



And Never Go Home

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IT WAS the season of high clouds and bright skies and wood smoke. Dr. Holman waited as the Negro porter opened the door of the passenger coach that had confined him for more than four hours since he left the Chicago depot.

The Negro shoved the metal door open and Dr. Holman stepped out onto the weathered wooden platform, into the bright October sunshine. Beside the door on the once-painted wall was a shiny new sign—"Apple River—1949 pop. 831."

"We're really sorry about this delay, folks," he heard the red-faced engineer saying to the half-dozen passengers who had been confined with him in the coach. "We'll get the parts here as soon as we can. But if they don't come this afternoon, you're all welcome to spend the night in the Pullman, no charge."

"We'll blow the whistle if we get'er ready to roll," the engineer added.

Dr. Holman—he was the Ph.D. type of doctor—welcomed the chance to escape from the smoky coach with its red plush seats that smelled of stale tobacco. The day, he had thought on the drive from the University to the Chicago depot,

wasn't made for being locked inside. But he had a hundred miles to go, and a thousand faces to greet, in the evening.

"A thousand students," he thought, "and they want to hear about 'Geological Formations in the USA.'" Dr. Holman's speech was prepared, but he wondered if the promised thousand would be there to hear it.

The October sun was just past straight south in the clear sky and warmed him. He slipped off his jacket, slung it across his arm, and loosened his tie. In the town, no one would notice an open collar.

"Might's well have a look 'round the town," advised the depot agent, leaning back in his chair on the freight platform. "Looks like t'll be a while 'fore they get them cylinders fixed."

"Yes, I guess I could," replied Dr. Holman, sauntering to the end of the platform, looking west and expecting to see black smoke on the horizon. He remembered how he used to sit on the platform at home and watch for the train, waiting to wave at the engineer and the man in the caboose as they went past.

Dr. Holman descended the few steps onto the cobblestone path that led to main street. He took the path and wondered how the street had remained the way it was, unmarred by new facades of cinder block or neon tubing. Near the front of the five-and-ten he saw the Negro porter.

"Archie," Dr. Holman asked as he approached the dark figure in the shiny blue suit, "do you think they'll get the train fixed by evening?"

"Well now, ah jus' can't say fo shuh, Doctah Ho'man," the Negro replied. "But they sho will try, you kin jus' bet." He flashed a mouth of white teeth.

"Want to come along, Archie? I'm going to take a walk around town." The Negro followed Dr. Holman down the street. "It's a quiet little town, isn't it? It reminds me of home."

"Not me," Archie answered. "I's brung up in dem Sheecago slums. But you's right dat it sho is quiet."

They walked on. Suddenly the Negro paused, sniffing. "Wheeee-ew! Man, what dat smell?"

"It's a fish market, Archie. We had one just like it back home."

"Man, we had fish mahkets too but dey nevah smell like

dat,” Archie chuckled. “Ah sho woulda moved quick if ah’s you.”

“It really smells kind of pleasant, in its own way,” Dr. Holman replied. He looked at the sign above the market, almost surprised that it didn’t say “Fulton’s.” Outside, cats slept under parked cars. “See them? They’re waiting for scraps, or for customers to have dripping packages,” Dr. Holman explained. “We used to tie fish to strings and then throw them at the cats and watch them chase us.” The Negro slapped his knee and laughed with a shiny grin.

“There’s something else that’s familiar,” Dr. Holman pointed across the street to a tiny corner shop. “The first dime I ever made was in a place like that.” They crossed to the little store. The windows were filled with crackers and cookies, and a huge bunch of brown and yellow bananas hung from a rafter inside. “It was Mr. Fogerty’s. He wanted me to stay with him but I went away to school. Sometimes now I wonder if I did the best thing.”

“But you makin’ good dough,” the Negro argued.

“But good dough isn’t always everything you need, Archie.” They walked on in silence, then stopped and sat down on a wooden bench next to a red and white striped pole.

