, beauty, as you might say, ain't everything. Not sayin' that you haven't your share of good looks, I always admired more than anything else about you the nice, kind way you treat your ma and pa. Any one what's good to their parents and is a kind of home- body don't specially need to be too pretty."

Ileen gave him one of her sweetest smiles. "Thank you, Mr. Cunningham," she said. "I consider that one of the finest compliments I've had in a long time. I'd so much rather hear you say that than to hear you talk about my eyes and hair. I'm glad you believe me when I say I don't like flattery."

Our cue was there for us. Bud had made a good guess. You couldn't lose Jacks. He chimed in next.

"Sure thing, Miss Ileen," he said; "the good-lookers don't always win out. Now, you ain't bad looking, of course-but that's nix-cum-rous. I knew a girl once in Dubuque with a face like a cocoanut, who could skin the cat twice on a horizontal bar without changing hands. Now, a girl might have the California peach crop mashed to a marmalade and not be able to do that. I've seen--er--worse lookers than you, Miss Ileen; but what I like about you is the business way you've got of doing things. Cool and wise--that's the winning way for a girl. Mr. Hinkle told me the other day you'd never taken in a lead silver dollar or a plugged one since you've been on the job. Now, that's the stuff for a girl--that's what catches me."

Jacks got his smile, too.

"Thank you, Mr. Jacks," said Ileen. "If you only knew how I appreciate any one's being candid and not a flatterer! I get so tired of people telling me I'm pretty. I think it is the loveliest thing to have friends who tell you the truth."

Then I thought I saw an expectant look on Ileen's face as she glanced toward me. I had a

wild, sudden impulse to dare fate, and tell her of all the beautiful handiwork of the Great Artificer she was the most exquisite--that she was a flawless pearl gleaming pure and serene in a setting of black mud and emerald prairies--that she was--a--a corker; and as for mine, I cared not if she were as cruel as a serpent's tooth to her fond parents, or if she couldn't tell a plugged dollar from a bridle buckle, if I might sing, chant, praise, glorify, and worship her peerless and wonderful beauty.

But I refrained. I feared the fate of a flatterer. I had witnessed her delight at the crafty and discreet words of Bud and Jacks. No! Miss Hinkle was not one to be beguiled by the plated-silver tongue of a flatterer. So I joined the ranks of the candid and honest. At once I became mendacious and didactic.

"In all ages, Miss Hinkle," said I, "in spite of the poetry and romance of each, intellect in woman has been admired more than beauty. Even in Cleopatra, herself, men found more charm in her queenly mind than in her looks."

"Well, I should think so!" said Ileen. "I've seen pictures of her that weren't so much. she had an awfully long nose."

"If I may say so," I went on, "you remind me of Cleopatra, Miss Ileen."

"Why, my nose isn't so long!" said she, opening her eyes wide and touching that comely feature with a dimpled forefinger.

"Why--er--I mean," said I--" I mean as to mental endowments."

"Oh!" said she; and then I got my smile just as Bud and Jacks had got theirs.

"Thank every one of you," she said, very, very sweetly, "for being so frank and honest with me. That's the way I want you to be always. Just tell me plainly and truthfully what you think, and we'll all be the best friends in the world. And now, because you've been so good to me, and understand so well how I dislike people who do nothing but pay me exaggerated compliments, I'll sing and play a little for you."

Of course, we expressed our thanks and joy; but we would have been better pleased if Ileen had remained in her low rocking-chair face to face with us and let us gaze upon her. For she was no Adelina Patti-- not even on the fare-wellest of the diva's farewell tours. She had a cooing little voice like that of a turtle-dove that could almost fill the parlor when the windows and doors were closed, and Betty was not rattling the lids of the stove in the kitchen. She had a gamut that I estimate at about eight inches on the piano; and her runs and trills sounded like the clothes bubbling in your grandmother's iron wash-pot. Believe that she must have been beautiful when I tell you that it sounded like music to us.

"She Must Have Been Beautiful When I Tell You That It Sounded Like Music To Us"

Ileen's musical taste was catholic. She would sing through a pile of sheet music on the left-hand top of the piano, laying each slaughtered composition on the right-hand top. The next evening she would sing from right to left. Her favorites were Mendelssohn, and Moody and Sankey. By request she always wound up with Sweet Violets and When the Leaves Begin to

Turn.

