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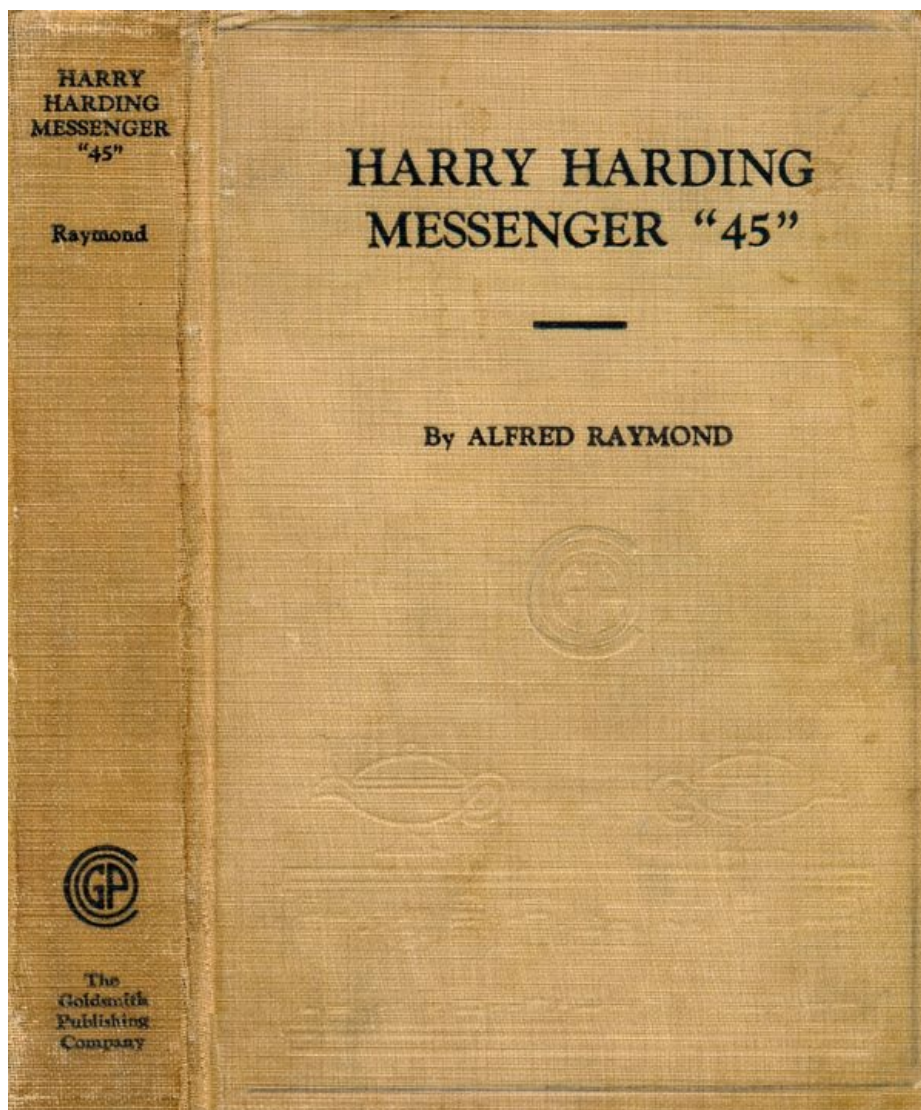
Author: Alfred Raymond

Release date: July 15, 2016 [EBook #52578]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Donald Cummings and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HARRY HARDING—MESSENGER "45" ***



**HARRY HARDING
—*Messenger "45"***

By
ALFRED RAYMOND



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HARRY HARDING —*Messenger "45"*

[1]

CHAPTER I

A MENACE TO THE SCHOOL

"I will drown and no one shall help me," announced Miss Alton defiantly.

The first class in English accepted this remarkable statement in absolute silence, their eyes fixed on their teacher. As she stood high and dry on the platform, facing her class, there seemed little possibility of such a catastrophe overtaking her, therefore, they knitted their wise young brows, not in fear of her demise by drowning, but in puzzled worry over the intricacies of shall and will.

"I will drown," repeated Miss Alton firmly, "and no one——"

"Oh-h-h!" a piercing shriek rent the grammar-laden air. As though about to prove her declaration, Miss Alton made a sudden dive off the platform that carried her half-way up an aisle toward the immediate vicinity of that anguished voice.

[2]

The first class in grammar immediately forgot the uses of shall and will and twisted about on their benches to view their teacher's hurried progress toward the scene of action.

"It's Teddy Burke," muttered a boy to his nearest classmate. "Wonder what he's done."

Miss Alton had now brought up between two seats at the rear of the room. In one of them sat a little girl, her head buried in her arms. Directly opposite her sat a red-haired boy. His thin face wore an expression of deep disgust, but his big black eyes were dancing with mischief. As the teacher approached, he made an ineffectual dive toward a grayish object on the floor. Miss Alton was too quick for him. She stooped, uttered a half-horrified exclamation, then gathered the object in. It was a most terrifying imitation of a snake, made of rubber, and coiled realistically.

"Theodore Burke, what does this mean?" she demanded, holding out the snake and glaring at the offender.

The little girl raised her head from her arms and eyed the culprit with reproachful horror. "He put it on my seat," she accused. "I thought it was alive, and it scared me awful." Her voice rose to a wail on the last word.

"This is too much. You've gone just a little too far, young man. Come with me." Miss Alton stood over the red-haired lad, looking like a grim figure of Justice. [3]

The boy shot a glance of withering scorn at his tearful victim, then rose from his seat.

Grasping him none too gently by the arm, Miss Alton piloted him down the aisle and out of the door. It closed with a resounding bang.

A buzz of conversation began in the big schoolroom. Two or three little girls left their seats and gathered about the heroine of the disquieting adventure, while half a dozen boys of the eighth grade of the West Park Grammar School put their heads together to discuss this latest bit of mischief on the part of their leader and idol, Teddy Burke.

Meanwhile, Teddy, of the black eyes and Titian hair, was being marched rapidly toward the principal's office.

Miss Alton flung open the door and ushered him into the august presence of Mr. Waldron, the principal, with, "Here is an incorrigible boy, Mr. Waldron."

The principal, a short, stern-faced man, adjusted his eye-glasses and stared hard at Teddy. The boy hung his head, then raising his eyes regarded Mr. Waldron defiantly.

"So you are here again, young man, for the third time in two weeks," thundered the principal. "What has this bad boy done, Miss Alton?"

Miss Alton began an indignant recital of Teddy's latest misdeed. The principal frowned as he listened. When she had finished, he fixed Teddy with severe eyes. [4]

"Let me see. The last time you were here it was for interrupting the devotional exercises by putting a piece of ice inside the collar of one of your schoolmates. Aren't you ashamed of yourself? How would you like to have your schoolmates play upon you the unkind pranks you are so fond of playing upon them?"

"I wouldn't care," returned the boy, unabashed. "I wouldn't make a fuss, either."

"Miss Alton is right," snapped Mr. Waldron, his face reddening angrily at the boy's retort. "You are, indeed, an incorrigible boy. I think I had better put your case before the Board of Education. There are special schools for bad boys like you. We don't care to have such a boy among us. You are a menace to the school." He continued to lecture Teddy sharply, ending with, "Take him back to your room for the day, Miss Alton, but make him remain after the others have gone home this afternoon. By that time I shall have decided what we had better do with him."

Teddy walked down the corridor ahead of Miss Alton with a sinking heart. Was he a menace to the school and could Mr. Waldron really put him in a school for bad boys? He had heard of such schools. He had heard, too, that sometimes the boys came out of them much worse than when they entered. The murmur of voices came to his ears as Miss Alton flung open the door and urged him into the schoolroom. The noise died a sudden death as she stepped over the threshold. [5]

"Go to your seat," she ordered coldly.

Teddy obeyed. The little girl, whose shriek had caused his downfall, eyed him with horror. Even in the midst of his troubles he could not resist giving her an impish grin. She promptly made a face at him and looked the other way. The smile vanished from Teddy's face. Then he folded his hands on his desk and thought busily for the next five minutes.

The class resumed its interrupted recitation. Suddenly the boy reached into his desk and began stealthily to take out his belongings. The books belonged to the school, but a pencil box, a knife, a box of marbles, a top, a dilapidated baseball, a magnet and a small, round mirror with which he delighted to cast white shadows on the books of the long-suffering eighth-grade girls, were treasures of his own. Stuffing them into his pockets he replaced the books; then he sat very still. It was almost time for the recess bell to ring. He hardly thought Miss Alton would order him to keep his seat. Such light punishments were not for him. To-night—but there would be no to-night in school for him. When recess came he would go outside and say good-bye to the fellows, then he would start out and hunt a job. He was almost sixteen, and the law said a boy could work when he was fourteen, if he had a certificate. Well, he would get that certificate. His mother would let him go to work if he wanted to. She was so busy with her own affairs she never cared much what he did. If he had a job, then Mr. Waldron couldn't send him to a reform school. That [6]

was the place where incorrigible boys were sent.

Teddy did not stop to consider that his mother might prove a match for Miss Alton and Mr. Waldron when it came to a question of her son's incorrigibility. He thought only of putting himself beyond the reach of the school authorities by his own efforts.

The recess bell rang at last and the pupils filed out in orderly rows to the big, grassy yard, at one side of the school building. Teddy was at once surrounded by half a dozen boys, his particular friends. The girls collected in little groups about the yard to comment on Teddy's iniquity. They eyed him askance with curious, aloof glances. The boys, however, were deeply interested in the possible outcome of Teddy's rash defiance.

"You're goin' to get fired all right," was the cheerful prophecy of one boy. "What'll your mother say?"

"She won't say," giggled a freckle-faced boy. "She'll just take Ted across her knee and——"

"Well, I guess not," flung back Teddy. "I'm not going to wait to get fired, either. I'm going to beat it. When the recess bell rings I'm not going in with the rest of you. See here," Teddy began pulling his various treasured belongings out of his pockets. "I brought all this stuff out to give you fellows. I sha'n't want it. I'm going down to Martin Brothers' Department Store and get a job. That's what I'm going to do. Here's my looking glass, Sam. Every time you cast a shadow with it, think of me. And you can have my marbles, Bob."

Teddy distributed his belongings rapidly about the little circle. The boys took them with some reluctance. They had far rather have Teddy Burke, ringleader of all their mischief, with them than his belongings.

"Aw, why don't you get your mother to come down here and fix it up with those old cranks?" demanded Sam Marvin regretfully. "It ain't your stuff we want, Ted. It's you. What're we goin' to do without you?"

"Be good," grinned Teddy. "I'm a menace to the school, you know."

"I wish I was goin' to work," said Bob Rayburn sadly. "Pa won't let me, though."

"Honestly, won't your mother lick you if she finds out about what happened to-day?" inquired Arthur Post, a tall, thin boy with a solemn face.

"Lick nothing," retorted Ted. "She isn't going to find out about it. I'm going to tell her myself. She'll say I can go to work if I feel like it."

His chums eyed him with mingled admiration and regret. To them Teddy was a hero.

"There goes the bell. I've got to beat it. Don't any of you start to go in till I get to the corner," directed Ted. "Then *she*," he jerked his thumb in Miss Alton's direction, "won't know I've skipped until it's too late. I'll let you know where I am as soon as I get that job. Good-bye, fellows. Be sure and do what smarty Alton tells you, and don't go bringing any rubber snakes to school. You can have that one of mine if you can get it away from old Cross-patch."

With an air of gay bravado Teddy raised his hand in a kind of parting salute, then darted down the yard and through the gateway to the street. At the corner he waved his hand again, then swung out of sight, leaving a little knot of boys to gaze regretfully after him and wonder how they could possibly get along without wide-awake, mischievous Teddy Burke.

CHAPTER II

ON THE TRAIL OF A JOB

"I don't know what we are going to do, Harry, if the cost of living goes any higher." Mrs. Harding stared across the little center table at her sixteen-year-old son, an expression of deep worry looking out of her patient, brown eyes. "A dollar used to seem like quite a lot of money, but it doesn't go far these days. I've spent every cent I dare this week for groceries, and we've still three days to go until I'll have the money for this dress. I've got to sew every minute to get it done. Thank goodness, the rent's paid for this month. But you must have a new pair of shoes and I don't know where they are going to come from." The little woman sighed, then attacked her sewing with fresh energy. "I can't stop even to complain," she added bravely.

"You'll just *have* to let me go to work, Mother." Harry Harding laid the text-book he was studying on the table and regarded his mother with serious eyes.

"But I don't want to take you out of school, Harry," she protested. "You are getting along so well. Why, next year you'll be in high school."

"No, I won't, Mother. Do you think that a great big boy like me is going to let his mother support him any longer? It's time I went to work. Besides, I haven't the money for clothes and books and all the other things high school fellows have to have. I'm past sixteen. Lots of boys have to go to work when they're only fourteen. I guess it won't hurt me any to begin now."

"But I want you to have an education, Harry. If your father had lived, he intended to let you go through high school and then to college." Mrs. Harding's voice trembled a little. The sudden

death of her husband two years previous had been a shock from which she had never quite recovered. It was hard for her even to mention his name without shedding tears.

"I'll get an education, somehow, and work, too," returned Harry confidently. "There are night schools where a fellow can go and learn things. Please let me quit school to-morrow and try," he pleaded. "I can't earn much at first, but even three dollars a week'll help some. I've got to start some time, you know. If you won't let me go to work I could sell papers after school."

"No, you couldn't," retorted his mother with decision. "I'd rather have you leave school than see you racing around the city streets selling papers. That's one thing you sha'n't do." [11]

"Then let me go and hunt a job," begged the boy.

"I'll think it over. Now go on studying your lesson and don't tease me any more about it."

Harry took up his book obediently enough. His frequent pleading to leave school to go to work had always been promptly vetoed by his mother. She had struggled desperately to keep her son in school and was willing to go on with the struggle. It was Harry himself who had repeatedly begged her to allow him to take his place in the work-a-day world. She could never quite bring herself to the point of consenting to the boy's plea. But, to-night, as she thought darkly of their poverty and of their continual fight against actual want she was nearer consent than she had ever been before.

Perhaps Harry felt this, for it was not long until the book went down on the table again. "Do say you'll let me try, Mother," he implored earnestly. "You don't know how much it means to me. It isn't as if I'd stop trying to learn things as soon as I started to work. I'd study harder than ever. Just think how much the money would help us after I'd been working awhile. Why, some of the greatest men that ever lived had to quit school and go to work when they were lots younger than I. Benjamin Franklin did, and so did Abraham Lincoln. Just yesterday the teacher read us a story of how Lincoln earned his first dollar when he was a boy." [12]

Mrs. Harding looked wistfully at her son's eager face. "My little son, do you want to help mother so much?" she asked tenderly. Her voice trembled a little.

"You know I do. Oh, Mother, may I try? Are you going to say 'yes' at last?" Harry sprang from his chair and going to his mother's chair slipped his arm around her neck.

"Well," began the little woman reluctantly, "if you are so set on working, I guess you might as well try it. But remember, Harry, if you don't like it, you can go back to school. We'll get along some way."

"But I shall like it," protested Harry. "I've always said I was going to be a business man when I grew up. If I start right now maybe I'll be one in a few years."

"But where are you going to look for work, child?" asked Mrs. Harding. Now that she had given her son the longed-for sanction to make his own way, she began to feel something of his boyish enthusiasm.

"I don't know," returned Harry thoughtfully. Then, seized with a sudden inspiration, "I guess I'll look in the *Journal*. That always has a lot of advertisements."

Picking up the evening paper, which lay on the center table, Harry turned its leaves to the column of "Male Help Wanted," and scanned it earnestly. "Here's one, Mother. 'Boy wanted for errands, good chance for advancement. Opportunity to learn business. 894 Tyler.' That sounds good." Taking the stub of a lead pencil from his pocket, Harry carefully marked it. "Oh, here's another. 'Bright boy for office work. 1684 Cameron.'" This advertisement was duly checked. Harry went eagerly down the column until he had marked six advertisements. "There, that will do to start with. If I don't get a position at any of those places I'll try again when to-morrow's paper comes out. But surely some of them will have a chance for me. It's nine o'clock. I guess I'll go to bed right now, so as to be up bright and early in the morning." [13]

Piling his books on one arm, Harry went over to his mother and kissed her good night. "You must keep thinking hard that I'm going to get one of those positions, Mother," he said brightly. Then he went into the tiny room that was really half of his mother's room, curtained off for his use. Harry was very proud of his little room. It was so small it held nothing but his cot bed, one chair, a small table and a bamboo book-case of two shelves, which he had bought in a second-hand store for a quarter. This held the few books he owned and was dear to his heart.

After he had undressed and lay down on his bed he found that he was too much excited over the prospect of his new venture to sleep. Already he could see himself in a beautiful office, with soft rugs on the floor and shining oak furniture. He could imagine himself saying, "Yes, sir," and "no, sir," to his employer, and listening with alert respectfulness to his orders. He would prove himself so willing to work and perform whatever he was given to do so faithfully that in time he would be promoted to something better. His favorite story-book hero, Dick Reynolds, had begun work as an office boy and had done wonderful things. Why couldn't the same things happen again to him? [14]

When at ten o'clock his mother stole into the room, as was her nightly custom before going to bed, for a last look at her son, she saw two bright, wide-awake eyes peering at her. "This will never do, little man," she said, patting his cheek. "You must go to sleep, if you are anxious to be up early to-morrow morning."

"I'll try, Mother," sighed Harry, "but I just can't help thinking about it."

After his mother had kissed him again and gone to her own room, Harry shut his eyes tightly

and resolved to go to sleep. When finally the sandman did visit him, he dreamed that he was Dick Reynolds and had secured a position in a bank. He was the president's office boy, and the president had sent him to the City Hall with a bag full of bank notes. He ran all the way from the bank to the Hall and was just going in the door when two boys leaped out from behind it and tried to take the bag away from him. He fought like a tiger, but he had to hang on to the bag with one hand while he knocked down the thieves with the other. As fast as he knocked them down they bobbed up again. Finally, one of them hit him over the head with an arithmetic. It was his own book. He recognized it by the green paper cover he had put on it. He wondered as he fought how the boy happened to have his arithmetic. Then the other boy suddenly took a long coil of rope from under his coat and lassoed him. He felt himself falling, falling. He struck the pavement with a terrible crash. Then—

[15]

"Why, Harry, what is the matter?" The City Hall, the money bag, even the robbers had faded away, and Harry found himself sitting on the bare floor, blinking up at his mother, who bent anxiously over him.

"I guess I must have been asleep, Mother, and fell out of bed." Harry eyed his mother sheepishly. "I dreamed I had a job in a bank and was fighting two fellows who tried to take a whole lot of money away from me. What time is it?"

"It's ten minutes to twelve. Now, go straight to sleep, or I won't call you early."

Harry obediently climbed back into bed and was not heard from again that night. It seemed to him as though he had hardly gone to sleep before he heard his mother calling, "Six o'clock, Harry." The boy was out of bed in an instant. He pattered to the window, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes as he went. The light of a perfect day in early October shone in as he raised the shade. If good weather were a happy omen, then surely he would obtain that which he was going forth so earnestly to seek.

[16]

His mother had taken special pains with his breakfast that morning, and though he was quivering with excitement over what was to be his first venture into the busy world of trade, he tried to show his appreciation of her tender thoughtfulness by eating a hearty meal. In his neat, blue serge suit, he had put on his Sunday best, his well-shined shoes and his clean, white shirt with its immaculate collar, he was above reproach as far as attire went, and his bright, boyish face with its clear, blue eyes and clean-cut, resolute mouth made him a boy to be proud of. So his mother thought as she looked approvingly at him across the table. She stifled the sigh of regret that her boy must so early take his place among the bread-winners, and listened to his eager plan of what he intended to do with an encouraging smile.

"Well, Mother, I'm off. That was a dandy breakfast. You know what I like, don't you. I wish all the boys in the world had mothers like you. I don't know when I'll be back. If I don't come home all day, you'll know I'm working." Reaching to the nail where he always hung his cap, Harry stood for an instant with it in his hand. Then he kissed his mother and went manfully down the two flights of stairs to the street.

[17]

He had clipped from the paper the section of the want column with the advertisements he had marked. Now he studied it earnestly and set out for the Tyler Street address. It was at least fifteen squares from his home, but the clock on a nearby church had just chimed out the hour of seven. In his pocket reposed twenty cents in small change. He had earned it by doing errands after school. But he made up his mind that not a penny of it should go for carfare if he could help it. He had plenty of time to walk. He would very likely reach the place he had selected for his first call before the office was open. He wondered what sort of building it would be, and whether it was an office building or a factory. More than one person glanced in friendly fashion at the erect, manly lad as he hurried along. There was something in his earnest young face that commanded attention and instant approbation.

"There it is," he murmured as, after a half-hour's brisk walk he came opposite a tall rather dingy-looking brick building. "That must be the office over there where the sign is hanging out."

Hurrying across the street the boy approached the door over which hung the sign, "The Knickerbocker Worsted Mills." He read it aloud, then looked a trifle disappointed. This did not exactly accord with his ideas of a position. Then he laughed at his own mental hesitation. "What do you care if it *is* a mill office, Harry Harding," he murmured. "It's work you're looking for, and you can't expect to have everything just the way you want it."

[18]

Turning the knob on the door that bore a small sign of "Office," the boy opened it and stepped inside a long room that had the shining oak furniture of his dreams. This room was divided off into many compartments by little oak fences with swinging gates. Near the door, at a little desk, sat a boy of about his own age. As he stepped into the room the boy rose to meet him.

"Whada yuh want?" he asked superciliously.

"Good morning," said Harry politely. "I came in answer to your advertisement in the *Journal* for a boy. To whom do I go?"

"Yuh don't *go* unless I let yuh in," declared the boy ill-naturedly. "Anyway, the position's filled. The boss just hired a boy about ten minutes ago. That's him over there." He pointed to a black-haired lad, who had just emerged from a room adjoining the long office. "That's the kid. Yuh better beat it. Nothin' doin' around here."

[19]

"Can't I see the manager or—or—someone?" persisted Harry.

"Naw, yuh can't. Think I wanta get my head snapped off by buttin' in where Mr. Warner's

openin' his mail? Guess I know my business. Didn't the boss just say, 'Fred, if any more boys come here answerin' our ad, tell 'em we've hired a boy?' There's nothin' doin', I tell yuh. Can't yuh understand that?"

"Yes, I can understand that," retorted Harry with spirit. "What I can't understand is how a big firm like this happens to have such a rude office boy. Good morning."

Harry walked away, his cheeks burning, eyes snapping, leaving the disagreeable boy to gaze after him in positive astonishment.

Once outside the office, Harry paused and taking out the section of newspaper he had marked, scanned it earnestly. The next nearest place he had selected was at least a mile and a half from where he stood. It was twenty minutes to eight o'clock. "I guess I'd better ride," mused Harry. "The earlier I reach a place, the better my chance will be to get something to do. I hope all the places won't be like that mill. Why, I didn't have a chance to talk to a soul except that smart office boy."

When, at a few minutes after eight o'clock, Harry climbed the steps of an imposing building of white stone, and was waved to a door on the right by a uniformed attendant, he entered a good-sized ante-room, only to find it filled with boys of anywhere from fourteen to eighteen years of age. They were not making so much noise as one might expect at least fifteen active boys to make, yet a distinct buzz of conversation was going on. [20]

Harry paused irresolutely. His eyes met those of a thin, red-haired, black-eyed boy with a mischievous face who stood just to the right of the door. The black-eyed boy grinned in friendly fashion. "Hullo," he said.

"Good-morning," returned Harry, answering the grin with a pleasant smile. "Are all these boys looking for the same position?"

"Yep," nodded the black-eyed boy. "I guess the fellow that's in the office now is going to get it. He's been there quite a while."

He had hardly finished speaking when the door to the inner office opened and a tall, severe-looking man appeared. "We won't need you, boys," he said curtly. "The position is filled." He waved his arm as though to shoo the waiting throng of lads out of the ante-room, then disappeared. The door closed after him with a reverberating bang that shattered the hopes of the fifteen waiting youngsters.

"Huh," ejaculated the black-eyed boy in disgust, "no more offices like this for me. I've been to two before this, and every time I'm too late. I guess these fellows that get the jobs get up in the middle of the night. Me for Martin's Department Store. That's where I ought to have gone in the first place." [21]

"Do they need boys there?" asked Harry. He had walked beside his new acquaintance as far as the door. Here they paused. The attendant eyed them threateningly.

"I hope so. Come on. Let's get out of here. That man in the uniform will hurt his eyes tryin' to look a hole through us." The thin little boy urged Harry out of the building and down the steps to the street. "Say, what's your name?" he asked curiously.

"Harry Harding. What is yours?"

"My name's Theodore Burke, but everybody calls me Ted or Teddy, and I just quit school to find a job."

"I haven't quit yet," declared Harry, "but I'm going to as soon as I find work."

"Then you didn't get fired?"

"Oh, no. I am going to work to help my mother. I am obliged to find work."

"I had a fight with the teacher," related Teddy, with unabashed candor. "She said I was a menace to the West Park School, and she was going to have me put in a school for tough kids. So I gave the fellows my stuff and beat it at recess. Ma was mad, but she got over it right away and said I could go to work if I wanted to."

"The teacher couldn't put you in a school for tough boys, unless you did something pretty bad," informed Harry. [22]

"I put a rubber snake in a girl's seat," confessed Ted, "and she hollered like anything." His black eyes twinkled.

Harry laughed. "Nobody could put you in a reform school for that," he said wisely. "The teacher was trying to scare you. I guess you're just full of mischief, that's all."

"I guess I am," agreed Ted, "but, anyhow, I'm not goin' back to West Park School again."

"Was that your school? I've been going to the Winthrop School. It's on the North Side. I'd be in high school next year if I kept on."

"So would I," nodded Teddy, "but not for mine. I'd rather work."

"I'd rather go to school," sighed Harry, "but I can't."

"Say, wouldn't it be funny if we'd both get a job at Martins'?" queried Teddy.

"What makes you think they need boys there? There was no advertisement in the paper."

"Oh, I know a boy that quit there yesterday for an office job, and he told me that there was

always a chance there for a fellow that wasn't afraid to work."

"Is that so?" Harry brightened visibly. "Suppose we go down there right away," he proposed. "What time does the store open?"

"Half past eight." Teddy Burke took a dollar watch from his pocket and consulted it, saying, "It's twenty after now. We can walk all right and be there by 8:45. That's early enough."

[23]

Without further parley the two boys set out for Martin Brothers' Department Store, the largest retail concern of its kind in the city. Accustomed as they were to the roar of the city streets, they talked on earnestly in their boyish voices, oblivious to the noise.

"Here we are," announced Teddy, at last, as they paused before a huge stone edifice that towered high above the neighboring buildings. "Let's go in at that big middle door. Then we can ask someone the way to the office."

"Suppose we ask that man standing in front of the elevators," suggested Harry a moment later, as they threaded their way in and out of the crowded aisles. Suiting the action to the word, he approached the man and asked his question.

"All the way down, turn to your right, and four aisles over," repeated the man mechanically.

"Thank you," Harry replied doubtfully. "'All the way down, turn to your right, and four aisles over,'" he repeated.

"That's clear as mud," was Teddy's satirical comment.

"I guess we can find it. Let me see. We have to go clear down to that desk. Come on." Harry led the way. From the desk they made the turning to the right and counted the aisles.

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"I see it," Teddy cried, pointing straight ahead.

"Yes, there it is."

A dozen steps down a short, narrow aisle brought the boys to an enclosure railed off from the passage by a flat-topped, breast-high partition of oak. Within the enclosure were several desks. At these desks young men and women were seated. Beyond the enclosure they caught sight through half-opened doors of an inner office with a shining desk, before which a grave, middle-aged man was sitting. Along the wall, facing the outer office, were long, oak benches. These were but sparsely occupied. A gray-haired woman occupied the end of one of them. The length of a bench from her two young girls sat, talking in whispers and glancing furtively at the young man who received the aspirants for positions.

It seemed hours to both lads before their turn came. "Well, boys, what is it?" asked the young man kindly. He had a dark, alert face, and dark, penetrating eyes.

"We came to apply for work in the store, sir." It was Harry who answered, at a nudge from Ted.

"How old are you?"

"He is fifteen and I am sixteen, sir," replied Harry.

"You will have to go to Mr. Keene's office to fill your application blanks. He has charge of the store messenger service, and of all the boys who work here."

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"Where is his office, sir?"

"On the third floor, Warren Street front; north-east corner."

"Thank you, sir. Do you think Mr. Keene needs any boys?" Harry could not refrain from asking the question.

"I don't know, my boy," smiled the young man, "but if he does need any help, I shouldn't be surprised if he gave you a trial."

Harry's eyes glowed with eagerness to know his fate. Thanking the young man, he nudged Ted to come on.

"Let's not bother with the elevator," he proposed. "That's the way to the Warren Street side. As soon as we find the stairway we can go straight to Mr. Keene's office."

The prospective wage-earners skipped nimbly up the long flights of stairs, bent on reaching their goal as fast as sturdy young leg-power could carry them. After a little inquiry they managed to bring up at their goal. Here they found themselves standing before a large, railed-in space similar to that of the main office on the first floor. On a closed door at the left of this space appeared the magic words, "Mr. Keene." The two lads brought up at the railing and looked uncertainly about them, not quite sure what their next move would be.

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A pretty young woman with curly brown hair and pink cheeks rose from a nearby typewriter desk. "Well, boys?" she interrogated with an encouraging smile.

"We'd like to see Mr. Keene." As before, Harry was spokesman.

"Sit down there and wait a few minutes." She pointed to an oak settee. "Mr. Keene is busy with his mail just now. You can see him when he has finished. I will tell him about you when I go into his office for dictation."

Just then there was a loud buzzing sound. The young woman picked up her notebook and hurried toward the office door marked "Mr. Keene," leaving two anxious boys to wonder what fortune had in store for them.

CHAPTER III

AN ANXIOUS MOMENT

“Mr. Keene will see you. Go in there, boys.” The pretty young woman emerged from an inner office with this welcome announcement. Resuming her seat at her typewriter, she began clicking the keys industriously.

“At last,” breathed Teddy Burke, with an impatient twitch of his head. “You go first, Harry.”

Harry stepped rather diffidently forward and over the threshold of Mr. Keene’s office, Teddy following closely at his heels. The only occupant of the room, the man at the desk, looked up from a letter he was reading as the boys entered. His shrewd, dark eyes took in his callers at one sweeping glance. “Well, boys,” he began in quick, business-like tones, “what can I do for you?”

“We came to see about getting work, sir.” Harry found himself answering in the same business-like tones of the superintendent.

“How old are you?”

“I am sixteen.”

“And how old are you?” He turned to Teddy.

“Fifteen, sir.”

“Have you a certificate?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Let me see it.”

Teddy drew his certificate from an inner pocket. It was rolled up and fastened with an elastic band. His first thought after receiving his mother’s permission to go to work had been for the obtaining of the necessary certificate.

The shrewd-eyed man examined it carefully. “Why did you leave school?” he asked quietly.

Teddy blushed rosy red. Then looking rather defiant, he said clearly, “I couldn’t get along with the teacher. But I’ve had enough of school. I want to work.”

Their interrogator smiled slightly. Then his eyes sought Harry’s face.

“And did you have trouble with the teacher, too?”

“No, sir. I am obliged to go to work to help my mother support us. I left school of my own free will.”

“You will have to bring your certificate of birth. We must know positively that you are as old as you claim to be.”

Harry’s face fell. He had hoped that they would be able to start work at once, provided they were lucky enough to obtain positions.

The brown-eyed man studied the two boys in silence. Teddy braced himself and put on as dignified an expression as he could muster. Harry returned the scrutiny with calm, steady eyes. Still without speaking, Mr. Keene touched the buzzer at one side of his desk. The next instant the pretty girl appeared.

“Miss Mason, give these boys application blanks to fill. Show them where to sit to write,” he directed. “When you have filled them, boys, bring them to me.”

“We’re goin’ to get a job, all right,” whispered Teddy, as, with their application blanks in their hands, they followed their attractive guide to a long table where another boy sat, laboriously filling in the spaces on the big white card. Teddy’s thin little face was aglow with triumph as he slipped into a chair beside the first-comer and began a curious inspection of his own application blank.

“Don’t be too sure,” murmured Harry. “We may fill out these blanks and then Mr. Keene may tell us that he will send for us if he needs us.”

