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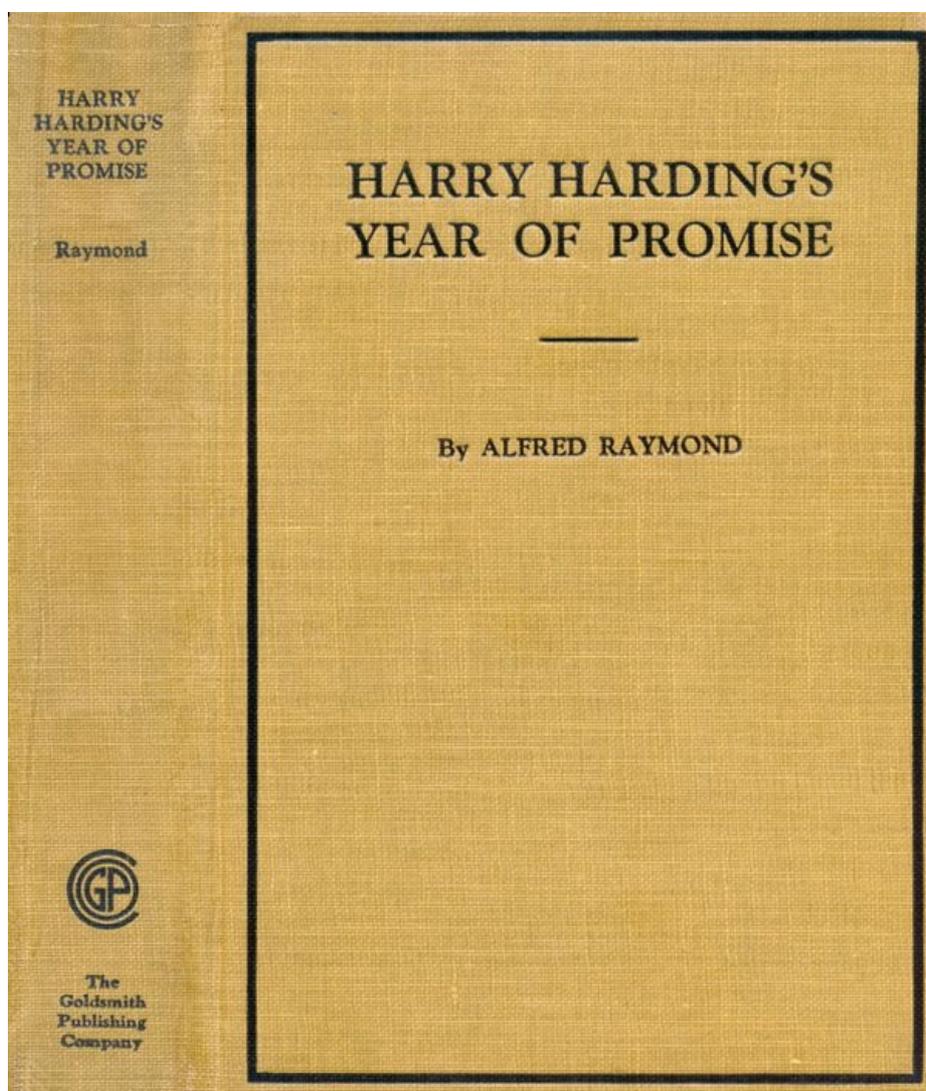
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## HARRY HARDING'S YEAR OF PROMISE

*By*

ALFRED RAYMOND



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## CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I <a href="#">PLANNING THEIR YEAR OF PROMISE</a>	1
II <a href="#">WHAT CAME OUT OF A BIN</a>	10
III <a href="#">DECLARING WAR ON THE PERCOLATOR</a>	20
IV <a href="#">AN EVEN EXCHANGE OF CONFIDENCES</a>	28
V <a href="#">AN UNPROMISING DAY</a>	40
VI <a href="#">HARRY SPEAKS HIS MIND</a>	54
VII <a href="#">TEDDY BURKE, AVENGER</a>	65
VIII <a href="#">A SANE LUNATIC</a>	76
IX <a href="#">THE PARTY OF THE THIRD PART</a>	84
X <a href="#">TEDDY BEGINS HIS FALL CANNING</a>	93
XI <a href="#">THE MARTIN MINUTE MEN</a>	100
XII <a href="#">THE BOY WHO COULD FORGIVE</a>	111
XIII <a href="#">THE ERRAND OF MERCY</a>	121
XIV <a href="#">TEDDY SCENTS A MYSTERY</a>	132
XV <a href="#">THE PLOT THICKENS</a>	143
XVI <a href="#">AN UNLUCKY DISCOVERY</a>	153
XVII <a href="#">DECORATING A DÉBUTANTE</a>	163
XVIII <a href="#">A QUEER TWIST OF FATE</a>	173
XIX <a href="#">TEDDY'S DARKEST HOUR</a>	185
XX <a href="#">ALL FOR THE SAKE OF TEDDY BURKE</a>	196
XXI <a href="#">AN UNEXPECTED FRIEND AT COURT</a>	211
XXII <a href="#">THE BEAUTY OF EFFICIENCY</a>	220
XXIII <a href="#">A BELATED RECOGNITION</a>	235
XXIV <a href="#">ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL</a>	248

