

A DAY OUT OF TOWN

By Walter Prichard Eaton.

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HOLLISTER'S "spiritual adventure" began some time between two o'clock and morning of a hot June night. Hollister had retired at two, after a vain attempt to rewrite a story which had just come back to him from yet another magazine. Working half the night for a newspaper and rising after insufficient sleep to toil at stories, poems, essays, plays, week in and week out, is not a healthful mode of life for a sensitive, high-strung young man who was brought up to open air and exercise; especially when the stories, poems, plays are systematically rejected and a faltering faith in oneself has to be lashed constantly. In Hollister the symptoms had been growing recently, till even he, prodigal of his youth was beginning to be alarmed—sleeplessness, a constant twitching of the muscles, worst of all, a pessimism that would not be shaken off. He lay in bed on this particular night filled with unutterable gloom about his own powers, his own future, and tried to keep the tired fingers of his right hand from twitching. The bedroom was insufferably hot. Outside wagons rattled past, flat-wheeled cars on the avenue a block away sent jarring echoes down the side street, distant ferryboat whistles tooted without success. He could not seal his ears to these noises. They vexed, then maddened him. After one wagon had rattled past and the echoes died, he waited, every nerve in his body quivering, till the next one came. He was almost in hysterical tears when an auto horn honked under his window. Hollister gave a cry like a snarl, and found himself out of bed on his feet. He dressed and went out. How long he tramped he did not know. Presently he was crossing Madison square and there was a strong hint of dawn in the east. In the middle of Fifth Avenue the Flatiron Building arrested his attention. Never had it seemed so like a great, proud snip, towing lower Broadway northward, as in this strange half light, when its western side was in heavy shadow and its eastern flushed with morning. Hollister stood spellbound by its beauty. Tired and nerve-racked as he was, perhaps, as he watched the thing seemed to stir and move; the great towering prow to lift into the air as on a mighty wave and to be poised for a plunge directly at him, a pygmy in its path. At the same instant an auto horn honked a sudden, sharp, unexpected warning behind him. With a cry of terror Hollister sprang across the asphalt, across Broadway, falling up against a pillar of the Hoffman House.

He leaned there a moment panting and trying to steady his shaking nerves before he observed that he was not alone. Shrinking into the shadow behind the column was a woman. There was no reason why he should speak, why he should not move away. But, from some impulse, he said, "I'm not crazy, please." Then he was angry for having spoken.

The woman moved out a little into the light, and they regarded each other. She was young and well dressed, in the prevailing fashion of the Rialto. But there was paint on her cheeks, a ghastly pink now in the dawn light, and her eyes looked heavy, tired, and full of trouble.

"I thought at first somebody was chasing you," she said. "But I didn't see anybody."

"It was only the Flatiron Building," said Hollister with a laugh. "That puzzles you? Just a case of nerves. It looked so like a ship that I got an illusion it was coming at me. But I wouldn't have jumped so if an auto hadn't tooted behind me—curse the things!"

"It does look like a ship. I've noticed that," said the girl, glancing toward the building.

Somehow her presence was a kind of comfort, and Hollister still made no move to go, regarding her curiously. The girl met his look with a half-frightened timidity that contrasted oddly with her paint and the place.

"I'm not what you think I am!" she blurted out suddenly.

"I was already quite sure that you are not what you think I think you are," he answered kindly. "Is there anything I can do to help you?"

"Help me?" she laughed grimly. "No, I was merely making up my mind. Nobody can help you do that!"

"Ah, but they can!" said he. "Perhaps even I could."

"Why should you want to?" she asked.

Hollister paused. "I don't know, exactly," he said slowly. "It's hard to put it into words. But somehow I've a feeling that both of us have been ground out beneath the gigantic millstones of this town and have fallen into the sack side by side. Life does throw strangers together that way and makes them friends for the time. Last night I was down miles deep in the blues and my nerves are a frazzle. Something's wrong with you. Here we are. Isn't that enough?"

The girl looked at him a long moment, and made her decision. "Come over and sit on a park bench," she said.

They watched the rhythmic spasms of the fountain for a time in silence. "Did you ever want to drown yourself?" the girl asked suddenly.

"Once," said Hollister.

"Why?"

"Because I had made up my mind to go back on an ideal—no matter what it was."

"Ah, but you didn't! One doesn't—one goes back on the ideal instead. Did you?"

"Yes," he nodded. "And after that I learned that the only way is to live things down. I've almost forgotten now."