When we left at ten o'clock the three of us would go down to Jacks' little wooden station and sit on the platform, swinging our feet and trying to pump one another for dews as to which way Miss Ileen's inclinations seemed to lean. That is the way of rivals--they do not avoid and glower at one another; they convene and converse and construe--striving by the art politic to estimate the strength of the enemy.

One day there came a dark horse to Paloma, a young lawyer who at once flaunted his shingle and himself spectacularly upon the town. His name was C. Vincent Vesey. You could see at a glance that he was a recent graduate of a southwestern law school. His Prince Albert coat, light striped trousers, broad-brimmed soft black hat, and narrow white muslin bow tie proclaimed that more loudly than any diploma could. Vesey was a compound of Daniel Webster, Lord Chesterfield, Beau Brummell, and Little Jack Horner. His coming boomed Paloma. The next day after he arrived an addition to the town was surveyed and laid off in lots.

Of course, Vesey, to further his professional fortunes, must mingle with the citizenry and outliers of Paloma. And, as well as with the soldier men, he was bound to seek popularity with the gay dogs of the place. So Jacks and Bud Cunningham and I came to be honored by his acquaintance.

The doctrine of predestination would have been discredited had not Vesey seen Ileen Hinkle and become fourth in the tourney. Magnificently, he boarded at the yellow pine hotel instead of at the Parisian Restaurant; but he came to be a formidable visitor in the Hinkle parlor. His competition reduced Bud to an inspired increase of profanity, drove Jacks to an outburst of slang so weird that it sounded more horrible than the most trenchant of Bud's imprecations, and made me dumb with gloom.

For Vesey had the rhetoric. Words flowed from him like oil from a gusher. Hyperbole, compliment, praise, appreciation, honeyed gallantry, golden opinions, eulogy, and unveiled panegyric vied with one another for pre-eminence in his speech. We had small hopes that Ileen could resist his oratory and Prince Albert.

But a day came that gave us courage.

About dusk one evening I was sitting on the little gallery in front of the Hinkle parlor, waiting for Ileen to come, when I heard voices inside. She had come into the room with her father, and Old Man Hinkle began to talk to her. I had observed before that he was a shrewd man, and not unphilosophic.

"Ily," said he, "I notice there's three or four young fellers that have been callin' to see you regular for quite a while. Is there any one of 'em you like better than another?"

"Why, pa," she answered, "I like all of 'em very well. I think Mr. Cuninngham and Mr. Jacks and Mr. Harris are very nice young men. They are so frank and honest in everything they say to me. I haven't known Mr. Vesey very long, but I think he's a very nice young man, he's so frank and honest in everything he says to me."

"Now, that's what I'm gittin' at," says old Hinkle. "You've always been sayin' you like people what tell the truth and don't go humbuggin' you with compliments and bogus talk. Now, suppose you make a test of these fellers, and see which one of 'em will talk the straightest to you."

"But how'll I do it, pa?"

"I'll tell you how. You know you sing a little bit, Ily; you took music-lessons nearly two years in Logansport. It wasn't long, but it was all we could afford then. And your teacher said you didn't have any voice, and it was a waste of money to keep on. Now, suppose you ask the fellers what they think of your singin', and see what each one of 'em tells you. The man that 'll tell you the truth about it 'll have a mighty lot of nerve, and 'll do to tie to. What do you think of the plan?"

"All right, pa," said Ileen. "I think it's a good idea. I'll try it."

Ileen and Mr. Hinkle went out of the room through the inside doors. Unobserved, I hurried down to the station. Jacks was at his telegraph table waiting for eight o'clock to come. It was Bud's night in town, and when he rode in I repeated the conversation to them both. I was loyal to my rivals, as all true admirers of all Ileens should be.

Simultaneously the three of us were smitten by an uplifting thought. Surely this test would eliminate Vesey from the contest. He, with his unctuous flattery, would be driven from the lists. Well we remembered Ileen's love of frankness and honesty--how she treasured truth and candor above vain compliment and blandishment.

Linking arms, we did a grotesque dance of joy up and down the platform, singing Muldoon Was a Solid Man at the top of our voices.

That evening four of the willow rocking-chairs were filled besides the lucky one that sustained the trim figure of Miss Hinkle. Three of us awaited with suppressed excitement the application of the test. It was tried on Bud first.