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# HARRY HARDING'S YEAR OF PROMISE

## CHAPTER I

### PLANNING THEIR YEAR OF PROMISE

Under a huge horse-chestnut tree, at the foot of a pretty bit of green, sloping lawn, a curly-haired boy lay stretched at ease, his blue eyes glued to the last page of an open book before him. Harry Harding emitted a deep sigh of satisfaction as he read:

"When the last golden sunset rays touched with tender glory the Kingdom of New Hope, once the Kingdom of Despair, the formerly unhappy king, now happy in the knowledge of well-doing, hurried to the lonely spot in the forest where the tall pines whispered and sung. He hoped to meet again the queer little man who had promised him the secret of happiness. He waited there until the darkness fell, but no one came. Tired at last of the still blackness and the sighing of the pines, he called out in a loud voice, 'Little man, where are you? The Year of Promise is ended. I have done your bidding faithfully. The Kingdom of Despair is now the Kingdom of New Hope. My happy subjects adore me and I have found peace. Show yourself once more, little friend, that I may thank you.'

"Still no one came and he found no wonderful casket. Only the evening breeze sang on through the sentinel pines. But, as the king listened, he was sure he heard it murmur: 'Continue to do well. Every year comes to you as a Year of Promise. It lies within yourself to make it a Year of

Fulfillment. This is the true secret of——”

Whack! A carefully-aimed apple struck the open book with a force that sent it flying from the absorbed reader's grasp. From behind a neighboring tree a freckled face peeped out. It was lighted by two dancing, black eyes and crowned with a mop of brilliant red hair.

“No use hiding. I'll get you!” Leaping to his feet Harry made a dash for the tree that sheltered the mischievous marksman.

Emitting a war whoop of pure joy the red-haired boy left his refuge and tore across the lawn and around the corner of the little bungalow, his victim in hot pursuit. After circling the house several times, his quarry still in the lead, Harry brought strategy to the chase. Turning about, he ran in an opposite direction just in time to nab the offender as he rushed around a corner at reckless speed. [3]

“I've caught you!” Harry proceeded to administer a mild punishment, which merely served to bring shouts of wild glee from the unrepentant apple thrower. “Now go and pick up my book,” he commanded. With a final shake he released his wildly wriggling catch.

“Go and pick it up yourself,” invited the red-haired boy with a grin. Nevertheless, he strolled over to where the maltreated book helplessly sprawled. Raising it he presented it to Harry with a chuckle. “Here's your old book, but don't think you're going to read it. You've been too busy with it all afternoon.”

“All right, I won't. I've finished it, anyway.” Tucking it under his arm, Harry dropped down beneath the tree and beckoned to his companion. “Sit here, Teddy, and let's talk.”

Teddy Burke responded to the invitation with a bounce and a flop that pitched Harry on his side in the short green grass. The will to gambol about like a very frisky young lamb was strong within Teddy on this beautiful July day, and the process of settling himself for a talk was accomplished with difficulty.

“What have you been reading about that kept you so quiet?” was his curious question, as he finally came to rest at Harry's left.

“It's a dandy book.” Harry fingered the dark green cover with evident affection. “I bought it for only ten cents at an aisle sale, just before we came out here for our vacation. It's all short stories. I like the last one best, though. It's called ‘The Secret of Happiness,’ and it's about a king——” [4]

“Huh, I guess it's a lot of old fairy tales,” sniffed Teddy. “Catch me reading 'em. I like stories about fellows that went on voyages round the world and discovered islands and things that nobody else'd ever heard of.”