“Looks like a bill-of-fare, doesn’t it?” grinned Teddy, as he opened the blank, which was folded twice like a programme, and had printed matter on all four sides. “Let me see. What’ll I have to eat. Oh, excuse me! I mean, What’s your full name?” Teddy’s voice rose a little higher with each word.

“Sh-h-h,” warned Harry. “Be more quiet, Teddy. You don’t want to be told to keep still, even before you’re hired, do you?”

There was nothing goody-goody or priggish in Harry’s tone, so Teddy did not resent his new friend’s warning. While Harry, unconsciously drawn toward the mischief-loving, black-eyed youngster, spoke as he might have to a brother, if he had had one.

“All right. I’ll be good.” Teddy seized a fresh hold on his application card and glowered at it with a purposely threatening scowl that made Harry smile in spite of himself. Then the little boy laid it down, and seizing a pen from the rack in front of him, dipped it energetically into the ink, spattered a few drops on the table and settled himself to his task. There were a great many

questions to answer, such as, "Have you ever before been employed?" "Are you the sole support of your family?" "How many persons are dependent upon your earnings?" "Will you cheerfully obey the rules of this establishment?" and "Would you consider it your duty to report any disobedience of the rules of the store on the part of your fellow employees?"

"I'm not goin' to say, 'yes' to this," whispered Teddy, pointing with his index finger to the objectionable rule. "Catch me reporting anybody. I'm no telltale. That's a nice idea—running to the superintendent's office with every little thing." Teddy sat back in his chair, disgust written on every feature. [31]

"I don't think it means every little thing, Ted." Harry soberly scanned the paragraph. "I think it means the big things like stealing, or damaging store property or something like that. Wouldn't you report another fellow if you saw him taking what didn't belong to him?"

"No; I'd make him put it back," declared Ted stoutly.

"But he might steal it again when your back was turned," argued Harry. "Do you think a boy who would steal would be a safe person to employ in a big place like this, full of beautiful and expensive things? I don't. Why, if such things weren't looked after and reported, a whole lot of the employees might be tempted to take what didn't belong to them. First thing you know the store might fail and then everyone in it would be without work."

"I guess that's so," admitted Ted, visibly impressed by Harry's somewhat far-fetched argument for strict honesty of purpose as well as deed.

"Of course it's so," nodded Harry. "Why, I wouldn't put my name on this card if I weren't ready and willing to obey all the rules of this store."

"Well, I don't suppose I would, either," admitted Teddy. "I thought if I got clear of school and went to work I could do as I pleased. But this doesn't look like it." He wagged his head in disapproval of the card. [32]

"Oh, well, here goes." He wrote "Yes" in a large, boyish hand after the contested question.

A brief silence ensued. The boys wrote their answers carefully. They wished to hand Mr. Keene neatly written applications.

"There, it's done." Harry heaved a little sigh of relief. Laying down his pen he turned to the first page of his application blank and began to read over what he had written. Teddy finished writing soon afterward. His application filled, Harry busied himself with watching what went on about him, while he waited for Teddy. The outer office, which they were in, was much larger than the inner one. About it were scattered several desks. There was one large desk at one side of the room, but it was closed. The boy wondered vaguely to whom it belonged. It must belong to a person of importance. It was by far the largest desk in the office. At a smaller desk a little to one side sat a young man. He was busily engaged in transferring something from cards to a large book that looked for all the world like the teacher's register in school. The cards were about the size of a post-card and from where he sat Harry could see that they were ruled into little squares and had printing at the left-hand side. He guessed that these were the record cards of the boys of the great establishment, and he afterward found his guess to be correct. [33]

"All right. I'm done." Teddy finished writing with a flourish, and rose from the table.

"Better look your blank over, first," advised Harry. "I went over mine."

"Oh, bother," ejaculated Teddy impatiently. Nevertheless, he sat down again and read over what he had written. "Say," he turned to Harry. "What salary did you put down?"

"Four dollars a week," returned Harry. "I think I can earn it."

"I put down three. They'll never give you four to start with. I guess two and a half'll be about what we'll get."

"I won't take that." Harry's boyish mouth set in a determined line. "A big boy of sixteen who can't earn at least four dollars a week doesn't amount to much. I think I'm worth four dollars a week, so I put it down. If I don't get that, I'll surely get three. A boy I know, who works in Arnold's store, says that when you apply for a position in a store you must always ask for more salary than you expect to get. But that isn't why I put down four dollars. I set it down because I know I can earn it."

"I guess I'll change mine." Ted picked up his pen, hesitated, then laid it down. "Oh, what's the use of changing it now. I've written three, I'll stick to it and see what happens. Come along. That man in there'll think we are pretty slow." [34]

The boys once more made their way to Mr. Keene's office. He was busy for the moment with a tall, cross-looking man who turned at the interruption and glowered at the two boys like a veritable ogre, then resumed his conversation with Mr. Keene in quick, harsh tones.

"Some crank," whispered the irrepressible Ted to Harry.

Harry gave his companion a sly poke. Teddy subsided with his usual cheerful grin. But low-spoken as was Teddy's rude comment, the cranky-looking man had heard. Instead of attributing it to Teddy, however, he glared straight at Harry, as, his business with Mr. Keene finished, he passed the waiting boys and stalked on out of the office. Luckily, at the very instant Teddy had made this careless but uncomplimentary comment, Mr. Keene had been called upon to answer the telephone on his desk. He was still talking when the disagreeable man left his office and under cover of it Harry said sternly, "Cut it, Teddy."

Teddy, whose quick eyes had noted that the cross-looking man had silently blamed Harry for the rude remark, became at once unduly solemn.

"Here are our applications, sir." Harry was again spokesman. He laid his application blank on Mr. Keene's desk. Teddy followed suit. Mr. Keene looked searchingly at the two eager, boyish faces. Long experience in the handling and training of promising youth had taught him to read boy nature. In Harry's and Teddy's features he saw much that appealed to him, and before reading their meagre histories and expectations as set down on the blanks before him, he had determined to give them a chance. However, he merely said, "Very well, young men. You may come here to this office at half past seven o'clock to-morrow morning and I will see what I can do for you. Bring your certificates with you."

"Thank you, sir. Good morning," said Harry politely.

"Thank you, sir. Good morning," repeated Teddy hastily.

"Good morning," returned Mr. Keene pleasantly.

Neither boy spoke until they had left the outer office behind. Then Teddy Burke gave vent to his disappointment. "We don't know any more about whether we're going to work here than we did when we came in," he grumbled.

"It looks hopeful to me," was Harry's cheery response. "I'm going home and think just as hard as I can that I'm going to get the position. Mr. Keene looked so nice and kind, I don't believe he'd tell us to come back in the morning if he didn't intend to give us a trial."

"Maybe not." Teddy's tones expressed lingering doubt. "I'll try to make myself believe I'm goin' to get it, too. If we don't, we'll just have to go somewhere else to find work."

Harry nodded emphatically.

"The fellows up at West Park School will wish they were me, if I do get it. Won't it be great not to have to go to school any more?"

"No, it won't." Harry's face fell, as the memory of the school life which he had been obliged to leave rose before him. "I wish I *could* go to school."

"Not for mine," reiterated Ted slangily. "I'm all done with school forever and ever."

But even as he boasted of his freedom from the school-room, a most astonishing surprise was hurrying to catch up with Teddy Burke.

CHAPTER IV

A SURPRISE AND A DISAPPOINTMENT

A thin, black-eyed boy halted on the street corner opposite Martin Brothers' Department Store and looked eagerly up and down the street. It was fifteen minutes past seven by the clock on a nearby public building. Commerce Street was beginning to teem with early-morning activity. Noisy, crowded trolley cars rumbled by, each bearing its patient load of working men and women, forced by necessity to make their daily pilgrimage in over-crowded cars, where they paid their hard-earned nickels for the privilege of hanging to a strap, or being knocked about like unresisting nine-pins as the cars jolted and bumped over weary blocks of city streets. Hurrying pedestrians impatiently dodged one another, each intent on reaching his goal at the very earliest possible moment. The thin little boy on the corner eyed the clock with a frown. It was now twenty minutes past seven. Where was Harry Harding?

"Did you think I was never coming?" Teddy Burke gave a positive jump, as he heard Harry's voice in his ear. The other boy had come up the street at a moment when Teddy was busily gazing in the opposite direction. "I know it's late. I walked. I should have given myself a little more time, though. To-morrow I'll start ten minutes earlier. We'll just about reach Mr. Keene's office by half past seven."

"Catch me walking to work in the morning," said Teddy, as they hurried across the street. "I don't mind walking home, but I'd have to start fifteen minutes earlier if I hoofed it down here every day, and I need that fifteen minutes for sleep. Ma gave me a quarter for lunch and carfare, too, so I guess I can spend it."

"You're richer than I am," laughed Harry. "I've only a dime."

By this time the boys had entered the store and were walking briskly down the main arcade to the elevator nearest to Mr. Keene's office.

"We'll make it, with five minutes to spare," commented Harry as they stepped out of the elevator. He pointed to a clock on the wall. It was twenty-five minutes past seven.

But when they reached the large outer office and waiting room where they had filed their applications, they were somewhat surprised to see at least eight boys of about their own age seated on the oak benches reserved for applicants.

"I wonder if they've got jobs, or are just waiting to see Mr. Keene," whispered Teddy. "I wonder where that nice girl is. The one who took us into the office yesterday. I'd like to know how we're

going to get in to see Mr. Keene, if he doesn't know we are here. There's a man at the big desk this morning. Don't you remember? It was shut when we were here yesterday. I wonder what he does?" Teddy's sharp, black eyes roved here and there, taking in every point of interest. Suddenly they grew round with astonishment. "Oh, look, Harry!" He pointed excitedly. Advancing from the direction of the stairway was a procession of boys. They were walking two abreast, in precise, orderly fashion. Harry and Teddy watched them in fascination.

"Whew!" breathed Teddy. "What a lot o' boys. I wonder where they're goin'? I don't b'lieve they'll want us here when they've got so many other fellows."

"I thought you said you were going to keep thinking you'd get a position," reminded Harry, smiling. His eyes were riveted interestedly on the line of boys now almost out of sight around a corner formed by a partition at the further end of the long open space where the waiting boys were seated.

"Well, I did, and I am," retorted Teddy. "Oh, dear, it's a quarter to eight now, and here we sit." He fidgeted impatiently, slid to the far end of the long bench, then slid back again, bumping smartly against Harry.

"Quit it, Ted," rebuked Harry good-humoredly.

Ted snickered softly, but ceased his sliding. He sat quietly for perhaps three minutes, then impatience overcame him. "If nobody comes to ask us what we want by eight o'clock, I'm goin' to beat it out of here," he warned. "I'll go somewhere else and look for a job."

"My, what a lot of patience you have," commented Harry sarcastically.

At that moment the man at the large desk, whose back had been toward them, swung round in his chair and viewed the little assemblage with critical eyes. Rising from his chair he strolled over to where the waiting youngsters sat. "How many of you were here yesterday?" he asked.

"I was," Teddy answered like a flash.

"So was I," declared Harry.

No one else answered.

"Did Mr. Keene tell you to come back this morning?" was the next question.

"Yes, sir," came the simultaneous answer.

The young man, who had a fair, pleasant face, very blue eyes, and a large, humorous mouth, stepped into the inner office. The next second he appeared in the doorway and beckoned to Harry and Teddy.

"Good morning, boys," greeted Mr. Keene briskly. His alert eyes scanned the lads before him. "Did you bring your certificates?"

"Here is mine, sir." Harry tendered his birth certificate. Teddy once more presented to Mr. Keene the certificate from the Bureau of Labor, which, in company with his mother, the boy had secured on the previous day before starting out on the glorious adventure which was to end his school days for good and all—by his own reckoning, at least. Mr. Keene had returned it to him the day before, but he again accepted the fateful document, and went over the two certificates carefully.

"Well, boys," he said at last, "do you think you can work for the highest interests of the store?"

"I will try very hard, sir," answered Harry seriously.

"I think I can." Teddy spoke more boldly.

Mr. Keene regarded him with a quizzical expression that was very near to a smile. In Teddy's sharp little face and bright eyes he read the boy's mischievous nature. But he also looked further and saw honesty and manliness in him.

"Remember, at first you will be only a very small part of this great business machine, but sometimes a defect in the smallest part will serve to clog the whole machine. If you faithfully perform whatever you are given to do, in a little while you will receive larger salaries and promotion. It rests with yourselves whether you will be indispensable to this store, or worthless. Let me see." He picked up a memorandum on his desk. "Which of you is Theodore Burke?"

"Me," answered Teddy with a fine disregard for English. "I—I—mean, I am, sir."

"You are to go to the house furnishings, Department Number 40, in the basement. They need a bright, steady, obedient boy there very badly. Do you think you can fill the position?"

"I—think I can." Teddy's voice was not quite so confident as in the beginning. The idea of house furnishings did not appeal to him. He had secretly hoped to be put in the sporting goods department. Teddy's whole soul was bound up in games and sports, and though slender he was strong, well-muscled and had considerable reputation among his schoolmates for running, leaping and swimming.

"And you are Harry Harding." Mr. Keene consulted his memorandum, then glanced up at Harry.

"Yes, sir."

"I am going to put you at the exchange desk, between the book department and the jewelry. Here is your card. Every boy in the store carries one. You must take care of it. Do not deface it or

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[41]

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[43]

lose it. It is marked every day by your aisle manager and your teacher, and is a record of your behavior in the store, whether in school or on the selling floor."

At the word "teacher," Teddy Burke figuratively pricked up his ears. What was Mr. Keene talking about, and what did he mean by his record in school? Was it possible that each day he would have to take his card to his ancient enemy, Miss Alton? Would Mr. Keene send to West Park Grammar School for his record? It was a most uncomfortable moment for Teddy.

Harry, however, was drinking in the superintendent's words with an eagerness born of a sudden hope. He thrilled at the words "teacher" and "school." He remembered dimly that a boy had once told him of a certain department store in the city which conducted a school for its messenger and stock boys. He had forgotten all about it, but now his heart beat faster. Suppose that store were Martins', and that he—

Mr. Keene interrupted his reflections with, "Through the kindness of Mr. Edwin Martin, the senior partner of Martin Brothers, the store has a school for both the boys and girls under eighteen years of age who are employed here. Every boy and every girl must go to school from half-past seven until eleven o'clock on two different days of each week. We expect our boys to take advantage of this great privilege and do their very best, all the time, whether in school or on the floor."

"I am *so* glad I can still go to school." Harry's voice vibrated with thankfulness. Teddy was strangely silent. [44]

"It is a great opportunity, my boy," returned Mr. Keene kindly. "Now, take these slips to Mr. Marsh, the young man who brought you here. He will show you to your departments and tell you what to do."

"Thank you, sir," Harry's eyes were shining with happiness as he turned to leave the room.

"Thank you, sir," said Teddy mechanically. His thin face was decidedly solemn. Supreme disgust looked out of his black eyes. Once outside the office, Harry felt a quick clutch at his arm. Harry's blue eyes met Teddy's scornful gaze. "I'm goin' to beat it," he declared. "Catch me working any place where I have to go to school."

"Oh, don't be such a goose." Harry's voice was purposely sharp. He had no time to argue the matter with Teddy. "I wouldn't be a quitter until I'd tried things out. You may like this school as much as you hated the other. Come on. We can't stand here talking all day."

Teddy walked beside Harry to Mr. Marsh's desk with the air of a martyr. As he passed the still-waiting row of boys he hunched his shoulders and stared at them with a cross-eyed glare, which was one of his accomplishments, and caused them to giggle audibly.

"What did you do to make those boys laugh?" queried Harry. [45]

"I just looked at them. Want me to look at you the same way?"

"No, I don't. I want you to be good and not get fired before you're hired," smiled Harry.

This brought a snicker from Teddy, and the grin had not vanished from his impish face when they paused before Mr. Marsh's desk.

"All right, boys?" was his cheerful inquiry. "Let me have your slips. You are to go to Department 40, Burke, and you, Harding, to exchange desk Number 10, on the first floor. I'll send messengers with you to these departments."

"Please, sir, we would like to know something about our work and where we go to school," put in Harry, anxiously.

"I am coming to that," smiled the pleasant young man. "You must be in the store, at the boys' assembly room, every morning at twenty minutes after seven o'clock. I will assign both of you to Company A, which goes to school every Monday and Thursday morning. On these mornings you will form in line in the assembly room with the other boys of your section and march to the schoolrooms, which are on this floor at the opposite side of the building. When school is dismissed you are to go directly to your departments. At ten minutes past eleven every boy must be in his department, or receive a demerit for loitering. That is, unless he has an exceptionally good excuse." [46]

Mr. Marsh took a number of cards, ruled off into little squares, from a pigeon hole in his desk. Consulting the slips the boys had given him, he wrote their names in the blank space at the top, reserved for that purpose. "These are your report cards," he explained. "If you can keep them clear, you will be the kind of boys that this store needs. These little squares are for demerits. Untidiness, disobedience of orders, failure in lessons, bad behavior in school, in fact, all the things which you know to be wrong, but do wilfully, will put black marks on this card. Your aisle manager, or your teacher, can give them to you, and ten demerits mean that you will be sent to Mr. Keene's office. He is the special superintendent for the boys, and it rests with him whether you stay in the store or not. But first of all it rests with yourselves, boys. It is just as easy to be neat and obedient and manly as it is to be untidy, disobedient and unruly. Remember that. If there is anything you do not understand or that you wish to know you can come to me between five and half past five o'clock on any afternoon, after first having received permission from your aisle manager to do so. Now, are there any questions you wish to ask before going to your departments?"

"How much time do we have for lunch?" asked Teddy. [47]

"Forty-five minutes. Your aisle manager will set the time for your lunch hours. There is an employees' restaurant in the store where you can buy a substantial lunch for ten cents."

"I should like to ask, sir, what wages we are to receive?" was Harry's pertinent question.

"Three dollars a week. We start all our boys at that salary. If they make good, they are sure of a fifty cent increase within six months after they start to work."

Harry vowed mentally that he would "make good," if such a thing were possible. He made no response to Mr. Marsh's statement, as it seemed to call for none.

"I will send a messenger with you to your departments. Here, Alec." Mr. Marsh addressed a tall, thin lad seated at a little desk near the end of the room. "Take this boy to Department 40. Take him straight to Mr. Duffield. Then show this boy," indicating Harry, "to Mr. Barton at exchange desk Number 10. Tell him I am sending him a boy. He asked Mr. Keene for one yesterday morning." With a friendly smile at Harry and Teddy the pleasant young man handed the boys their cards. "Here are your honor rolls. Keep them clean," he admonished. "All right, Alec." He nodded to the messenger.

The tall, thin boy started off at a quickstep, followed by the two latest recruits to the great store of Martin Brothers.

"Say, he's some fellow, ain't he?" remarked Teddy, as he hustled to keep up with their guide's lengthy stride. [48]

"Who, Mr. Marsh? You just better believe he is," was the emphatic tribute.

"He's pretty smart. He looked at our names when we handed him our slips and he knew right away which of us was which," went on Teddy.

"What he don't know about boys ain't worth knowing. The fellows here all think he's the candy kid. Mr. Keene's pretty good to us, but there's only one Mr. Marsh."

"What is his position?" asked Harry, curiously.

"Oh, he's Mr. Keene's assistant, but he does most of the lookin' after the boys."

"Is the house furnishings department a nice place to work?" asked Teddy, abruptly.

"Not for mine," was the slangy retort. "I wouldn't call hustling pans and kettles a cinch. Still, it's better than workin' for old Piggy Barton at Number 10. Say, I'll bet that old crab just hates himself."

"What does this Mr. Barton do?" queried Harry apprehensively.

"He's the meanest aisle manager in the store. You want to watch yourself or you'll get ten demerits in about ten minutes. Every boy that works for him gets fired. It ain't always the fellow's fault, either. I know of two fellows he canned, all right enough."

Teddy grinned at the slang expression "canned." It happened to be new to him. He had a vision of the two helpless messengers being forcibly bottled, and the humor of the idea appealed to him immensely. Harry's face had fallen a trifle. Just when he had built up high ideals of his future usefulness in the store it was rather discouraging to know that he must begin his work under such a disagreeable person. [49]

"I'm going to try very hard to get along with Mr. Barton," he said bravely, smothering the sudden pang of disappointment that seized him.

The thin boy grinned knowingly, but made no answer. Just then they brought up in front of an elevator. During the descent to the basement nothing further was said on the subject of Mr. Barton. The two boys followed their guide through a sea of millinery and women's clothing and made port at last in the land of house furnishings.

"There's Mr. Duffield now." The tall, thin boy conducted Harry and Teddy to one corner of the department where a short, stout man with gray hair and a red face was talking to a salesman. "Come on here." He marched Teddy up to the stout little man with, "Here's a new boy for your department. Mr. Marsh sent him. Come along." This last command was addressed to Harry.

"In a minute," returned Harry tranquilly. "Ted, I'll wait for you to-night where we met this morning." [50]

Teddy had only time for a quick, backward nod as he followed Mr. Duffield down the aisle between rows of shining kitchen ware. Harry turned and accompanied his companion up a nearby stairway and down the main arcade. Just off the broad aisle his guide stopped and peered about him. "There he is." He hustled Harry past a long row of glass cases filled with shining silver. A tall man was standing with his back to the boys. He was writing on a salesman's book with a blue pencil. Then he said loudly, "You ought to be more careful." The harsh tones chilled Harry through and through. There was something familiar, too, about that grim, uncompromising back.

"Mr. Barton," began the messenger. "Mr. Marsh told me to tell you——"

The tall figure wheeled about and to his amazement Harry found himself staring at the man whom Teddy had thoughtlessly dubbed "some crank," and who had mistakenly laid the untimely remark at Harry Harding's door.

CHAPTER V

FRIENDS AND FOES

Harry Harding's heart sank as he stood before Mr. Barton. It was evident from the frowning glance which the aisle manager bestowed upon him that he had recognized him, furthermore that he believed Harry to be the boy who had called him a crank.

"Let me see your card," snapped Mr. Barton.

Harry instantly handed his card to the aisle manager.

"Your number's 45; just remember that. When I call you, come on the jump. I've no time to waste on idle, disobedient boys. You are to stay at this exchange desk whenever you are not sent on an errand. If a customer brings an article into the store to be exchanged, on a cash sale, you are to wait until the exchange clerk makes out a credit slip. Then you must take the slip and the article to the department to be signed in stock. You are to do whatever the exchange clerk or I tell you to do, and you are to step lively. No grumbling or excuses." He eyed Harry severely.

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"I will try, sir," Harry answered in quiet, respectful tones.

"You'll have to do more than try, if you expect to stay at this desk," retorted Mr. Barton. "Here, Miss Welch, is a new boy for you." He addressed the young woman at the exchange desk, then stalked off down the aisle.

The girl smiled winningly at the lad, then said, "What's your name, son?"

"Harry Harding, ma'am." The smile went straight to Harry's sore little heart. Keenly sensitive, the harsh words of the aisle manager had cut him to the quick. If only Teddy hadn't made that unlucky remark, he thought mournfully. Then he could have started fairly with Mr. Barton. Now Mr. Barton believed him to be a rude and disrespectful boy, and would treat him accordingly until he proved that he was neither. Harry threw back his shoulders and made a firm resolution to win Mr. Barton's good will. He would be prompt, courteous and obedient, and "in time" Mr. Barton would learn to trust him, perhaps like him.

Harry looked shyly at Miss Welch. He hoped she would like him. She was so pretty, with her big, blue eyes and pink cheeks, and how gracefully her thick, black hair curled about her forehead!

"What's on your mind, son?" she asked, noting the boy's timid scrutiny. "Cheer up. Don't look so sad. That old grouch, Barton, is enough to give anyone the blues, but just remember he can't eat you, or kill you, or do anything worse than scold you. He never opens his mouth to say a pleasant word. We're all used to him down here."

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"He—he—doesn't like me," stammered Harry.

"He doesn't like anybody. He even hates himself," declared the girl.

"He thinks I called him a crank," Harry colored slightly, as he made this admission.

"When did all this happen?" The sympathetic exchange clerk elevated her eyebrows in surprise.

"Yesterday morning. I was waiting in the employment office to see Mr. Keene. There was another boy sitting there waiting, too. Mr. Barton was in the office talking to Mr. Keene. When he left the office he looked so cross that the boy said, 'some crank,' and he heard it. He thought I said it."

"Good for the boy that said it," laughed Miss Welch. "I'm glad smarty Barton heard it. Now he knows what other people think of him. I'm sorry you got blamed, though. Why don't you tell him you didn't say it?"

Harry shook his head. In his recital of the incident he had been careful not to mention Teddy as the real transgressor. "I'd rather not say anything. Maybe he'll forget about it if he sees me trying hard to please him."

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"You couldn't please *him* if you gave him a million dollars," was the discouraging information. "But never mind, kid. I'll see that he don't bite your head off. I'm not afraid of him. He isn't afraid of me, neither," she added with a giggle. "Still, it takes the Irish to hand him one, once in a while."

"Are you Irish?" asked Harry.

"Irish as can be. Don't I look it? And proud of it, at that. Now you just listen to me, Harry. Keep out of Mr. Barton's way as much as you can. If there's anything you don't know, ask me. Now you'd better take a walk around the jewelry and the book department and find out where you're at. Size up 'jewelry' first and then come back here. I may have something for you to do. If I don't need you, you can chase yourself over into the books for a walk around. If you hear me call '45' at any time, then come over here as fast as your feet'll let you."

"Thank you for being so kind. I certainly will try hard to please *you*." Harry forgot his shyness. This pretty girl with her sharp tongue and slang phrases was quite different from his meek, quiet little mother, but he felt somehow that she had the same warm heart.

"Listen to the kid." Margaret Welch beamed on Harry and made a mental resolve that old Cross-patch would have to let him alone or settle with her. And thus Harry Harding began his store life by making an enemy and a friend.

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In the meantime, Teddy Burke, greatly to his displeasure, had been left to thrive or languish among the kettles and pans. There was little danger of Teddy languishing. His was a disposition that longed to be up and doing. House furnishings were altogether too tame to suit his active tastes. Still, there might be a chance for a little fun. Teddy eyed the red-faced, gray-haired aisle man and decided that he wasn't very cross, and quite easy. Now that he was away from Harry's subduing influence, his mischievous nature began to come to the surface and his bright black eyes roved speculatively about the department.

"What's your name, boy?" asked Mr. Duffield, in placid tones.

"Teddy Burke—sir." Teddy tardily remembered the sir, but forgot to say Theodore.

"Well, Teddy, you are to make yourself generally useful in this department. Do you think you can do that?"

"Oh, yes, sir," was Teddy's confident answer.

"Stay right in your department, where we can get you when we need you. No running off the floor, unless I give you permission. I don't want a boy here who says, 'I can't,' or 'I haven't time,' when he's asked to do something. I want a pleasant, willing boy. Understand?"

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"Yes, sir," murmured Teddy, rather meekly. The red-faced little man didn't seem quite so easy. There was a ring of finality in his voice that meant business. Just then a monotonous voice was heard calling, "Mr. Duf-field, Mr. Duf-field," and the aisle manager trotted off toward the sound, leaving Teddy to his own devices. He sidled up to a table of blue and white kitchen ware and surveyed it with contemptuous eyes. How the fellows in school would tease him if they knew where he was. They would call him "kitchen mechanic" and "Bridget," and any other appropriate names that happened to come to their minds. Teddy's unhappy reflections were broken in upon by a peremptory voice, "Here, boy." Teddy turned toward the sound and saw a salesman beckoning to him. The little, red-haired boy obeyed the call with alacrity. Mischievous though he might be, Teddy, thanks to Harry's earnest views of good service, had made up his mind to do his best.

"Take these over to the wrapping desk. It's all the way back, behind that partition." The man piled Teddy's thin, wiry arms high with cooking utensils.

"Don't drop 'em," he directed, "and don't lose the checks."

The boy started off jauntily enough. The granite-ware utensils had been piled one upon another in a huge dishpan. On the very top of the lot was a stewpan with a long handle. Before Teddy had proceeded ten feet, it slid off the pile to the floor with a protesting rattle. Teddy glanced quickly about. He wondered if anyone had seen him drop the pan. There was no one near the long aisle through which he walked, except a demonstrator, who was so busy cooking something on a shining hot-plate that she paid no attention to him. Setting down his load on the end of a table piled with similar goods, he picked up the offending stewpan and put it in place. He had barely started when off it slid again. "I'll fix you," he muttered. Seizing it savagely he measured it with his eye, then jamming it firmly down upon his head, proceeded calmly up the aisle, looking not unlike a small helmeted knight.

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"Boy!" A horrified voice checked Teddy's triumphal progress, causing him to let the whole armful of kitchen ware clatter to the floor. Bearing down upon him strode a tall, loose-jointed man, whose arms seemed to flap as he walked.

"Take that pan off your head. Take it off, I say!" He pointed dramatically toward the stewpan, still perched upon Teddy's red hair. Two sales-girls and a customer passed by. The girls giggled outright. The customer, a stout, comfortable-looking woman, smiled.

The pan came off Teddy's head in a twinkling. "It wouldn't stay on the pile," he murmured, but his eyes were dancing. He stooped to gather up his fallen wares.

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"Look at me," commanded the man. "How long have you been in this department?"

"'Bout half an hour." Far from being abashed, Teddy straightened up and eyed his questioner. He was not thinking about what he had done. He could still see the tall man flapping toward him, looking for all the world like a funny scarecrow he had once seen in a play. He had to scowl to keep from laughing.

"Well, let me tell you, young man, you won't be here half an hour longer, if I catch you at any more such tricks. Do you think a customer wants a stewpan that a boy has been using for a head piece? What do you suppose our customers will say about Martin Brothers' store, if we allow our boys to disgrace us in that fashion!"

Teddy hung his head, but, wise child that he was, said nothing.

"What is your name and your number? Mr. Keene must hear of this. He is responsible for putting such boys as you in the store."

Teddy gave his name and number, which was 65, and the tall man flapped off down the aisle with the air of one who has done his duty, leaving poor little Number 65 to collect his scattered burden.

"You better watch yourself, kid." The laughing voice caused Teddy to straighten up, the big dishpan in his hand. A young man with hair as red as Teddy's own and twinkling blue eyes was regarding him amiably. "That's Mr. Seymour, the floor superintendent."

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"I guess his name oughta be *talk* more," grumbled Teddy, reaching for the last spilled article and setting it down hard. "Stewpan hats aren't goin' to be the style this year," he grinned, placing the troublesome pan where it could not roll off.

"You're a funny one," commented the salesman. "You and I are in the same class when it comes to red hair. I'll bet you're chuck full of mischief. I used to be, too, when I was a kid like you."

"I guess you ain't got over it yet," said Teddy slyly. "Say," the young man's friendly manner invited confidence, "will that guy report me to Mr. Keene?"

"He will if he happens to think of it again, but it's not likely he'll remember. He's a lot on his mind all the time. He looks grouchy, but he's not so bad. Now you better get over to that desk with that stuff. Got your checks?"

"Yep." Teddy exhibited them, clutched in one hand.

"All right. Run along, youngster." Teddy had also made a friend, and a true one.

Teddy reached the desk without further mishap. When he returned to his department, he heard Mr. Duffield calling, "Boy, boy," and from that moment on his work began in earnest. Being as quick-witted as he was mischievous, it did not take Teddy long to get his bearings. By the time the morning was over he had explored every corner of the department, and knew the location of the wrapping and exchange desks, the buyer's office and the names of several sales persons. At half-past twelve he was told that he might go to lunch. The red-haired salesman, whose name was Samuel Hickson, showed him the way to the men's time desk and by following three boys who were bound for the lunch room he brought up safely in the big room where the men and boys of Martin Brothers' store could obtain a substantial meal for ten cents. [60]

Teddy's first move was to look for Harry Harding. Despite the fact that he was hungry, he wandered up and down among the small tables set for from four to eight persons, his sharp, black eyes darting alertly about the room in search of Harry. After ten of his precious forty-five minutes had passed, he gave up his quest and walked over to where the eatables were laid out in tempting rows on a long counter. Behind the counter were several women, who served the meats and vegetables. The salads, bread and desserts were put within convenient reach. One chose or ordered what one wished, and placing it upon a tray carried it to a nearby desk, where a cashier inspected it and collected the amount due for the luncheon. Then the purchaser was free to carry it to an unoccupied place at any of the tables and eat it at his leisure. [61]

Teddy spied a sign which read, "Regular dinner, 10 cents," and decided to invest his dime. He received two slices of bread, a bit of butter, a medium-sized piece of roast beef, a boiled potato and a small wedge of pie. In spite of his disappointment at not seeing Harry, he felt quite jubilant over having been able to get as much as he could eat for ten cents. If he walked home with Harry that night, he would have ten cents left from his quarter. That would take him and Harry to the movie theatre across the street, where "The Outlaw's Last Stand" was showing, and one could see six reels for five cents.