“Afternoon, fellas. Which one needs a trim?” asked a man with a white coat, holding a scissors.

The Negro rubbed his wooly head. “Not me, suh. Ah cuts mah own.” He grinned at the barber.

“No thanks,” Dr. Holman began to say, then stopped. “Yes, I guess I could stand one.” He stood up. “I’ll see you at the train, Archie.” The Negro shuffled off down the narrow sidewalk and Dr. Holman went into the shop and climbed into the chair.

“Stranger, ain’t ya?” asked the barber, snapping open the scissors. “Where ya from?”

“Chicago,” Dr. Holman replied. “The train broke down and. . . .”

“Ya say Chicago?” the barber interrupted. “Say, ’s it true they charge four bits for a shave there?”

“That’s right. It’s not like it was when I got my first shave back home.” Dr. Holman paused. “In a shop a lot like yours.”

"Guess they're all about alike in these small towns," said the barber, running the clippers around Dr. Holman's ear. "There. Ya want any more off any place?"

"No. It looks fine." The barber took off the towel and Dr. Holman stepped down from the swivel chair.

"Always do my best, ya know. Stop back, won't ya?"

"Next time I'm in town." He wondered if he ever would be.

Dr. Holman left the shop and wandered past the park, with its statue of Abraham Lincoln in the center. "I guess *all* the parks must have them," he thought. Around the statue, as he knew there would be, were gray pigeons that fluttered away as he approached.

Dr. Holman ambled on, half listening for the whistle to call him back. "Another hour and I can call them that I can't make it for the speech," he told himself, and smiled. The trees, gold and yellow, lined the street, arching and meeting high overhead, casting their lengthening shadows across his path. Familiar squirrels with bushy tails and shoe-button eyes watched from the trunks of elms and oaks as he passed.

At the end of the street was a white church with a tall belltower. Dr. Holman strolled around it, surveying the peeling paint and the cracked stained-glass windows. "I wonder if the church at home ever got painted," he thought. "It needed it when I left."

Neat rows of houses stood at the other side of the park he had passed, and he circled the trees and walked by them. He could hear voices murmuring from porches, asking, he knew, what that young Holman boy was doing alone on the street. Behind the houses, a hill stretched upward. He remembered the hill, except it was supposed to be on the other side of town. But the apple trees marching up its side, buxom and pink-blossomed on fine spring evenings and covered with apples in the fall, were the same.

Long shadows of dusk criss-crossed his way as Dr. Holman retraced the path toward mainstreet. In fifteen minutes it would be too late for him to go the hundred miles. He could call off the speech and go somewhere, alone, to meet the evening, to forget rock formations and Chicago.

On the bench by the barber shop, an old man sat tamp-

ing his pipe, and the tobacco smells brought back memories of other times and younger faces. It was the hollow-and-hungry-for-dinner hour, the time to head for the smoky comfort of the kitchen at home. Dr. Holman knew he could find the corner to turn at, and the white house with the wooden fence would be at the end of the street. A wisp of breeze whispered through the maple leaves on the side streets, stirred around him and became a part of his breath.

The main street stillness was broken by a shrill blast from the direction of the track. For a moment it had no meaning to James David Holman. Then, he turned and walked slowly toward the depot.

"We's ready to go, Doctah Ho'man," the Negro porter shouted. "We get ya to yo speech yet." He reached out a dark hand to help Dr. Holman into the darker coach.

"That's fine, Archie," Dr. Holman said quietly. The Negro closed the door and the latch caught with a metallic click.

Dr. Holman slumped down into his seat as the train shuddered and lurched away from the station. A thousand faces waited, and he would speak. He watched as the depot and its platform disappeared in the growing darkness. Tonight he would tell all he knew of rock formation in America, and continue to wonder if he could know satisfaction on the whirling stone on which he lived.

A halo,
Unlike a hat,
Is more becoming,
When not in style.

Michael Firth