

# **From a Bench in Our Square**

by

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## A Patroness Of Art

I

Peter (flourish-in-red) Quick (flourish-in-green) Banta (period-in-blue) is the style whereby he is known to Our Square.

Summertime he is a prop and ornament of Coney, that isle of the blest, whose sands he models into gracious forms and noble sentiments, in anticipation of the casual dime or the munificent quarter, wherewith, if you have low, Philistine tastes or a kind heart, you have perhaps aforesaid rewarded him. In the off-season the thwarted passion of color possesses him; and upon the flagstones before Thorsen's Élite Restaurant, which constitutes his canvas, he will limn you a full-rigged ship in two colors, a portrait of the heavyweight champion in three, or, if financially encouraged, the Statue of Liberty in four. These be, however, concessions to popular taste. His own predilection is for chaste floral designs of a symbolic character borne out and expounded by appropriate legends. Peter Quick Banta is a devotee of his art.

Giving full run to his loftier aspirations, he was engaged, one April day, upon a carefully represented lilac with a butterfly about to light on it, when he became cognizant of a ragged rogue of an urchin regarding him with a grin. Peter Quick Banta misinterpreted this sign of interest.

"What d'ye think of that?" he said triumphantly, as he sketched in a set of side-whiskers (presumably intended for antennae) upon the butterfly.

"Rotten," was the prompt response.

"What!" said the astounded artist, rising from his knees.

"Punk."

Peter Quick Banta applied the higher criticism to the urchin's nearest ear. It was now that connoisseur's turn to be affronted. Picking himself out of the gutter, he placed his thumb to his nose, and wiggled his finger in active and reprehensible symbolism, whilst enlarging upon his original critique, in a series of shrill roars:

"Rotten! Punk! No good! Swash! Flubdub! Sacré tas de--de--piffle!" Already his vocabulary was rich and plenteous, though, in those days, tainted by his French origin.

He then, I regret to say, spat upon the purple whiskers of the butterfly and took refuge in flight. The long stride of Peter Quick Banta soon overtook him. Silently struggling he was haled back to the profaned temple of Art.

"Now, young feller," said Peter Quick Banta. "Maybe you think you could do it better." The world-old retort of the creative artist to his critic!

"Any fool could," retorted the boy, which, in various forms, is almost as time-honored as the challenge.

Suspecting that only tactful intervention would forestall possible murder, I sauntered over from my bench. But the decorator of sidewalks had himself under control.

"Try it," he said grimly.

The boy avidly seized the crayons extended to him.

"You want me to draw a picture? There?"

"If you don't, I'll break every bone in your body."

The threat left its object quite unmoved. He pointed a crayon at Peter Quick Banta's creation.

"What is that? A bool-rush?"

"It's a laylock; that's what it is."

"And the little bird that goes to light--"

"That ain't a bird and you know it." Peter Quick Banta breathed hard. "That's a butterfly."

"I see. But the lie-lawc, it drop--so!" The gesture was inimitable. "And the butterfly, she do not come down, plop! She float--so!" The grimy hands fluttered and sank.

"They do, do they? Well, you put it down on the sidewalk."

From that moment the outside world ceased to exist for the urchin. He fell to with concentrated fervor, while Peter Quick Banta and I diverted the traffic. Only once did he speak:

"Yellow," he said, reaching, but not looking up.

Silently the elder artist put the desired crayon in his hand. When the last touches were done, the boy looked up at us, not boastfully, but with supreme confidence.

"There!" said he.

It was crude. It was ill-proportioned. The colors were raw. The arrangements were false.

But--the lilac bloomed. And--the butterfly hovered. The artist had spoken through his ordained medium and the presentment of life stood forth. I hardly dared look at Peter Quick Banta. But beneath his uncouth exterior there lay a great and magnanimous soul.

"Son," said he, "you're a wonder. Wanta keep them crayons?"

Unable to speak for the moment, the boy took off his ragged cap in one of the most gracious gestures I have ever witnessed, raising dog-like eyes of gratitude to his benefactor. Tactfully, Peter Quick Banta proceeded to expound for my benefit the technique of the drawing, giving the youngster time to recover before the inevitable questioning began.

"Where did you learn that?"

"Nowhere. Had a few drawing lessons at No. 19."

"Would you like to work for me?"

"How?"

Peter Quick Banta pointed to the sidewalk.

"That?" The boy laughed happily. "That ain't work. That's fun."

So the partnership was begun, the boy, whose name was Julien Tennier (soon simplified into Tenney for local use), sharing Peter Quick Banta's roomy garret. Success, modest but unflinching, attended it from the first appearance of the junior member of the firm at Coney Island, where, as the local cognoscenti still maintain, he revolutionized the art and practice of the "sand-dabs." Out of the joint takings grew a bank account. Eventually Peter Quick Banta came to me about the boy's education.