He waited, but the girl did not speak again for a long time. Finally she said, "What if you had had to go back on one ideal to reach another?"

"That would have all depended on what they

were," he answered, and waited again.

Morning was full upon them by now and the streets were filling up with early traffic. The girl put her hand to her head. "Oh, I can't; I'm too tired!" she said. "If I could only get out of this town awhile! How can one think here?"

"Come," he replied. "We will get out of town for a while, for a whole day. Come."

The girl let herself be led to a ferry. They were like two strangers emerging from the flank of a mighty army, who knew not what the battle meant but knew they were wounded and sore and tired. Presently the man raised his fist and shook it at the mortared mountains, gliding past. "Curse you," he said, "I'll get the best of you yet!"

Amen," said the girl.

When they entered the Pennsylvania station she caught sight of her face in the mirror of a gum



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machine, and fled to wash it. "I forgot the paint," she said. "I didn't even stop last night to get the make-up off. Why didn't you tell me? Or did you think—"

"I'm not going to think," he interrupted gently. "Presently you'll tell me."

The express roared in their ears for the next hour, while something like a drowsy half slumber came to them both, the slumber of exhaustion. They alighted at Princeton Junction and the express rolled on, leaving a great sense of silence behind, of silence and the sweet smell of the country. The girl threw back her head and drew a great, deep breath. The little branch train they boarded seemed to belong to another, a slower and milder order of things to be taking them into another world. And when they alighted from it at Princeton station the beautiful stately gate tower was opening its portal to them, while from the quiet spaces beyond floated the boom of a bell. The girl's eyes swept the sweet low line of dormitories that flank the gate, and returned to rest on that perfect tower itself, that no doubt on lower Broadway would look like a subway entrance. "It is so beautiful," she said. "Can it be real?"

For answer Hollister led her up the steps into the campus.

Princeton was not his college. Possibly had it been he would not have returned to it now, and certainly his mood would have been otherwise, a mood of wistful sadness and regret. But, plagued with no memories, the academic seclusion of the campus, its low, scholastic Gothic, the colonial Charm of old Nassau, the elm-shaded walks, were like music to him, and he moved along almost oblivious for the time of the girl at his side. But the undergraduates, piling out of the dormitories to lectures and recitations, were not oblivious. They glanced at her with frank curiosity and the admiration of youth for a pretty face, and then at the spare, pale young man beside her who was so obviously of their kind as she was of another world. Hollister looked at her, too. She certainly was too sheer, and her hat too striking. There was a strange incongruity between this evident child of the Broadway Nights and the scholastic peace of the college campus. She knew so much of life and so little of books! And yet, as she stood in the flowered court of the library, in mere physical appeal a great rose flower growing there, the brown backs of ancient Virgils, the priceless collection of a scholar, looked out at her; and the grubbings of forgotten grammarians might be seen entombed in leather, through the open windows. But there was ancient trouble in her face; some plague of the ideal was upon her, too. How many of those dead writers whose books were all round had grown gray in search of an ideal—the magic epithet or, the

secret of creation or just the lost digamma! Somehow, as they stood in that quiet inclosure, framing its green picture under the arch at either end, Hollister's lost hold on his own ideals began to come back to him. And then he wondered what thoughts were passing through the mind of the girl beside him, for her face was growing more troubled.

"It's not fair, it's not fair, it's not fair," she suddenly exclaimed, flinging out her hands, "that some folks should live in so much beauty! All those books in there—the boys go in and read them and smell the shrubs and look out on this perfect court and dream themselves into any mood. But I, who am trying to create moods, too, have to do it in surroundings that are awful. I want to succeed, I want to succeed. I want to be an artist, too! I wish I were dead!"

"Come," said Hollister, "we will go up the canal, far up into the country. Things will look different there." He was beginning dimly to divine her story. The girl, for whom canoeing was evidently a new sport, climbed gingerly down upon the cushions. Hollister threw off his coat, rolled up his sleeves over arms so white that he felt ashamed, dipped his paddle in astern, and the boat moved up the canal in the still summer sun. Neither of them spoke. With the feel of a paddle in his wrists, the sun on his back, the outdoors all around him, the man was too full of the renewed joy of physical existence. With every dip of his blade into the water, with every answering life and spurt of the boat, he felt as if new blood were pumping through him. The girl lay back on the cushions, half in exhaustion, half in delicious languor, an abandonment to repose, and watched the green banks slip through half-closed lids.

