

Sociology In Serge And Straw

O Henry

The season of irresponsibility is at hand. Come, let us twine round our brows wreaths of poison ivy (that is for idiocy), and wander hand in hand with sociology in the summer fields.

Likely as not the world is flat. The wise men have tried to prove that it is round, with indifferent success. They pointed out to us a ship going to sea, and bade us observe that, at length, the convexity of the earth hid from our view all but the vessel's topmast. But we picked up a telescope and looked, and saw the decks and hull again. Then the wise men said: "Oh, pshaw! anyhow, the variation of the intersection of the equator and the ecliptic proves it." We could not see this through our telescope, so we remained silent. But it stands to reason that, if the world were round, the queues of China-Men would stand straight up from their heads instead of hanging down their backs, as travellers assure us they do.

Another hot-weather corroboration of the flat theory is the fact that all of life, as we know it, moves in little, unavailing circles. More justly than to anything else, it can be likened to the game of baseball. Crack! we hit the ball, and away we go. If we earn a run (in life we call it success) we get back to the home plate and sit upon a bench. If we are thrown out, we walk back to the home plate -- and sit upon a bench.

The circumnavigators of the alleged globe may have sailed the rim of a watery circle back to the same port again. The truly great return at the high tide of their attainments to the simplicity of a child. The billionaire sits down at his mahogany to his bowl of bread and milk. When you reach the end of your career, just take down the sign "Goal" and look at the other side of it. You will find "Beginning Point" there. It has been reversed while you were going around the track.

But this is humour, and must be stopped. Let us get back to the serious questions that arise whenever Sociology turns summer boarder. You are invited to consider the scene of the story-wild, Atlantic waves, thundering against a wooded and rock-bound shore -- in the Greater City of New York.

The town of Fishampton, on the south shore of Long Island, is noted for its clam fritters and the summer residence of the Van Plushvelts.

The Van Plushvelts have a hundred million dollars, and their name is a household word with tradesmen and photographers.

On the fifteenth of June the Van Plushvelts boarded up the front door of their city house, carefully deposited their cat on the sidewalk, instructed the caretaker not to allow it to eat any of the ivy on the walls, and whizzed away in a 40-horse-power to Fishampton to stray alone the shade -- Amaryllis not being in their class. If a subscriber to the Toadies' Magazine, you have often -- You say you are not? Well, you buy it at a news-stand, thinking that the newsdealer is not wise to you. But he knows about it all. HE knows -- HE knows! I say that you have often seen in the Toadies' Magazine pictures of the Van

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Plushvelts' summer home; so it will not be described here. Our business is with young Haywood Van Plushvelt, sixteen years old, heir to the century of millions, darling of the financial gods and great grandson of Peter Van Plushvelt, former owner of a particularly fine cabbage patch that has been ruined by an intrusive lot of downtown skyscrapers.

One afternoon young Haywood Van Plushvelt strolled out between the granite gate posts of "Dolce far Niente" -- that's what they called the place; and it was an improvement on dolce Far Rockaway, I can tell you.

Haywood walked down into the village. He was human, after all, and his prospective millions weighed upon him. Wealth had wreaked upon him its direfullest. He was the product of private tutors. Even under his first hobby-horse had tan bark been strewn. He had been born with a gold spoon, lobster fork and fish-set in his mouth. For which I hope, later, to submit justification, I must ask your consideration of his haberdashery and tailoring.

Young Fortunatus was dressed in a neat suit of dark blue serge, a neat, white straw hat, neat low-cut tan shoes, of the well-known "immaculate" trade mark, a neat, narrow four-in-hand tie, and carried a slender, neat, bamboo cane.

Down Persimmon Street (there's never tree north of Hagerstown, Md.) came from the village "Smoky" Dodson, fifteen and a half, worst boy in Fishampton. "Smoky" was dressed in a ragged red sweater, wrecked and weather-worn golf cap, run-over shoes, and trousers of the "serviceable" brand. Dust, clinging to the moisture induced by free exercise, darkened wide areas of his face. "Smoky" carried a baseball bat, and a league ball that advertised itself in the rotundity of his trousers pocket. Haywood stopped and passed the time of day.

"Going to play ball?" he asked.

"Smoky's" eyes and countenance confronted him with a frank blue-and-freckled scrutiny.