"He's a swell," said Peter Quick Banta. "Look at that face! I don't care if he did crawl outa the gutter. I'm an artist and I reco'nize aristocracy when I see it. And I want him brung up accordin'."

So I inducted the youngster into such modest groves of learning as an old, half-shelved pedagogue has access to, and when the Bonnie Lassie came to Our Square to make herself and us famous with her tiny bronzes (this was before she had captured, reformed, and married Cyrus the Gaunt), I took him to her and he fell boyishly and violently in love with her beauty and her genius alike, all of which was good for his developing soul. She arranged for his art training.

"But you know, Dominie," she used to say, wagging her head like a profound and thoughtful bird; "this is all very foolish and shortsighted on my part. Five years from now that gutter-godling of yours will be doing work that will make people forget poor little me and my poor little figurines."

To which I replied that even if it were true, instead of the veriest nonsense, about Julien Tenney or any one else ever eclipsing her, she would help him just the same!

But five years from then Julien had gone over to the Philistines.

## II

Justly catalogued, Roberta Holland belonged to the idle rich. She would have objected to the latter classification, averring that, with the rising cost of furs and automobile upkeep, she had barely enough to keep her head above the high tide of Fifth Avenue prices. As to idleness, she scorned the charge. Had she not, throughout the war, performed prodigious feats of committee work, all of it meritorious and some of it useful? She had. It had left her with a dangerous and destructive appetite for doing good to people. Aside from this, Miss Roberta was a distracting young person. Few looked

Being-done-good-to is, I understand, much in vogue in the purlieus of Fifth Avenue where it is practiced with skill and persistence by a large and needy cult of grateful recipients. Our Square doesn't take to it. As recipients we are, I fear, grudgingly grateful. So when Miss Holland transferred her enthusiasms and activities to our far-away corner of the world she met with a lack of response which might have discouraged one with a less new and superior sense of duty to the lower orders. She came to us through the Bonnie Lassie, guardian of the gateway from the upper strata to our humbler domain, who--Pagan that she is!--indiscriminately accepts all things beautiful simply for their beauty. Having arrived, Miss Holland proceeded to organize us with all the energy of high-blooded sweet-and-twenty and all the imperiousness of confident wealth and beauty. She organized an evening sewing-circle for women whose eyelids would not stay open after their long day's work. She formed cultural improvement classes for such as Leon Coventry, the printer, who knows half the literatures of the world, and MacLachan, the tailor, to whom Carlyle is by way of being light reading. She delivered some edifying exhortations upon the subject of Americanism to Polyglot Elsa, of the Élite Restaurant (who had taken upon her sturdy young shoulders the support of an old mother and a paralytic sister, so that her two brothers might enlist for the war--a detail of patriotism which the dispenser of platitudes might have learned by judicious inquiry). And so forth and so on. Miss Roberta Holland meant well, but she had many things to learn and no master to teach her.

Yet when the flu epidemic returned upon us, she stood by, efficient, deft, and gallant, though still imperious, until the day when she clashed her lath-and-tinsel sword of theory against the tempered steel of the Little Red Doctor's experience. Said the Little Red Doctor (who was pressed for time at the moment): "Take orders. Or get out. Which?"

She straightened like a soldier. "Tell me what you want done."

At the end of the onset, when he gave her her release from volunteer service, she turned shining eyes upon him. "I've never been so treated in my life! You're a bully and a brute."

"You're a brick," retorted the Little Red Doctor. "I'll send for you next time Our Square needs help."

"I'll come," said she, and they shook hands solemnly.

Thereafter Our Square felt a little more lenient toward her ministrations, and even those of us who least approved her activities felt the stir of radiance and color which she brought with her.

On a day when the local philanthropy market was slack, and Miss Holland, seated in the Bonnie Lassie's front window, was maturing some new and benign outrage upon our sensibilities, she called out to the sculptress at work on a group:

"There's a queer man making queer marks on your sidewalk."

"That's Peter Quick Banta. He's a fellow artist."

"And another man, young, with a big, maney head like an amiable lion; quite a beautiful lion. He's making more marks."

"Let him make all he wants."

"They're waving their arms at each other. At least the queer man is. I think they're going to fight."

"They won't. It's only an academic discussion on technique."

"Who is the young one?"

"He's the ruin of what might have been a big artist."

"No! Is he? What did it? Drink?"

"Does he look it?"

The window-gazer peered more intently at the debaters below. "It's a peculiar face. Awfully interesting, though. He's quite poorly dressed. Does he need money? Is that what's wrong?"

"That's it, Bobbie," returned the Bonnie Lassie with a half-smile. "He needs the money."