To those who have read “HARRY HARDING, MESSENGER 45,” Teddy Burke and Harry Harding are already familiar acquaintances. In that volume was recorded the manner in which they met, their ready entrance into mutual friendship and how, together, they began their business life as messengers in Martin Brothers' department store. Many incidents, serious and laughable, fell to their lot as members of the great store family. While Teddy, in spite of numerous mischievous pranks, flourished in his new surroundings, Harry's early days of work were brimmed with bitter misfortune. But he met trial and discouragement with a staunch heart, and amply proved himself worthy of the reward his persevering stand for the right brought him.

The winning of a prize of twenty dollars in gold afforded him the coveted opportunity to take his mother into the country for a brief vacation. In this project he was joined by Mrs. Burke and her son Teddy, and the last Saturday of the delightful two weeks freedom from toil found the four happy idlers spending their final vacation hours together at the cozy bungalow where their combined finances had enabled them to pass this brief, pleasant season together. [5]

“You're not the only one that likes adventure stories,” smiled Harry in answer to Teddy's derisive fling at fairy tales. “I like them, too. But the stories in this book are not about old witches and enchanted castles and such things. They're allegories.”

“What's allegories?” Teddy eyed Harry as though he wondered whether they might not be some rare species of animal of which the Zoo could not boast.

“An allegory is—let me see—well, it's a story that seems like a fairy tale but isn't.”

“Must be even worse, then,” discouraged Teddy.

“No; it's better,” contradicted Harry. “It tells you a story, but it teaches you a lesson at the same time. Now this one I was just reading——”

“I don't want to hear anything that sounds like a lesson.” Teddy made a grimace of disgust. “I hate to think about going to that old night school.”

“That's what you said about day school, but you liked it just the same. You're a humbug, Teddy Burke.”

“I ain't.” Teddy resorted to inelegant defense. “Let's not talk about school. Go on and tell me your old story.” [6]

Harry regarded Teddy out of affectionate blue eyes. “You're a fraud, then,” he teased.

“I wouldn't let any other fellow call me that, but you don't count. Now go ahead with your yarn.”

“Thank you.” Harry bowed ironically. “Well, this allegory is about a king who ruled over the Kingdom of Despair. It was called so because everything in it went wrong. And that was his fault

because he was so hateful and harsh with his subjects. After a while these poor people got up a plot to take the kingdom away from him, and he found it out. He didn't know what to do so he went out into a big pine forest all by himself to think things over. While he was there he met a queer little man who gave him a terrible scolding and made him see how mean he was. He felt very bad and said if he only had another chance he'd do better. So the little man said that if he meant what he said, he'd give him a year to keep his promise. If he failed, then he'd lose his kingdom and his life, too. But if at the end of the year the people still wanted him for king he was to come back to the pine woods and there he would find a wonderful casket in which was the secret of happiness.

"So the king went back to his kingdom and set all the poor prisoners free that he had hidden away in underground dungeons. Then he called all the people of the kingdom together and told them that he was going to do better by them. He told them of the wonderful casket and promised if they would let him be king for another year he would divide the secret of happiness with them when he got it. So they said they would help him and promised not to take his kingdom from him."

"And did he behave himself?" was Teddy's matter-of-fact question. Fairy tale or allegory, he was interested in the doings of the repentant king.

"You can better believe he did. He was good as gold for a whole year and instead of going on hating him, his subjects grew to love him."

"Did the little man give him the casket when the year was up?"

"Listen and I'll read it to you. I had just finished it when you shied that apple at me."

Harry opened the book to the last page and again read the concluding paragraphs.

"So *that's* an allegory," mused Teddy. "Hm! It's not so slow. I kind of like that idea about the Year of Promise. Say, Harry, it's something like us, isn't it? When we go back to Martin Brothers' next Monday it would be kind of fun to pretend it was *our* Year of Promise. Now, wouldn't it?"

"I was thinking that when I first read it." Harry looked pleased to find that Teddy had made the same application of the allegory. "It *will* be our Year of Promise, Ted, and it's up to us to make it our Year of Fulfillment."

"I guess it is." Teddy considered the idea gravely, his impish face becoming solemn. "I'm going to try to behave—if I can. No more throwing baseballs over balconies for me. That's about the worst thing I did last year, except punching Howard Randall and wearing a stewpan for a hat and pestering the Gobbler—I mean Miss Newton." Teddy launched into a further enumeration of his iniquities.