"Low Bridge!" cried Hollister presently. As they ducked and shot under the cool shadow where the dusty sunbeams filtered through the cracks above, their eyes met. He smiled at her reassuringly, and, leaning forward, touched her hand. "We're getting farther and farther away from it," he said.

The canal ran placidly on for a mile or two, widening above Mr. Carnegie's foolish lake. The day was windless, the water still as a mirror. Birds sang in the trees on the bank; through the trees on the distant hill the towers of Princeton began to emerge. Once or twice they lay up against the embankment while a slow canal boat was towed past. Each time when the wash of the boat had gone down, they moved on again, but ever more slowly, for the lazy peace of the canal was working upon them.

"Canals have always had a strange fascination for me," said Hollister, once. "When I was a very little chap the train from our town ran along beside one, and I used to wonder where all the barges came from and where they went, just as George Moore says he used to do. There is a mystery about a canal—about this canal for instance. Where does it begin, where does it end? Who dug it in the long ago? It seems ages old, a part of nature, of the landscape. And like all canals, though it leads from somewhere to somewhere else, yet the water does not flow. It is still and quiet, like a secret."

"It is the most utterly peaceful thing I have ever known; it is a rest cure," said the girl, and shut her eyes.

By and by they passed the end of Mr. Carnegie's foolish lake and drew near a little town. The noon hush was on the world. Their boat glided along the depths of the sky, so still the water was. All sounds had ceased, save the barking of a distant dog and the happy cry of a child. Before them a white rock barred their way. To the left the lock-keeper's cottage, bright with new whitewash and gay with a red geranium in a pot beside the door, looked down at its reflection in the black water. Just at that moment there was not a soul in sight, and from the steeple, thin and faint, drifted down the sound of a bell, tolling twelve.



"IT'S THE MOST UTTERLY PEACEFUL THING I'VE EVER KNOWN," SAID THE GIRL.

"Lunch!" cried Hollister, shooting the canoe in under the shade of the willow.

"I believe I'm hungry," said the girl, with something like gaiety in her tone.

Up in the tiny village they found a store where peanut butter and crackers were sold, and even a bunch of bananas hung in the window, amidst whips, harnesses, samples of calico, and a sleepy swarm of flies. With their provisions they return-

ed to the canoe. Presently Hollister tossed overboard the empty cracker box, weighted with a stone, because, he said, it would be a crime to violate the tidiness of this picture-book water way; and looked an interrogation at the girl.

She smiled back at him. "You saw the box go down?" she said. "Well, my last doubt went with it. I've decided. You needn't worry about me any more, kind gentleman."

"So the ideal is saved?" he cried. "Good!"

"It is curious," she mused, "how much plainer some things are only fifty miles from town. I can't put it into words; but I didn't really make the choice myself at all. It was made for me while we were floating up here in this still little boat, with you sitting in the stern, so—so different, like the boys we saw there in the college grounds. It's as if a different order of life from mine had just come and grabbed hold of me, kind but strong, and made me do its way."

"No," said the man, "that's not it. You had the different order deep in you somewhere, and this life-to-day has just called to it—that's all."

"Yes, I suppose I have," she said, half to herself. "I wonder if really that isn't the part of me through which the big things will come—oh, I am sure it is!"

"What do you mean?" he asked.

The girl grew red. Then suddenly she put her blushes aside, and said calmly: "You have been my very good friend. I'll tell you everything. I was born in a little city on the one-night circuit, and had to quit school when I was fifteen, to work in a store. I was always ambitious and always crazy about the stage. But my folks weren't only poor, they didn't know enough about things to send me to be trained, even if they could have afforded it. Life in the store was worse than drudgery—it was hell. I acted at socials and dramatic clubs whenever I could, and one day when I was eighteen I went to the manager of a musical comedy that came to town and asked him for a job. He said he needed broilers, and he took me. Most of the fresh girls—I mean literally—in musical shows are picked up like I was round through the country. I told my parents, and they said I couldn't go. So I ran away. For the rest of the season we did one night, and I learned what theatrical life is. All my dreams of ease and luxury vanished; and the things I saw going on in the company sickened me. But a girl who's worked in a department store, even a small one, knows how to take care of herself if she wants to, and I wasn't molested much."