The rampant philanthropist stirred within Miss Roberta Holland's fatally well-meaning soul. "Would it be a case where I could help? I'd love to put a real artist back on his feet. Are you sure he's real?"

On the subject of Art, the Bonnie Lassie is never anything but sincere and direct, however much she may play her trickeries with lesser interests, such as life and love and human fate.

"No; I'm not. If he were, I doubt whether he'd have let himself go so wrong."

"Perhaps it isn't too late," said the amateur missionary hopefully. "Is he a man to whom one could offer money?"

The Bonnie Lassie's smile broadened without change in its subtle quality. "Julien Tenney isn't exactly a pauper. He just thinks he can't afford to do the kind of thing he wants and ought to."

"What ought he to do?"

"Paint--paint--paint!" said the Bonnie Lassie vehemently. "Five years ago I believe he had the makings of a great painter in him. And now look what he's doing!"

"Making marks on sidewalks, you mean?"

"Worse. Commercial art."

"Designs and that sort of thing?"

"Do you ever look at the unearthly beautiful, graceful and gloriously dressed young super-Americans who appear in the advertisements, riding in super-cars or wearing super-clothes or brushing super-teeth with super-toothbrushes?"

"I suppose so," said the girl vaguely.

"He draws those."

"Is that what you call pot-boiling?"

"One kind."

"And I suppose it pays just a pittance."

"Well," replied the Bonnie Lassie evasively, "he sticks to it, so it must support him."

"Then I'm going to help him."

"To fulfill his destiny,' is the accepted phrase," said the Bonnie Lassie wickedly. "I'll call him in for you to look over. But you'd best leave the arrangements for a later meeting."



Being summoned, Julien Tenney entered the house as one quite at home despite his smears of the working artist. His presentation to Miss Holland was as brief as it was formal, for she took her departure at once.

"Who is she?" asked Julien, staring after her.

"Bobbie Holland, a gilded butterfly from uptown."

"What's she doing here?"

"Good."

"O Lord!" said he in pained tones. "Has she got a Cause?"

"Naturally."

"Philanthropist?"

"Worse."

"There ain't no such a animal."

"There is. She's a patron of art."

"Wow!"

"Yes. She's going to patronize you."

"Not if I see her first. How do I qualify as a subject?"

"She considered you a wasted life."

"Where does she get that idea?"

The Bonnie Lassie removed a small, sharp implement from the left eye of a stoical figurine and pointed it at herself.

"Do you think that's fair?" demanded the indignant youth.

The Bonnie Lassie reversed the implement and pointed it at him. "Do you or do you not," she challenged, "invade our humble precincts in a five-thousand-dollar automobile?"

"It's my only extravagance."

"Do you or do you not maintain a luxurious apartment in Gramercy Park, when you are not down here posing in your attic as an honest working-man?"

"Oh, see here, Mrs. Staten, I won't stand for that!" he expostulated. "You know perfectly well I keep my room here because it's the only place I can work in quietly--"

"And because Peter Quick Banta would break his foolish old heart if you left him entirely," supplemented the sculptress.

Julien flushed and stood looking like an awkward child. "Did you tell all this stuff to Miss Holland?" he asked.

"Oh, no! She thinks that your pot-boiling is a desperate and barely sufficient expedient to keep the wolf from the door. So she is planning to help you realize your destiny."

"Which is?" he queried with lifted brows.

"To be a great painter."

The other winced. "As you know, I've meant all along, as soon as I've saved enough--"

"Oh, yes; I know," broke in the Bonnie Lassie, who can be quite ruthless where Art is concerned, "and you know; but time flies and hell is paved with good intentions, and if you want to be that kind of a pavement artist--well, I think Peter Quick Banta is a better."

"Do you suppose she'd let me paint her?" he asked abruptly.

If statuettes could blink, the one upon which the Bonnie Lassie was busied would certainly have shrouded its vision against the dazzling radiance of her smile, for this was coming about as she had planned it from the moment when she had caught the flash of startled surprise and wonder in his eyes, as they first rested on Bobbie Holland. Here, she had guessed, might be the agency to bring Julien Tenney to his artistic senses; and even so it was now working out. But all she said was--and she said it with a sort of venomous blandness--"My dear boy, you can't paint."

"Can't I! Just because I'm a little out of practice--"

"Two years, isn't it, since you've touched a palette?"

"Give me a chance at such a model as she is! That's all I ask."

"Do you think her so pretty?" inquired the sculptress disparagingly.

"Pretty? She's the loveliest thing that--" Catching his hostess's smile he broke off. "You'll admit it's a well-modeled face," he said professionally; "and--and--well, unusual."

"Pooh! 'Dangerous' is the word. Remember it," warned the Bonnie Lassie. "She's a devastating whirlwind, that child, and she comes down here partly to get away from the wreckage. Now, if you play your part cleverly--"

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