"Me?" he said, with deadly mildness; "sure not. Can't you see I've got a divin' suit on? I'm goin' up in a submarine balloon to catch butterflies with a two-inch auger.

"Excuse me," said Haywood, with the insulting politeness of his caste, "for mistaking you for a gentleman. I might have known better."

"How might you have known better if you thought I was one?" said "Smoky," unconsciously a logician.

"By your appearances," said Haywood. "No gentleman is dirty, ragged and a liar."

"Smoky" hooted once like a ferry-boat, spat on his hand, got a firm grip on his baseball bat and then dropped it against the fence.

"Say," said he, "I knows you. You're the pup that belongs in that swell private summer sanitarium for city-guys over there. I seen you come out of the gate. You can't bluff nobody because you're rich. And because you got on swell clothes. Arabella! Yah!"

"Ragamuffin!" said Hay-wood.

"Smoky" picked up a fence-rail splinter and laid it on his shoulder.

"Dare you to knock it off," he challenged.

"I wouldn't soil my hands with you," said the aristocrat.

"'Fraid," said "Smoky" concisely. "Youse city-ducks ain't got the I sand. I kin lick you with one hand."

"I don't wish to have any trouble with you," said Haywood. "I asked you a civil question; and you replied, like a -- like a -- a cad."

"Wot's a cad?" asked "Smoky."

"A cad is a disagreeable person," answered Haywood, "who lacks manners and doesn't know his place. They, sometimes play baseball."

"I can tell you what a mollycoddle is," said "Smoky." "It's a monkey dressed up by its mother and sent out too pick daisies on the lawn."

"When you have the honour to refer to the members of my family," said Haywood, with some dim ideas of a code in his mind, "you'd better leave the ladies out of your remarks."

"Ho! ladies!" mocked the rude one. "I say ladies! I know what them rich women in the city does. They, drink cocktails and swear and give parties to gorillas. The papers says so."

Then Haywood knew that it must be. He took off his coat, folded it neatly and laid it on the roadside grass, placed his hat upon it and began to unknot his blue silk tie.

"Hadn't yer better ring fer yer maid, Arabella?" taunted "Smoky." "Wot yer going to do -- go to bed?"

"I'm going to give you a good trouncing," said the hero. He did not hesitate, although the enemy was far beneath him socially. He remembered that his father once thrashed a cabman, and the papers gave it two columns, first page. And the Toadies' Magazine had a special article on Upper Cuts by the Upper Classes, and ran new pictures of the Van Plushvelt country seat, at Fishampton.

"Wot's trouncing?" asked "Smoky," suspiciously. "I don't want your old clothes. I'm no -- oh, you mean to scrap! My, my! I won't do a thing to mamma's pet. Criminy! I'd hate to be a hand-laundered thing like you."

"Smoky" waited with some awkwardness for his adversary to prepare for battle. His own decks were always clear for action. When he should spit upon the palm of his terrible right it was equivalent to "You may fire now, Gridley."

The hated patrician advanced, with his shirt sleeves neatly rolled up. "Smoky" waited, in an

attitude of ease, expecting the affair to be conducted according to Fishampton's rules of war. These allowed combat to be prefaced by stigma, recrimination, epithet, abuse and insult gradually increasing in emphasis and degree. After a round of these "you're anothers" would come the chip knocked from the shoulder, or the advance across the "dare" line drawn with a toe on the ground. Next light taps given and taken, these also increasing in force until finally the blood was up and fists going at their best.

But Haywood did not know Fishampton's rules. Noblesse oblige kept a faint smile on his face as he walked slowly up to "Smoky" and said:

"Going to play ball?"

"Smoky" quickly understood this to be a putting of the previous question, giving him the chance to make practical apology by answering it with civility and relevance.

"Listen this time,' said he. 'I'm goin' skatin' on the river. Don't you see me automobile with Chinese lanterns on it standin' and waitin' for me?"

Haywood knocked him down.

"Smoky" felt wronged. To thus deprive him of preliminary wrangle and objurgation was to send an armoured knight full tilt against a crashing lance without permitting him first to caracole around the list to the flourish of trumpets. But he scrambled up and fell upon his foe, head, feet and fists.