Rising so early had given Teddy a keen appetite for dinner and it did not take him long to dispose of it. He found he still had twenty minutes to do as he pleased, so he wandered about the lunch room watching wistfully several tables where merry little companies of boys were talking and laughing over their lunch.

"Wish I knew some of those fellows," was his thought. His eyes still on a group of four particularly lively boys at a small table, he forgot for a second to steer a safe course among the lads who were passing back and forth with trays.

"Crash!" He came into full collision with a stout boy who was hurrying from the opposite direction with a full tray. [62]

"Now see what you've done," exploded the stout boy angrily. The wreck of a ten-cent dinner lay scattered over the floor. Only one dish had been broken. The plate on which reposed the piece of beef. The other dishes were still whole.

"I—I—didn't mean to," faltered Teddy.

"You big elephant. You did it on purpose," scolded the fat boy.

"Huh!" snorted Teddy, his own temper rising. "I guess you look more like an elephant than I do."

By this time a dozen boys had surrounded the two belligerents, with others constantly arriving. Several men stood laughingly in the background.

"See here, freshie, do you want to fight?" blustered the fat boy. "If you do, just call me another name and see what happens."

"Rhinceros," flung back Teddy, white with defiance. Both his fists were now doubled menacingly.

"Teddy Burke!" a surprised, disapproving voice caused Teddy's eyes to leave the fat boy's face momentarily. Harry Harding was pushing his way through the crowd to Teddy's side. "What is the matter here, Ted?"

"Aw, I bumped into this—this fellow and upset his tray and now he wants to lick me for it. I didn't mean to, but he's so thick he can't get it through his head." [63]

"He did it a-purpose," sputtered the boy. "Now I haven't any dinner or any more money. I gotta have something to eat." His voice became a whine.

"Oh, you make me tired," retorted Teddy scornfully. "Do you s'pose I wasn't goin' to pay for your old dinner? Here's a dime. Go buy another, and keep still." He handed the fat boy his dime.

The latter clutched it eagerly. "But my dinner cost fifteen cents," he objected, as he pocketed the silver.

At this moment one of the women employed in the lunch room had come forward to clear away the wreck.

"Wait a minute, please." Harry Harding began an examination of the food on the floor. Then he turned to the woman. "Isn't this a ten-cent dinner?" he asked. "Is there anything besides the regular dinner there?"

The woman viewed the wreckage. "It's a ten-cent dinner, all right," she nodded.

Harry's eyes were full of contempt as he turned to the fat boy, who, caught in a lie, colored deeply, his small, shifting eyes refusing to meet Harry's. Those who had crowded around the two began looking and voicing their disapproval.

"Pretty small, isn't he," sneered a young man. "He was trying to work that other boy for a nickel."

"Serve him right if he had to go without his dinner," commented a boy of about Harry's own age.

"Come on, Ted." Taking the red-haired boy by the arm, Harry turned his back on the dishonest boy. The surrounding group dissolved, by magic, leaving the fat youth standing alone, a deep scowl darkening his disagreeable face.

"See here, Ted," began Harry as they walked down the long room, "did you start that fuss?"

"Course I didn't," flung back Teddy in indignation. "I was goin' along, minding my own business, when I bumped into that fathead. Why didn't he look where he was goin'?"

"Why didn't you look where *you* were going?" questioned Harry slyly.

"I guess that's right, too," admitted Teddy. "Still, he needn'ta made all that pow-wow. I was goin' to make his old dinner up to him. I had ten cents left of my quarter and I was goin' to take you to the movies when we got out to-night. Then he had to come along and spoil it all."

"I couldn't go to the movies to-night, anyhow, Ted," said Harry, "but it's good in you to think of me."

"Why not?" demanded Teddy.

"I've got to go straight home. Mother will be waiting for me. She'll want to know how I made out to-day. Your mother will probably want to know, too."

"Oh, she won't care," retorted Ted. "She's too busy goin' to a club she belongs to, to care what I do. If I ain't there at supper time she leaves my supper on the table or in the oven for me and beats it off to her old club. They're always havin' meetin's and parties and things."

Harry cast a quick glance of sympathy at his companion. He could not imagine life without his mother's interest in all he did. He made a secret resolve to take Teddy home with him as often as he would go. Teddy should share his mother. Then a bright idea came to him. "Why don't you tell your mother what you do and where you go?" he proposed. "If she got used to hearing about it she might want to know. My mother always likes to know all I do. It helps a fellow a lot if his mother's that way."

"I s'pose it does," returned Teddy soberly.

"My goodness, I forgot to buy my dinner!" exclaimed Harry. "Have you eaten yours?"

"Yep. It's time for me to go back to my department. I had a lot to tell you, but it'll have to keep till to-night. Wait for me on the corner."

"I will. I've a lot to tell you, too."

"So long," nodded Teddy.

The two boys separated. Teddy left the room, while Harry went over to buy his dinner. Twenty minutes of his precious time had already gone. He carried his tray of food to a nearby table and sat down to eat it. But he had hardly settled himself when he heard a surly voice in his ear, "You think you're pretty smart, don't you? Well, next time you butt in where it ain't any of your business you'll be sorry."

Harry whirled in his chair to see the sulky fat boy directly behind him, glowering down at him. His steady blue eyes measured the other with a long look of quiet contempt and indifference. Then he turned his back squarely upon the disgruntled boy and went on eating his dinner.

CHAPTER VI

AT THE END OF THE DAY

“Well, how did you get along this afternoon?” was Harry’s greeting, as the two boys met on the corner after work. It was fifteen minutes to six. The store closed at half past five o’clock, but the boys of the store were obliged to form in line in the assembly room and pass out of the building, reporting their numbers at their special time desk as they went.

“Oh, pretty good. Better’n this morning. Got a call down first thing,” confessed Teddy.

“You did! I’m surprised.” Harry didn’t look in the least surprised. “What could you possibly do to get a scolding?”

“Aw, quit teasing me,” retorted Teddy. He related his first disastrous errand to the wrapping desk. As might be expected, Harry laughed. He had a mental vision of Teddy parading down the aisle in his granite-ware helmet, his arms full of kitchen utensils.

“You wouldn’ta thought it was quite so funny if you’d seen that great tall giraffe comin’ down the aisle at you,” grumbled Teddy.

“I don’t suppose I would,” Harry regarded the red-haired boy smilingly. “Still, you couldn’t blame him very much. You’d better be careful about calling people pet names, though, Ted.” Harry grew serious. “You got me into trouble by calling Mr. Barton a crank, then you called that fat boy an elephant. I must say, the name suits him, only it’s rather hard on the elephant. Now you’ve named another man a giraffe. First thing you know, you’ll have a zoo, and when they hear you calling their names the whole menagerie will come at you and gobble you up.”

“You talk like a fairy story,” grinned Teddy. “Don’t worry. I won’t let anyone hear me calling ‘em pet names. I’m sorry about that fellow I called ‘some crank.’ If his ears had been in the right place he wouldn’ta thought you said it. I’ll go to him and tell him I’m the boy that said it. He may treat you pretty mean.”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort.” Harry’s lips set with decision. “Mr. Barton will probably forget about it. I don’t believe he’ll be so very mean to me. There’s a nice young lady at the exchange desk. Her name is Miss Welch. She has been real good to me to-day. She told me not to mind if Mr. Martin was cross.”

“There’s a nice man in the old pans and kettles department,” returned Teddy. “His name’s Hickson and he has red hair, too. He says he used to act like me when he was a boy.”

“Then we’ve each made a friend, haven’t we?” commented Harry. “You’re better off than I am, though, Ted. You haven’t anyone down on you, and I’m on the bad side of two persons.”

“Yes, and I’m to blame,” said Ted savagely. “You shoulda let me alone with that fat kid up in the lunch room. I’da punched him and—”

“Been discharged,” finished Harry.

“Well, he wouldn’t’ve jumped on you, anyhow,” muttered Teddy.

Harry regarded the little, red-haired boy with genuine affection. This sudden revelation of regard for him on Teddy’s part pleased him greatly.

“You’re a good chum, Teddy,” he said. “Don’t you worry about that fat boy. He won’t bother either of us again. He’s a coward.”

The boys trudged along the busy city streets, talking earnestly of their day’s work. In spite of the fact that they had been on their feet all day, neither of them felt tired. The novelty of their first day’s work had caused them to forget themselves. When at last they separated at the corner where their ways diverged, Teddy said eagerly, “Well, it’s been some day, all right. I’d a good deal rather work than go to school. Say, if I can get up early enough to-morrow morning I’ll meet you on this corner at seven o’clock. If you don’t see me, don’t wait.”

“All right,” nodded Harry. “Good-bye, Teddy. Don’t forget to tell your mother all about your first day in the store.”

“I will,” promised Teddy. Then he was off down a side street like a flash, leaving Harry to pursue the rest of his walk home alone.

The pleasant aroma of newly-made coffee and broiling beefsteak greeted his nostrils as he opened the door of their tiny apartment. His mother was so busily engaged in bending over a pan of biscuits which she was in the act of removing from the oven that she did not hear the boy enter. Slipping quietly up to her he wound both arms about her waist, just as she straightened up.

Crash! The pan of biscuits fell to the floor, but obligingly landed right side up and in the pan.

“Mercy, child, how you startled me!” exclaimed Mrs. Harding. “It’s a good thing those biscuits landed right side up with care. Well, dearie, how did you get along to-day? I suppose you got the position, or you’d have been home long ago.” Mrs. Harding set the biscuits safely on the end of the table and, turning, gave Harry an affectionate hug and kiss.

“Yes, Mother, I’m a working man at last. My, but I’m hungry and how good the supper smells! I didn’t know until this minute just how starved I was. It’s splendid in you to have beefsteak. It’s just what a hungry fellow likes best. And creamed potatoes, too!” He had stepped over to the stove, lifted the lid of a saucepan, and was peering into it.

“I thought we could afford to have a little beefsteak to-night. I knew you’d be hungry. I had to ask the man in the meat market to trust me for it until Saturday, but I wanted you to have a good supper, son. Let’s sit right down as soon as you’ve washed your face and hands. Everything’s

ready. Then you can tell me what happened to you to-day."

"I'll be ready, too, in a jiffy," declared Harry. Going over to a stand on which stood a china bowl and pitcher, Harry took the pitcher and filled it with water from the sink. One room served the Hardings as kitchen and dining-room. Pouring the water into the bowl, he began a vigorous splashing. Five minutes later, his boyish face shining with health and cleanliness, he seated himself opposite his mother at the table.

"Now, eat first and talk afterwards," she commanded, as she heaped her son's plate with beefsteak and creamed potatoes and passed it to him.

When his first hunger had been appeased, Harry began an account of the day's happenings. His mother listened in interested silence. Harry said nothing about Mr. Barton's evident dislike for him, or of the fat boy who had sworn to "be even" with him. He felt that these tales were better left untold. His mother would merely worry if she knew that things had not gone quite smoothly. Besides, it was a poor sort of boy who couldn't fight his own battles.

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Mrs. Harding laughed merrily over Teddy's triumphant march down the aisle in his stewpan headgear. "He must be a funny little boy, Harry," she said. "You must bring him home with you to supper, some night."

"Oh, may I?" Harry's eyes shone. "That will be fine. I know Ted can come. He says his mother lets him do whatever he pleases. Do you know, Mothery," this was Harry's pet name for his mother, "I feel a little bit sorry for Ted, to think his mother doesn't make a fuss over him like you do over me. She belongs to some kind of a club, and she's always going off to it, so Ted hardly sees her in the evenings. You see, he isn't so poor as we are. He doesn't have to work if he doesn't want to. He can go to school. His father's dead, too, but his mother has money enough to take care of her and Teddy so long as they both live. He just started to work because he didn't like school. Nobody cares much what he does."

"The poor little mite!" sympathized Mrs. Harding. "You just bring him home with you. I'll mother him."

"You can't help liking him. He's such a jolly, funny little fellow," was Harry's enthusiastic reply.

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But while the Hardings were discussing him, Teddy Burke was trying to put into execution his new plan of telling his mother everything. The moment he entered the hall of the two-story brick house which his mother owned, he hurried up the stairs to the sitting room. He drew aside the portiere and peeped in, then looked disappointed. There was no one there. Then he set off down the hall to her bedroom. The door was closed. He listened for an instant, then tapped on the door.

"Is that you, Teddy?" came in quick, business-like tones. "What do you want?"

"I want to see you. Can't I come in?"

"Yes, but don't bother me. I am going to a concert that the Mozart Club is giving to-night and I'm in a hurry. You'll find your supper downstairs in the oven. I couldn't wait for you."

Teddy had entered the room while his mother was talking. He found her sitting before her dressing table in a kimono, arranging her hair.

"I just want to tell you about the kind of a day I had in the store," he began bravely. "I started to work——"

"You can tell me about it when I come home to-night, dear. I haven't time to listen to you now. I am to meet Mrs. Andrews at the club at seven o'clock and I'll never get there on time if you bother me. Run downstairs and get your supper. That's a good boy."

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"All right," Teddy sighed, and turning on his heel went downstairs to the kitchen. He paused before the kitchen range and stared at it with a scowl. "I knew it wouldn't work," he muttered. "Harry's lucky. I'll try it again to-morrow. If I keep it up, maybe she'll listen to me, even if I do bother her." Then he set to work to carry his lonely supper to the table, and was soon eating it with the appetite of a very hungry little boy, his brief disappointment forgotten.

But though Teddy did not then know it, the seed had fallen on good ground, for Mrs. Burke could not help wondering as she dressed for the concert what had caused her usually non-communicative son to be so ready to talk. A sudden vague regret that she had sent him away swept over her, and as she hurried downstairs to keep her appointment she found time to stop in the dining-room and say, "I'm sorry I have to hurry away, dear. But I wish you'd tell me all about the store to-morrow." Stooping, she kissed Teddy's cheek and hurried off to the Mozart Club, leaving a happy little boy to murmur, "Maybe it's goin' to work, after all. She certainly is some mother."

CHAPTER VII

TEDDY COMES INTO HIS OWN

[75]

Their second day in the store passed much more quickly than the first, for Harry Harding and Teddy Burke. In the first place everything did not seem so new and strange. To Teddy, his realm of kettles and pans looked fairly familiar, and he felt quite as though he had known Mr.

Hickson, the red-haired salesman, all his life. Harry, however, was not at ease at the exchange desk. It seemed to him that Mr. Barton perpetually hovered near the desk, ordering everyone about, his heavy, black eyebrows almost meeting in a ferocious scowl. Even Miss Welch, the pretty clerk, could not escape his fault-finding. Above the hum of the busy departments his loud, strident voice was constantly to be heard, and wherever he moved he left behind him a trail of dissatisfaction and muttered rebellion.

Harry had fully determined to obey the crabbed man's orders so promptly that he should have no room for complaint. All day he was strictly on the alert, and though Mr. Barton spoke sharply to him whenever he demanded his services, he found no room to criticize the clear-eyed, obedient lad. [76]

Harry went to lunch earlier that day and made his way to the lunch room with the feeling that if he kept on as he had done that morning, Mr. Barton would understand that he was trying to do his best. As he entered the long room he glanced quickly about to see if the fat boy of his yesterday's encounter had arrived. Yes, there he was at the far end of the room, greedily gobbling his dinner, his head bent low over his food. When Harry had secured his own tray of food, he took good care to put the length of the room between them. Though far from being afraid of the disagreeable youth, he had no desire to precipitate another scene. Meanwhile, he kept one eye on the door for Teddy, who was due in the lunch room some minutes later than himself. He intended to go forward and meet his chum with the idea of steering him clear of trouble. To his relief, however, the belligerent fat youth finally rose and shuffled off, disappearing through the door that led to the stairs.

Five minutes later Teddy appeared, and hailing him, Harry pointed to a place at his table which he had reserved for his chum.

"Did you meet that fat boy?" was Harry's first question.

"Nope. Didn't see the big baby," replied Teddy contemptuously. "Did you see him?" [77]

"Yes; he just left here. I thought you might have met him in the hall. I am glad you didn't."

"It's a good thing for him. If I'd seen him and he'd said a word to me, I'd have punched him, sure," threatened Teddy.

"See here, Ted, you had better make up your mind here and now to let that boy alone if you happen to meet him. He isn't worth bothering with. Certainly he isn't worth losing your position for. If you get into a fight with him, you'll both be discharged. Even though he is so hateful, he may have to work to help support his family. You wouldn't like to be the means of doing the boy's mother out of her son's help, would you?"

"Aw, rats! He couldn't support a mosquito," jeered Teddy. "I'll bet he's a great, big, spoiled kid, that got fired from school just as I did. He's no good."

"Then if he's no good, keep away from him," retorted Harry sharply.

"Oh, I'm not going to chase after him," grinned Teddy. "Don't get excited."

"I sha'n't. At least, not over anything like that." Harry smiled in sympathy with Teddy's irresistible grin. Then he changed the subject abruptly by saying, "To-morrow is our first day to go to school, Teddy. Have you forgotten it?"

"No, I haven't. I wish I had. I wish when to-morrow morning came I'd forget every single thing about school until eleven o'clock. What's the use of going to an old school when you've got a job? I know enough already." [78]

"I don't," said Harry earnestly. "I think it's a splendid chance. Why, Ted, we're lucky to have it."

"Then I'd rather be unlucky," asserted Teddy stubbornly. "I'd rather hang around with the old kettles and pans all my life than be chased off to a silly school."

There was a moment's silence after Teddy's grumbling speech. Then Harry said, "I hope we are put in the same division."

"We won't be. You know more'n I do, and you use better grammar. How far did you go in arithmetic?"

"I was just through percentage when I left school," Harry made reply.

"You've got me beaten a mile. I only went as far as decimal fractions. I don't know much about 'em, either. Don't know that I want to."

"Yes, you do. You must try to do your best in school, as well as in your department. I think if you'd try not to use so much slang, you'd find your grammar improved." Harry regarded the red-haired boy with an anxious solicitude, that quite took away the impression that he was attempting to dictate to his little companion.

"See here, Harry," Teddy's black eyes were fixed earnestly on the other lad, "if any of the fellows I knew at school had handed me a lot of goody-goody talk, I'd have told 'em to shut up pretty quick, but somehow I don't mind what you say to me. I guess it's because I like you, and I wouldn't be su'prised if you are pretty near right. I'll try to get along in the old school, just because you want me to." [79]

"Will you shake hands on that?" asked Harry, extending his hand.

Teddy's hand shot out instantly to meet Harry's. His black eyes were gentle with friendliness.

Then he said almost sheepishly, "I gotta go. I'll see you on the same old corner to-night. If you get there first be sure and wait for me."

The rest of the day went by uneventfully and, as agreed, the boys met after the store closed and walked part way home together. Both lads found themselves a trifle more tired than on their first day. For once Teddy had the supreme satisfaction of eating supper with his mother. Strange to relate, she had no engagement for the evening, and heard his tales of the day's work with considerable interest. She listened closely to Teddy's description of Harry, and his eager assertion that Harry's mother "liked boys a lot" and had told Harry to bring him home to supper some night. Teddy could hardly believe his ears when his mother said, "Then you must invite this boy to our home to supper, too."

[80]

After the meal they sat together in the living room, Ted reading one of the books in a favorite series of his, in which a wonderful boy hero goes through all sorts of hair-raising adventures and bobs up triumphantly at the end of the story, while his mother stitched diligently on a doyley she had begun months before and neglected to finish. Still more wonderful, when at nine o'clock he began to yawn over his book and decided to go to bed, she called him to her and kissed him good night.

After her son had gone happily to bed, Mrs. Burke began to consider him more seriously than she had done for years. She felt a little piqued over Teddy's enthusiastic description of Harry and his mother. She wondered if she had done right in allowing Teddy to leave school and go to work, and she resolved that in future she would look after him a little more closely than she had in the past.

Meanwhile, in his own humble home, Harry was going over the day's doings to his own mother, entirely unconscious of the blessed change his admonition to Teddy Burke to cultivate his mother's acquaintance had wrought in two lives.

CHAPTER VIII

[81]

THE RECRUITS TO COMPANY A

"To-day's the day!" exclaimed Harry Harding joyfully, as he came within hailing distance of Teddy Burke, who, as usual, had arrived first at the corner on which the two boys had met every morning since they had begun their work in Martin Brothers' Department Store.

"What day?" demanded Teddy Burke, with a purposely blank expression. "To-day's nothin' but Thursday."

"You know very well what day I mean," smiled Harry. "To-day is the day we go to school."

"Don't you s'pose I know it?" grumbled Teddy. "What made you tell me about it? I was trying to forget it."

Harry laughed. "Oh, forget you've a grudge against school. Maybe it won't be so bad as you think."

"Cheer up. The worst is yet to come," grinned Teddy.

"Exactly; only the worst may turn out to be the best. You never can tell."

[82]

"No, you can't. That's right. If I'd known that this store had a school I'd have beat it out of here pretty quick," retorted Teddy.

"I believe you told me that yesterday, and the day before that, which was our first day in the store," reminded Harry, his eyes twinkling.

Teddy made no reply. They had by this time reached the men's entrance to the store and the red-haired boy's eyes roved about, taking in everything from the row of time-keepers seated behind their high desks to a dilapidated glove that someone had dropped on the floor.

Although the boys entered the store at the men's door, they did not report to the time-keepers at the men's desk whose business it was to record the male employees' time, from the moment of their arrival until they stepped out into the street when their day's work was done. The entire force of boys was obliged to report each day in the assembly room on the second floor to a time-keeper there. It was in the assembly room that they received a critical looking over before going to their departments or to school. Here they lined up for a general inspection, which included neatness of dress, clean hands and faces, and freshly shined shoes. Dark blue or black clothing was preferred, but not exacted, although the boys were not allowed to wear light-colored suits or shoes, or brightly colored ties.

[83]

Any untidiness in personal appearance meant a black mark on the report card which each boy carried. Having been given their cards on the day they entered the store, Teddy and Harry had had ample time to look them over. They had found that the little squares on them were made by the divisions ruled off after the words untidiness, discourtesy, tardiness, carelessness, absence, lying, inattention, loud talking, bad language, low average in school, deportment in school. These words were printed in regular order down the card, while the space after them was used for the little ruled squares, each one just large enough to hold a black mark. These demerits could be given by either the teacher or the aisle manager of the boy who transgressed. Once a month

these cards passed into the hands of Mr. Marsh's assistant for a general inspection and averaging. As Mr. Marsh had already explained, ten demerits in one month meant a most uncomfortable session in Mr. Keene's office, when the superintendent decided whether the offender should be dropped from the store, while a lesser number was recorded against him and held for future reference. A boy who month after month had received from five to eight demerits was also quite likely to find himself without a position.

So far, Harry's and Teddy's cards remained as clean as when Mr. Marsh had handed them to the lads. Harry's had remained so because he had doggedly determined to make no mistakes or call down upon his head the displeasure of the crabbed aisle man, Mr. Barton. Teddy's card had stayed clean by sheer good luck. If Mr. Duffield had spied him calmly wearing his stewpan crown, it is safe to say that there would have been at least one black mark on his card. Fortunately, Mr. Seymour was far too busy a man to bother about report cards. To be sure, he had threatened to report Teddy to Mr. Keene. Then he had gone on his way and forgotten all about it. So Teddy had escaped a demerit on his first day in the store.

Inspection was hardly over when one of the two young men who had charge of the assembly room, and whose duty it was to conduct the inspection, called, "Company A, fall in for school."

"That's us," whispered Harry to Teddy, who stood next to him in the line. "Mr. Marsh said we'd be in Company A."

Teddy nodded disconsolately, as he took his place beside Harry in the rapidly forming line. He felt that the shades of his old prison were about to close around him again. The very thought of school made him unhappy. He wondered if his teacher would be as old and as cranky as Miss Alton. He supposed she would be, and his mischievous, freckled face looked decidedly solemn as he marched along beside his chum.

Out of the assembly room, up a flight of stairs, through several departments and straight past Mr. Marsh's desk went the long line of boys. It was the same line Harry and Teddy had watched when first they had come to Mr. Keene's office. Harry gave a little shiver of sheer pride as his eyes wandered to the bench where he and Teddy had sat and viewed the long procession, of which they were now a part. It was wonderful to think that they had so quickly found places in the work-a-day world. Now it remained to them to go ever onward and upward to prosperity and success.

His rapt reflections were disturbed by a sharp nudge in the ribs.

"Look who's here," muttered Teddy.

"Where? Who?" asked Harry in a whisper.

"The elephant; old Fatty Felix. There he is, waddling along ahead of us," murmured Ted in guarded tones. "Wouldn't that make you sick, though. Hope he isn't in my class." Teddy's voice rose higher as his disgust grew greater.

"No talking in the line, young man," came the sharp command. Company A was rapidly dividing itself into three sections. They had reached the southern end of the building, which faced on a small side street. This end had been reserved for the school rooms. There were three of them in a row, each being the size of an ordinary class-room, and seating comfortably twenty-five boys. There were rarely that number to a room, however, as each of the three companies comprised not more than fifty boys, except at the holiday season. But during those busy days, school was not in session.

Both boys glanced sharply about at the sound of the voice. A short, severe-looking woman with small blue eyes and a sallow complexion stared fixed reproof upon them. Teddy's heart sank. She was even worse than Miss Alton, he decided.

"Where do you boys belong? Why haven't I seen you before? How long have you been in the store?" came the sharp questions.

"We were taken on last Tuesday, and we were told to come to school to-day. This boy is in Department 40, and I am at Exchange Desk Number 10." Harry spoke in pleasant, respectful tones.

"Where are your school slips?"

"We haven't any. We——"

"Go and get them."

"Where shall we go for them?"

"To Mr. Marsh, of course. It's very evident you boys were not paying attention to what he said to you when you were taken on the store messenger force. Look out, or you each will get a demerit for inattention."

Both boys were decidedly embarrassed. Harry's pale face was red with confusion. Teddy colored hotly under his freckles. His black eyes became two belligerent sparks.

"Shall we go to Mr. Marsh now?" asked Harry quietly.

"Yes, and return at once. Don't play along the way. Bring them to me. I shall be in that room." She pointed to the door on the right.

"B-r-rr!" shivered Teddy, once their backs were fairly turned to the woman. "I wonder who she is."

"I suppose she's the principal," returned Harry.

"She makes me tired. How were we to know about school slips? It's Mr. Marsh's fault for not telling us. Why didn't you tell her that he didn't say anything about 'em?" demanded Teddy.

"Because I didn't like to begin that way. I'd rather take the blame than lay it upon him. I'd hate to tell tales of anyone who has been so nice to us as he has."

"I guess it wouldn't hurt him. He's a match for this old girl."

"Teddy Burke!" Harry's voice carried a note of sternness. "Do you think it's nice to call a lady an 'old girl?' Suppose someone called your mother that. You'd be pretty angry, I guess."

"Nobody could call my mother that," flung back Teddy. "She's young and nice, and not a bit like that old crank of a principal. I'm going to call her the Dragoness." [88]

"Well, I don't suppose your mother is that sort," conceded Harry. Then in spite of his reproving words, he could not repress a faint giggle. Teddy's disrespectful appellations were so funny.

Teddy echoed the giggle and racked his brain for something else to say about the principal. But before he had thought of anything, they had arrived at Mr. Marsh's desk, at which he sat, writing busily.

The boys paused beside him. He did not look up for a moment. Teddy gave a little impatient wriggle. The pleasant young man raised his eyes and viewed the lads with a slight frown.

"You mustn't come to me at this hour, boys," he reproved. "That is, unless you were sent here on an errand."

"The principal of the school sent us down to you, sir," began Harry. "We did not know we were obliged to have school slips."

Mr. Marsh's face had grown a trifle stern at Harry's first words. Was it possible that he had been mistaken in these boys? Had they transgressed so soon? With the last sentence, however, his expression changed.

"Of course you didn't know. That was my fault. I should have told you. Did you tell Miss Pierce that I forgot to give them to you?"

"No, sir," returned Teddy. "The Drag——"

"We did not think it necessary to tell her, sir." Harry interrupted Teddy just in time. The red-haired boy turned scarlet as a poppy and meekly subsided. [89]

Mr. Marsh studied Harry's clear, honest face for an instant. Moved by a sudden impulse he reached forth his hand to Harry. "Thank you, my boy," he said. "My shoulders are broad enough to bear just censure. Still I appreciate your kindly spirit. Let me tell you something, boys. Occasions often arise when it is only fair and right for a boy to shield himself, even at the expense of someone else, provided that someone else is to blame. But the boy who can fight his own battles without drawing others into them is worthy of praise. Just remember that. Here are your school slips. If you feel that you wish to consult me about your affairs, I am always ready to hear whatever you may wish to say to me, between five and half-past five o'clock every afternoon."

"Thank you, sir." This from both boys as they turned to go.

"Hm-m," sniffed Teddy as they started away from Mr. Marsh's desk. "He didn't shake hands with me."

"I was surprised," admitted Harry.

"Te-he," snickered Teddy. "I came pretty near calling that old principal 'Dragoness' right out. I'd a said it, if you hadn't begun to talk so quick."

"Yes, I know it." Harry could not repress a smile. "I don't suppose it will do the least bit of good for me to tell you again not to give people funny names." [90]

"Huh!" exploded Teddy, again. "It don't hurt 'em any. They can't hear 'em."

"You might forget yourself as you did to-day," reminded Harry. "How would you like it if someone called you——" Harry eyed Teddy speculatively—"a red-head."

"Well, it's the truth, isn't it?" demanded Teddy. "I wouldn't care what folks called me," he added with a fine air of indifference, "if they didn't call me too early in the morning."

"Just wait until someone calls you a name and see," Harry predicted.

By this time the boys had reached the school rooms and conversation between them ceased. Entering the room Miss Pierce had designated, they tendered their slips to the principal, who stood talking to a fair-haired young woman. There were perhaps eighteen boys seated at the desks.

"Which of you is Harry Harding?" she asked, examining the slips, then fixing her pale-blue eyes on the two boys.

"I am he, ma'am," returned Harry.

"Where did you go to school? What grade were you in? How old are you?" came the rapid questions.

Harry answered them in turn.

"I shall put you in Section I of Company A. If you cannot keep up with the class, you will be demoted." Then she put Teddy through the same brief catechism, assigning him also to Section I, which was the room on the left.

[91]

Obeying her brusque command, "Come with me, boys," the two lads followed her out of the door and into the left-hand class-room. Their eyes turned involuntarily toward their new teacher. She stood with her back toward them, facing her class. At the sound of the opening door, she turned her head. Teddy drew a long breath of relief. This teacher might be cross, but at least she was pretty. She had big, brown eyes and soft, fluffy, brown hair, and as she nodded good morning to Miss Pierce, her smile disclosed white, even teeth, while two deep dimples appeared in her cheeks.

"Here are two new boys, Miss Leonard." Miss Pierce indicated Teddy and Harry with a gesture which implied that they were of small consequence. Then she marched majestically out of the room, leaving the newcomers to their fate.

That fate promised to be a happy one. If Miss Leonard were nice as well as pretty, school might be endurable, was Teddy's thought, while Harry's eyes sparkled with delight. He was sure Miss Leonard liked boys. He was even surer when he heard her say, "Boys, we are glad to welcome you to our section. We have just two vacant seats. I think they must have been waiting for you. I will put your names on my register; then you can take your places."

[92]

Stepping over to her desk, she beckoned the two boys to her side and wrote their names on the register. Then she conducted them down the center aisle between the rows of desks to two empty seats, the last two on the last of the four rows of seats, each row of which contained six seats.

"Faces front," reminded Miss Leonard, gently, as pair after pair of curious eyes were directed toward these latest arrivals. "After classes you may stop and speak to the new members of our school-room family. All ready for your writing lesson, boys. Take out copy books. Remember, we are going to work quickly and quietly." She walked to the front of the room and faced her class.

Miss Leonard did not raise her voice above an ordinary conversational tone, yet her class obeyed her at once, with the exception of a stout, cross-faced boy who occupied the seat directly across from Teddy in the next section. He was glaring at Teddy as though about to pounce upon him, then as Teddy's eyes happened to rest on him, he screwed his fat face into a most hideous contortion.