"Mr. Cunningham," said Ileen, with her dazzling smile, after she had sung When the Leaves Begin to Turn, "what do you really think of my voice? Frankly and honestly, now, as you know I want you to always be toward me."

Bud squirmed in his chair at his chance to show the sincerity that he knew was required of him.

"Tell you the truth, Miss Ileen," he said, earnestly, "you ain't got much more voice than a weasel--just a little squeak, you know. Of course, we all like to hear you sing, for it's kind of sweet and soothin' after all, and you look most as mighty well sittin' on the piano-stool as you do faced around. But as for real singin'--I reckon you couldn't call it that."

I looked closely at Ileen to see if Bud had overdone his frankness, but her pleased smile and sweetly spoken thanks assured me that we were on the right track.

"And what do you think, Mr. Jacks?" she asked next. "Take it from me," said Jacks, "you

ain't in the prima donna class. I've heard 'em warble in every city in the United States; and I tell you your vocal output don't go. Otherwise, you've got the grand opera bunch sent to the soap factory--in looks, I mean; for the high screechers generally look like Mary Ann on her Thursday out. But nix for the gargle work. Your epiglottis ain't a real side-stepper--its footwork ain't good."

With a merry laugh at Jacks' criticism, Ileen looked inquiringly at me.

I admit that I faltered a little. Was there not such a thing as being too frank? Perhaps I even hedged a little in my verdict; but I stayed with the critics.

"I am not skilled in scientific music, Miss Ileen," I said, "but, frankly, I cannot praise very highly the singing-voice that Nature has given you. It has long been a favorite comparison that a great singer sings like a bird. Well, there are birds and birds. I would say that your voice reminds me of the thrush's--throaty and not strong, nor of much compass or variety--but still--er--sweet--in--er--its--way, and-- er--"

"Thank you, Mr. Harris," interrupted Miss Hinkle. "I knew I could depend Upon your frankness and honesty."

And then C. Vincent Vesey drew back one sleeve from his snowy cuff, and the water came down at Lodore.

My memory cannot do justice to his masterly tribute to that priceless, God-given treasure--Miss Hinkle's voice. He raved over it in terms that, if they had been addressed to the morning stars when they sang together, would have made that stellar choir explode in a meteoric shower of flaming self-satisfaction.

He marshalled on his white finger-tips the grand opera stars of all the continents, from Jenny Lind to Emma Abbott, only to depreciate their endowments. He spoke of larynxes, of chest notes, of phrasing, arpeggios, and other strange paraphernalia of the throaty art. He admitted, as though driven to a corner, that Jenny Lind had a note or two in the high register that Miss Hinkle had not yet acquired--but-- "!!!"--that was a mere matter of practice and training.

And, as a peroration, he predicted--solemnly predicted--a career in vocal art for the "coming star of the Southwest--and one of which grand old Texas may well be proud," hitherto unsurpassed in the annals of musical history.

When we left at ten, Ileen gave each of us her usual warm, cordial handshake, entrancing smile, and invitation to call again. I could not see that one was favored above or below another--but three of us knew--we knew.

We knew that frankness and honesty had won, and that the rivals now numbered three instead of four.

Down at the station Jacks brought out a pint bottle of the proper stuff, and we celebrated the downfall of a blatant interloper.

Four days went by without anything happening worthy of recount.

On the fifth, Jacks and I, entering the brush arbor for our supper, saw the Mexican youth, instead of a divinity in a spotless waist and a navy-blue skirt, taking in the dollars through the barbed-wire wicket.

We rushed into the kitchen, meeting Pa Hinkle coming out with two cups of hot coffee in his hands.

"Where's Ileen?" we asked, in recitative.

Pa Hinkle was a kindly man. "Well, gents," said he, "it was a sudden notion she took; but I've got the money, and I let her have her way. She's gone to a corn--a conservatory in Boston for four years for to have her voice cultivated. Now, excuse me to pass, gents, for this coffee's hot, and my thumbs is tender."

That night there were four instead of three of us sitting on the station platform and swinging our feet. C. Vincent Vesey was one of us. We discussed things while dogs barked at the moon that rose, as big as a five-cent piece or a flour barrel, over the chaparral.

And what we discussed was whether it is better to lie to a woman or to tell her the truth.

And as all of us were young then, we did not come to a decision.

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