"But I didn't want the musical line; I wanted to act. When we got in the following June I began the horrid humiliating trot around from one office to another, waiting, begging, suffering all kinds of insults. Finally a man who wanted somebody for a tiny soubrette role in a cheap stock company took me, and shipped me up to a New England city. There I lived on next to nothing a week, played every afternoon and evening, and rehearsed every morning. But I got a chance to act, and, as I made good, they gave me pretty good parts finally. I learned a lot, too, from our leading woman, who was kind and helpful. She'd be on the three-sheets along Broadway if it wasn't for the booze, poor thing."

"Then I came back to the Alley, and did the round of the offices again, and was again insulted—insulted you know, in the worst way a woman can be. I began to wonder if that was the price all of them paid for their parts. And then I began to wonder another thing. I suppose other girls have wondered it before me, God help them! I began to wonder, not so much if it was wrong, but if, right or wrong, it wasn't the way to learn a thousand shades of the emotions we actresses are called on to express, and which I, for one, felt myself so ignorant of expressing. I was ambitious, terribly ambitious—you believe that, don't you?"

"Of course," said Hollister gravely.

"Well, it wasn't the promise of better parts for the mere sake of the name, or greater comfort; it was just this ambition to learn, to get ahead, this

came in the other day—we're filling in a week down at the Grand now. Last night the manager offered me the second lead next season at—his price. That's what I was debating when I met you."

The girl looked Hollister in the eyes for a moment as she finished, desperately trying to read there if he understood and believed. She saw his



SHE PUT HER HAND IN HIS AND THEN VANISHED.

kind, strong sympathy. Then she suddenly broke into sobs, and buried her burning face in her hands.

He was silent for a time. It seemed best. Then he spoke.

"I've noticed," he said, "that most of the plays and books which preach the doctrine you speak of preach it as a justification of wrong already committed, as a sort of consolation, not as advice to those who haven't stepped out of the path. That's what makes them, when you come to reflect on the matter, so pitifully weak as philosophy or ethics. It isn't sin, it's sympathy that gives you power to act emotions, or me power to write them—for I, too, am trying to be an artist, and I haven't got as far as a speaking part yet, either! You spoke of to-day's way of life, this country way, this high-bred, college way—well, don't you see that this way has, after all, produced more and greater artists than the other way ever did? And don't you see it gives you something the other can never give? I mean peace and security and the knowledge that you are not a coward, that you have never gone back on an ideal? Sympathy and imagination can teach you to portray any emotion. And they grow best, believe me, in the life you've chosen. You'll get the second lead soon enough, cheer up! The world—even the stage world—isn't so dark as it looks on a hot night in New York."

The girl raised her face to his and put out her hand. "You're right; I know you're right. Every bit of me is telling me so now," she said. "Tomorrow I'll begin snooping for a part in a different company."

"You must let me help you," said Hollister. "I've some friends in the business, even if they don't like my plays. Besides I'm on a newspaper and that helps a whole lot."

"Somebody who knows?" she laughed. "I'll star in one of your dramas!"

"Shake on it!" he cried.

And then he faced the canoe toward Princeton, and, chatting gayly, like two new born into a world of joy and sunshine, they slid between green banks up the canal.

The evening lights on lower Manhattan were twinkling, as of a myriad of cliff dwellings, against the twilight blue as the ferryboat bearing them back moved out of her slip. A cool, salt breeze came up the bay and touched like a caress their eyelids, heavy with healthy sleep, the sleep that comes from open air and exercise. The great, twinkling city, the tossing river, the evening sky, the gulls, the busy ferryboats darting to and fro like golden waterbugs, seemed beautiful to them, like a picture. After a hastily snatched supper Hollister left his companion at the stage entrance.

"Nerve?" he said. "Why, I shall sleep like a log for ten mortal hours and wake up to work on our play!"

But the girl looked at him shyly.

"I've a long way yet to go!" she said in a low tone.

"Nonsense," said he. "The good part will come before you know it."

"That isn't what I mean," she answered.

"But you've no doubts any more?"

"That isn't what I mean, either." She smiled a little wistfully as she met his eyes.

"Then what?"

She shook her head. "But it's worth it!" she said, as she put her hand in his again, and then vanished quickly into the dingy passage.

Hollister did sleep that night, the sleep of oblivion, even of oblivion to an irate city editor. But before he went to bed he read the story he had just been working on.

"Rubbish!" he exclaimed as he finished. "Who invented the fallacy that the happy ending is illogical? Here's not an ideal but a delusion gone!"

And he tore the last sheets of his manuscript into fragments. It was not till later that he came to realize what her parting words had meant—which proves that he was a modern man.