Teddy leaned forward and touched Harry on the shoulder. "Well, if here isn't the elephant," he said in a loud whisper. "Dear old Fatty Felix."

[93]

Unluckily, the fat boy's ears were sharp. He heard the whispered words "elephant" and "Fatty Felix." His broad face grew very red; then he raised his hand. Before Miss Leonard could ascertain the cause of the upraised hand, he fairly shouted out, "Teacher, *he*," pointing a pudgy, accusing forefinger at Teddy, "called me 'elephant' an' 'Fatty Felix,' an' Tuesday he knocked my tray out of my hand in the lunch room and spilled my dinner. He did it apurpose. He wasn't goin' to pay for it, neither."

A tense, little figure, crowned with a mop of red hair launched itself straight at the now maliciously-grinning fat boy. Another second and Teddy's closed fists would have landed on his tormentor's body with all the force which an angry little boy can put into blows. Someone caught him and set him down hard in his seat. He raised astonished eyes to Harry's stern face. "You crazy boy," hissed Harry. "Now you *are* in for it!"

"He can't say I wasn't goin' to pay for his old lunch without gettin' punched," sputtered Teddy, wriggling from Harry's grasp.

"Boys, what does this mean?" Miss Leonard's dimples were not in evidence. She looked uncompromisingly stern, and her eyes sparkled angrily. "Tell me, at once." The other occupants of the class set up an excited buzzing.

"Silence!" Miss Leonard's voice rang out with subduing effect. "Now," turning to the fat boy, "what have you to say for yourself, sir?"

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The boy began a loud arraignment of Teddy's misdeeds.

Miss Leonard's face expressed an astonishment which changed to lively displeasure, as the boy again blared forth his accusation of Teddy's refusal to pay for the damage he had caused to his luncheon.

"He is not telling the truth, Miss Leonard," broke in a quiet voice.

Unable to endure hearing Teddy maligned in this wholesale fashion, Harry Harding had come to his rescue.

CHAPTER IX

THE BITTERNESS OF INJUSTICE

[95]

There was a tense silence in the schoolroom. Every eye was directed toward the two lads whose appearance had been the signal for so much commotion. They had made a decidedly

disturbing entrance into school, to say the least.

Miss Leonard regarded Harry searchingly. His clear, unwavering glance seemed to assure her of his honesty of purpose. "Suppose you tell me all about this argument," she said quietly. "You appear to understand what it means. First, let me ask you why you say that this boy," she indicated the fat youth, "is not telling the truth."

"I know that he is not telling the truth, because I was in the lunch-room when Ted—this boy, upset his tray. It was entirely an accident. He was looking at something else and bumped into the boy. The boy was very angry. He tried to make my friend pay fifteen cents, when his dinner cost ten. My friend gave him ten cents, and I suppose he bought another dinner."

"He said he'd get even with me," put in Teddy.

"Wait a moment!" Miss Leonard held up her hand. "I have not asked you to say anything yet," she reminded. Then she turned to the fat boy. "Howard, did you make all this commotion simply because you wanted to 'be even' with this boy?"

"He called me 'elephant' and 'Fatty Felix,'" whined the boy addressed as Howard. "He spoiled my dinner apurpose."

"He made a face at me," declared Teddy, scowling. "That's why I called him names. We were minding our own affairs and he——"

"Howard, it looks to me as though you began this quarrel. Therefore, you are to apologize to Theodore for speaking falsely of him and for making a face at him. You, Theodore, must apologize to Howard for calling him unkind names. Now, Howard."

Howard glared at the red-haired boy, whose impish face wore a most tantalizing grin, then he mumbled a most unwilling apology.

"I'm sorry I had to call him names. I wouldn't have done it if he hadn't made a face at me." Teddy addressed this naïve apology to Miss Leonard, rather than the injured Howard.

Miss Leonard had difficulty in keeping an unsmiling face. Teddy's offhand, unrepentant manner of apologizing was funny in the extreme. She felt her heart warm toward this mischievous-faced, ruddy-haired boy. She liked the honesty that peeped out from behind the mischief, just as she disliked the mean, dishonorable spirit of which she knew Howard Randall, her oldest and most stupid pupil, to be possessed.

"Now, boys, I shall expect you to mind your own affairs strictly, in future. If any more such scenes occur, I shall send you to Mr. Keene. As it is, I shall give each of you a demerit. Hand me your cards."

The boys' hands traveled reluctantly to the breast pockets of their coats. Teddy brought forth a card devoid, by lucky chance, of black marks. Howard Randall's card, however, was decorated with several evidences of his failure to obey the rules of Martin Brothers' store.

"I am sorry to be obliged to give a boy a demerit before he has been my pupil ten minutes," she said with a significance that made Teddy hang his head and resolve to keep his card clear thereafter.

Her pretty face grew perceptibly harder as she leveled cold eyes upon the fat boy. "This is the fifth demerit for you this month, sir. Remember, October is not half over. It would pay you to make up your mind to be a good boy. Now, listen to me. The next time I have occasion to speak to you I shall send you to Miss Pierce and tell her that I do not care to have a boy like you in my class."

The fat boy listened in sulky silence to Miss Leonard's threat. As she turned and walked down the aisle to her desk, he made a face at her retreating back. Several boys, who were watching him, giggled. The teacher eyed him sharply as she faced her class, but by this time the fat boy's face had returned to its expression of sullenness.

After this break in the usual routine of the school work, matters progressed more smoothly. Miss Leonard interviewed Teddy and Harry as to their class standing in the schools which they had attended previous to their entry into the store. She was not slow to perceive Harry's eagerness for study, and that he was farther advanced than the majority of the boys in her class. He seemed so anxious to learn, too. She felt that it would be a pleasure to teach him. She had serious doubts of Teddy, however. By no means did she hold him blameless for the recent disturbance. Still, there was something very likable about him. At least Teddy was honest and straightforward. This would, perhaps, outweigh his mischievous tendencies. She determined to keep him busy every moment of the time he spent in her class-room, and in this respect she showed that rare good sense which had made her the most successful teacher in Martin Brothers' school for boys.

As each boy had only two mornings in the week in which to attend school, these mornings were extremely busy ones. On Tuesday and Friday Company B went to school, on Wednesday and Saturday it was Company C's turn. School opened promptly at half-past seven o'clock, with the reading of the Bible. In Miss Leonard's room each boy was required to recite a Bible verse or poetical quotation. The recital of the quotations followed the Bible reading. Then the remainder of the time until eight o'clock was devoted to penmanship, the boys copying a paragraph placed on the large blackboard which took up most of the wall space directly behind Miss Leonard's desk. A peculiarity of the writing lesson was that once the copy was begun it could not be erased or re-written. It must stand as it had been originally put down. This was Miss Leonard's own idea,

and it went far toward inculcating the habits of neatness and carefulness in writing.

From eight o'clock until half-past eight, the three sections joined in gymnastic exercises on one morning and on the other the same period was devoted to concert singing. On the same floor with the schoolrooms a small gymnasium had been fitted with wands, dumb-bells, Indian clubs, and all the paraphernalia of a high-school gymnasium. Their instructor was a young salesman in the sporting goods department, who left the selling floor for a half hour every other morning to give the boys the benefit of his services. [100]

From half-past eight until nine o'clock came the arithmetic recitation, followed by a half hour of geography. From half-past nine until ten o'clock was a study hour, followed by half an hour of English grammar and composition. From half-past ten until a quarter to eleven was also given over to study, and the last fifteen minutes of the morning were devoted to spelling. As far as possible the boys were given no home work to do, although they were privileged to prepare their arithmetic, English or geography lessons outside of school, if they failed to finish them during the time allotted during each school morning for study.

Such was the programme of the school in which Teddy and Harry now found themselves. Harry's eyes shone with a great happiness, as the morning wore away and the several periods of recitation and study came and went, while for the first time in his life, perhaps, Teddy was genuinely interested in school.

When, at eleven o'clock, Section A filed out of the schoolroom, Teddy hurried to catch up with Harry, who was walking a few steps ahead of him. "How about it?" he asked jocularly. He was not quite sure how Harry had taken his lapse from good conduct.

"How about what?" retorted Harry, purposely dense.

"Wh-y—er—school," beamed Teddy. "It wasn't so *bad*, after all." [101]

"Oh, no, *school* wasn't bad," flung back Harry with unmistakable emphasis.

Teddy grinned cheerfully. "Well, it wasn't your fault, anyway. You told me not to call people names. I'm much obliged to you for being on my side, though."

"I wouldn't have helped you at all if that boy had told the truth," informed Harry calmly. "You got just what you deserved, a demerit. But it wasn't fair in that Randall boy to say what he said."

"Well, I'm not going to get any more demerits. Not unless I'm asleep and somebody steals my card and puts 'em there."

"You'd never get any while you were asleep. That's when you are really good," was Harry's sly comment.

Teddy's grin grew broad again. "Some knock," he murmured. "Well, here's where I leave you. See you to-night."

"All right," nodded Harry. His eyes followed Teddy as he ran down a basement stairway. He turned in the direction of his own department. Suddenly a peevish voice addressed him: "Where's the perfume counter, boy?" He felt a decided poke between the shoulders.

Harry whirled and saw a cross-looking old man with a cane partly raised, as though to poke him again if necessary.

"Two aisles down, turn to your left, sir," answered Harry politely. [102]

"I'd like to know who can make anything of that information," snapped the old man. "You take me down there, boy. That's what you're here for."

"Very well, sir, I will." Harry led the way down the aisle toward the perfumes, while the old man trotted after him, grumbling that he couldn't see why department stores tried to hide their wares if they expected to sell them.

It was at least ten minutes before Harry succeeded in getting away from the ill-natured customer, who insisted that the boy call a salesgirl to wait on him.

"Oh, dear," he breathed in consternation, as, free at last, he hurried toward his department. He had caught sight of the clock in the book department. It was seventeen minutes past eleven. He hurried down the aisle that separated the books from the jewelry, so intent on reaching the exchange desk that he did not see a man, carrying several books, who stepped from a narrow aisle, formed by several tables, into the main one.

Crash! The books fell from the man's hands to the floor. The impact of the collision sent both man and boy backward several steps.

"I beg your pardon, sir. I did not see you coming." Harry stooped. Gathering up the fallen books, he presented them to the stranger, a fine-looking man of perhaps forty-two, with keen, gray eyes and black hair, lightly touched with gray at the temples. [103]

"It was my fault, my lad," smiled the man. "I was so busy thinking I was not looking where I walked."

His gray eyes took in the boy from head to foot with a searching glance that contained decided approval.

"What a nice man," was Harry's thought as he turned away. "I wonder who he is. He must be a salesman in the books. He had all those books. My goodness! It's twenty minutes after eleven o'clock. What will Mr. Barton say, I wonder. Still, I couldn't help taking that man to the

perfumes.”

Harry was soon to learn what Mr. Barton had to say. He had hardly reached the exchange desk when he saw the aisle manager bearing down upon him, looking like a cross old bird.

“Look at that clock,” began Mr. Barton in a voice that could be heard the length of the department. “Eleven minutes late. Give me your card. If you play along the way, you mustn’t expect I’m going to excuse you. Oh, no!”

“Mr. Barton, I would have been here on time if——”

“You hadn’t stopped to fool with some other boy,” supplied the man sarcastically. “Where’s your card? Give it to me, I say.”

“But, Mr. Barton,” protested Harry, “I had to show an old gentleman where the perfume——”

“That’ll do,” roared the aisle manager. Harry’s mild protest had aroused his temper. “Either give me your card, or up to the front you go.”

Harry said no more. With his boyish face white and set he handed Mr. Barton his precious card, the card he had dreamed of keeping clear and fair.

“There’s one for tardiness, one for impertinence, and one for—lying. You can’t fool me with a yarn about having to show a customer a department. I’ll let you go with demerits, this time, but don’t you ever lie to me again. I know too much about boys.”

Harry’s face turned from white to scarlet. He clenched his hands in an effort to control himself. It seemed to him that for the first time in his life he knew what hatred really meant. Now he understood, or thought he understood, Teddy’s rooted dislike for his former teacher, Miss Alton.

“Here, take your card and put it away.” Mr. Barton thrust Harry’s card into his hands and stalked off. The boy gazed gloomily at the three black marks that loomed in a sinister row on the bit of cardboard that spelled his future in the store, while, for the first time, deep in his soul, rankled and stung the bitterness of injustice.

[104]

CHAPTER X

[105]

BREAKERS AHEAD FOR HARRY

“Don’t feel so bad about it, Kiddy.” It was the sympathetic Miss Welch who addressed Harry. Seated at the exchange desk she had witnessed Mr. Barton’s harsh, unjust manner of dealing with Harry. Her pretty eyes still snapped with angry sympathy as she tried to comfort the boy, who looked ready to cry.

Harry clenched his hands hard, and manfully swallowed the lump that rose in his throat. He was a sturdy boy and not given to tears, but now his sense of outraged justice was so great that they were very near to falling. “I—I——” he stammered, then stopped, fighting for self-control.

“Don’t I know you wasn’t to blame?” soothed Miss Welch’s kindly voice. “Ain’t I seen him get after other boys besides you, when they hadn’t done a thing? Don’t tell me. You don’t have to. I guess I know old Smarty Barty.”

Harry’s woe-begone face lightened a little at Miss Welch’s disrespectful reference to the formidable Mr. Barton.

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“Oh, see the gloom break up!” she exclaimed in pretended astonishment. “I guess it’ll be a nice day after all. How about it, Kiddy?”

“I guess it will,” smiled Harry. Then he sighed. “I couldn’t help being late, Miss Welch. First an old man asked me where the perfumes were. I directed him to them, but he said I’d have to go with him to show him. I was afraid he’d report me, so I went with him. Then, just as I was coming through the book department, I bumped into a man with some books. The books fell to the floor and I stooped to pick them up. Then I came here as fast as ever I could, but I was ten minutes late. Now I’ve got three demerits on my card, and I wanted to keep it so nice—and—clean.” Harry’s voice broke.

“Never mind, Kiddy, never mind,” comforted Miss Welch. “Just let me put you wise, though. Don’t have nothing to do with these old fuss-budgets that want you to go on a personally conducted tour of the store with ’em. Answer ’em politely if they ask you anything, and then beat it out of their vicinity as fast as you can. They won’t report you. They wouldn’t know you from Adam if they saw you two minutes afterward. Course, you couldn’t help but pick up those books. You’re all right, youngster, and you just keep on being the little gentleman you are, no matter what fifty Smarty Bartys have to say.

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“Now, cheer up. I’m goin’ to tell you something funny. ’Bout half an hour ago, while you was up to school, a long, thin, solemn-looking woman came up to the desk and says in a kind of a scared voice, ‘Is this the exchange desk?’

“‘It is,’ says I, ‘what can I do for you?’

“She hands me a big package and says, ‘I bought two little gold baby-pins here day before yesterday on a transfer, and when they come home they was two pairs of men’s overalls. They

wasn't no pins at all.' Maybe I didn't laugh. I couldn't help it. When the woman saw me laugh, she grinned a kind of a sickly grin, too. Now, wasn't that funny?"

Miss Welch leaned back in her chair and indulged in a fresh burst of laughter. "Ha, ha! That certainly was a good one on the Transfer Department," she chuckled. "They certainly changed things around that time."

Harry forgot his troubles and joined in the laugh. The sunshine cast by the good-natured exchange clerk had scattered his gloom for the time being, at least. "I'll try harder than ever," he thought, setting his boyish mouth firmly. "He sha'n't give me any more demerits. I guess everybody has to learn things by experience."

He was greatly surprised and not a little perplexed that afternoon when Mr. Barton beckoned to him from one of the aisles and said in an actually pleasant tone, "45, I want you to go on an errand. Here is a pass. Show this to the time-keeper as you go out. Come with me and I will tell you what you are to do." Beckoning to Harry, he strode down the aisle, the boy at his heels. At the extreme end of the jewelry department was a small room in which Mr. Barton kept his personal effects. It had formerly been used by the buyer of the jewelry as an office. Now it held nothing but empty boxes and odds and ends that had drifted into it. Unlocking a small closet, Mr. Barton took from it a good-sized pasteboard box. "Here, boy, I want you to take this to 1855 Commerce Street. It goes to Jacoby's tailor shop. Here's his card. There's a note in the box. Just ask for Mr. Jacoby, and say that Mr. Barton sent you. It won't take you long."

"Yes, sir," replied Harry obediently. "Shall I go now?"

"Yes, and get back as soon as you can." Mr. Barton's grim features relaxed into what he evidently considered a pleasant smile.

Taking the box under his arm, Harry started toward the men's coat room for his cap. As he walked, he examined the bit of paper. It was a printed form of store pass, and at the bottom was written, "On store business. Barton."

The man at the time-desk examined the slip indifferently, made a mysterious mark on it with a red pencil, and shoved it back to Harry. It was not until Harry had left the store behind and walked at least a block that he took the card bearing the tailor's address from his pocket and again glanced at the street and number. Martin Brothers' store fronted on Commerce Street. It took up the entire space between numbers five and six hundred. But it was to number 1855 that Mr. Barton was sending him. Twelve long, city blocks lay before him. The boy looked rather dismayed; not because he objected to the long walk in the crisp, autumn air, but because of the time it would take him to go to the shop and return. Harry wondered vaguely if it were not customary to allow the messengers their carfare when on outside business for the store. Perhaps Mr. Barton had forgotten all about it. He was decidedly absent-minded. Even in the short time Harry had been stationed at the exchange desk, he had discovered that. Had he not heard Miss Welch scold frequently over Mr. Barton's mistakes, due to his absent-mindedness? But he was so crabbed that she never dared call him to account openly for them. She had to content herself with throwing out barbed insinuations, to which he never appeared to pay the slightest attention.

Harry soon forgot his brief uneasiness over the distance to his destination and trudged briskly along the city streets, happy in being out in the fresh air. After twenty minutes fast walking he arrived at the shop. Over the door hung a large sign, which read, "A. Jacoby, Repairing, Cleaning and Pressing Garments While You Wait." It was followed by a list of prices.

Harry delivered the box into the hands of a stout, gray-haired man with a red face and a decided German accent. The man opened the box. In it lay a blue serge suit. On top of the suit lay a note. The tailor read the note, then motioning Harry to a chair he said, "Sit down and wait. It will be a little while only before I can do dot shob for Meester Parton."

The old man took the suit over one arm and trotted off into an adjoining room with it.

Harry sat down obediently enough. He glanced curiously about him at the rows of suits, single coats and trousers that hung on racks set on three sides of the room, each garment bearing a large white tag. Harry always made it a point to be interested in all that he saw, but tailoring and repairing did not in the least appeal to him. After twenty minutes had passed he began to feel slightly impatient. Mr. Barton had said it would not take him long. When twice twenty minutes had slipped away, he grew uneasy. It had been twenty minutes past two o'clock when he left the store. It was now twenty minutes past three. A whole hour had vanished.

"Won't Mr. Barton's suit be ready soon, sir?" he asked the gray-haired proprietor politely, as Mr. Jacoby waddled into view at the sound of the door-bell.

"Ven it ees hready, I dell you, poy," the old man returned placidly, then went on explaining, to a beetle-browed young man who had just come in, why it would be advisable to steam clean a much-soiled gray suit he had brought into A. Jacoby's dominion for renovation.

Half-past three, then a quarter to four arrived. Harry fidgeted uneasily. He was in an agony of apprehension lest Mr. Barton might accuse him of playing along the way. At four o'clock, A. Jacoby waddled into the room where Harry sat in despair. The blue serge suit hung over one pudgy arm.

"You dell Mr. Parton he should pring his glose alhready sooner. Next dime he haf to wait until the next tay." The old man was folding the suit in the box as he talked. It seemed to Harry that he was hours tying up the box. "Dell him he can bay me any dime," he instructed Harry.

"Two hours in that shop, and it'll take twenty minutes to get back to the store. Oh, if I just had

a nickel." He looked longingly at the cars as they lumbered by him, then squaring his shoulders he set off toward Martin Brothers' Store almost on a run.

He thought the time-keeper eyed him rather suspiciously as he tendered his slip at the time-desk. He wondered if the man thought he had been loitering. But what would Mr. Barton say? That was the all-important question. Harry decided that if Mr. Barton accused him of playing along the way, he would suggest that he call A. Jacoby himself on the telephone and thus find out the time he left the tailor shop. [112]

Harry hastily handed his cap to the boy who was on duty in the coat-room and hurried up the nearest stairway, two steps at a time. As he neared the exchange desk number 10, his eyes traveled over the jewelry department, in a search for Mr. Barton. Then suddenly he heard an indignant voice exclaim, "Well, 45, I wonder where *you've* been all afternoon!"

Harry whirled to face Miss Welch's disapproving eyes. Her pretty face was not lighted by its usual smile. She looked distinctly out of humor.

"I didn't think it of you, Kid," she replied. "I thought you was a good boy. Here, when I'm as busy as can be, you go and lose yourself for all afternoon. I nearly ruined my voice hollering for you, and maybe Mr. Seymour ain't mad. He flopped up here with some lady friend of his awhile ago. She wanted to exchange a ring and I had no boy to send with her to the department. He had to go himself. After she was gone he came back and I had to give him your number. He asked Smarty Barton where you was and he said he sent you to the stock-room half an hour ago, and you'd oughta been back. Now there's just this about it, Kid. If you aren't going to be on the job when I need you, then I'm going to ask for another boy. I've tried to be good to you and you ought to kinda look out for me and be Johnny-on-the-spot when I call, 'Boy,' without my wasting my breath and splitting my throat yelling for you." [113]

Harry stared at the ruffled exchange clerk in silent amazement. Could he believe his ears? What was it Miss Welch had just said about Mr. Barton?

"I guess you know you didn't do right," went on Miss Welch. "I certainly am su'prised and sorry."

"Miss Welch," Harry's voice rose in excitement. "I wasn't up in the stock-room. Why, I don't even know where it is. I was out of the store on an errand for Mr. Barton."

It was the exchange clerk's turn to stare. There was absolute truth in the boy's clear eyes. They met hers unflinchingly.

"Well, what do you think of that?" she muttered. "On an errand for old Smarty! Where'd he send you?"

"To a tailor shop on Commerce Street. I had to take a blue suit there to be pressed. I had to wait for it, and it took a long time. He gave me a store pass. I'm afraid he'll scold me, though, for being gone so long. But I——"

"Scold you," snorted Miss Welch. "Don't you worry. He won't scold you. The mean old reprobate! Here he sends you out on an errand for him and then tells Mr. Seymour he sent you to the stock-room. Oh, just wait till the next time he gets on his ear around here. I'll hand him something. Now, you listen to me, Harry. I mighta known you was too good a kid to go playing hookey from your department. Don't you ever go on personal errands for anybody but a real boss. No aisle man can send you out with his clothes or his laundry or to buy theatre tickets or anything like that. Some of 'em do it, I know, but they're generally men enough to stand up and say so. If he tries it again, say 'No,' right out flat. Just like that. He can't do a thing to you, because if he reported you he'd have to tell on himself. Catch him doing that!" [114]

"But what shall I say if Mr. Seymour asks me about to-day?" queried Harry, his boyish face very sober.

"Tell him—let me see—tell him—the truth, of course. You don't love Smarty Barton so much that you want to be a nice, gentle martyr for him, do you?"

"No-o-o, only I hate to—tell tales," faltered Harry.

"Humph!" ejaculated the exchange clerk with deep scorn. "Well, wait and see. Maybe Mr. Seymour won't think of it again. But you remember what I told you. No more errands for S. B. I'll bet you he never gave you a cent of carfare, now did he?" [115]

Harry shook his head.

"Can you beat it?" muttered Miss Welch. "Yes, lady, this is the exchange desk." She turned to the customer who had asked the question. "Where's your check? You'll have to get the aisle manager to sign it."

Harry moved a little away from the desk, still keeping within call. His honest young soul rebelled against Mr. Barton's treachery. He made up his mind, however, that he would not betray the aisle manager if he could avoid doing so, provided Mr. Seymour should take him to task for his long absence from the floor. But he hoped with all his heart that Mr. Barton would not ask him to go on another similar errand.

CHAPTER XI

TEDDY BURKE DISTINGUISHES HIMSELF

But while Harry Harding was finding life in a department store far from tranquil, Teddy Burke was making himself very much at home in the prosaic realm of kettles and pans. In fact, the kettles and pans were but a small part of department 40. It did not take the active Teddy long to discover this. The kingdom of house furnishings spread over a large part of the basement, and from a profound contempt for the lowly conveniences and necessities of the housekeeper, he developed at least a good-natured tolerance for the engines of housekeeping, great and small.

It did not take him long to explore every foot of the territory into which his lot had been cast, and before he had been in the department a week he knew everyone in it. The demonstrator who concocted appetizing dishes on her shining gas range became his firm friend and slipped him many a surreptitious dainty. Mr. Duffield, the aisle manager, liked Teddy chiefly because he was unusually keen of understanding. "I never have to tell 65 a thing more than once," he was wont to remark to the salesmen. Samuel Hickson, the red-haired young man, was Teddy's chief crony, however, and Teddy liked nothing better than to travel about at his heels. Mr. Hickson laughingly referred to Teddy as his mascot, and more than once the little boy's sharp eyes singled out prospective customers "who looked as though they wanted a whole lot of things," and put his friend on their trail.

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"Say," began Teddy one afternoon when during a lull in business he lined his thin little body beside Hickson, who stood leaning against a table, peering anxiously across the wide stretch of household wares for customers. It had been an unusually dull day and few sales were recorded on Hickson's book. "Who's this man Everett they're always talkin' about?"

"Mr. Everett's the buyer. He's been in New York ever since you came. I expect to see him in here most any time."

"What do you suppose he'll think of me?" asked Teddy naïvely.

The salesman laughed. "Probably he'll never see you, unless he happens to want you to go on an errand. Who do you think you are, Reddy?"

Teddy's face fell, then he put on an expression of ridiculous dignity, puffed out his chest and said, "Well, I guess I'm just as much as some other people I know."

The salesman only laughed the louder. Looking deeply injured, Teddy marched off down a narrow aisle, between high-stacked rows of granite ware, to a section reserved entirely for mops, brooms, long-handled brushes and other paraphernalia for cleaning.

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"I guess if the buyer saw me once, he'd remember my hair, anyhow," Teddy muttered. At that moment his eyes were attracted to a curious, many-colored figure poking disconsolately along toward him. "She's an Eyetalion," decided Ted. "I guess she's just got here to America." The woman wore a red skirt and a bright blue waist; a wide red and yellow kerchief was folded about her shoulders. On her head she wore a red silk handkerchief with a ringed red and white border, the ends of which were tied under her chin. In her ears hung long hoops of gold that swung and shook as she walked. She was looking eagerly from side to side as though in search of something.

While Teddy was still several yards from her, a saleswoman approached and addressed the woman.

"What can I show you, madam?" The saleswoman smiled ingratiatingly.

Whether the stranger understood the other woman's words or not, she at least seemed to comprehend the offer of services. With a smile more than equal to the one bestowed upon her, she gestured with both hands as though pushing something ahead of her. "Aht, aht!" she exclaimed, with another vigorous shoving forward of both hands.

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"Oh, yes, I see." The saleswoman stepped to a stack of long-handled floor brushes, and selecting one demonstrated its good qualities for the customer's benefit.

The Italian woman smiled broadly, but shook her head. "Aht, aht," she repeated plaintively.

By this time two other saleswomen, attracted by the unusual spectacle the woman presented, joined the first.

"Aht, aht," pleaded the woman, repeating her gesture.

"She wants a mop. That's what she wants," nodded one of the women, a tall, stout blonde, whom Teddy had privately named "The Gobbler," on account of her loud voice.

"Yes, show her a mop," echoed the third saleswoman.

The mop was duly shown. A carpet-sweeper was next paraded forth. It was followed by a broom. The Italian woman seemed highly appreciative of the display. She continued to smile broadly, although she still shook her head and repeated her monotonous, "aht, aht."

Gradually a dozen persons drifted to the scene of action. As they stood viewing the brisk demonstration of brooms, sweepers and mops, into their midst strode a rather slender, blue-eyed man, with a close-lipped, resolute mouth and a distinct air of business about him.

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"What does this woman want?" he asked sharply.

"We don't know," blared forth the saleswoman whom Teddy had wickedly named the Gobbler.

"We've showed her everything. She keeps going like this and saying, 'Aht!'"

"Give me that carpet-sweeper," ordered the man. He ran it back and forth in front of the smiling customer.

"No—no; aht!" The misunderstood daughter of Italy made a desperate sweep of her arms.

Suddenly, a wide smile irradiated Teddy Burke's freckled face. Stepping directly up to the woman he said, "Come along. I know what you want. You want to get out of the store. Out—*out*," he emphasized.

"Aht!" The Italian clasped her fat brown hands in rapture and, nodding delightedly to her amazed audience, shuffled after Teddy, who had already started up the aisle toward an elevator.

"Forevermore!" gasped the Gobbler. "I'd like to know how that boy guessed what she wanted."

"Who is that boy?" came the sharp question from the business-like man.

"His name is Teddy. That's all I know about him," volunteered one of the saleswomen.

"He's the messenger boy in this department," stated another girl, better informed.

"He's a very bright boy," cut in the man decisively, "and decidedly observing." Then he marched off down the aisle to his office, while the little knot of salespersons resumed their usual stations in their department.

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CHAPTER XII

A DISASTROUS COMBAT

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"Say, Reddy," called Sam Hickson, a little later. A chance customer had prevented him from joining the group about the Italian woman. "Look down the aisle. There's the buyer, if you're dying to see him."

"Oh, I saw him long ago," drawled Teddy. "He was over there with that Eyetalion woman who was lost in the wilds of Martins' basement." He related the incident to Hickson who had been busy with a customer at that time.

Hickson laughed heartily. "And it took little Reddy to show 'em. I guess maybe Mr. Everett *will* know you the next time he sees you."

But before the day was over, Mr. Everett was destined to receive a most vivid impression of Teddy. The long, dull afternoon was drawing slowly to a close. The wall clock at one end of the department pointed to a quarter to five.

"I'm not sorry this day's pretty near done," grumbled Sam Hickson to Teddy. "I haven't sold enough to-day to earn my salary, let alone my commission."

"If you don't sell enough of this junk to earn your salary, will you get fired?" was Teddy's anxious inquiry.

"Well, Martin Brothers haven't said anything yet about keeping me for an ornament," Hickson made humorous answer.

"Te, he!" snickered Teddy, "I guess they think these old kettles and pans are nicer ornaments than you are. All they have to do is to hang around here till somebody buys 'em, or they jump off the table," he added, as, his arm coming into contact with a long-handled dipper, it bounced to the floor with a protesting bang. "I'm goin' to take a walk down there where the wash boilers grow."

Teddy slammed the dipper into its accustomed place and strolled down the aisle, his alert, black eyes roving over the department in search of adventure. He could never pass the rows of wash boilers without slyly lifting the lid of one of them and holding it in the position of a shield. He always wondered how cannibals and head-hunters could hold those great, clumsy things in one hand and fight with the other. To-day he peered sharply about to see if anyone was observing him. That end of the department was apparently deserted. Far up the aisle the Gobbler was expatiating on the glories of a clothes-wringer to a stolid-faced woman, who clamored for a bargain in wringers. The loud gobble, gobble of the saleswoman's strident voice floated down the aisle to Teddy. It meant that the Gobbler was too much taken up with her customer to trouble herself about him. With the shield-like lid in his hand he flitted through a cross-aisle, like a mischievous little shadow, to a corner where a collection of clothes-poles stood. He ran his eye over the lot, then singling out the smallest one, reached for it. Again he glanced quickly about him. The coast was clear.

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Holding his improvised shield in an attitude of defence, Teddy charged down the deserted aisle, the clothes-pole poised threateningly. His impish face was aglow with the excitement of his pretended warfare. At the end of the cross-aisle he paused to reconnoiter. No one was in sight. Teddy took a fresh grip on his shield and charged back again. Suddenly, to his amazed horror, his shield came in violent contact with something moving. The snarling, "Hi, there, whoda you think you're hitting," proved the "something moving" to be a very angry human being.

The clothes-pole clattered to the floor. The victim of his spirited charge was none other than his

old enemy, Howard Randall, the fat boy. Teddy hastily flung aside his shield and doubled his fists.