"Just think of all the good things you did," reminded Harry. "What about helping Miss Newton when she lost her purse and—"

"Oh, can it!" The red that sprang to Teddy's cheeks threatened to rival that of his hair. "It's funny I didn't get fired. I'm going to be pretty careful what I do this year, though."

A faint smile curved Harry's lips at this earnest declaration. Knowing Teddy as he did, he doubted his chum's ability to steer prudently clear of scrapes. Mischievous and the red-haired boy were one.

"You needn't smile." Teddy had marked the amused flicker. "I'm going to be so good all the time that it'll make you dizzy."

"Then I sha'n't be able to work."

Teddy giggled as his quick fancy pictured Harry reeling helplessly about Department 85, as the result of his own perpetual good behavior. "I guess you won't get very dizzy," he predicted.

"No; I don't believe I shall. Still, it isn't what we *say* we're going to do that counts, Ted. It's what we really *do*." Harry's bantering tone changed to one of deep conviction. "It's just as the pine trees whispered to the king. We're going back to the store on Monday to begin our Year of Promise, and if we do our level best with each day of it, then it can't help but be a Year of Fulfillment, too."

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## CHAPTER II

### WHAT CAME OUT OF A BIN

"**N**o, Madam, you can't settle your transfer here. You'll have to go to that desk down there. Four aisles below." Miss Welch's indexing pencil pointed with a determination that invited the zealous clamorer for settlement to seek further. "Down there," she repeated, as the woman fixed her placid gaze on a spot far up the aisle, then aimlessly wandered around a corner of the desk to implore fresh information from a nearby salesperson.

"Can you beat it?" muttered the disgusted exchange clerk. "Tell 'em to go down the aisle and they rubber up and don't go neither way but sidle around the desk and hold up a sales. Just like that. If I was a— Why, hel-lo, Kiddo!" Miss Welch's monologue ended in a cry of pleasant surprise. "If it ain't Harry Harding! Now where did *you* drop from? Look at the boy! Grown an

inch in two weeks; and see the tan. Some little vacation, I guess. How about it?"

[11]

"Oh, Miss Welch, I'm ever so glad to see you." Harry shook the exchange clerk's extended hand with joyful fervor. "I was afraid maybe you'd be away on your vacation, and I wanted to see you."

"Listen to the kid. He wanted to see me. Well, I'm exhibiting at the same old stand. Maybe I didn't miss you, too, Harry. I got your postcard. I knew you couldn't slight your old friend Irish."

"Of course I couldn't. Whenever I thought about the store, I thought of you and that was every day. I had a splendid time, but I'm glad to be back, though. When are you going on your vacation?"

"Not until the last of August. Martin Brothers just can't bear to give me up. If you hear a noise like a roof falling in around the last of next month you'll know I've went off for a two weeks' hunting the joy-bug, and the shebang has collapsed." Pretty Miss Welch's dimples were in evidence as she made this astonishing statement.

"I shouldn't be surprised if it would," Harry responded with boyish gallantry. "I know books and jewelry'll miss you."

"So will Smarty Barty. He's ordered black already. I hate to leave *him*, with the hate left out."

Harry's sensitive face clouded momentarily. The mention of his ancient enemy brought back the memory of long-unredressed wrongs.

[12]

"Is he pretty cross now?" was his sober question.

"*Now?*" Miss Welch's eyebrows went up. "Take it from me, kid, he was born with crankitis and never got cured. He could take a bite out of one o' them triple plate card trays over there and not hurt his teeth. But away with S. B. How's the boy? You certainly look fine. I heard you speak your little piece up in Martin Hall. I was sorry I didn't see you that night to praise you for the hit you made. Now tell me where you went and all about it."

Harry responded with a brief but eager account of his vacation, to which the exchange girl kept up a running fire of encouraging comment.

"I'll have to leave you," he said at last. "There's going to be a mid-summer sale, beginning tomorrow, and I've a lot of books to bring down from the stock-room."

"Don't forget Number 10," was Miss Welch's pertinent reminder, as he turned away. "Wedding presents, misfits and general junk exchanged while you wait."

Smilingly Harry walked down the aisle in the direction of the elevator that would take him to the stock-room. How pleasant it was to see Miss Welch again, and to greet the members of his department. Yet on entering the store how strange it had seemed not to go to the assembly room for roll call. He and Teddy now reported at the regular time-desk for the men. Instead of being obliged to report at half-past seven o'clock, their time limit was set at eight. Not until the first of October would they again go to school; then only twice a week and after the business of the day was over. This last they had learned from Mr. Marsh when they had reported at his desk that morning.