The fight lasted one round of an hour and ten minutes. It was lengthened until it was more like a war or a family feud than a fight. Haywood had learned some of the science of boxing and wrestling from his tutors, but these he discarded for the more instinctive methods of battle handed down by the cave-dwelling Van Plushvelts.

So, when he found himself, during the mêlée, seated upon the kicking and roaring "Smoky's" chest, he improved the opportunity by vigorously kneading handfuls of sand and soil into his adversary's ears, eyes and mouth, and when "Smoky" got the proper leg hold and "turned" him, he fastened both hands in the Plushvelt hair and pounded the Plushvelt head against the lap of mother earth. Of course, the strife was not incessantly active. There were seasons when one sat upon the other, holding him down, while each blew like a grampus, spat out the more inconveniently large sections of gravel and strove to subdue the spirit of his opponent with a frightful and soul-paralyzing glare.

At last, it seemed that in the language of the ring, their efforts lacked steam. They broke away, and each disappeared in a cloud as he brushed away the dust of the conflict. As soon as his breath permitted, Haywood walked close to "Smoky" and said:

"Going to play ball?"

"Smoky" looked pensively at the sky, at his bat lying on the ground, and at the "leaguer" rounding his pocket.

"Sure," he said, offhandedly. "The 'Yellowjackets'" plays the 'Long Islands.' I'm cap'n of the

'Long Islands.'

"I guess I didn't mean to say you were ragged," said Haywood. "But you are dirty, you know."

"Sure," said "Smoky." "Yer get that way knockin' around. Say, I don't believe them New York papers about ladies drinkin' and havin' monkeys dinin' at the table with 'em. I guess they're lies, like they print about people eatin' out of silver plates, and ownin' dogs that cost \$100."

"Certainly," said Haywood. "What do you play on your team?"

"Ketcher. Ever play any?"

"Never in my life," said Haywood. "I've never known any fellows except one or two of my cousins."

"Jer like to learn? We're goin' to have a practice- game before the match. Wanter come along? I'll put yer in left-field, and yer won't be long ketchin' on."

"I'd like it bully," said Haywood. "I've alway wanted to play baseball."

The ladies' maids of New York and the families of Western mine owners with social ambitions will remember well the sensation that was created by the report that the young multi-millionaire, Haywood Van Plushvelt, was playing ball with the village youths of Fishampton. It was conceded that the millennium of democracy had come. Reporters and photographers swarmed to the island. The papers printed half-page pictures of him as short-stop stopping a hot grounder. The Toadies' Magazine got out a Bat and Ball number that covered the subject historically, beginning with the vampire bat and ending with the Patriarchs' ball -- illustrated with interior views of the Van Plushvelt country seat. Ministers, educators and sociologists everywhere hailed the event as the tocsin call that proclaimed the universal brotherhood of man.

One afternoon I was reclining under the trees near the shore at Fishampton in the esteemed company of an eminent, bald-headed young sociologist. By way of note it may be inserted that all sociologists are more or less bald, and exactly thirty-two. Look 'em over.

The sociologist was citing the Van Plushvelt case as the most important "uplift" symptom of a generation, and as an excuse for his own existence.

Immediately before us were the village baseball grounds. And now came the sportive youth of Fishampton and distributed themselves, shouting, about the diamond. "There," said the sociologist, pointing, "there is young Van Plushvelt."

I raised myself (so far a cosycophant with Mary Ann) and gazed.

Young Van Plushvelt sat upon the ground. He was dressed in a ragged red sweater, wrecked and weather- worn golf cap, run-over shoes, and trousers of the "serviceable" brand. Dust clinging to the moisture induced by free exercise, darkened wide areas of his face.

"That is he," repeated the sociologist. If he had said "him" I could have been less vindictive.

On a bench, with an air, sat the young millionaire's chum.

He was dressed in a neat suit of dark blue serge, a neat white straw hat, neat low-cut tan shoes, linen of the well-known "immaculate" trade mark, a neat, narrow four-in-hand tie, and carried a- slender, neat bamboo cane.

I laughed loudly and vulgarly.

"What you want to do," said I to the sociologist, "is to establish a reformatory for the Logical Vicious Circle. Or else I've got wheels. It looks to me as if things are running round and round in circles instead of getting anywhere."

"What do you mean?" asked the man of progress.

"Why, look what he has done to "Smoky," I replied.

"You will always be a fool," said my friend, the sociologist, getting up and walking away.

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