"Thought you'd lick me, didn't you," sputtered Howard. "Had to get a clothes-pole and a boiler lid to do it, though. I c'n lick *you* with my two fists, and I'm goin' to do it right now while no one's lookin'." Howard aimed a savage blow at Teddy, who dodged nimbly, placing the width of a narrow aisle table between them. [125]

"'Fraid of me, ain't you, baby," sneered Howard, following Teddy up menacingly. "I'll show you."

Both boys reached the end of the protecting table at the same instant and met in the narrow aisle. Intent on what promised to be a real battle, neither had noted the approach of a very short, stout man, who, equally occupied in trying to gaze on both sides of the aisle at once, had not yet perceived them.

"Take that, you red-head." With unseeing rage Howard lunged viciously, putting all his strength into the blow. Teddy again side-stepped.

A groan of deep anguish, followed by an angry snort rent the air.

Howard's fist had missed Teddy but it had not missed the stout man. The force with which Howard had delivered his blow had caused him to lurch forward. Before he could recover his balance, he was seized in an iron grip.

"You young rascal," growled the enraged recipient of the blow, "I'll teach you to go about attacking customers!"

Teddy stood transfixed. Things had happened with most amazing suddenness. [126]

The fat boy wriggled ineffectively to free himself. "Aw, let me go, mister. I didn't mean to hit you. I was tryin' to hit *him*," he begged, wagging his head toward Teddy.

"Let you go! I guess not, you young ruffian. Why don't you pick a boy of your own size, if you want to fight?"

"I guess it was some my fault," put in Teddy. "I ran into him, and he thought I did it on purpose. That's why he was goin' to fight me. Please don't report him, mister. He didn't mean to hit you. There isn't a boy in this store that would do such a thing on purpose."

Teddy's black eyes were fastened on the man with desperate pleading. The fat boy stared at Teddy in amazed unbelief.

The man looked from one lad to the other. His grim face softened. He relaxed his hold on Howard's arm. "I ought to report you both for fighting," he said, "but I've a boy about your age at home. So I'll let you go. You'd better be careful in future whom you hit. The next person might not see things as I do." He turned abruptly and walked off in the opposite direction.

The belligerents watched him out of sight, then their glances met. The fat boy looked somewhat sheepish. Teddy was grinning broadly. [127]

"I'm glad he had a boy of his own," he commented.

"You got me into that mess, but you got me out of it, too," said Howard slowly. "Say, honest, did you mean to upset my dinner that day?"

"Of course not," sniffed Teddy, "but you had no business to try to stick me for five cents. That was just the same as stealing."

The fat boy colored hotly. "I don't know what made me do it," he muttered. "*You* hadn't any business to call me an elephant and Fatty Felix. I can't help being fat any more'n you can help having red hair."

"I guess I know that." This time it was Teddy who blushed.

"Say, I don't think you're a baby. You're a real scrapper for a boy of your size. I kind of like you."

"You've got an awful punch in that right arm of yours," was Teddy's magnanimous tribute. "I'll bet you hurt that man, all right."

Both boys giggled.

Down the aisle floated the Gobbler's voice, "Boy, boy. Num-ber 65." She had triumphantly put over the sale of the wringer.

"That's my number. I'll have to go. See you in school Thursday." Teddy's little thin hand shot out. A fat hand clasped it half-way, and marked the beginning of a friendship between the two lads that was to be the making of Howard Randall. [128]

As Teddy hurried up the aisle and the fat boy lumbered off about his business, a man emerged from a small room not far from where the disastrous encounter had taken place. His face wore a broad smile. Seated in his office, through the partially-closed door, he had heard the boyish altercation, and had decided not to interfere. The surprising turn the affair took had convulsed him with mirth, despite his efforts to sympathize with the maltreated customer. He had also witnessed the end of the scene, and as he watched Teddy's wiry, lithe body speed up the aisle, he murmured, "Mischievous as that youngster seems to be, he's a boy with a future."

CHAPTER XIII

THE MEASURE OF A MAN

"I'm glad you are going home with me to supper to-night," was Harry's first speech as they left the assembly room that evening. As the boys were obliged to line up for roll call before going home, the chums did not now have to meet on the street corner. "I've a lot to tell you."

"Good news?" questioned Teddy.

"No." Harry's face clouded. "I never have any good news to tell." His voice vibrated with bitterness.

"Go ahead. Tell me your troubles. After you're done, I'll tell you something funny."

Harry related the disheartening events of the afternoon. Teddy listened, his elfish face unusually solemn.

"I wish I hadn't called your aisle man 'some crank,'" he deplored. "That started the whole business."

"No, I don't believe so," disagreed Harry. "If you hadn't said a word he would have treated me just the same. Miss Welch says he treats all his boys that way. I can't go on any more errands for him, it wouldn't be fair to Martin Brothers." [130]

"Suppose he asks you."

"I'll say 'no,'" was Harry's firm response, "but I'll offer to do the errand for him when the store closes."

"You're easy if you do anything of the kind," burst forth Teddy. "Why, he can't say a single thing to you if you say you won't go on his old errands."

"He can make it pretty hard for me in the department," reminded Harry. "He gave me three demerits for nothing, and Miss Leonard thinks I deserved them. I know she does. He wasn't even cross with me for anything when he did that. What do you suppose he'd do if he really was mad?"

"Try to get you fired, most likely."

Harry nodded sadly. "Sometimes I think I'll leave the store before anything happens, and try to get work in an office. I hate to give up my school, though. Miss Leonard is a splendid teacher. I've learned a good deal in the little time I've gone to school to her."

"So have I. She makes a fellow feel as if he wanted to study. I don't mind school so much now. But, Harry, you mustn't leave the store. What would I do without my chum?" Teddy's thin hand fastened upon Harry's shoulder with a quick clutch of fellowship. [131]

"I know. I'd miss you, too. Oh, I suppose I might as well stay and make the best of things. Mother is so pleased to think I can work and still go to school. Don't say a word to her about Mr. Barton. I haven't."

"I won't," promised Teddy. "I wonder if your mother'll like me!"

"Of course she will. She always likes my boy friends. You'll like her. You can't help it."

"My mother says I am to bring you home with me to supper. Any night that suits you'll suit us."

"Does you mother——" Harry stopped. He was about to ask if Teddy's mother had become interested in her son's progress as a business boy. Then in fear of intruding upon what did not concern him, the rest of the question died on his lips.

Teddy cast a swift, sidelong glance at him from under his long heavy lashes. "My mother likes to hear about what happens to me in the store. I kept telling her things, just the way you said you told your mother. At first she didn't seem to care, but now she does. We have lots of talks, and last week she stayed home with me every night but one. That was the night of her club meeting. She's a vice-president, so she had to go to it."

"Isn't that fine?" glowed Harry. "I'm glad she likes to hear about the store." [132]

"I never had anything good to tell her about school," returned Teddy, "and I didn't want her to know what a——" Teddy grinned—"a—menace to the school I was. It's different when you work. I feel more like a man." Teddy drew his slender body up to its fullest height and stalked proudly along beside Harry, who was divided between laughter and approbation of his small companion's newly found dignity. He managed to keep a sober face, however, for he was too fond of Teddy to run the risk of wounding his pride.

"Seems funny not to go that way," remarked Teddy as they passed the corner where he usually bade Harry good night.

"Yes, it does seem queer for you to keep right on going with me," smiled Harry. "But you said you had something funny to tell me. Go ahead with it."

Smiling at the recollection of the puzzled Italian woman who had plaintively begged to be conducted to Warren Street, and had been shown a large part of Martin Brothers' stock of house furnishings instead, Teddy related the circumstance, interspersing the tale with frequent giggles.

Harry's boyish laugh rang out at the ridiculous incident. He laughed still more when Teddy went on with the story of his spirited charge down the aisle and its unlooked for consequences. [133]

"It was square of you, Ted, to ask that man not to report the fat boy." Harry regarded Teddy with affection and appreciation. It didn't much matter, he thought, if Teddy couldn't keep out of mischief. He was truthful and honest, and that was what counted in a fellow who was one's best chum. "What did that Howard Randall say? I suppose he didn't say, 'thank you?'"

"Well, he didn't exactly say that, but—he—I—he isn't such a mean kid, after all. He said he was sorry he tried to stick me for a nickel, and I'm not going to call him the elephant any more. We kind of made up."

"I'm surprised." The corners of Harry's mouth twitched. Then he burst into laughter. "Don't get mad, Ted," he gasped, "but it's so funny. He's the last fellow I know that I'd say you'd be friends with."

"I'm not friends with him, yet," retorted Teddy, flushing, "but I'm not going to put him in the Zoo class again, unless he gets too smart. Say, Harry, let's go to the Zoo some Sunday afternoon, before it gets too cold. How about next Sunday?"

"I'd like to go. I've never been there," was the eager answer.

"You haven't! Oh, I've been there slews of times. Once Miss Alton read us a story about a funny little animal named Rickey Tickey Tavi, that lived in a man's house in India, and kept all the snakes away. There are barrels of snakes in India. They get into the houses and even into your bed and everything. This Rickey Tickey killed two big snakes named Nag and Nagaina. They were cobras and had hoods on their heads."

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"Yes, I know," nodded Harry. "I've seen pictures of them."

"They've got two real ones at the Zoo. I stayed around their case one whole afternoon, but the stingy old things hid in a log and wouldn't come out. I'm going to see 'em some time, though. There are lots of other funny things. I like to tease the monkeys and there's the seals and a great big animal called a gnu. I always make faces at him. He stares at me so funny."

"Perhaps I can go next Sunday. I'll let you know by Friday night."

The walk to Harry's home seemed very short to the chums. There was so much to talk about. Being a boy, it did not occur to Teddy to draw a comparison between the Harding's tiny apartment and his mother's large, comfortable brick house. He knew only that, next to his mother, he was sure Mrs. Harding was the nicest person in the world, and she certainly knew what boys liked to eat. Teddy was by no means a shy, retiring youngster, although he was not overbold. He was just a normal boy, with a boy's joy of living, ready to talk to anyone who wished to talk to him on the subjects that lie nearest a boy's heart.

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After supper, Harry insisted that his mother go into the sitting-room and read the paper while he and Teddy washed and wiped the dishes. It was new work for Teddy, but he rather enjoyed it, and polished each dish as he dried it with an energy worthy of a better cause. Far from looking upon Harry with scorn because he was willing to perform a household task that usually falls to a woman, Teddy thoroughly enjoyed the novelty of his labor.

When the last knife and fork were put away, the boys repaired to the sitting-room, where Mrs. Harding sat sewing industriously on a gown for a customer. Harry brought out a combination checker and backgammon-board, and the boys played several games of checkers. Harry had begun to instruct Teddy in the mysteries of backgammon, when the mission clock on the sitting-room wall struck nine.

"I'll have to go. I promised my mother I wouldn't stay later'n nine," said Teddy, with a little air of pride. "She's at home to-night waiting for me."

"You must come to see us often, Teddy," smiled Mrs. Harding.

"Yes'm, I will. I'd like to come to see you. I think my mother would like to come, too."

"I should be pleased to meet her," was Mrs. Harding's courteous response, but she decided there was little possibility of Mrs. Burke coming to visit any person in her humble circumstances. From what Teddy had told her of his home and his mother, she concluded that the Burkes were in far better circumstances than were she and Harry.

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"Your friend Teddy is a dear, little fellow, Harry," she remarked after Teddy had gone. "I'm so glad his mother has waked up to it." Harry had repeated to her the story of Teddy's home progress. "I had hard work not to smile when he said he thought his mother would like to come here. Very likely she wouldn't look at us."

"If Teddy's mother ever comes here once, she'll come again. She couldn't stay away, Motherly. She'd just have to." Harry sidled over to where his mother sat sewing and slid a loving, loyal arm about her neck.

Mrs. Harding dropped her work and gathered her boy into her arms. "I don't mind hard work and poverty as long as I have you, little son," she said tenderly.

"But we are not going to be poor always, Motherly. I'm going to keep earning more money all the while. By the time I'm twenty-one, you won't have to do a single thing but keep house for me. I'm going to be a business man by that time."

Mrs. Harding stroked her son's curly head. "Perhaps you will be. Who knows? I'm so pleased that you are getting along so well in the store. No one could help liking you, Harry, you are such a good, thoughtful boy."

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Harry's sensitive face clouded briefly. He felt as though he would like to pour forth to his

mother the whole cruel truth about his store life. He wished she knew how unjustly he was being treated by Mr. Barton, yet he had a curious conviction that he must bear his cross alone. He must get used to being silent about the things which did not please him. No great business man would publish the story of his hurts abroad, and as he intended to become a truly great business man he must be silent, too. Perhaps some day, when he had been promoted to a position of trust in Martin Brothers', he would tell his mother about these first unhappy days, but while he was only number 45 of the store messenger force, he would meet whatever came to him with a brave face and no whimpering.

CHAPTER XIV

THE PRICE OF HONESTY

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When Harry took his station near the exchange desk the next morning, it was with renewed determination to do his duty to the full as he saw it. He wondered if Mr. Barton would mention the errand on which the aisle manager had sent him the previous afternoon. He also speculated anxiously as to whether Mr. Seymour would send for him and demand an explanation of his absence from the department. The day sped on, however, and no summons came. Mr. Barton managed to keep some distance from poor little messenger 45, and studiously avoided the boy's unconsciously accusing eyes, whenever they happened to come in contact with each other at the exchange desk.

Late in the afternoon, as Harry was returning from an errand to a basement exchange desk, he felt a heavy hand on his shoulder. Wheeling about, he faced Mr. Barton.

"Boy, if anyone asks you about that errand I sent you on yesterday, don't you tell where you went. I said you had gone to the stock room. That's enough for any curious people who come prying around here to know."

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"But I didn't go to the stock-room, sir, so I couldn't truthfully say that."

"You just do as I tell you. I know how to run this end of the store. If I need the services of a messenger, I am at liberty to send you wherever I like," snapped Mr. Barton.

"Then why did you not say exactly where I went?" asked Harry quietly. The boyish mouth had set in the firm lines that meant stubborn resistance to the end. "Why did you say that I had gone to the stock-room?"

"Don't be impudent," hissed the man, his eyes narrowing. "I'm not obliged to answer your questions. You're here to do as I say. Every other boy who has worked for me has done my errands and said nothing. You aren't any better than the rest. Any time I have anything for you to do outside the store, you'll do it, or I'll get a boy down here that will."

Mr. Barton had grown angrier with every word he spoke.

Harry measured the enraged aisle manager with a clear, searching glance in which lurked a shade of contempt. "I give you fair warning, Mr. Barton, I won't do an errand on the store's time unless it is strictly on business for Martin Brothers. I can't help what you say about getting another boy down here, I won't do what I think is unfair to the men who hired me. I've never done a dishonest thing yet, and I'm not going to begin now."

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"I suppose you think you'll go to Mr. Keene and tell him a pack of lies," sneered the aisle manager, "rather than do me a little personal favor now and then."

"I'm not a telltale, and I'll gladly do any errand you wish me to do on my lunch hour, or after the store closes. You are welcome to *my* time, but I can't give away what doesn't belong to me."

"You'll do as I say," ordered the aisle manager grimly, as though he had not heard Harry's firm refusal. Then he turned on his heel and walked rapidly away, leaving Harry to stare after him, a bitter smile on his youthful face. He was learning the ways of men all too rapidly.

"What are you looking so gloomy about, Kiddy?" questioned Margaret Welch, as Harry strolled thoughtfully up to the desk, his hands behind his back. "Come here. I want to ask you something."

Harry approached the exchange clerk's desk. She bent down and said in an undertone, "Were you and old Smarty Barton having it out over there?"

Harry nodded.

"Did you say what I told you to say?" she asked sharply.

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"Yes, Miss Welch, I did."

"Good for you. If he has any sense he'll let you alone, or Margaret Welch'll take a hand in things. You'll have to watch yourself harder than ever, Harry. He won't have your kind of a boy around."

"Miss Welch, there aren't many of the aisle managers in the store like Mr. Barton, are there?"

"No, indeed," was Miss Welch's vigorous reply. "Most of them are as nice men as you'd care to meet anywhere. There's only about three or four mistakes in the aisle-man bunch here, and

Smarty's one of 'em. He's been here a long while and served in almost every department in the store. If there was to be a contest to find out who's the meanest man in the store, everybody'd vote for his crabship. Do I love him? Well, not so you could notice it. Does anyone else? Nay, nay, my child. Here he comes, bless him. Run along, or he'll think you're telling me everything you know."

Harry trotted obediently down the aisle, and wandering into the juvenile section of the book department, began reading, with longing eyes, the titles on the gaily-colored jackets of a table of boys' books. He was never tired of exploring the book department. Whenever there was a lull in the business of the exchange desk, he slipped across the space that divided the books from the jewelry department to spend a few rapturous minutes among the volumes he loved. [142]

On several occasions he had encountered the man with whom he had collided on that first, disastrous school morning. By this time he knew him to be Mr. Rexford, the buyer of the books. Miss Welch had given him that information. Mr. Rexford had invariably smiled at him in a kindly fashion that quite won the boy to him. Harry never saw him without wishing secretly that he had been placed in the book department. It would be the height of happiness to work for such a man as Mr. Rexford.

As he stood eagerly devouring the titles with book-hungry eyes, a deep, pleasant voice at his elbow said, "Well, my boy, it's evident that you like to read."

Harry swung about. Mr. Rexford stood looking at him, a half smile on his handsome, clean-cut face.

"Oh, yes, sir. I'd rather read than do anything else. I've read some of these books. I get books from the Public Library."

"Did you ever read 'Alice in Wonderland!'" asked the buyer.

Harry smiled. "Long ago," he answered. "I've read 'Through the Looking Glass,' and 'Treasure Island,' and 'Robinson Crusoe' and lots of books like that. I call those my baby books. I read adventure stories now, but I'm trying to read Shakespeare and Thackeray and Dickens. I don't understand Shakespeare so very well yet, but I love 'Henry Esmond' and 'The Tale of Two Cities.'" [143]

Mr. Rexford's eyebrows were elevated in surprise. He scrutinized Harry's flushed, animated face. Yes, here was a boy who really loved books. Such a boy would be extremely valuable in his department. He made mental note of it and resolved to set the wheels in motion to bring about the desired end.

"Forty-five, forty-five!" shrilled Miss Welch's high voice.

"That is I. I must go." Harry set off up the aisle toward the exchange desk.

"An obedient boy, too," murmured Mr. Rexford, as he watched Harry bring up at the desk, stand in a respectfully attentive attitude, then hurry off on his errand. "Well, we'll see. We'll see."

Contrary to all expectation, Mr. Barton let Harry strictly alone for several days. He ordered him about in his usual gruff fashion, but did not again broach the subject on which he and Harry had disagreed. Then, suddenly and without warning, he began a series of petty persecutions of the boy that caused Miss Welch to glower with rage and hurl caustic remarks in his direction that he could hardly fail to overhear. He began operations by detaining Harry in the department on his school mornings just long enough to give the appearance of deliberate lateness. On the first morning this had happened, Miss Leonard had looked surprised, and accepted his excuse. On the second morning she had looked displeased, on the third as well as the fourth mornings, she had scolded him and given him demerits. She had flatly refused to listen to his plea of being detained and responded severely that any boy who *wished* to be in his class on time, *could* be on time. [144]

Dropping the pleasantness with which she had treated him on his entrance into her room, she became stern and uncompromising. She had been greatly attracted toward Harry in the beginning, and it annoyed her to find him in the least disappointing. He already had five demerits on his card and he had been in the store only three weeks. At the rate he was going he would hardly last the month. Absorbed in her own affairs, Miss Leonard had not inquired into Messenger 45's record at the exchange desk, and, therefore, knew nothing of the boy's trials. She had anticipated frequent trouble from Teddy Burke, but to her surprise none arose in his corner. One demerit, and one only, disfigured Teddy's card.

Poor Harry was in despair. Keenly sensitive, he read Miss Leonard's attitude toward him only too correctly, yet he could neither do nor say that which would place him once more on the pleasant footing that had been his when he began his school work. He talked matters over with Teddy, who was deeply downcast over his chum's misfortunes, but could suggest no remedy beyond offering "to tell Miss Leonard all about it," or to "punch that old snapping-turtle," as he had fondly named Mr. Barton. [145]

"If he gives me any more demerits, I don't know what I'll do. Miss Welch says to go to Mr. Marsh about it, but I hate to be such a baby," mourned Harry, as he and Teddy trudged home together one crisp evening in late October.

"I'd go to him," advised Teddy. "I wouldn't let him put it all over me like that. I'd fight him."

"Perhaps I had better go to Mr. Marsh," Harry spoke with indecision. "If he gives me another demerit, I'll go."

Harry had reason to remember his resolve when, early in the afternoon, Mr. Barton set him to

straightening the cubby-hole where he kept his various effects and dignified with the title of his "office." It was dusty work and when Harry had finished, there was a long streak of dirt across one cheek, his white collar bore evidences of his work, and his hands were dark with dust. Just as he was putting the last box in place, he heard Mr. Barton's strident voice raised in a cry of "Forty-five, forty-five."

Forgetting his unsightly appearance, Harry rushed in the direction of the call. The habit of obedience was firmly ingrained. The aisle manager stared hard at him. "What do you mean by coming out on the floor in such an untidy condition?" he thundered. [146]

For the first time Harry remembered his disheveled and dusty appearance.

"I came straight to you when I heard you call, sir. I forgot how I looked. I had just finished cleaning your office, sir, and I hadn't time to wash my hands."

"You should have tidied yourself before daring to appear on the floor, even if you did hear me calling. Suppose Mr. Martin had seen you? What would he say of such a slovenly boy? Give me your card. You deserve half a dozen demerits. You're lucky to get off with two. Now go and wash your hands and face, at once."

"Mr. Barton," choked an indignant voice, "you had no business to give that boy those demerits. You did it on purpose, and *I know why*."

Mr. Barton whirled and faced the exchange desk. Miss Welch's blue eyes flashed with quiet fury.

"You tend to your own affairs, Miss Welch. Don't interfere with me. That is, if you know what's good for you."

"I know I'm not going to see that boy abused," flashed the exchange clerk. "How about that errand—to the *stock-room*?"

A deep flush mounted to the man's forehead. "You mind your own business," he said quickly, his voice shaking with anger. "When Martin Brothers give you charge of this end of the floor, then you can offer your advice. But I don't believe you'll be here long enough for that to happen." He stalked away from the desk. [147]

"The old scorpion," muttered Margaret Welch. "He'll never rest till he gets that poor kid out of here. Harry's too honest to suit him."

And this was precisely what Mr. Barton was thinking as he walked away.

CHAPTER XV

A FATEFUL GAME OF CATCH

But while the clouds of injustice lowered over Harry Harding's head, the days moved along far more pleasantly for Teddy Burke in his realm of kettles and pans than he had expected when first cast adrift in Department 40. Notwithstanding Teddy's love of mischief, he had made many friends in the department. His impish performances were never directed against a particular individual, and they were usually so funny as to be extremely entertaining, rather than reprehensible. The very sight of a slim little figure, topped by a brilliant red head, bobbing about between the rows of house furnishings was sure to be productive of a smile on the part of the salespersons. Teddy was in a fair way to be spoiled, and had he not possessed a sturdy honesty of purpose that spurred him on to do his work well, he might frequently have taken advantage of the good-natured tolerance with which the members of the department looked upon him.

Teddy was very sure that he liked everyone in Department 40 except the Gobbler. She alone was a thorn to his flesh. In the first place, the gobble, gobble of her loud voice sent the shivers up and down his back. In the second place, she detested boys and did not hesitate to say so frankly in Teddy's presence. Then, too, she was continually complaining to Mr. Duffield that she could never find Teddy when she needed him. He was never in one spot for two consecutive minutes. Mr. Duffield usually listened to her complaints in silence, then walked away quickly to hide a smile. He knew, perhaps, better than anyone else Teddy Burke's rapidly increasing usefulness. Given a commission to perform, Teddy carried it to an end without a mistake. He was quick as lightning when it came to grasping an idea, and rarely had to be told anything twice. Mr. Duffield, who had trained boys in the work of the store, realized that Teddy's elfish propensities were but an outlet for the high-strung, brilliant temperament of the lad. [149]

Mr. Everett, too, had found time to keep a starboard eye on Teddy. Since the momentous day when Teddy had gone to the Italian woman's rescue, and later, had pleaded for clemency for his arch-enemy, the fat boy, the buyer had grown daily more interested in the lively lad, and, unobserved, often watched Teddy at his work in the department.

So, although Teddy did not know it, he stood well in the eyes of the men who held his fate as a business boy in their hands. [150]

His store standing was not worrying Teddy one rainy afternoon, however, as he strolled about his department, his black eyes roving over the shining expanse of kitchen-ware as if to discern if there were anything new on the placid surface of 40. Suddenly his black eyes sparkled with the

joy of discovery. He made a sudden dive down a cross aisle and, stooping over, garnered an entirely new feather duster from a secret recess formed by two protecting ice-cream freezers. Only a part of the handle had been coyly exposed to view, and it was this same handle that Teddy's alert eyes had spied from afar.

Sliding the duster behind him, he leaned against a table and took a comprehensive survey of the landscape. Far down the department the Gobbler was holding forth, with many gobblers, upon the beauties and uses of a fireless cooker. Her customer, a meek little man, was either too horrified or too interested to do other than stare in fascination at her rapidly moving lips. Chuckling gleefully, Teddy made a wide detour of the department and brought up at the far end. Sliding his hand under the lower part of a table of granite ware, he extracted a duster, sparsely feathered and bearing evidences of long usage. Even the handle looked worn. He attempted to unscrew the handle from the duster. It stuck. Slipping his hand into his pocket, Teddy drew forth his four-bladed pocket knife, his most cherished possession, and deliberately pried loose the handle of the work-worn duster, then unscrewed it. Placing the new duster where the old had reposed, Teddy gathered up the parts of the now useless weapon for waging war against dust and slid cautiously back to the vicinity of the two sheltering ice-cream freezers. [151]

Bending low, he placed the duster handle at the same coy angle that the other had displayed. Then jamming the other part into his coat pocket, he once more made his way to where the new duster now reposed. Again the pocket knife played a brief but effective part. Teddy chipped off at least an inch of the end of its handle. Then on the wood next the handle that formed a casing for the feathers, he laboriously cut the initials S. H. One more move and his work would be done. Slipping slyly up to the half-open door of Mr. Everett's office, Teddy peered in. There was no one there. Darting across the floor, he dipped the end of the duster in the ink-well, giving it a lavish baptism of ink. Then, with the innocent air of a young cherub, he trotted back to the place where Sam Hickson kept his duster and carefully placing the new acquisition so that the ink-stained handle would dry, went on his way with the consciousness of having done a good deed. For three weeks Samuel Hickson, the red-haired salesman, had vainly importuned Mr. Duffield for a new duster, while the Gobbler gobbled in triumph, because she had managed to lay hands on a fine one, and boasted that she kept it hidden where no one could find it. Now it was the duster of his pet aversion that he had spied after conducting a still hunt for it for several days, and as his sympathies all lay with Hickson, he decided that the duster should be his. [152]

Teddy felt extremely pleased with himself after making this righteous exchange, and went about grinning so broadly that Samuel Hickson remarked curiously, "I'd like to know what you've been up to. Some piece of mischief, I'll be bound."

Teddy's grin only widened. "Wait till to-morrow morning. You're going to be su'prised."

"I'll warrant I shall, if you've anything to do with it," smiled the salesman.

"It's a good su'prise, though. You'll like it, all right, but some other people won't."

"Tell me about it now," teased Hickson, amused at Teddy's important air of mystery.

"Nope. You've got to find it for yourself. I'll be round when you do, but don't you say a word. You just leave it to me. I know something I'm goin' to do."

"All right, youngster," nodded Hickson. "I guess I'll have to wait till you get ready to talk. To-morrow'll do." [153]

At this moment Mr. Everett came toward them, looking sharply on both sides of him.

"Were you looking for me, sir?" In a twinkling Teddy was the alert, respectful messenger. There was something about Mr. Everett that always inspired him to do his best.

"Yes. You are to take this note to Mr. Eddy, the buyer of the upholstery. Do you know where the upholstery department is?"

"Oh, yes, sir. I know where every department in the store is."

Mr. Everett smiled slightly at this information. He did not in the least doubt it.

Teddy was off up the aisle almost as soon as the answer to Mr. Everett's question left his lips. The upholstery department was on the second floor, so he made for the nearest stairway which led to it, disdaining to wait for an elevator. The stairway which Teddy had chosen was cut in half by a balcony on which was a part of the sporting goods department. Just as Teddy set foot on the balcony landing, he heard a soft whistle. Coming down the balcony aisle was a tall, blue-eyed boy named Arthur Worden, who went to school in Teddy's division. He had been lovingly handling a number of baseballs which a salesman had been showing to a customer and which had been left there while the customer's purchases were being wrapped. Now the boy raised one of the balls, struck an attitude in imitation of a famous pitcher he had seen, and commanded, "Catch." [154]

Whether it was Arthur's intention to throw the ball, or whether he was merely pretending to do so, Teddy never knew. He saw the ball hurtling toward him. Instinctively, he put up his hands to receive it, but it merely grazed the tips of his fingers and went sailing over the balcony rail.

The two boys stared at each other in silent horror.

"We'd better get out of here," advised Arthur.

"I guess we had. Do you s'pose that——" Teddy tittered softly in spite of his consternation—"it hit anyone?"

"I donno. Hope not. Come on, let's beat it!"

Teddy scuttled up the half flight of stairs to the upholstery department, most uneasy in mind. Suppose somebody had been hit? It would surely be a surprise. It would probably hurt, too. Then there was the ball itself. It ought to be put back in the department. Teddy delivered the note to the buyer of the upholstery and departed with all speed for the first floor.

When he arrived upon the spot where he decided the ball was likely to have landed, his expression of dismay deepened. A small group of salespersons and customers had surrounded a tall man with a pained expression, who held one hand to his head, while in the other hand he held a globular object which Teddy had no difficulty in identifying. The man rubbed his head ruefully, then as his hand descended, Teddy saw that there was no hair on the top of that head, only a pink, angry, glistening surface with a large bump rising on the middle of it. [155]

"Whew!" breathed Teddy. "That certainly must have hurt him." Turning, he walked quickly away. But after he was safely back in his department the memory of that maltreated bald head would not leave him. To be sure, it had been an accident, but if he and Arthur had been attending strictly to business it wouldn't have happened. Now, how was the ball to be put back where it belonged? If he went forward to the group and frankly admitted his part in the affair, it would in all probability mean dismissal from the store for him. Teddy decided to ask Harry's advice on the subject before committing himself. Although he had not known Harry long, he had come to lean upon his judgment.

It was a sober-faced little boy who wended his way slowly back to department 40.

"What's the matter, Teddy?" hailed Sam Hickson as he saw the red-haired boy coming toward him, wearing an expression of deep dejection.

"Nothin' much. I'm only thinking," was Teddy's brief response. [156]

"Well, don't let it strike in and kill you," warned the salesman waggishly.

Teddy smiled, but faintly. He was hardly in the mood for pleasantries.

That evening as he and Harry started up Commerce Street together, Teddy said in a low tone, "Maybe I won't work in the store much longer."

Harry's eyes opened wide.

"Why not?" he demanded. "What's the matter?"

Teddy plunged into an account of the impromptu game of catch that had ended so disastrously. "What had I better do? Must I go to Mr. Marsh and tell him?" For once Teddy could see nothing funny in the situation.

Harry hesitated before answering. "Yes, Ted, I believe I would," he said at last. "If someone else has happened to see you, Mr. Marsh will surely hear of it. Then it will be a good deal worse for you. You can explain to him that it was an accident."

"But I don't want to tell on Arthur," objected Teddy.

"You needn't tell his name. If Mr. Marsh asks you, you can say you don't wish to mention any names. He will probably let you off. He understands how one fellow feels about telling tales on another."

"Well, I guess I'll do as you say," sighed Teddy. "I'd been thinking that I ought to, but I wanted to see you first. I'll go to him to-morrow afternoon. You know he will see any of the boys from five until half-past. I'm afraid he'll hear about it before I have a chance to tell him myself, though. Next time I'm sent on an errand maybe I'll know enough to go on about my business. That is, if there is any next time. I'll get a bunch of demerits for this, even if I don't get discharged, and all for a dinky old ball." [157]

CHAPTER XVI

 [158]

ALL IN THE DAY'S WORK

Teddy's fears that the news of yesterday's madness would reach Mr. Marsh's ears before he had an opportunity to make a confession, were only too well grounded. While the boys were lining up for inspection the next morning, Mr. Marsh walked into the assembly room, with a grave face that spelled trouble for someone.