[13]

As the elevator came to a jiggling stop, and the boy was about to step in, a tall figure loomed up beside him, brushed him out of the way as though he had been a troublesome fly, and crowded into the cage ahead of him. Only the flashing of his blue eyes betrayed Harry's annoyance at the rudeness. The next second the car was speeding upward, but that second revealed to the boy the author of the discourtesy. It was Mr. Barton who had thrust him aside. If the crabbed aisle manager was aware of the lad's presence in the car, he gave no sign of it. His scowling face was fixed on the operator's back and when the car stopped at the fifth floor he fairly bolted out of it.

"Pipe that old crank?" The operator, a youth of perhaps twenty years, turned to Harry with a grin. "He's a sick man, he is. Pretty near every mornin' he hits my car about this time and beats it for the hospital. His ugliness has struck in an' gives him a pain, I guess."

"Do you know him?" Harry looked his surprise at learning Mr. Barton's destination.

[14]

"Sure I know him. So do you. I run this car the day he took you up to Prescott's office. That was some crime, but you got clear all right. I heard about it. A guy downstairs tipped me off."

"It was a mistake all around." Harry was too much of a man to take advantage of the opportunity to disparage the unjust aisle manager. "Why does he go to the hospital so much?" he inquired, with a view to leading the operator away from the unpleasant past.

"He's got the dis-pep-shy. The pep's struck to his stommick and makes it ache. I heard him tellin' another floor-walker 'bout it one morning. He can't get nothin' to cure it. Too bad, ain't it? I'd turn on the salt water, but cryin' hurts my eyes," he concluded with a derisive grimace.

"No wonder he's so cross. I never knew he had dyspepsia." In spite of his dislike for Mr. Barton, Harry could not help feeling a trifle sorry for the unfortunate victim of so painful a malady.

"I wouldn't lay awake nights thinkin' about it," was the operator's succinct advice as Harry stepped out of the cage at the tenth floor.

"I never lie awake nights thinking about anything," he retorted sharply. The boy's utter lack of sympathy jarred on him. He could not help wondering, as he made his way to the section reserved for the book stock, whether, after all, Mr. Barton could really be blamed for his perpetual snarling. Long since he had forgiven the aisle manager for the injustice which had

[15]

merely been the means of placing him under the guidance of Mr. Rexford. His ready sympathy awakened by what he had just heard, Harry was sure that if at any future time his path should cross Mr. Barton's, he would be charitable enough to make allowances.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "What's been happening here, I'd like to know." His active mind swung from the subject of Mr. Barton's woes to confront a most astonishing change in the stock designed for the sale, which he had arranged so neatly before starting on his vacation. In the bins where order had reigned supreme, the hapless volumes were jumbled together in reckless confusion. Uneven piles of books, that the lightest touch would scatter, rose from various points on the floor. Wherever his eye chanced to rest, Harry marked plentiful signs of dust. The hand of neglect lay heavy upon his treasures, and he emitted a low whistle of consternation as he investigated a nearby bin in which crazily commingled an expensive edition of the great poets and a quantity of low-priced books for boys.

His whistle at least was productive of instantaneous results. Hearing a sudden shuffling sound behind him, he whirled. From a bin at the lower end of the stock-room a black, tousled head emerged. It was followed by a long, wiry body that gradually straightened itself. A pair of thin arms stretched themselves lazily. From under a thatch of black, rumpled hair two half-shut black eyes resentfully viewed the newcomer. The stretching process continued, and a wide mouth opened more widely in a yawn.

"Whada you want?" came the ill-natured challenge, issued between yawns.

"Who are you?" Harry returned in crisp, business-like tones.

"I'm the stock boy. Who you whistlin' for? What's missin' downstairs? A fellow can't more'n get up here until somebody's after him."

"The stock boy!" Harry's tone registered incredulity. "How long have you been stock boy? Where is Fred Alden?"

"How do I know where he is? I'm no direct'ry. I've been here a week, but that's none of your business. If you're talkin' about the kid that had this job before me, he's left."

"Why did he leave?" Harry's eyes grew wide at this news.

"Ask the employment office. Now whada you want? I got a lot to do and I can't stop to fool around with you."

"You seemed to be very busy—sleeping when I came here." Harry launched this barb merely by shrewd guess.