Teddy, standing next to Harry, gave his chum a frantic nudge that sent him against the boy next to him, eliciting a grunt of disapproval from that lad. Harry returned the nudge with less force, but with as great significance.

Mr. Marsh waited until his assistant had formed the line into its usual order. Every pair of boyish eyes was fixed on him. It was unusual for him to be present at the daily line-up.

"Boys," began Mr. Marsh, in his pleasant, direct fashion, "something very disagreeable has happened. Yesterday afternoon two boys of the store messenger force decided to play a game of ball on the balcony. What they were doing up there remains to be seen. Certainly they were not attending to business, or they would not have done what they did do. One of them couldn't have been a very skilful catcher, for he missed the ball and it flew over the balcony rail and hit a man [159]

on the head who *was* going about the store's business. If it had hit him squarely on the head, it might have injured him seriously. It just grazed his head, however, but caused him intense pain. Now, I know that two of our boys are guilty. An employee of the store saw the whole thing from the first floor, but could not describe the boys. Those boys must be made to understand that we cannot tolerate such conduct. If they are manly boys, they must be very sorry by this time for their fault. What I came here for this morning is, the whole truth of the matter. I am going to put you on your honor. Will the two boys who were playing ball on the balcony yesterday step out of line?"

A tense silence reigned in the room. Each boy eyed his neighbor furtively. Someone was guilty, but who? Suddenly a slim, little figure stepped manfully out of line, an evidence that honor lived in that assemblage.

"I'm one of those boys, Mr. Marsh," said Teddy in a clear, resolute voice. "I didn't mean to hurt the man. I was going to come and tell you all about it this afternoon." Teddy was so pale that the freckles stood out like brown polka-dots on his set face. [160]

Mr. Marsh regarded him for an instant without speaking. At last he asked, "Did you throw the ball?"

"No, sir."

"Who threw it?"

"I can't tell you, sir; that is, I don't want to."

Mr. Marsh stared hard at Teddy. "Did you have the ball in the first place? Tell me just how it happened."

"I was going to the upholstery department on an errand for Mr. Everett. Just as I got to the sporting goods balcony, a boy I know came along. There were some baseballs on the show-case. The boy picked up one and said, 'Catch.' I don't think he meant to throw it, sir. It just went before he knew what he was doing. I saw it coming, and put up my hands, but I couldn't catch it. The first thing I saw when I went downstairs was the man rubbing his head. I was going to tell you about it then, but I thought I'd better ask a friend of mine what to do."

The assembled boys listened with breathless interest.

"And what did your friend say?" inquired Mr. Marsh enigmatically.

"He advised me to tell you about it," returned Teddy simply.

Involuntarily, Mr. Marsh's glance traveled down the line until it rested upon Harry Harding. A deep flush rose to Harry's face, but he met the quizzical glance with steady eyes. [161]

"Well, Burke, I'm glad to know you are a manly boy, at least," asserted Mr. Marsh, "but I must know who the other boy is. Someone else in this room is more at fault than you. Still, if he won't own up to his part of this affair, and you won't give me his name, then you will have to bear your punishment and his too." Mr. Marsh spoke with a decision that made Teddy's heart sink.

"I'm—sorry—I can't tell you, sir," he stammered.

"I'm sorry, too," returned Mr. Marsh, gravely, "because I shall—"

There was a sudden movement at one end of the line. A tall boy came awkwardly forward.

"I'm the ki—boy that threw that ball. I'm not going to let *him* be blamed. It was my fault." The speaker's face was lit with a gleam of positive admiration as he jerked his head in Teddy's direction with the word "him."

A murmur of astonishment went up and down the line.

"It was just the way *he* says it happened. I wasn't goin' to really throw the ball. It went before I could stop it. I'm sorry." The tall boy gulped and looked miserably at Mr. Marsh.

"You're a *man*, even though you did wrong," declared Mr. Marsh. He gave the word "man" special emphasis. He wished to impress upon every boy present his appreciation of the courageous spirit that had prompted two boys to tell the truth, even in the face of dismissal. [162]

"Now, boys, because you have been honest with yourselves and with me, I'm going to give you both another chance to retrieve yourselves. Your names will have to go to Mr. Keene, as the principals in this affair, but he has left the rest to me. I'm not going to allow you to go scot-free. That wouldn't be fair to the boys who keep the rules of the store. I'm going to give each of you six demerits to help you remember that Martin Brothers' store isn't a playground. Give me your cards."

Two hands went into two breast pockets with positive alacrity. Taking out his fountain pen, Mr. Marsh went to a small desk at the end of the room and laying the cards on top of it put six sinister marks on each of them. He handed them back with, "Tend strictly to business hereafter, boys." Then, with a pleasant nod to the young man in charge of the assembly, he left the room. But the little he had said had sunk deeper into the boyish hearts of the culprits than if he had given them a severe rating.

"I never was so glad to get anything in my life as I was to get those demerits," murmured Teddy, in Harry's ear. "I don't want to leave this store, Harry. I never knew how stuck on it I was until I thought I was goin' to lose my job." [163]

"I'm glad it came out right," whispered Harry. "I want to stay here, too—if Mr. Barton'll let

me," he added too low for Teddy to hear.

Beginning with his anxiety over Teddy's trouble, things seemed determined to go wrong with him that morning. Miss Leonard's clock happened to be a trifle slow and Harry arrived in the department at least five minutes late. Luckily for him, Mr. Barton was off the floor at the time, and he escaped a demerit. Then, too, Miss Welch was in a bad humor—something quite unusual for her—over a credit that had been lost.

"It's a good thing Barty didn't see you come in late," she remarked crossly, as Harry approached her desk. "You want to see to it that you get around on time, 45."

"Miss Leonard's clock was slow," defended Harry.

"Tell that to old Smarty Barty and see what he says," was her short rejoinder. Then, noting the boy's hurt look, she repented her curtness and apologized, "Don't mind me, Kiddo. I'm cranky enough to-day to bite a ten-penny nail into three pieces. I've had a string of customers a rod long at this desk ever since the store opened. This is our grand annual exchange day, I guess." She smiled enough to show her dimples, and Harry brightened visibly.

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Trouble lay in wait for him, however. Not an hour later, as he happened to stop for a moment in one of the aisles of the book department, a man rushed up to him and asked hurriedly, "Where will I find running water?"

"All the way down the aisle and around the corner," Harry made polite answer. The man rushed off in the direction indicated, only to return three minutes later, looking black as a thundercloud.

"See here, young man, what do you mean? I ask you for a book called 'Running Water' and you send me on a wild goose chase clear out of the department."

Harry's look of blank amazement made the man angrier.

"I'll report you, you young rascal. I'll——"

"I didn't know you meant a book, sir. I thought you wanted a drink of water. I'm not in this department, but I'll find a salesperson for you."

Harry's tone was gravely respectful, although he had hard work to keep from laughing. The absurdity of the situation had dawned upon him.

The man's face relaxed suddenly into a wide grin. "Oh, ha, ha! Ha, ha! That's a funny one! All right, boy, you get me a clerk. I'll wait here. Running water! Ha, ha!"

"That was a narrow escape," smiled Harry to himself as, after securing the desired saleswoman, he hurried back to his desk. "I seem to be unlucky to-day. I hope I won't get into any more mixups."

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The afternoon brought its own crosses, however. Harry did not have an opportunity to go to lunch until after two o'clock. When he returned to the department, he was scolded and hustled here and there by Mr. Barton until he was ready to cry with sheer vexation.

"I'm glad it's almost five," he confided to Miss Welch, when at last there came a lull in the day's business. "I guess there's a jinx on my shoulders to-day. Everything's gone wrong."

"Half an hour more and it'll be over," she sympathized. "I'm dead tired myself. Some of these customers would give you the hydrophobia."

"Boy! Forty-five!" came Mr. Barton's raucous call from the direction of the silverware section, which was a part of the jewelry department.

Harry trotted obediently up the aisle. Mr. Barton stood at the end of the cut glass and sterling silver counter. Just as Harry approached, an elaborately-dressed woman walked down the aisle. As she passed Harry, she switched close to the flat-topped glass show-case. Her silk sleeve brushed against a row of cut-glass powder-boxes with silver tops. There was a jingling, then a crash, and one of the larger boxes lay on the floor in fragments. Harry stood rooted to the spot. The woman hurried down the aisle and around the corner without a backward glance.

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"Now see what you've done," snarled Mr. Barton. "You are the clumsiest boy I ever saw. Miss Winton," a dark-faced woman came forward with a scowl, "how much was that powder box? This careless boy just broke it. I'm going to sub-slip him for it, too."

"Give me that lid," ordered the woman, turning to Harry.

White with righteous indignation, Harry picked it up and handed it to her.

"Seven-fifty," she announced, after scrutinizing the silver top.

"I won't pay it," burst forth Harry. "I didn't break it, and I won't be sub-slipped. I'll go to Mr. Keene, first. That customer broke it. I saw her with my own eyes. Her sleeve brushed the show-case. That box was right close to the edge and——"

"None of your made-up yarns," roared Mr. Barton. "You broke it and now you're trying to lay it to——"

"That will do, Barton," cut in a stern voice. "I happened to see that this boy did *not* break the powder box."

Mr. Barton whirled to find himself staring into the steady, contemptuous eyes of Mr. Rexford, the book-buyer.

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"If you sub-slip that boy, or even give him a demerit, you'll be sorry." Turning on his heel the

book-buyer walked away. Nevertheless, his threat had the desired effect. Mr. Barton put the slip blank he had taken from his pocket into it again, and with a spiteful glance at Harry, strode off towards the exchange desk.

Harry stood gazing after him, too dazed to do anything but stare. It had all happened so quickly. And Mr. Rexford, that splendid man, had come to his rescue. A rush of grateful tears blinded the boy's eyes. He winked them back, then moved by his feeling of gratitude he made straight for Mr. Rexford's office.

The door stood open. Mr. Rexford was just about to seat himself before his handsome mahogany desk.

"Oh, Mr. Rexford, I don't know how to thank you," cried Harry impulsively.

The book-buyer faced about. "Oh, it's you, my boy. You had rather a bad case against you, didn't you? Lucky I happened to see the whole thing."

"Yes, sir. Mr. Barton wouldn't have believed me."

"Yet I don't believe you are an untruthful boy. What makes Mr. Barton so hard on you? What have you done to offend him?"

Harry colored and was silent.

"Nothing very criminal, I'll wager," commented Mr. Rexford dryly. "I am fairly well acquainted with Mr. Barton and his methods. You are not the first boy I have championed. Now, listen to me, my boy, if you have any further trouble with Mr. Barton, come straight to me with it. I can help you."

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"Thank you. I will, sir. I must go now. I hope I can do something for you some day, sir."

Mr. Rexford smiled. "Perhaps you can. One never knows."

Harry walked back to the exchange desk with a light heart. Mr. Rexford was his friend. He was glad now that he had not found the time to go to Mr. Marsh with his story of Mr. Barton's harshness. If worst came to worst, Mr. Rexford would help him. Had he not just said so? Even though he met with discouragements from one source, there would always be someone to help him in his hour of need.

CHAPTER XVII

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THE SINGER AND THE SONG

"I wonder when school will close," remarked Harry Harding to Teddy Burke one morning in late November. It was now a little more than a month since the two chums had enlisted under the banner of Martin Brothers, and they had become thoroughly familiar with the routine of store life.

"After Thanksgiving, I guess," returned Teddy. It was a cold, blustering morning, but the lads swung down the street apparently unmindful of the officious wind which whisked pedestrians' hats from their heads and blew the red into their cheeks and noses.

"Won't it be glorious to have a whole day off?" glowed Harry.

"Will it? Well, I guess maybe," rejoined Teddy, his small face animated with the prospect of the coming holiday. "What are you going to do?"

"Oh, my mother and I are going to a restaurant for Thanksgiving dinner and then I'm going to take her to The Pickford, that new motion picture house we pass every day. Oh, yes, we are going to church in the morning. Mother says everyone ought to go to church on Thanksgiving Day, even if one never goes any other time, to give thanks for one's blessings."

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"I never go to church," stated Teddy, cheerfully unashamed. "My mother used to take me, but I behaved so bad she quit. I go to Sunday School, but not every Sunday."

"What did you ever do in church that was so very terrible?" asked Harry, smiling.

"Oh, a lot of things. Once I sang a whole line of a hymn after everybody else got through singing, and I fell out of our pew into the aisle and made all the folks laugh. I tied two girls' sashes together once in Sunday School. They sat right in front of me and the ends of their ribbons hung down. Maybe they weren't wild when they started to go home in different directions. Once I lost my nickel for the collection plate, so I put a milk bottle check on the plate instead. It looked just like a quarter, but the man who passed the plate was pretty mad about it. He told my mother afterwards, and she said I'd better stay home, if I couldn't behave better than that. So I stayed home. I guess that was the best place for me."

"I always go to the church that Father used to go to with Mother. Sometimes I get tired before it's out, but sometimes I hear really interesting things," said Harry. He was still smiling over Teddy's list of iniquities.

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"I don't mind the singing. It's the sermons that make me sleepy. I love to sing." Teddy's eyes glowed. "I think it's fine that we have one morning a week for singing. My mother can play the piano, and sing, too. Sometimes she lets me sing with her. I know a lot of songs."

"I can't sing very much," confessed Harry, "but I love to hear singing."

"I like that Miss Verne, who plays the piano for us at school. She's so small and pretty. She looks like a little girl dressed up in a grown woman's clothes. Did you hear Miss Leonard tell three of the boys last Monday that Miss Verne wanted them to sing for her after school?"

"Yes," nodded Harry. "I heard her tell them. Elmer Barry told me that there is to be a Christmas play, or something, and these boys are going to sing."

"I wish I was going to be in it," sighed Teddy wistfully. "I wouldn't be afraid to sing in public. My mother says I have a good voice."

"Maybe Miss Verne will ask you to be in the entertainment," suggested Harry kindly, noting Teddy's wistful look.

"How can she when she doesn't even know I can sing? I'm not going to tell her, either. She'd think I was crazy about myself. Oh, I guess I'll live if I don't have a chance to show off," ended Teddy philosophically. [172]

Nevertheless, that morning as Company A filed into the room used as a gymnasium and seated themselves in the rows of chairs arranged for them, Teddy could not help cherishing a faint hope that Miss Verne would notice him and ask him to sing in the Christmas entertainment. There was small chance of that, he reflected, for this was to be their last morning in school until after the holiday rush was over. School closed that Saturday, not to open again until after New Year's.

"Now, boys," began Miss Verne, after Company A had sung several songs of her suggesting, "I am going to teach you such a pretty, new song this morning. You'll like it, I'm sure. Listen while I play and sing the first verse for you." After a rollicking introduction on the piano, she began a delightful little popular song that had just recently been published and was fast gaining popularity. Although Miss Verne frequently chose popular music for the boys to sing, she was extremely careful in her choice of songs, and never presented any which could be classed as vulgar or over-sentimental.

She played and sang the verse to the boys three times, then said brightly, "Now, boys, you try it."

With the quick ear for music possessed by the majority of children, the boys took up the first two or three lines of the song at once. They wavered on the fourth line, and at the fifth there was only one boy singing in perfect time with the accompaniment. But that boy was well worth listening to. His clear, soprano voice sang on, growing stronger and surer with every breath. The song ended with a gay little run up to a fairly high note. The boy took the run exquisitely, holding that note for an instant. Miss Verne's hands dropped from the piano. "Come up here," she commanded, beckoning to the boy who had sung so sweetly. [173]

With his freckled face only a shade paler than his hair, Teddy Burke reluctantly ascended the platform. In spite of his boastful denial that he wouldn't be afraid to sing in public, Teddy was decidedly embarrassed. He had not meant to sing a solo. As it happened, the song was one which he had heard his mother practising for the past week to sing at a club entertainment. It had appealed to Teddy from the moment he had first heard it, and happy in the love of letting out his voice in sweet sounds he had sung on, wholly unconscious of singing alone, until the end of the song. The dead silence which followed it, and Miss Verne's command to come to the piano had awakened him to what he had done.

"What's your name?" asked the pretty little woman abruptly.

"Teddy—Theodore Burke, ma'am."

"Well, Teddy, who taught you to sing?" [174]

"No one—I mean—I hear my mother sing and I sing, too," stammered Teddy.

"Didn't anyone ever tell you that you have a beautiful voice?"

Teddy's face blazed with fresh embarrassment at the complimentary grilling he was undergoing. He hung his head and made no reply.

"Well, if no one else ever told you, I am going to tell you now," Miss Verne said in brisk fashion. "You are just the boy I am looking for to sing the leading part in the Christmas musical play we are getting up. Would you like to sing in it?"

"Yes, ma'am. I mean, no, ma'am. I don't—know—whether I would like it or not," floundered Teddy.

"Of course you would. The only part you won't like is rehearsing after the store closes."

"I don't mind *that*," admitted the boy.

"All right. Take your seat. I'll talk with you about it after singing is over. Miss Leonard, may I keep this boy here for a moment after the others are gone?"

Miss Leonard bowed a smiling assent. She was very proud to think that one of her boys was to be honored.

"Now, boys," she returned to her class again. "Let's try our song once more."

Teddy Burke finished the rest of the singing period in a delightful daze. Once he gave his hand a wicked little pinch to see if he were really awake. He pinched himself hard enough to leave an angry red spot, so he ruefully concluded that he was not dreaming. Every now and then he [175]

glanced shyly at Harry, who beamed at him in a way that left no doubt in Teddy's mind of Harry's pleasure in his good fortune.

Harry was unselfishly glad that his friend was to have the longed-for chance to sing, particularly so since he had heard the boy's sweet voice. He waited anxiously about for a moment after school was over, thinking perhaps Miss Verne would take time merely to make an appointment with his chum after the store closed.

"Don't loiter here, Harry," reproved Miss Leonard rather coldly. Although the boy was the soul of good behavior in school, she did not trust him. The growing number of demerits on his card influenced her against him, and instead of inquiring into matters, she placed a secret ban of disapproval upon him and privately characterized him as one of those boys who were well-behaved when watched, and then only. Usually clever in her reading of boy character, she was wholly in error as far as Harry was concerned, an error which time alone could rectify.

Harry glanced wistfully toward the gymnasium, then he went sadly downstairs. Miss Leonard did not like him. She did not trust him. She believed the story of his report card. She would never know that he had not deserved all those demerits, for he could never tell her. How beautifully everything was going for Teddy. He wondered what would have happened to Teddy, had their positions been reversed. Suppose Teddy had been placed at the exchange desk, while he, Harry, had taken Teddy's place in the house furnishings. Teddy was such a droll little boy. Perhaps Mr. Barton would have liked him. Then he remembered Miss Welch had said that Mr. Barton had never been kind to any of the various boys who had been stationed at the exchange desk. Harry gave a little sigh, then involuntarily straightened his shoulders. He was better fitted to bear harsh treatment than his chum. Teddy would have flared at the first cross word on the part of the crabbed aisle manager. He would have rebelled, defied Mr. Barton, delivered a most uncomplimentary opinion of him to his face, and then he would have walked out of the store without waiting to be discharged. That was precisely what Teddy would have done.

"I'm glad Teddy's in a nice department and glad folks like him," was Harry's honest reflection, as he walked down one of the aisles of the book department to the exchange desk. "I suppose 'what is to be, will be.' That's what Mother always says. Maybe there's a better day ahead for me, too. Only I guess it's so far ahead I can't see it."

But while he peered hopefully into the veiled future, that "better day" was not far distant, although he was destined to pass through one more ordeal before it dawned.

CHAPTER XVIII

CONFIDENCES

"Teddy Burke, I was never so glad in all my life as when Miss Verne called you to the piano, this morning!" exclaimed Harry, as he and Teddy passed out the door that night and stepped into the street. It was the first opportunity the two boys had had for conversation since Teddy's remarkable vocal demonstration that morning.

"I was never so su'prised in my life," returned Teddy, almost sheepishly. "I forgot all about the other fellows. I learned that song from hearing my mother sing it. I didn't know everybody'd stopped singing till I quit singing myself."

"I hadn't any idea you could sing like that," praised Harry, warmly.

"Oh, I'm not so much. I guess there are a lot of fellows in school that can sing better'n I can."

"I don't believe it. Your voice is—is just splendid." Harry glowed with enthusiasm. "I'm so glad everything is going so well for you, Ted."

"It's you that ought to have things fine and dandy," retorted Teddy, in a burst of loyalty. "If it hadn't been for you I'd of hated school, and acted up and been discharged from the store long ago."

Harry's earnest face flushed with pleasure. Teddy's good opinion was very sweet. There were at least three persons who believed in him, Teddy, Mr. Rexford and Miss Welch.

"It's a shame you have to work for that cranky old aisle man," continued Teddy. "Why don't you ask to be transferred? You didn't talk to Mr. Marsh. You said you were going to, you know."

"I thought I'd try to stick it out. I hated to begin complaining the very first thing. If only Mr. Barton would believe in me." Harry's face fell as he mentioned the aisle manager's name.

"He wouldn't believe in the President of the United States," was Teddy's scornful reply.

Harry smiled at this. "I try not to think about him when I'm out of the store. All I'm afraid of is that he'll be worse when the Christmas rush begins. Miss Welch says an angel would get mad then."

"I don't think our department's going to be so very busy," commented Teddy. "People aren't going to give clothes baskets and tin pans and wringers and ice-cream freezers for presents."

"Jewelry's going to be pretty busy, I suppose; and books, too. I wish I'd get a whole cartload of books for Christmas."

"Maybe you might get some." Teddy registered a private vow that he would play Santa Claus to Harry in that respect.

"Mother always gives me one." Harry brightened. His mother's simple presents to him were sacred. "What did Miss Verne say to you, to-day?"

"I have to stay to-morrow night. She's going to give me my part in the Christmas play and begin to teach me the songs." Teddy looked important. "She told me all about the play. Every year the boys give one in Martin Hall. It's a place in the store where they give all the entertainments. We have to give the play every afternoon for two weeks before Christmas. It's for the children whose mothers bring 'em to the store to see Santa Claus. There's going to be a Santa Claus in this show. It's all about a boy who didn't like Christmas, and didn't believe there was a Santa Claus. I'm to be that boy." Teddy looked very proud.

"How splendid!" breathed Harry. "I hope I can see it."

"I hope you can," nodded Teddy, "but if you come to it, don't you dare look at me, or I'll burst right out laughing."

The boys trudged home through the bleak November night, talking of the wonderful honor that had come to Teddy. When Harry reached home he could not eat his supper until he had related the day's happenings to his mother. [181]

"Teddy seems to be a very lucky boy," commented Mrs. Harding.

"Yes, he is." There was no trace of envy in Harry's sensitive face.

"I wish something just as nice would happen to my boy," said his mother fondly. "You never say much of yourself, dear child."

"Oh, there isn't anything to tell, Mother. I just work and that's all. Wait until something big happens to me. You'll be the first one to hear it. Isn't it fine that we are going out together on Thanksgiving Day?" He changed the subject abruptly. They were on dangerous ground. His mother must never know how little possibility there was of anything "big" happening to him.

"I'm very proud to think my son is going to take me out." His mother came over to Harry and kissed him.

"You're the best mother a fellow ever had," murmured Harry. What were a few hardships to him, compared to the satisfaction of being able to give his mother pleasure with the money he had earned by his own labor. "I hope Ted'll have a nice time with his mother, Thanksgiving. I must ask him what he's going to do."

Harry did not see his chum the next morning. For once, Teddy failed to be at their usual meeting place. The two boys did not meet until they happened to come together in the lunch-room at noon. For once, Mr. Barton had allowed Harry to go to lunch on time. Usually, he kept the boy at the exchange desk until long after the time he had first assigned to him to go to lunch. [182]

"I was late. My mother overslept this morning. I had to hustle to get here. I was only ten minutes late, though. Mr. Duffield didn't scold. My, but he's good. He just said, 'Try not to be late again.' Mr. Hickson says he's always like that to everybody. Mr. Hickson's a pretty good fellow, too. I'd do most anything for him. I like all the folks in kettles and pans, except the old Gobbler. Maybe she didn't gobble the other day, though." Teddy launched forth with the tale of the purloined feather duster. "You ought to have heard her gobble the next morning when she went to fish out her duster and got nothing but a handle." He giggled gleefully at the memory. "I was watching her to see what she'd do. She made a lot of fuss. She went around making the folks in the department show her their dusters to see if any of 'em had hers."

"But didn't she know her duster when Mr. Hickson showed it to her?" asked Harry, his eyes dancing with amusement.

"He didn't happen to be on the floor when she was going around the department. Te, he! I went and got the duster and took it over to her. She was telling Mr. Duffield her troubles. 'Is this your duster, Miss Newton?' I asked. That's her real name. She looked at it and gobbled, 'That duster, mine? No, sir. My duster's brand new. That's all cut up, and the top's gone.' So I put it away again. Maybe Mr. Hickson didn't laugh when I told him. He said he was even with her now for taking a big sale away from him the other day." [183]

"You're a bad boy, Teddy," laughed Harry. But his tone contained little rebuke.

"I'm good sometimes," defended Teddy stoutly. "Doesn't it seem funny to think we won't have to go to school any more until after Christmas?" Teddy preferred not to speak of his shortcomings.

"I'm sorry, aren't you?"

"Well," Teddy squinted reflectively, "school isn't so bad. I have a pretty good time in my department, though. How's dear, kind Mr. Barton to-day?" he asked sarcastically.

"Dear, kind Mr. Barton has been quite mild lately. I hope it lasts."

"He's glad he's going to get a holiday. He has something to be thankful for on Thanksgiving. He can be thankful he isn't any uglier than he is," berated Teddy.

Strangely enough, Mr. Barton's mild mood remained with him, and when Harry left the department on Wednesday night he felt more cheerful than since he had first taken up his work at exchange desk Number 10. [184]

Thanksgiving came and went, bringing to the two lads the sweetness of their first hard-earned holiday. Harry and his mother followed to the letter the programme he had outlined to Teddy. Imbued with the spirit of Harry's gallantry to his mother, Teddy solemnly proposed to Mrs. Burke that he accompany her to church on Thanksgiving morning. To his secret delight, she made no protest and, when dressed in his Sunday best, Teddy marched decorously along beside her to the church which she attended, she felt a strange, new thrill of pride in her son. It seemed to her that she was just beginning to become acquainted with him. That afternoon she did the honors and took Teddy to a wonderful play for children that was having a popular run at one of the theatres, and on Thanksgiving night mother and son spent a blissful evening at home, at the piano, trying over the songs that Teddy was to sing in the play, which Miss Verne had painstakingly copied for him.

Teddy was bubbling over with joy the following morning, when he and Harry met. The two lads compared notes and decided unanimously that it was the best Thanksgiving they had ever spent.

CHAPTER XIX

THE BELATED DAWN

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"Watch yourself, Harry," was the greeting he received from Miss Welch as he went to his station, still glowing with yesterday's happiness. "Smarty Barty's on the warpath. I guess his Thanksgiving dinner didn't agree with him."

Although Miss Welch did not know it, that was precisely what ailed Mr. Barton. Being afflicted with dyspepsia, he had eaten to his sorrow, and when he stalked into his section that morning, he was ready to snap at the first unlucky person who might offend him.

By prompt obedience to orders, Harry managed all morning to avoid a clash with Mr. Barton. Just before twelve o'clock, however, the aisle manager swooped down upon him with, "Here, boy, take this money over to Miss Exley in the perfumes and get it changed. Bring it back to me, and hustle. Miss Rowe, at the book desk, is waiting for it."

Harry was instantly off on his errand. He was frequently intrusted with a five-dollar bill to be changed. This morning, however, it was a yellow-backed twenty-dollar note that Mr. Barton handed to him. Hurrying to Miss Exley's desk, he handed her the money. She grumbled at having to part with her small notes, but counted out four crisp five-dollar bills, and thrust them into the boy's hand with, "Take that to Mr. Barton, and don't you dare lose it."

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Three minutes later the notes lay in the aisle manager's hand. In that same instant, however, he was besieged by an irate customer, who demanded that he sign her check for the return of a bracelet which had been sent to her in place of one she had purchased. Intent on pacifying the woman, he accompanied her to Miss Welch's desk, the money in his hand.

It took at least fifteen minutes to rectify the mistake, and send the woman on her way with the bracelet she had originally purchased safely in her shopping bag.

"After that, it's me for lunch," announced Miss Welch grimly. "I need food to sustain me until the next trouble hunter hits this desk." Mr. Barton mumbled a disgruntled reply and stalked off up the aisle in answer to a frantic call from a salesman in the books.

"I hope Mr. Barton lets me go to lunch on time to-day," reflected Harry. "It isn't a bit busy. Here he comes back again. I wonder if I dare ask him. My, but he looks cross."

"Boy," thundered the aisle man, approaching Harry almost on a run. "Where's that money I gave you to change?"

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"I gave it to you, sir," replied Harry. "Don't you remember, I—"

"You gave me nothing," stormed the man.

"Oh, yes I did, sir," Harry's voice rose in an anxious note.

"You did *not*. I *say* you did *not*." The aisle manager's voice soared to a hoarse bellow of rage.

"What's this? What's this?" demanded a stern voice. Mr. Seymour, the floor superintendent, had come up in time to hear Mr. Barton's words.

"I gave this boy a twenty-dollar note to take over to Miss Exley to change. Now he says he gave it to me. I tell you, he didn't. He has lost it or else he has stolen it."

"Stolen it! Oh, Mr. Barton!" rang out Harry's agonized cry.

"What have you done with that money, young man?" thundered Mr. Seymour.

"I gave it to Mr. Barton, sir. I came straight from Miss Exley's desk and gave it to him."

"He didn't. I haven't seen it." Mr. Barton glared vindictively at Harry. "Search that boy. He's taken it."

"Come with me." Mr. Seymour grasped the stunned, unresisting boy by the arm and steered him to the nearest elevator.

"Oh, Mr. Seymour, I didn't take it. Please believe me. I didn't."

"Hold your tongue. Get into that elevator. We'll soon find out whether you did or not. I'm going to have you searched."

The three passengers in the elevator eyed the boy askance.

"He's stolen something," whispered one of them to the other. "They're taking him to the store detective's office."

Harry heard the whisper. "Oh, please——" he began. His voice died away in a half sob. The elevator stopped at the fourth floor. He was hustled roughly off it and down a narrow passage to a door which he had learned to know led to the room where the force of store detectives searched the persons they caught stealing Martin Brothers' wares. A stern-faced man seated at a desk rose to meet them as they entered.

"Search this boy," commanded Mr. Seymour. "Barton says he has stolen twenty dollars."

Then the most humiliating moment of Harry Harding's short life began. The search did not reveal the missing money, however. For half an hour the detective kept up a merciless grilling of the unfortunate boy. Harry's brief desire to cry had vanished. With pale, set face, he repeated over and over again, "I didn't take it. I gave it to Mr. Barton."

"Send for Barton," ordered the detective. Mr. Seymour left the room on his errand. The detective eyed the boy angrily. His patience was becoming exhausted. [189]

"You'd better own up, youngster. If you don't——"

The door was suddenly flung open and two persons fairly rushed into it. One of them was Miss Welch. Her face was white with rage. Her blue eyes shot fire. In her hand was clutched four five-dollar notes.

"There's your old money," she cried, throwing it on the desk. "Oh, Kiddy, what a shame!" She ran to Harry and encircled him with protecting arms. Then she turned fiercely upon the detective. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Torturing this poor boy, before you stop to find out things. Look at him, the poor lamb. His heart's broken. Why don't you take somebody your own size? He *did* give the money to Mr. Barton, just as he said he did. The old trouble-hunter laid it in my exchange book and I just now found it. Maybe I didn't hot-foot it up here!"

"See here, miss, this boy was brought to me for stealing. How was I to know——"

"You didn't know," broke in the person who had accompanied Miss Welch. It was Mr. Rexford. "This boy is innocent. I'll be responsible for him. You can settle this with Barton. Come, Harry."

As one in a dream, Harry found himself leaving the hated room between his two protectors. [190]

"Now, my boy," said Mr. Rexford grimly, "we are going to settle matters once and for all. I'm going to take you to Mr. Keene, and he is going to give you a transfer slip. I need a boy like you in my department, and if you are not working for me within the next ten minutes, then my name isn't Henry Rexford."

Harry Harding's "better day" had dawned.

CHAPTER XX

TEDDY'S TRIUMPH

Although only the width of an aisle separated Harry Harding from his former station at Exchange desk Number 10, it seemed to him as if he had entered into a new and wonderful realm. Three busy, happy weeks had glided swiftly by since that bitter morning when, crushed by Mr. Barton's shameful accusation, he had been haled to the detective's office and searched for the missing twenty dollars.

From the moment when, vindicated from the aisle manager's unjust charge, he had walked out of that hateful office under the protection of Miss Welch and Mr. Rexford, he felt that he was leaving his misfortunes behind him, that for him the "better day" of which he had dreamed was, indeed, a reality. Five minutes confidential conversation between Mr. Keene and Mr. Rexford had resulted in the transferring of Harry from the exchange desk to the book department. Mr. Rexford had also insisted on taking Harry to Mr. Marsh. There was another short, private confab, then Harry was called upon to present his much-marked report card to Mr. Marsh. That kindly man tore it in bits and writing Harry's name on a fresh card, handed it to him with a pleasant, "Well, my boy, I think you can be trusted to keep *this* card clear of demerits." [192]

But when Harry reached the department of which he had so often vainly sighed to be a part, the greatest joy of all was his. Mr. Rexford did not intend him to be a messenger. He was to be a stock boy, and his salary was to be increased to four dollars a week. Thus in one eventful day the current of his life was changed, and through shame and suffering he came into his own.

During those first, blissful days among the books, Harry's affection for Mr. Rexford was so great that it made him feel like crying. Gradually, however, he regained his normal poise, and tried to show his gratitude by giving the best possible service to the man who had fought for him

in his hour of need. Of Mr. Barton Harry saw little. To be sure, he was still aisle manager in the book department, but he passed Harry with averted head, or, if they chanced to meet face to face, with no sign of recognition. He had been lectured most severely by Mr. Seymour for his hasty accusation against Harry on that disastrous day. Mr. Prescott, the detective who had searched Harry, had also rated him scathingly, and Miss Welch, aside from business transactions, treated him with a sweeping contempt that was more humiliating to the crabbed man than he cared to admit even to himself. He had learned a lesson, however, that he was not likely to forget, and the boy who took Harry's place at the exchange desk profited by Harry's suffering in that Mr. Barton accorded him at least fair treatment.

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December brought with it the great annual rush that precedes Christmas. Day after day the store was crowded with busy shoppers, and though the employees of Martin Brothers' store had much to contend with, still the spirit of Christmas which is yearly being lived up to more faithfully by the customers in the treatment of those who serve their never-ending wants, pervaded the whole establishment.

Harry Harding spent little time in the department. All day long he worked like a beaver in the stock-room on the tenth floor of the store, coming into the department merely to bring down truckload after truckload of books to fill up the constantly diminishing tables. For, at the holiday season, the book department reaped its richest harvest, and the demand for its wares never seemed to lessen.

Those were halcyon days for Teddy Burke, too. Not because of the rush of business in his department, although trade was brisk, and a few new salespersons had been added to the house-furnishings force, but for the delightful reason that he was the most talked-of boy in school.

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As the chief actor in the little play that was being daily given in Martin Hall, Teddy was covering himself with glory. Miss Verne had spared no pains in training him for his part of "Dicky Darrow," the boy who didn't believe in Santa Claus, and Teddy displayed a histrionic ability that astonished all who were fortunate enough to witness the musical play.

It may be said to Teddy's credit that much adulation had not turned his head. Off the stage he was the same old Teddy, and far from given to swaggering he showed a positive distaste for crowing over the fresh laurels that he daily won.

"A lot of these people make me tired," he grumbled to Harry as they trudged home together one snowy evening. "I wish they would not come around talking to me about my voice and all that foolishness."

"But, Teddy, you've a right to be proud of yourself," was Harry's hearty praise. "Everybody's talking about you. I'm crazy to see the show. Two more days and the rush will be over. Then the boys will all have a chance to hear you sing and see you act."

Mr. Keene had arranged for a special performance to be given for the benefit of the employees after the store closed on Christmas eve, and Harry was eagerly looking forward to seeing Teddy in his wonderful part. Harry had a delightful secret he was hugging to his breast, and he could hardly wait for the time to come to carry it out.

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"I'm glad that'll be the last of it," returned Teddy. "I came to this store to be a business man, like Mr. Everett, not to sing for a lot of folks who think they're goin' to hear something wonderful. Just you remember, Harry Harding, not to dare look at me when I'm singing, or I'll laugh; see if I don't."

"I'll turn my back to the stage," promised Harry, with twinkling eyes.

"Now you're making fun of me," declared Teddy, with a snicker. "If I should happen to look out at the audience and see nothin' but your back, I'd laugh all right. I guess you'd better look at the stage, if you don't look too hard. My mother's been to hear me sing three times. She thinks I'm some son."

"My mother was here yesterday. She thinks so, too. You are kind of an adopted son of hers, you know."

"I guess I'm lucky to have two mothers," nodded Teddy, his small face glowing.

Teddy had become a frequent visitor at the Harding's humble home, while Harry had paid several visits to the Burkes. Mrs. Harding and Mrs. Burke had also met, liked each other on sight and a vigorous friendship had sprung up between the two little families. In fact, Harry and his mother were to spend Christmas Day with the Burkes and the boys were looking eagerly forward to the occasion.

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On the day before Christmas, trade slackened in the store. Here and there, through the rapidly thinning aisles, dilatory customers wandered who had refused to obey the mandate to do their Christmas shopping early, while shrewd bargain hunters darted about, ready to pounce upon any article that had been "marked down" at the last moment.

But even these indefatigable shoppers drifted out of the store, one by one, and at the last the welcome ringing of "closing" gongs in all parts of the store proclaimed that another holiday rush had passed out to keep company with the shades of past busy seasons.

Harry Harding was positively thrilling with excitement, as he hurried to the assembly room to form in line for the triumphal march to Martin Hall. The hour had come when he was to witness his chum's triumph. A number of rows of seats had been reserved for the store messengers, and as Harry marched into the hall with his work-a-day comrades to the inspiring strains of Sousa's

"Salute to the Colors," played by the store orchestra, he was wrought up to a high pitch of pleasurable emotion.

Once seated, his eyes never left the curtain that hid his chum from view, and as with a warning tinkle of the bell it rose, disclosing a pretty living room in which two boys were seated, he could have shouted out of sheer joy. [197]

The play began with a discussion between two little boys in regard to the reality of Santa Claus. The opening lines were Teddy's, and the first sound of his clear young voice uttering the emphatic words, "I don't believe in Santa Claus, so there!" thrilled Harry through and through. After a short dialogue, Teddy sang his first song, "There is No Santa Claus," and the boy who played the part of his brother responded to it with, "Santa Will Come To-night."

Although the other boy's voice was sweet and true, the interest of the audience was centered in Teddy. He was obliged to repeat part of his song before his listeners would allow the play to proceed. More dialogue followed in which the boys agreed to steal downstairs to the living-room after the household were asleep to watch for the coming of their patron saint. Then followed a beautiful duet, "We'll Watch for Him To-night," which closed the act.

The second act opened with the stealthy entrance of the boy watchers. Dicky's brother was given the opening song, "When Santa Comes Down the Chimney," and Teddy answered it with a funny little song, "Seeing is Believing."

Then followed a brisk dialogue which died out as two drowsy youngsters succumbed to sleep on each side of the fireplace, only to waken as a cuckoo clock sang out the hour of midnight. A faint jingling of distant sleigh-bells sounded and a surprising thing happened. The big fireplace opened wide and a radiant white figure, glittering with diamond dust, stepped out. She waved a wand. The chime of bells grew louder and in dashed Santa Claus, perched in a tiny sleigh, drawn by eight little boys in queer, tight-fitting brown suits and close-fitting hoods, topped with funny little antlers. They stamped and curvetted in true reindeer style, then stepped out of harness and sang, "Run, Run, Run, You Little Reindeer." [198]

A serious time followed for the abashed Dicky. Santa Claus rated him soundly in a queer, shrill voice, and the eight reindeer wagged their antlered heads in stern disapproval. The radiant figure, which was none other than the Spirit of Christmas, sang a tuneful number, "What Shall We Do with Dicky?" and Santa Claus answered with, "Try Him for Unbelief." Dicky protested with, "I Won't Be Tried in Court," but the eight reindeer seized him and dragged him before Santa Claus.

Then followed a funny trial scene in which the prosecutor was the Spirit of Christmas, the eight reindeer the jury, and the judge, Santa Claus, who condemned him to go without presents every Christmas until he acknowledged the reality of Santa. [199]

The play ended with Dicky's remorseful solo, "I Believe in Santa at Last," while Santa Claus was finally persuaded by the Spirit of Christmas to shake hands with Teddy and recall his stern sentence. Then came a ringing chorus of "Merry Christmas to All and Good Night." Santa Claus flung down a pack of toys, called to his reindeer, and the whole procession skipped through the yawning chimney. The stage was darkened for an instant. Suddenly the lights flashed up, revealing the two boys sitting up, rubbing their eyes. Springing to their feet they ran down to the front of the stage and sang the final number, a duet, "Santa's the Friend of the Children."

Hardly had the curtain dropped when tumultuous applause broke forth. Dicky and his brother were called again and again before the curtain. Mr. Marsh hurried down the aisle with two immense bouquets of red roses. This was Harry's surprise. He had proposed to the messenger boys that they give ten cents apiece to buy these tributes of honor, and they had responded to a boy.

Half an hour later two happy-faced lads, their arms full of be-ribboned bundles, stepped into the snow-packed street. The bundles represented the good will of the various members of their department. They meant that the tired salespeople who had stuck to their posts so faithfully through the bustle and hurry of Christmas had not been so tired as to forget that a merry, gift-laden Christmas is the most important thing in the world to a boy. In each lad's pocket reposed a two dollar and a half gold piece, the gift of their respective buyers, and as Harry Harding and Teddy Burke trudged home through the sharp wintry air they both agreed that they were truly the luckiest boys under the sun. [200]

"I guess Santa Claus will be around to see you to-night," was Teddy's observation, called after Harry as they parted at the corner.

"I shouldn't be surprised if he called on you, too," flung back Harry.

Each boy smiled to himself as he sped home on his separate way, glowing with the unselfish ardor of giving.

When Harry Harding opened his eyes the next morning on the light of a perfect Christmas day, the first thing that met his eager gaze was a thick, square, be-ribboned package. It lay on the little table beside his bed, and on the holly-wreathed tag tied to the ribbon was written in Teddy's unmistakable handwriting, "Merry Christmas from Teddy." The package contained a set of Kipling's "Jungle Books," for which Harry had often sighed. While at almost the same moment [201]

Teddy Burke was lovingly caressing a beautiful dark blue sweater which Mrs. Harding's patient fingers had knitted for her adopted son. And as each youngster admired and gloated over this newest proof of the other's regard it came to him that after all there was nothing in the world quite so satisfactory as having a real chum.

CHAPTER XXI

[202]

GETTING EVEN WITH THE GOBBLER

The few days that were left of the old year proved to be particularly busy ones for Harry Harding. The holiday rush for books had left the department in wholesale disorder. The head salesperson of each particular stock of books clamored for the services of a stock boy to help bring order out of confusion, and Harry was hurried here and there at the command of many masters. Far from trying to dodge hard work, however, he plunged into it with an enthusiasm born of his love of books and his earnest desire to further Mr. Rexford's cause in every possible way.

In the matter of sales it had been a banner Christmas for Mr. Rexford's department. The almost emptied stock-room testified to that fact, so did the many blank spaces on the tables, when once the jumbled stock of many-colored volumes had been put in place. All this, however, was not accomplished in a day. It meant hard and constant labor for the salespeople, and the New Year was at least a week old before Department 85 settled into something resembling its usual placidity.

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During these busy days of putting things to rights in the book department, Harry and Teddy Burke seldom met in the lunch room, although they never failed to walk home together at night. School was not scheduled to begin again until the last Monday in January, after the annual stock-taking in the store was over. Released for the time being from study, both boys centered their interest on learning all they could about their respective departments.

Harry longed to know more about books, because of his predilection for them, while Teddy burned to be a business man like Mr. Everett, whom he secretly worshipped.

It was Teddy's first case of hero worship, and he kept it strictly to himself. He managed, however, when not busy, to keep within call of the buyer, or to flit about after him as he made his round of Department 40, looking for all the world like a mischievous sprite as he suddenly bobbed up from behind a table or appeared like magic from around a corner. Mr. Everett had grown to depend on his services to such an extent that to see him suddenly stop in the middle of the department and cast searching eyes over the rows of household utensils usually indicated that he was looking for Teddy. Already a curious sense of camaraderie had sprung up between the boy and man that later was to develop into an exceptional friendship. To the little, red-haired boy the once despised realm of kettles and pans seemed like a second home. There was but one drawback to the satisfaction he derived from his work in the house furnishings, and that drawback was—the Gobbler. She, alone, of all the salespersons in Department 40, disliked Teddy. Over and over again she had railed loudly against him, even going so far as to complain of him to Mr. Everett, and to ask that another boy be given his place in the department. In this instance she had gone a step too far, however. Wearied of her constant and prejudiced harping upon the subject of Teddy's shortcomings, Mr. Everett had turned on her with a sudden burst of anger that left her gasping, and thereafter she had modified her spleen against Teddy to muttered grumbling, with an occasional loud-toned reprimand, whenever the object of her dislike gave her the slightest opportunity for complaint.

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To be sure, there was no great reason why Miss Newton should evince a fondness for Teddy Burke. He had never laid himself out to win her regard. Quick to note her hostile attitude toward him, he had taken a wicked delight in playing more than one mischievous prank upon her, which in time she had ferreted out and very correctly laid at his door. She had been the only person in Department 40 to refuse to contribute toward the collection of Christmas gifts which the others had taken so much pains and pleasure in preparing for the boy. "What! Give that impudent youngster a present? Well, I guess not!" had been her indignant exclamation when Sam Hickson had put the project for making Teddy's Christmas a merry one before her. "Catch me spending a cent on a boy who calls me names." Unfortunately, it had been borne to her ears that Teddy had named her "The Gobbler."

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In due season, Teddy had learned all this from Sam Hickson, and, although he received the news with a fine show of indifference, and declared loftily that the "old Gobbler could keep her old present for all he cared," nevertheless it piqued him considerably more than he would let his friend Sam know, or would admit even to himself. He vowed secretly that he would "get even" with her, and planned untold mischievous vengeance to be wreaked upon her offending head. Yet deep in his heart it hurt him just a trifle to feel that there was one person in Department 40 who, to use his expression, "had no use for him."

It now lacked but two days until stock taking, and Teddy had made himself exceptionally useful to Sam Hickson in straightening and counting innumerable granite-ware utensils which formed a large part of the red-haired salesman's individual stock. As is usually the case in a department store, the salespersons in the house furnishings had begun to take account of their wares before

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the day set for wholesale reckoning of left-over stock. "Nobody in their right mind ever leaves it till the last day," Hickson had confided to Teddy. "I'd have to stay here all night if I didn't start beforehand. You keep an eye on this stuff. Whenever you see these folks selling any of it, tell me. Then I can take it off my count."

As the others in the department were of precisely the same mind, everyone watched his or her tables with an eagle eye. The Gobbler, who had dominion over a vast region of tinware, hovered about her tables, for all the world like the cross old fowl for which Teddy had named her, and gobbled loud directions to all comers who ventured into the sacred precincts of her domain.

It was on the day before stock-taking that Teddy, flitting impishly about the department, conceived the great scheme for "getting even." From a safe distance he eyed his enemy, who was laboriously counting row upon row of shining pie and cake tins, and moving each pile, as she counted it, to one side of the long table on which it reposed. Long before the hour when she departed for the lunch-room, neat stacks of tinware rose on one half of her table, while a space of about a foot in width separated the elect from the uncounted.

"Just wait until she goes to lunch," reflected Teddy wickedly, as, safely screened by a protecting wall of dishpans, he peered owlshly at the industrious Gobbler as she delved patiently in her stock. [207]

Miss Newton, however, was in no great hurry to go to lunch. Engrossed in her task the minutes slipped by, and when at last she stalked majestically off in the direction of the time-desk, Teddy was called upon to go on an errand for Mr. Everett.

The instant he was free, he hurried down the aisle toward the hapless table, vengeance in his eye. "Maybe she won't be mad, though," he chuckled, as he paused before the rows of tinware and eyed the dividing space which separated the figurative sheep from the goats. "She won't know what she's counted and what she hasn't, when I get through with 'em. She'll think a customer did it. I'd just as soon tell her it was little Teddy that mixed 'em up, though."

His hand slid out toward a pile of cake tins. Dividing it evenly, he lifted the upper half and was about to distribute it in picturesque confusion over the table, when a sudden cry of distress broke upon his ears, causing him to let the pile of pans to rattle back into place. Bearing down upon him came Miss Newton, but her hard face wore a look of dismay which was quite new to it.

"Oh, boy," she shrieked, as she hurried toward him, "have you seen it? Help me look for it. Oh, I must find it!" She wrung her hands frantically, and to Teddy's horror began to cry. [208]

"What's the matter?" asked Teddy sharply. The woman's evident distress had driven all thought of mischief from his mind.

"Oh, oh!" she moaned. "I've lost my purse. It had all my salary in it. I just got paid this morning. I put it in my apron pocket. I'm sure I did. But it's not there now. Oh, dear, what'll I do? I haven't paid my board, or my laundry, or anything!"

She searched frantically among the rows of tinware, peered up and down the narrow aisles, then dropped her head in her hands and lurching against the tinware table with a force that sent a pile of pie tins jingling to the floor, burst into noisy weeping.

A thin little hand reached forth and patted the sobbing woman on the shoulder. "Never you mind, Miss Newton, I'll find your money for you. How much did you lose, and where do you think you lost it?" Teddy was transformed into a small edition of a knight-errant about to go to the rescue of a lady in distress. "What kind of a purse was it?"

"Ten dollars," gurgled the Gobbler. "I don't know where I lost it. It was all I had. Oh-h-h! It was a little, black pocketbook."

"Don't you cry, now. I'll find it," promised Teddy hopefully. He began a rapid search among the piles of tinware. This time, however, he was extremely careful not to disarrange them. Next he darted up and down the aisles, peering under the tables, his alert eyes scanning every inch of the floor, but to no purpose. [209]

"Maybe someone's picked it up and taken it to the 'Lost and Found,' or to Mr. Duffield. You stay here. I'll go and see."

Down the department hurried the little figure, anxiously inquiring of the various salespersons, "Have you seen Miss Newton's purse?" But no one had seen it. A knot of sympathetic clerks gathered about him, asking eager questions and shaking their heads in denial. A hurried trip to the "Lost and Found" proved fruitless. Mr. Duffield disclaimed all knowledge of it.

"I guess it's gone for good," remarked a woman. "Somebody's always ready to snap up money and keep it. She might as well brace up and make the best of it. I know how it goes, though. I lost my salary once, and I never heard of it again."

"It was all the money she had," Teddy found himself repeating mechanically. "I hate to go and tell her we can't find it."

"I'll tell her," volunteered the woman. "Where is she?"

"Down there in tin pans, crying her eyes out," muttered Teddy. [210]

The woman started in the direction of Miss Newton.

"Wait a minute." Inspiration had come to Teddy. His hand went into his trousers' pocket. Only that morning he had received his salary. "Here." He fished up three new one-dollar bills. Separating one of them from its companions, he held it up. "I'm goin' to give her this. How much

are the rest of you goin' to give?"

"There's a dollar for you, Reddy." Sam Hickson laid the mate to Teddy's dollar in the boy's hand.

"I'll give you fifty cents. I know how it goes. I can't spare any more." This came from the woman who had volunteered to break the news.

"I'll give a dollar," volunteered another salesman.

"Here's fifty cents more," smiled a pretty girl, opening a tiny purse she had taken from her apron pocket. "Listen, Teddy, go 'round the department and ask everybody."

"Hold this." Teddy thrust the money he had collected into Hickson's hand and sped off on his errand of mercy. He was back within a few moments with the encouraging news, "Got two dollars more."

"What's all this?" demanded a brusque voice. "How often have I said to you, 'don't stand in groups?'" Mr. Everett had appeared on the scene with a suddenness that startled the knot of workers gathered about Teddy. [211]

"The Gob—Miss Newton's lost her purse. She feels awful. We've got six dollars, and we're goin' to give it to her," announced Teddy almost defiantly. He had flushed rosy red.

Mr. Everett regarded the boy with a quizzical smile. "How much did she lose?" he asked sharply.

"Ten dollars, and she hasn't paid her board, or her laundry, or anything. She——"

The buyer's hand traveled to his breast pocket. Taking out a seal wallet, he counted four crisp one-dollar bills. "There's your ten dollars. Now, scatter, all of you. What would Mr. Martin say if he happened along?" Turning abruptly, Mr. Everett walked away.

"There's a buyer for you!" glowed one of the men.

"He's a real man. Now, Teddy——"

But Teddy was half way down the aisle.

"Here's your ten dollars, Miss Newton," he cried jubilantly. "Hold your hands, and don't dare lose it this time."

The disconsolate weeper straightened up with a jerk, and stared in tearful amazement at the boy who had so sturdily come to her aid.

"Why—where—did you get it? That's not my money!"

"Yes it is. Hurry up and take it," retorted Teddy impatiently. "It's from the folks in the department. You'd better go and get your lunch now. I won't let anybody touch your stock while you're gone. Take it. I've got to go. Mr. Everett is yelling 65." [212]

Dumping the money on the table, Teddy was about to scuttle away, when two detaining arms reached out and seized him. "You're the best boy that ever lived," quavered the Gobbler. Then Teddy Burke turned redder than his ruddy hair, as his erstwhile enemy, the Gobbler, imprinted a resounding kiss on his freckled cheek.

Wriggling from the grateful embrace, Teddy raced off up the aisle almost at a gallop, muttering, "She got even with me, all right!"

CHAPTER XXII

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A DISTURBING CONVERSATION

"Who do you s'pose likes me?" asked Teddy Burke that evening, as he and Harry began their homeward walk together.

"Quite a number of persons, I should say," returned Harry, smiling.

"But this is the last person you'd ever guess. It's the Gobbler—I mean, Miss Newton. She said I was the best boy that ever lived. What do you think of that?"

"I think you must be dreaming, or else Miss Newton isn't in her right mind," jeered Harry. More than once Teddy had recounted to his chum his frequent tilts with the saleswoman he had naughtily named the Gobbler. Harry knew, too, that she had ignored Teddy in the matter of a Christmas gift, and far from being sympathetic had slyly reminded his friend that he could not expect favors from one he had teased and ridiculed.

"She's not crazy, and I'm not dreaming," retorted Teddy. "I started to mix up her pie tins after she got 'em counted this morning, to get even with her for Christmas, and——" [214]

"No wonder she likes you," interrupted Harry. "Are you sure she said you were the *best* boy that ever lived?"

"Aw, quit teasing me," grinned Teddy, "and listen to what I'm telling you. Where was I? Oh, yes. Just as I started on those tins she came yelling down the aisle like an Indian! She'd lost her

pocketbook with her salary in it."

"What did you do then?" asked Harry, with a curious sidelong glance at his companion.

"Oh, I had to drop the pans and help her hunt it. There wasn't any fun in mixing 'em when she was crying like anything," replied Teddy. "She didn't find it, but the folks in the department all put together and made it up to her. She lost ten dollars. Mr. Everett made me give it to her. That's when she said I was the best boy that ever lived. She—she—don't you dare tell anybody," Teddy stipulated threateningly, "but—she—she kissed me. Can you beat it?" His small face wore an expression of supreme disgust.

Harry shouted with laughter. "That's a funny one on you, Ted." Then, straightening his face, he asked with a suddenness that caught Teddy off his guard, "Who put in the first money for Miss Newton?"

"I did, I—oh, what made you go and ask that? I wasn't goin' to tell you." Teddy looked abashed. [215]

"I suspected she had a pretty strong reason for saying you were such a good boy. It was a kind thing to do, Teddy. I'm glad and proud you're my chum." Harry's earnest, admiring speech brought a quick flush to Teddy's cheeks. "Oh, forget it," he muttered. "Say, did you know that if we pass an examination in May we can't go to day school next year?"

"Yes, I heard that when first we came to the store. We will have to go to school on two evenings during the week after the store closes. But we are to have our suppers. Martin Brothers do that for the boys, to help them along. It's mighty fine in them, isn't it?"

"Yep," agreed Teddy. "Oh, say, who do you suppose is coming to see me to-morrow night?"

"Frank Campbell?" guessed Harry. He was the lad who had shared honors with Harry in the Christmas play.

"Nope; Fatty—I mean, Howard Randall. He's coming home to supper with me. You don't care if he walks home with us, do you? Why can't you come to supper, too?"

"I don't believe I will." Harry shook his head. He wisely decided that it would be better for Teddy and Howard to spend the evening together, without the presence of a third party.

"What a splendid boy Teddy is," was Harry's reflection as he hurried on toward home after saying good night to his chum. "The people in his department must like him. It's great to be liked." His face glowed with happiness. Since his advent into the book department he was tasting the joy of having his efforts to be of use to his buyer appreciated. He felt that there was nothing he would not do for Mr. Rexford to show his gratitude, and he longed for some fitting opportunity to demonstrate it. [216]

The winter days rolled swiftly on, however, bringing with them nothing more stirring than the chance for Harry to perform faithfully and painstakingly his daily duties. But these he executed with a thoroughness and good will that made him a general favorite in Department 85, and caused Mr. Rexford to congratulate himself on having the boy in his department.

February came in, stiff, cold and apparently implacable, only to thaw unexpectedly, hold out a deceitful promise of springlike warmth, then maliciously freeze again at the very moment when everyone was congratulating himself on the mildness of the winter. March came in blustering, buffeting the great city with hard, icy fingers, and roaring forth a challenge of unending winter. Later, however, he relented, grew sunny and smiling by day, and merely snappy and frosty by night, indulging only in an occasional blast of fury by way of keeping up his lionlike reputation. [217]

To Teddy Burke and Harry Harding the winter fairly raced along the frozen road to spring. Work brought the lads a contentment they had never before experienced. Teddy's efforts had been rewarded with another dollar a week, and an initiation into the mysteries of stock in the realm of kettles and pans. Determined to give the boy every chance, Mr. Everett made much of him, giving him simple but invaluable information in the business of careful buying and the care of stock. Teddy was laying the foundation for a useful future amid the pleasantest possible surroundings.

Harry Harding was also making rapid strides along the line of his work. The only drawback to his satisfaction lay in the thought that he could not do more for the man who had done so much for him. Over and over again he said to Teddy, "I wish I could do something splendid for Mr. Rexford and for Martin Brothers, too, just to show them that I appreciate working for them." With this aim in mind he was continually on the alert for a chance to demonstrate his gratitude, and it was this spirit of watchfulness that finally placed in his path the opportunity to prove his earnest words.

One morning, while busily engaged in unloading a truck full of books, Harry overheard what struck him as a curious conversation. He had moved his truck alongside a long, projecting ledge of book shelves under which stock was usually placed in open bins at unloading, then carried to the various tables where it belonged. Having emptied his truck, Harry had seated himself on the floor behind it and was straightening the rows of books he had placed in the bins. [218]

"I haf had my eye feexed on that set of Poe seence Christmas," he heard a low, unfamiliar voice say. He felt a sudden jarring of the truck. Someone had leaned against it. The truck rolled an inch or two, and the speaker changed position, without turning about or noting the boy seated under the shelf.

"Wait until that girl in the desk goes to lunch," came the cautious, whispered answer. "I can't do a thing, with her there. If the inspectress who relieves her is as stupid as the reliefs Wallace

has been sending down here lately, I can put it through all right. You'll have to pay ten cents a volume, though."

"It weel not break me," laughed the first speaker. "I weel return the favor whenever you say. Come to the department on your luncheon hour with your hat on and you shall haf the embroidered—"

"Beat it," hissed the other voice, "there comes—"

There was a quick scurry of feet. Harry rose hastily from the bin where he had been crouching, bumping his head smartly on the projecting ledge as he straightened up. The impact made him see stars for an instant. He struggled to his feet, however, pushing the truck from him, and glanced quickly up and down the department. But he was too late. Half a dozen salespersons stood about the floor, but there were no strange salesmen to be seen. The unfamiliar voice belonged to no one in Department 85, and the whispered voice he could not recognize. It might belong to anyone in the department. [219]

Then he remembered the words, "that set of Poe." He hurried to the section where the sets of expensive books were displayed and began an eager scanning of the titles. Here he met with defeat. There were at least a dozen sets of Poe, all in expensive bindings.

"What are you looking for, boy?" A drawling voice suddenly addressed him. The salesman who had charge of the stock, a stout, brown-haired young man with rather sleepy-looking, blue eyes stood blinking at the boy. "You mustn't finger those sets. Remember, they cost money."

"I wasn't fingering them. I was just looking." Inwardly, Harry was indignant. His quiet, respectful voice did not reveal this fact, however. Then he said innocently, although his blue eyes studied the salesman intently. "I suppose these sets of *Poe* are very expensive."

His remark drew no blood. The salesman merely grinned derisively at him and said, "I guess it would take more than your week's wages to buy a set." [220]

"I guess it would." Harry smiled and walked away. He had learned nothing. He had not even had time to count the sets, or fix their appearance in his mind. True, he had had an object in mentioning Poe to the man, but his ruse had failed. The man seemed not in the least perturbed.

"What had I better do?" was the uppermost question in Harry's mind. "I hate to tell Mr. Rexford that there is a thief in this department, when I haven't the least idea who it is. I'll wait a little, then I'll go back and count the sets when that fellow isn't around. If one's missing later, I'll know. But suppose somebody should sell one? I'd have to go around the department and look on everyone's book. I can't do that. I'll keep my eyes open, though; maybe I'll find out something. I'll look at those sets again, when I have a good chance."

But a little later Harry was ordered to the stock-room and spent not only the rest of that day there, arranging surplus stock, but the next three days, as well, and in the fulfilling of his duties, the disturbing conversation was, for the time being, forgotten.

It was revived when, one day, a week later, he stopped at Exchange Desk number 10 for a moment's conversation with his old friend. Miss Welch. [221]

"Well, Kiddy, how's books?" greeted the kind-hearted Irish girl. "Aren't you the busy boy, though? Haven't much time for your old friends, have you?"

"I've been pretty busy," admitted Harry, "but I've always time for you, Miss Welch."

"Hear him talk," smiled the girl. "Don't cry about it, youngster. I know you haven't forgot your old friend Irish. I've been busy myself. Most of these people with the exchange habit ought to be in a sanitarium. Say, there's an old friend of yours over there in the jewelry. I wonder what's up."

Harry's eyes followed Miss Welch's quick glance. Leaning against the counter, deep in conversation with Mr. Cohen, the buyer of the jewelry, stood Mr. Prescott, the head detective.

An almost imperceptible shudder shook the lad's slender body. He would never forget Mr. Prescott.

"I guess it's about that stock they've been missing in jewelry," speculated Miss Welch.

"Have they been losing stock?" asked Harry.

"Yes, but you just keep it under your hat. A lot of stuff has skidooed out of the department since Christmas. I've heard it's not shoplifters, either."

"Then it must be—"

"Employees," supplied Miss Welch. "A friend of mine told me that it's the same all over the store. I wouldn't be surprised if there was a gang." She nodded wisely. [222]

"A gang?" questioned Harry.

"Yes, a gang, Innocent. When I was inspecting in Harrington's store the detectives got next to a gang of thieves there. It was sort of an endless chain; inspectors and sales were both mixed up in it. One person would steal one thing and another would steal something else; then they'd exchange. Sometimes they'd send their friends in to cart stuff out. Sometimes they'd buy things for almost nothing and the inspectors would pass it. They kept it up for two years and then—"

"Miss Welch," Harry's voice trembled with excitement, "I want to tell you something." The boy recounted in a low voice the curious conversation he had overheard on the morning he had been seated in the bin.

"Whada you think of that!" exclaimed the girl. "My, but it would have been some feather in Kiddy's cap if he'd got a look at those two. Better keep your eyes peeled. Mark my words, there'll be more of it in your department. Why didn't you tell Mr. Rexford?"

"I hated to, because I couldn't prove a single thing. I was afraid I might make trouble for some innocent person," returned Harry. "I thought maybe one of the men might be that Mr. Farley who has the sets, but I was mistaken."