It struck home. The tall boy's sallow face grew red. He made a menacing step forward. "Cut that out," he growled. "Say what you're after and beat it."

"So *you* are the new stock boy." Harry regarded the other lad with a calm, unfearing glance. "I must say that I am surprised. As it happens, I came up here to *work*. So I'm going to stay. I can see that I shall find plenty to do. If you've finished your nap it might be a good idea for you to get busy, too."

"You're a fresh kid." The tall boy continued to advance threateningly, his fists doubled for battle. "Are you goin' to get out?"

"No; I'm not. You might as well put down your fists for I sha'n't fight you. I'm here to work, not to fight. I'm not the least bit afraid of you. If you *must* fight, I'll meet you anywhere you like outside the store."

For a moment the two boys faced each other in silence, Harry coolly defiant, his adversary too greatly enraged for speech. The determined glint in Harry's eyes, backed by his fearless demeanor, warned the bully to caution. Step by step he backed slowly away from the fight for which he apparently yearned. "I'll fix you yet, freshie," he muttered. Turning a prudent back on danger he shuffled toward the bin he had recently occupied and began pitching into it the tottering heaps of books that lay nearest to his ruthless hands.

"This is a nice mess," was Harry's inward comment, as he stood speculating where to begin the much-needed reform. "How did Mr. Rexford ever happen to hire such a stock boy? I'm surprised that Mr. Atkins hasn't reported him. Somebody must have been asleep at the switch or that lazy bully would never be working for Martin Brothers."

With a sigh he dropped to his knees and began a piling up of the famous poets, preparatory to transplanting them to their proper sphere. To find Henry W. Longfellow sandwiched between "The Boy Castaways of Snake Island" and "Umbasi, the Zulu Chief," was an outrage that called for instant reparation. He wished now that he had stopped to make a few general inquiries before coming to the stock-room. Knowing that Mr. Rexford was seldom in the department before nine o'clock, he had lingered on the selling floor after receiving his orders from the assistant buyer only long enough to greet a few of the salespeople and to speak to Miss Welch.

A repeated whacking and banging of books at the lower end of the stock-room conveyed to Harry the fact that the unwilling laborer had decided to work. The precise value of his noisy effort was yet to be determined. Harry was not optimistic regarding the final result. From what he had already discovered it was likely to be a thorough jumble. But where was Mr. Atkins, who had charge of the incoming shipments of books and who attended to the marking of their prices? It was not in the least like him to allow a stock boy to thus neglect the surplus stock. Harry now remembered that he had not seen the man about as he passed through the receiving room.

[16]

[17]

[18]

[19]

"I hate to go and tell tales the minute I come back to the store," was his reflection as he energetically delved and straightened the untidy bins. "Perhaps they've kept this fellow so busy he hasn't had time to set things straight. But just the same he was asleep. I know he was. If he's going to be so lazy, I'll work hard and keep the stock looking nice anyway. That is, unless he loafs all the time. I'm going to find out who he is and all about him. Mother says it doesn't need to make much difference to one what other people do or don't do. It's what one does or doesn't do oneself. I'm going to do my work just as if I were the only stock boy here. If this boy isn't playing fair with Martin Brothers, somebody will be sure to find it out and without my saying a word about it to anyone."

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## CHAPTER III

### DECLARING WAR ON THE PERCOLATOR

But while Harry Harding was wrestling with a difficulty that had risen on the very threshold of his Year of Promise, Teddy Burke had made a most triumphant return to the humble kingdom of house furnishings. From Mr. Everett, the buyer, down to Miss Newton, the Gobbler, Teddy was hailed as a long-lost brother.

"I am very glad to see *you* back again, 65," was Mr. Duffield's beaming greeting, and this genial sentiment was echoed by the others of the department as Teddy flitted about among them, his thin little hand stretched forth in ready comradeship, his freckled face wreathed with smiles.

"Well, Reddy, how's business?" was Sam Hickson's jovial question. Having made the round of the department, Teddy now proceeded to line himself up beside his old friend for a brief chat before his duties of the day grew too brisk to permit further social amenities.

"That's a nice question to ask me," sniffed Teddy. "How do you s'pose I know how business is when I've been off in the country enjoying myself?"

"Well, you've answered it just the same," teased the salesman. "Enjoying yourself in the country was your business, wasn't it?"

"I guess you must have been chewing smart-weed," retorted Teddy. "Wonder if I'd be as smart if I ate some. Tell me where you get it and I'll try it."