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"Farley. U-mm. Let me see. That's that fellow with the sleepy eyes. Looks like the real thing. Still, you never can tell. Sometimes these harmless-looking people are fakes. Why don't you do a little Sherlocking on your own account?"

"Sherlocking?" inquired Harry.

"Yes. Didn't you ever read about Sherlock Holmes? He was some detective. Put it all over Nick Carter and a few others. Go to it, Kiddy, and beat him."

"I will," promised Harry. "Do you think—?"

"Where's your check, madam?" Miss Welch had turned to a woman who had come up to the desk.

Harry walked away, reviewing the conversation he had overheard on that morning of over a week past. "I'll watch," he resolved, "and perhaps I'll find out something. If only I could I'd be helping Mr. Rexford and Martin Brothers, too."

CHAPTER XXIII

HARRY PAYS HIS DEBT

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Harry made good his promise. For once fate seemed with him. A huge job lot of books, which it had taken him three days to bring from the stock-room to the first floor, was to be placed on sale in the department and the handling of this stock kept him busy on the floor, where he could see what went on.

The day before the sale he was detailed to work after the store had closed. The majority of the men in 85 had also been detained for night work and among them was Mr. Farley, the sleepy-eyed salesman.

A week had passed since Harry's conversation with Miss Welch. During that time the boy had watched Mr. Farley whenever he had the opportunity to do so, without being observed. His vigilance had met with no reward. To all intents the salesman appeared to be perfectly open and above-board in his dealings. Harry felt almost ashamed of himself for shadowing a man of whom he had really no cause for suspicion other than the fact that he had charge of the sets and that Miss Welch had suggested that he might bear watching. Even though there were a chain of thieves among Martin Brothers' employees, it might not extend to the book department. Still the conversation he had overheard pointed plainly to the dishonesty of someone in Department 85.

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Late that afternoon, however, Harry chanced to witness something which bore out Miss Welch's suggestion. The boy was hard at work, arranging a table of bargain books when the sound of voices in his ears caused him to glance up. Mr. Farley stood before a shelf of special books devoted to arts and crafts. It was situated directly across the narrow aisle in which Harry was working. The man's back was toward the boy. Beside him stood a pretty young woman. She was talking animatedly on the subject of interior decorating and examining with interest the various books the salesman showed her.

"How much is this book?" Harry heard her ask.

"Five dollars," was the salesman's response.

The young woman turned the leaves of the book as though undecided whether she wished to pay that price for it. The salesman watched her narrowly.

"I'll take it," she said at last, "but need I have it wrapped? I wish to make a train and I can save time by tucking it in this bag." She pointed to a leather traveling bag she had set down on the shelf. Fumbling in her hand-bag she took from it a five-dollar note and handed it to Mr. Farley.

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"That will be all right, madam," Harry heard him say. He glanced cautiously up and down the aisle, still with his back toward Harry. The woman hastily opened her traveling bag, dropped the book into it and hurried out of the department. The man watched her out of sight, then he strolled off in the opposite direction without looking back, but as he went, Harry's watchful eyes saw him thrust the hand that held the money into his trousers pocket. When he withdrew his hand it was empty.

"He's going to keep that money," sprang to Harry's mind, then, anxious to give the man the benefit of the doubt, "Perhaps he has put it in his pocket until he gets his sales book." The boy strolled slowly behind the salesman, determined to see what Mr. Farley intended to do with the money. It soon became evident that the man was not searching for his book on which to record the sale. He walked to the end of the aisle, then crossed over to the other side of the department. Harry dodged behind a high pile of large dictionaries that had been stacked at the end of the

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aisle. From this point of vantage he watched Mr. Farley for at least ten minutes. During that time the man made no effort to record the sale. Instead, he approached one of the saleswomen and entered into a conversation with her. Spying a customer who was examining a set of Thackeray, he made his way to his own stock, with Martin Brothers' money still reposing in his trousers pocket.

Here Harry's watch ended. He could spend no further time shadowing the man. He went slowly back to the table on which he had been at work, hardly knowing what to do. He had seen Mr. Farley pocket the money, but how could he prove what he had seen, were he to accuse the man openly? He had no way of finding out who the customer was, or where she lived. If Mr. Farley were confronted with Harry's story he would no doubt deny the whole transaction, or make some sort of clever explanation that would entirely discount Harry's accusation.

"I'll tell Miss Welch," decided the boy. He made his way to the exchange desk, but his friend was too busily engaged with a row of more or less patient women, afflicted with the exchange habit, for confidences.

"I'll tell her as soon as she isn't so busy," he decided. Before that time arrived he was sent up to the stock-room for a small consignment of books for which a saleswoman had an order on the following morning. When he returned to the floor the second closing gong had rung and Miss Welch's desk was deserted. [228]

"I suppose I'd better go and eat my supper." Harry turned in disappointment from the exchange desk and went downstairs to the basement, pondering what he had best do. As is the custom in large department stores, the employees who work after the store's regular hour for closing receive their supper at the management's expense. They are usually given from thirty to fifty cents and allowed time enough to go to an outside restaurant for their evening meal. Certain stores, however, make it a point to serve supper to their salespersons working overtime. Martin Brothers were among the latter, and served their night workers with a substantial meal in the basement restaurant.

Harry had just begun his supper when he saw Mr. Farley enter the restaurant in company with a slender young man whose black eyes and hair, together with a small black moustache, gave him a decidedly foreign air. The two seated themselves at a table some distance from Harry, and with their heads close together began what appeared to be an extremely confidential conversation. He noted that when the waiter came to take their order they stopped talking and waited until he was well out of hearing before resuming their confab.

"I wonder who that man is," was Harry's thought. "I don't believe I ever saw him before." As he sat watching the two salesmen, Fred Alden, the other stock boy for Department 85, slid into the chair opposite Harry. [229]

"Any objections to the pleasure of my company for supper?" he grinned cheerfully. He was a tow-headed, homely youth, older by two years than Harry, and his unflinching good humor was proverbial in the department.

"I'm glad to have you. I hate to eat alone. I'd have waited for you to go to supper, but I wished to see Miss Welch. She'd gone home, though, so I came on down stairs," explained Harry. Seized with a sudden idea he asked carelessly, "Who is that man with Mr. Farley? They're over there." Harry indicated them with a nod of his head.

"Who's he? Oh, he's a salesman in the upholstery. He's a Frenchman, and thinks he's a whole lot. He talks like an American, though. Sometimes when he gets mad or excited you can tell he's a foreigner. The messenger kids used to tease him to see him get wrathful. He's got an awful temper."

Harry's heart gave a sudden leap. The unfamiliar voice he had heard that morning of some weeks past had held a curious note which he knew to be out of the ordinary, yet was at a loss to guess why. Now it was all clear. The peculiarly accented words were the speech of an alien. At last he was on the trail of at least two thieves. Whether that trail led out of the book department and through the store, he could not know. He only knew that Miss Welch's random suspicion had hit the mark. [230]

During the remainder of the meal he let Fred carry on the greater part of the conversation, a proceeding which exactly suited the other boy, who was a chronic talker. Harry's thoughts were busy with his discovery. He could not be sure of his man until he heard the dark young man speak. But while he pondered as to his next move he saw Mr. Farley and his companion rise from the table. Harry sprang to his feet, leaving his dessert half eaten. "I'm sorry I can't wait for you, Fred," he apologized, "but I—I—must go." Without further words he hastened toward the stairs.

The two men were half way up the stairs when Harry set foot on the first step. Up he sped, so quietly that they did not hear him. At least, they did not turn around. He was only three steps behind them as they reached the first floor. To his intense chagrin they stopped short at the head of the stairs. There was nothing left for Harry to do but pass them. Mr. Farley cast a sleepy glance at the boy, but did not speak. He invariably treated the lad as though he were a part of the department furnishings. The slender, dark man paid no attention to him whatever.

"How can I hear his voice if I can't get near enough to him to hear it?" was Harry's disgusted reflection. "I've got to hear it, but how can I manage to?" [231]

From behind a concealing screen of books some distance from the stairway, Harry peered at the two men. Acting on a flash of impulse, he suddenly walked boldly toward them. He had happened to recall that there was to be a sale of sets, too, along with the miscellaneous books.

"Do you want me to help you with your sets, Mr. Farley?" At the sound of the boyish voice the men at the stairway whirled about. They had turned their backs to the book department and had not heard his almost noiseless approach.

"When I do, I'll let you know," frowned Mr. Farley. His sleepy eyes awoke and gleamed angrily at the interruption. The Frenchman glowered reprovingly at the lad. "Go away, boy," he rebuked. "Why haf you interopted os?"

"I beg your pardon." There was a mocking inflection in Harry's tone. Then he obediently removed his undesired presence to the other end of the department. He was quite ready to go for he had attained his object. The dark man had spoken, and in the voice was the inflection he had reason to remember.

"It's the same voice," he breathed half aloud. "Now that I know, I suppose I'd better tell Mr. Rexford about it, and let him see to it. He'll believe me, but if I told somebody else he might not. Well, I've found out what I wanted to, so now I'll get to work as fast as I can. It's after six and I have to be out of here by eight o'clock." [232]

"Here, Harry," directed a pleasant voice. "I need you." It was Mr. Denby, the man who had charge of the new fiction, who called out. "This table is to be cleared and those books put on it."

"All right, sir." Harry attacked the job with vigor.

It was twenty minutes past seven when that task was finished. Harry stood eyeing his grimy hands. "I guess I'd better wash my hands," he decided. The water faucet was situated in a small room devoted to the book mail-orders, at one side of the department, and opened into it by two doors. There was no light and as Harry did not know the situation of the switch he felt his way to the faucet in the dark.

He had washed his hands, dried them on his handkerchief, and was about to pass out through the upper door when he heard subdued voices. Two men entered by the lower door and began to converse in low tones.

"You go and get it," drawled a familiar voice. "Here's the set, all wrapped. Keep to the lower end of the department. I'll wait here until you bring my stuff. Make it flat, so I can button it inside my coat. You'd better take the books out one at a time. That's a peach of a set. It's full morocco. If Rexford ever misses it there'll be some yelling." [233]

A dark, indistinct figure slipped from the lower door, another dimly outlined figure drew close to the side of a high desk out of sight of any chance intruder, while a third boyish figure sped across the department in search of Mr. Rexford, who had announced his intention of returning that evening to direct the preparation for the sale.

"Have you seen Mr. Rexford, Fred?" Harry's eyes blazed with excitement, as he paused for an instant to question the other stock boy whom he met coming toward him, his arms full of books.

"Nope," was the answer. "I don't b'lieve he'll show up. He hardly ever comes around when the fellows are workin' at night."

"But he *said* he'd be here." Harry's face was full of anxious concern.

"Well, mebbe he will, then. Don't cry about it," jeered Fred.

Harry did not answer this jibe. He merely smiled and set off in the direction of the buyer's office. The door stood half open, but the office was dark, except for the faint light which shone into it from the department. "He isn't there," muttered the boy. "I'll have to tell someone else." He realized that if he did not act quickly the two men would have exchanged packages and gone. To prove their guilt it was necessary to surprise them in the mail-order room. [234]

Harry darted from the buyer's office and collided violently with a man who had stepped into his path from between two tables.

"I beg your pardon," he began, "I didn't— Oh, Mr. Rexford, I was looking for you." The man with whom he had collided was the man he sought. "Please come quickly, or it will be too late. Two men are trying to steal some books. They're in the mail-order room. That is, they were there, if they haven't got away. We must slip in at the upper door without making any noise."

Mr. Rexford followed Harry without question. To the boy it seemed an hour since he had stolen from the mail-order room on his anxious quest for the buyer. In reality not more than four minutes had passed. "I'll stay back," he whispered as they neared the door. "You go in."

Just inside the upper door stood a tall filing cabinet. It effectually screened Mr. Rexford's noiseless entrance into the room. By crouching to one side of it he could lean forward and thus view all that went on, the darkness of the room protecting him from observation. Outside the doorway Harry waited in an agony of suspense. No sound came from within the room. He wondered if the Frenchman had returned while he was hunting Mr. Rexford, if the quick exchange of packages had already been made and the two thieves had stolen away. [235]

Mr. Rexford, however, had heard someone moving in the vicinity of the desk. He knew, if Harry did not, that one of the men was still there. Who they were he could not guess. The sight of Harry's troubled face as he cried out to him to come quickly was sufficient to convince him of the seriousness of the situation.

It was not long before the watcher heard a stealthy footfall. Someone had entered through the lower doorway. A dark figure left the protection of the desk. "I thought you'd changed your mind about coming back," drawled a low voice.

Mr. Rexford started in astonishment.

"It is not long—ten minutes, perhaps," rebuked the newcomer. "Here is the portiere. The package is small. You can—"

The room was suddenly flooded with a penetrating light, revealing the Frenchman in the act of holding out a package to the sleepy-eyed salesman, Mr. Farley.

"What does this mean, Farley?" Mr. Rexford confronted the astonished pair. The man Farley turned deathly pale. The package dropped from his hand. The Frenchman evaded Mr. Rexford and leaped for the door. The next second there was a rumble, followed by a loud crash. The man had stumbled over an empty truck, sending it rumbling against a book table, while he sprawled headlong to the floor. [236]

The noise, coupled with the man's fall, brought several workers to the scene. The Frenchman scrambled to his feet and was about to slink off when Mr. Rexford's authoritative voice called out from the mail-order door, "Don't let that man get away. I want him. Take him to my office and keep him there until I come."

Two of the salesmen hustled the man unceremoniously toward the buyer's office. Mr. Rexford retired into the mail-order room, only to appear almost instantly with Farley. The salesman's face was ghastly, his usually sleepy eyes were dark with fear. He walked quietly beside the buyer, however, making no effort to flee.

Mr. Rexford stopped and said something in a low tone to Mr. Denby, the man who had charge of the fiction. The salesman hurried out of the department, while the buyer motioned Farley into his office, stepped in after him and closed the door.

A little group of workers gathered at one side of the department to discuss the meaning of the scene they had just witnessed.

"I suppose they've been stealing. Looks like it," advanced one young man. "Who's that dark fellow? I've seen him around the department talking to Farley. *He's* the last person I'd accuse of stealing. He's been here for ten years." [237]

"It's cribbing, all right enough. Here comes Prescott, the head detective," murmured one of the men who had escorted the Frenchman into the office. "I wonder who spotted the game?"

Harry Harding might have given that information, but, instead, he stood in silence, listening to the talk that went on among the men. Glancing at the clock he saw that it was five minutes to eight. The law forbade any boy of his age to work after that hour. He was glad of it. He would go at once. He feared he might be called behind that closed door to testify against the offenders, and he shrank from doing so. He was not really needed. Mr. Rexford had caught the men in the act of exchanging stolen goods. Now the detective could do the rest. Harry lost no time in turning his night pass over to the man on the door and leaving the store behind him.

He had been gone perhaps fifteen minutes when Mr. Rexford emerged from the office and asked for him.

"He went home on the dot of eight," reported Mr. Denby, the fiction salesman. "You know these boys have to keep within the labor law." [238]

Mr. Rexford smiled. "That boy has done a good deal more to-night than keep within the labor law. He's been of untold service to Martin Brothers and to me. He has rounded up the ringleaders of a gang of thieving employees that have been profiting at the store's expense for a long time. What I'd like to know is where he got his first clue?"

CHAPTER XXIV

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WRITING THE WELCOME ADDRESS

The next morning, however, Harry could not escape testifying against the two men. Once more he found himself in Mr. Prescott's office, and although he entered it reluctantly, it was only because of the pity he felt for the men who had by their own wrong doing placed themselves in the toils of the law. To his relief he found no one save Mr. Rexford and Mr. Prescott in the office. To them he related everything that bore on the case, from the first conversation he had overheard while seated in the bin, to the moment when he had discovered the men in the mail-order room and gone for Mr. Rexford.

"You're a smart boy," commented the detective when he had finished.

"I don't believe I'd ever have kept on watching Mr. Farley, if it hadn't been for Miss Welch," confessed Harry. "I hated to do it."

"Is that the girl who jumped all over me the day Seymour sent you up here?" asked the detective. "I wish the store had a lot more girls like her." [240]

"Yes, sir, that was Miss Welch." Harry treasured the compliment to repeat to his friend. Then he added rather timidly, "Will Mr. Farley and the other man have to go to prison? It's too bad. I'm sorry they weren't honest."

"I guess they're sorry, too," returned Mr. Prescott grimly. "I can't say what'll be done with 'em. It'll take a week to get all the facts. Did you know that they belonged to a gang of thieves, all employees here? You did a good job, boy."

"I—wish—I hadn't—I didn't like to do it," faltered Harry, "but when I came here to work I promised on my application blank that I'd report anyone I saw working against the store's interest."

"No true man likes to bring even deserved misfortune on others, Harry," broke in Mr. Rexford kindly. "We understand how you feel about it."

"Will I have to—to——" Harry stopped.

"Appear against them?" interrupted the detective. "No; Farley has confessed everything. You're out of it from now on."

After a little further conversation, Mr. Rexford and Harry left the detective's office and returned to the book department. During the morning Harry was assailed with curious questions concerning the affair, but he only shook his head and replied, "I can't tell you. Please don't ask me."

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The news had traveled rapidly throughout the store, however, as at least thirty salespersons in the various departments were implicated in the thieving. Even Teddy, in his distant realm of kettles and pans, heard the tale and besieged Harry with countless questions when they met at the end of the day. But Harry told him nothing beyond the barest details, and at home he was absolutely silent on the subject. He was greatly relieved when at the end of the week he learned from Mr. Rexford that the offenders had escaped prison. They were each compelled to pay a sum to the store, set by the management, then discharged. Martin Brothers were not vindictive. They did not care to prosecute.

After this unpleasant experience followed a delightful monotony for Harry, in which he did his work faithfully, went to school, read the books Mr. Rexford frequently lent him and considered himself the luckiest boy alive. The friendship between him and Teddy had daily grown and deepened, and the acquaintance between the boys' mothers bade fair to become intimacy. Harry spent frequent evenings at Teddy's home, and Teddy was a welcome visitor in the Harding's humble rooms.

But while these pleasant friendships progressed, the year progressed also, and before the lads realized the change, winter had given an early place to spring and May arrived in all her flower-decked glory.

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"Walking's good these days," remarked Teddy as he and Harry strolled leisurely home one night through the warm spring sunshine. "Summer's coming pretty fast. I'm glad, but I'm sorry."

"What!" exclaimed Harry, "aren't you glad that vacation time is coming, and school will soon close?" he added slyly.

Teddy's freckled face grew red. Then he laughed. "You said that on purpose," he accused. "You know I hate to leave Miss Leonard."

"So do I," sighed Harry. "Still, if we don't pass our examinations we won't have to leave her."

"I guess I'll fail," grinned Teddy. "Maybe I will, anyhow. I know I won't pass in English. I never can remember how to parse and a lot of other things. I know more'n Howard Randall does about grammar, though. What do you s'pose he went and wrote the other day?"

"I don't know. Tell me." Harry's eyes danced. Howard Randall's lapses in English were the joke of Company A.

"You know that ten-question test we had last week," related Teddy. "Well, Howard couldn't answer a single question. Grammar won't stay in his head, somehow. He didn't want to leave his paper blank so he thought he'd try to answer one. He answered that one, 'What is meant by the first, second and third persons?' He, he! This is what he wrote, 'The first person was Adam, the second person was Eve and the third was the children.' Some answer, wasn't it?" Teddy ended with a giggle.

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Harry shouted with laughter at the fat boy's strenuous attempt to prove that he knew something about English.

"When are you going to take your vacation, Harry?" asked Teddy, as they halted at the corner where they separated.

"The first week in July, I think. I'm not going away anywhere. I can't afford it. You know we won't be paid for our vacation week, don't you?"

"Yes. The fellows say you have to be in the store a year before you can draw vacation money. That don't hurt me any, though. My Mother says I must take two weeks off. I'm going the first of July, too. She wants me to take a month, but I'm not going to do it. I'm afraid I might lose my job. Some of the boys of the West Park School are teasing me to go camping with 'em, but I haven't made up my mind about it. I thought I'd see first if you'd go along." Teddy eyed his chum wistfully. "The fellows would like you, and I'd be tickled to have you."

"You're a loyal chum, Teddy." Harry was deeply touched by the red-haired boy's thought of him. "I'd like to go, but I can't afford to spend a cent on a vacation trip. If I could I'd make Mother go away for a week. She needs a rest more than I do."

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Teddy was silent in the face of this argument.

"I'm going to read and help Mother," continued Harry cheerfully. "I'm not going to let myself even think that I'd have a better time camping or in the country, or at the seashore. Next year, if I live, and all goes well, Mother and I will both go on a vacation trip. I'm going to save every penny I can, just for that."

Nevertheless, as the spring days lengthened and the weather went from warm to hot, Harry could not repress an occasional wistful longing that he had money enough to send his mother away to the country for a week, while the merciless heat of summer rioted in all its scorching fury. For himself the boy had no thought. The dull season for the book department had begun. During the summer his work would be comparatively light. There would be no school. Only one more week of study remained, then a week of examinations. If he passed, it meant night school for him the next fall. He was glad to think of advancing in his studies, yet sorry to leave Miss Leonard. Since his transference from the exchange desk to the book department his report card had remained clean. Miss Leonard and he were now on the best of terms. It would be hard to say good-bye to her. [245]

This depressing thought made the boy's face unduly solemn as he sat watching his teacher on the last Monday morning of the regular study session. She had just called the roll, but instead of proceeding with the regular programme of school she rose and stepped down to the front row of seats with, "I have something to say to you this morning, boys, which I believe will interest all of you. Mr. Edwin Martin has offered a prize of twenty dollars in gold to the boy who can write the best welcome address. This address is to be learned and delivered by the boy who wins the prize on the night of the store messengers' commencement exercises, to be given in Martin Hall. Your address must not contain more than two hundred words. It must be neatly written on one side of the paper only, with your name in the upper left-hand corner of the first page. It must be handed to me one week from to-day. Mr. Keene, Mr. Marsh and Miss Pierce are to be the judges. Every boy on the store messenger force must write an address. Although only one boy can win the prize, remember, that if you do your very best, you may be that boy."

Miss Leonard's announcement met with a buzz of interest among the boys of Company A. To many of them twenty dollars in gold seemed limitless wealth. More than one pair of boyish eyes brightened at the prospect just opened to them, and the majority of them made secret resolve to try their hardest to win the golden prize. [246]

"I'm not goin' to try for that old prize," Teddy confided to Harry as they walked downstairs together after school was over that morning. "I'm goin' to sing a solo at the exercises and be in a duet and a quartette. I've got to learn my songs. Let somebody else win the money. Course, I'd get it, you know, if I tried for it," he declared waggishly. Then he added in a flash of inspiration, "You're the boy who can win it, Harry. You write the best compositions in Company A Class. Miss Leonard's always reading 'em out to us and saying how good they are."

"A welcome address is a good deal harder to write than a composition," demurred Harry. "I'm going to try to do my best to write a good one, but not because of the money. I don't expect to win that."

"Yes, but if you could win the twenty dollars you could take your mother away for a vacation," reminded Teddy.

Harry felt himself grow hot and cold at these significant words. A wave of determination swept over him to put forth the highest effort that lay within him for his mother's sake. Teddy's reminder had acted as a fresh spur to his ambition to write his best. He had, indeed, an object in winning the gold piece. [247]

That night after supper he sat at the little center table, pencil in hand, a pad of paper before him, but try as he might he could not compose a line that seemed in keeping with his idea of what a welcome address should be.

"What are you writing, Harry?" his mother asked curiously, as the boy wrote and erased, stripping off one sheet of paper after another from the pad, only to tear it to bits.

"I'm writing—a—well—it's a kind of composition." Harry had decided not to tell his mother of the prize competition until it was over. If he won, it would be a glorious surprise. If he did not, then she would never know, and thus escape being disappointed because the prize had not been awarded her son.

Harry went to bed that night in a rather disheartened frame of mind. He had not written a single line which he considered worthy. A constant reader of good books, he had decided ideas as to literary style, and was fairly competent to judge his own work. The next night he attacked his task with renewed resolve, but the words of inspiration would not come.

"I don't believe I can write anything good enough for an every-day composition, let alone a welcome address," he confided to Teddy after four evenings of hard, but futile effort at composing an address worth while.

"Mine's written and handed in," grinned Teddy. "I wrote seven lines, so I'll sure get the prize. I couldn't think of anything more. It's seven lines too much, anyhow." [248]

Harry's sober face relaxed into a faint smile. He had a very fair idea of Teddy's welcome address.

"I'm going to keep on trying," he declared, his pleasant face setting in lines of dogged determination.

"To-day's Friday. You've only Saturday and Sunday," was Teddy's well-meant reminder.

That evening Harry went to his task divided between the desire to write a fitting address and the despair of ever doing so. He read over the one he had written the night before, then, with an impatient exclamation tore it to bits. It was dull. It lacked force and sincerity. He longed to put into it his gratitude toward the man who had given so many boys not only work but the splendid chance to gain an education as well. If only he could set down that gratitude in smooth, elegant language!

He stared frowningly at the paper before him. All at once an idea occurred to him. Why not write all that he felt in every-day fashion? Then, perhaps, he could revise it and improve upon it. Seizing his pencil he began to write just what he would have liked to say to Mr. Martin had the opportunity come for him to tell this great man how much his goodness had meant to one boy. He wrote on and on, filling one sheet of paper, then another and still another.

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Finally, he laid down his pencil and began to read what he had written. It seemed very crude and boyish to him, but it had come straight from his heart. Whether he won the money or not he could write nothing else. He had said his say. All that remained to be done was to copy his address and write his name upon it. He had done his best.

CHAPTER XXV

COMMENCEMENT

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At precisely eight o'clock on a warm June evening a long line of boys walked sedately into Martin Hall and marching to the front to the inspiring strains of "The Stars and Stripes Forever," played by the store orchestra, filed into the rows of seats ribboned off in white which had been reserved for them. There was a buzz of expectation from an audience which packed the hall. A bell tinkled. Then the great curtain rose, disclosing a palm-decorated stage. There was a sudden hush. Then a slender, blue-eyed lad walked serenely out on the stage, as though utterly unconscious of the sea of upturned faces directed toward him. The boy was Harry Harding. He had come before this large and interested assemblage to deliver the welcome address.

"Dear friends," he began in a clear, earnest voice that carried to every part of the crowded room, "we are here to-night to do honor to the man who has proved, and is proving every day, his interest in the welfare of the messenger boys of Martin Brothers' store. To Mr. Edward Martin we owe our lasting thanks in that he has given us not only a chance to become useful business men, but to attain an education as well. Many of us have been obliged to leave the public schools in order to help those at home who need our assistance. It is a wonderful thing for us to be able to go on with our school work and earn money as well. We are glad to welcome you here to-night because we wish you to know that we appreciate the splendid opportunities that have been given us. We have tried earnestly to make the most of our good fortune and we shall continue to try to prove ourselves worthy in every respect of our privileges. We are young, and we must pass through many trials and experiences before we become men. But surely, with the help and guidance of those whose effort is given to directing and moulding of our character, we must finally become useful, thoughtful men, striving only to reach the highest and hold it fast.

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"In the name of Martin Brothers and the boys of their store messenger service, we extend you our heartiest welcome and thank you for your attendance to-night."

Ungrudging applause burst forth as Harry Harding bowed. As he was about to leave the stage the leader of the orchestra reached up and handed him an immense bouquet of pink roses. This time Teddy had taken up a collection, and honors were even.

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There was more applause, and Harry retired, considerably more confused than when he had stepped forth to make his speech, while a brown-haired, happy-faced woman in the audience wiped tears of sheer joy from her loving eyes at the triumph of her boy.

The exercises proceeded with a smoothness that was a supreme satisfaction to Mr. Keene, Mr. Marsh, Miss Verne and all those who had helped make the occasion one long to be remembered by those present. The graduates were at last called to the stage and presented one by one with the diplomas that marked the end of their course in the day school. To all of them it meant an increase of salary, promotion in the store, and night school during the coming year.

At last it was over and the audience had dispersed in leisurely fashion. Two radiant-faced boys made their way to where two proud mothers awaited them. Teddy's mother had equal reason to be proud of her son, whose sweet voice had added much to make the entertainment memorable.

"Here, Mother, you must carry my roses," laughed Harry, handing the huge bouquet of fragrant flowers into his mother's keeping.

"Oh, Harry, dear, Mother is so proud of her boy," the little woman whispered as they walked arm in arm to the street corner to wait for their car. Teddy and his mother were just behind them.

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"I guess we won't walk home to-night, Harry," grinned the irrepressible Teddy. "We deserve to ride home for once. We're some folks. My, but I'm glad you won the prize. I felt the shivers go up and down my back when you made the address. It was a welcome one, all right."

"It wasn't half so welcome as the money. Isn't it splendid, Ted, to think that we are all going on

that vacation together?"

The Burkes and the Hardings had arranged to rent a bungalow in the suburbs for two weeks. By joining forces Harry's twenty dollars would be sufficient to pay his and his mother's share of the expenses. The boys' vacation was to begin the following week. As the store was to be closed on Saturday they would not return to work until after their vacation.

"I can never be thankful enough that we went together to Martin Brothers that day to look for work," returned Harry; his eyes were bright with the memory of that never-to-be-forgotten morning when he and Teddy Burke had joined forces.

"You can't be any gladder than I am," was Teddy's serious answer. "It looks as though you and I were going to be business men for sure, doesn't it?"

"We'll get there after a while, I hope. It won't be long until we're salesmen."

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"And after that we'll be buyers," declared Teddy eagerly. "Perhaps we'll own a store like Martin Brothers' some day, Harry."

"Perhaps we will. At least, we've started on the long road to business and success, and it rests with us to keep in the middle of it. There's a lot of hard work ahead of us."

"I'm not afraid of hard work," boasted Teddy. "Just watch me wade into it when I come back from my vacation."

"I won't have time," retorted Harry, laughing. "I'll be too busy myself."

"My boy, I was very proud of you to-night!" a deep voice sounded at Harry's elbow, causing him to turn quickly. His color rose as he recognized the pleasant tones of Mr. Rexford. He had scanned the audience anxiously during the evening, wondering if the man to whom he owed so much had been present at the exercises. He could not know that Mr. Rexford had learned beforehand from Mr. Keene that he, Harry Harding, had been chosen for the honor of delivering the welcome address. The book-buyer had lingered in the hall just long enough to hear the boy's earnest little speech, then retired to his office to write letters. The task had taken him longer than he had expected, and he had left the store just in time to encounter the little group standing on the corner.

"Oh, Mr. Rexford! I'm so glad you happened to come this way!" cried Harry, extending his hand to meet that of his employer. "I tried to see you this afternoon to say good-bye, but couldn't find you. I looked for you in the audience to-night, too, but I didn't see you. This is my mother, and Mrs. Burke, and my chum, Theodore Burke." Harry welcomed the opportunity of presenting his dear ones to the man he so greatly respected and admired.

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"Allow me to congratulate you on your son, Mrs. Harding," were Mr. Rexford's first words after acknowledging the introduction.

"Thank you, Mr. Rexford." Mrs. Harding's brown eyes shone in appreciation of this praise of her boy. Although Harry still kept the secret of those dark days, long since passed, locked in his heart, she had daily heard him voice his gratitude for Mr. Rexford's interest in him. "I must thank you, also, for your goodness to Harry," she added.

"I consider myself fortunate in having him in my department. I wish he were *my* son," smiled the buyer. Then he bade them a kindly good night and walked on, leaving a happy-faced quartette behind him.

"Here's our car," called Teddy. "Come on, Mother. Good-bye, Martin Brothers. I'll see you after vacation." He waved his hand at the huge building which had sheltered and schooled the two boys and which held the promise of a future for them both far greater than they could then dream or know.

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Yet Harry and Teddy knew only too well that in order to become successful business men they must, as boys, lay a sure foundation on which to build their careers. They must be ready to greet each day with a smile and live it for all it was worth. To do the little things cheerfully and well, in the hope of greater things to come was to be their watchword. The story of their return to Martin Brothers' store after their hard-earned vacation, and what befell them on the field of duty, remains yet to be told.

Those who have followed the two lads through their first year as business boys will meet them once more and learn just what happened to them next in the second volume of this series, "HARRY HARDING'S YEAR OF PROMISE."

THE END

Transcriber's Notes:

Printer's, punctuation and spelling inaccuracies were silently corrected.

Archaic and variable spelling has been preserved.

Variations in hyphenation and compound words have been preserved.

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