"Same place where you get yours," grinned Hickson tolerantly. "It only agrees with red-headed folks."

Teddy's jolly giggle at this witticism was infectious. Hickson laughed, too, out of sheer pleasure at seeing his little friend again.

"I'll bet this kettles and pans crowd down here missed me," was Teddy's next modest assertion.

"You are just right about that. We all got a good rest. No more peace in kettles and pans with you running around loose."

"I've reformed." Teddy made this amazing statement with the air of one who has donned the difficult mantle of reform with the utmost ease.

"I didn't quite get that." Sam Hickson's hand cupped his ear as an assistant to hearing.

"I've reformed." Teddy repeated his announcement, looking slightly ruffled. "I'm going to beehave just like an angel. You watch me and see. I'm going to give kettles and pans the biggest s'prise they ever had."

Sam Hickson laughed uproariously. "I'll warrant you will," he agreed. "You've already given 'em a few shocks along the line of 'bee-having.' I guess they can stand a few more."

"I guess they can." Teddy's wide, roguish smile again sprang into evidence. It faded as he leaned forward to peer owlshly at a short, rotund young man who had just come into view from around a towering pile of tinware on a table at their left. "Say, who's he and where'd he come from? I've seen him every two minutes since I struck 40, but I haven't been introduced to him yet."

Hickson shrugged his shoulders.

"He's our new assistant buyer. Willard left, you know, just before you went on your vacation. What have you got to say about that? Look him over. Name him and you can have him to take home with you." There was decided rancor in the man's voice.

Teddy made thoughtful inventory of the neat young man, surveying him curiously from his aggressively smooth black hair to his narrow, glistening shoes. An expression of seraphic innocence lurked in the youngster's black eyes as he murmured, "He—he—looks like a—one of those fat, shiny little coffee-pots—a——" Teddy wrestled with the word. "A percolator!" he cried out triumphantly.

"Ha, ha, ha!" shouted Hickson. "You hit it that time, Reddy!" His face sobered, however. The stout young man had heard both Teddy's shrill accents and Hickson's accompanying burst of laughter. Now he charged briskly down upon the culprits, rebuke in his eye. Luckily for them, he had not the remotest idea that he was the object of their mirth. He was merely aware of undue

[20]

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[22]

[23]

boisterousness in his vicinity that warranted stern reproof.

"What is the cause of so much noise?" he rapped out sharply. "How much have you on your book, Hickson? And you," he glared at Teddy, "go to your own department. Don't loiter here."

"I have to stay here." Teddy regarded the questioner with the wistful gaze of a prisoner.

"What are you waiting for? Why must you stay here?" came the curt challenge.

"I'm not waiting for anything."

"Then you don't have to stay here. Go——"

"But I *do* have to stay here," contradicted Teddy with gentle, tantalizing dignity. "I belong in this department. I'm s'prised that you didn't know it."

"Humph!" With an indignant snort the stout young man wheeled and trotted off up the aisle.

Apparently deep in enumerating his sales, Sam Hickson's broad shoulders were shaking with silent merriment during this interesting bit of dialogue. [24]

"Oh, you Reddy!" he gasped when the disturber had passed out of hearing. "That's the time you put one over on—on the Percolator."

"What's the matter with him, anyhow?" Teddy personified disgust. "I s'posed everybody here had seen *me* this morning. His ears must be better'n his eyes. What's he got to say about the way we act? Mr. Willard never used to talk like that."

"I know it." Hickson grew suddenly glum. "I'm going to tell you something, Teddy, but keep it to yourself. This fellow is a trouble-hunter! He's got a game to play and I can see through him. I've had my eye on him ever since he hit 40, and, between you and me, he's after Mr. Everett's job. He's what you call an efficiency man."

"I didn't call him that. I called him a percolator. He's just like one. I'll bet when he gets mad he fizzes up, the way those coffee-pots do when the demonstrator pours hot water into 'em."

"He doesn't get mad," grumbled Hickson. "I wish he would. I'd feel then that he was a man instead of a bossing machine."

"He might get mad some day," predicted Teddy hopefully. "I'd like to see him bubble up." His fertile brain was already beginning to consider ways and means by which this greatly desired result might be attained. "Do you b'lieve he's after Mr. Everett's job?" The little boy shot a peculiar glance at the gloomy-faced salesman. [25]

"I don't believe it, I'm sure of it."

"Then I sha'n't reform just yet." Teddy drew himself up, mischievous purpose in his declaration. "I'm going to make the old Percolator bubble up. I'll make him boil over so many times he'll wish he'd never heard of house furnishings. Course, if he lets Mr. Everett alone, I'll let him alone. But if he thinks he is going to be buyer of this department instead of Mr. Everett, then he'd better look out. Mr. Everett's the best buyer that ever lived, and I'm going to fight for him."

"You're a good little friend, Teddy." Sam Hickson patted the lad's slender shoulder. "You'd better go slow, though. You can't do anything much except get yourself into trouble for your pains. I'm sorry I said anything. Maybe I'm wrong about it. Only I can't help noticing things."

"What things?" persisted Teddy.

"Oh, this fellow, Jarvis, that's his name, runs to the front with everything. Then he's hard on the people in 40. Follows us up all the time. Calls us down if we lose a sale. Won't let us say a word to each other. If he sees two of us standing together he chases us. When we *are* busy selling, he butts in with a crazy lot of talk and spoils the sale. It makes the customers mad, but he can't see it. Miss Newton went to Mr. Everett about it the first time he bothered her. Mr. Everett told him to quit it and he went to the front and told some kind of a yarn that got Mr. Everett a call down. First one he's ever had and he's been with Martin Brothers eight years. If this Jarvis can do that, and here less than two weeks, what will he do when he's been here a year?" [26]

"Maybe he won't be here a year." Again confidence lurked in Teddy's speech.

"You mean maybe *we* won't be here, but *he* will." Hickson was far from optimistic. "There's a customer. They're few and far between these hot days." The salesman moved away, leaving Teddy to ponder over this new unpleasant state of affairs.

"Sixty-five." Mr. Duffield's voice sounded the beginning of action.

Teddy darted off, obedient to the call. From that time on he found no further chance to reflect over what he had heard. When he went to his luncheon at twelve o'clock, he was kept busy by Harry and his boy friends. Both Harry and Teddy had become too well known and liked among the store messengers to escape notice when they appeared in the lunch room.

It was not until the two boys had passed the lunch-room time-desk on their way back to their respective departments that Teddy found an opportunity to say, "I've got something to tell you." [27]

"I've something to tell, myself," was Harry's quick response. "We'll have to wait until after the store closes, though."

"Wait for me outside. No more assembly for us. I'm kind of sorry. I'll miss the line up."

"So shall I," nodded Harry. "So long."

The two boys separated, each with his own problem to consider.

The moment that Teddy reached Department 40, his alert eyes scanned the wide expanse of house furnishings until they sought out a certain neat, rotund person against whom he had vowed to wage a determined campaign. Teddy strolled calmly down one aisle, then began a furtive dodging in and out among the engines of housekeeping until he reached a spot where he could conveniently observe without being observed. He studied the elegant Mr. Jarvis with a thoughtful gaze that a philosopher might well have envied, then he stole stealthily away to presently appear at a distant end of the department. Had Mr. Jarvis been aware that he was under the close surveillance of one small, red-haired, mischievous boy, it would not have in the least disturbed his bland equanimity. But he was destined to learn quite a number of things about Teddy Burke that had nothing to do with efficiency, as he saw it.

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## CHAPTER IV

### AN EVEN EXCHANGE OF CONFIDENCES

[28]

Across the street from Martin Brothers' great store a very impatient Teddy Burke was keeping a fidgeting vigil for Harry Harding. The moon-faced clock on a neighboring tower showed twenty-five minutes to seven. Indifferent to the ever-moving procession of eager home-seekers, traveling their accustomed evening trail toward food, rest and recreation, Teddy stood firmly planted against the sheltering wall of a cigar store, well out of the path of the surging stream of pedestrians. To active Teddy, thirty-five minutes of waiting seemed a long period of time. He had taken up his watch at precisely six o'clock and now he was growing restless. Only the reassuring thought that Harry would not fail him kept him lingering on the corner. He sighed with relief as he finally sighted Harry across the street, and, forsaking the friendly, sustaining wall, advanced to meet his dilatory partner.

"Did you think I was never coming?" greeted Harry. "I'm sorry to be so late. I had to finish a job I began right after lunch. There's to be a mid-summer sale, beginning to-morrow. I was afraid I'd have to stay longer, but Mr. Brady said I could hustle the stuff down early in the morning."

[29]

"Oh, I s'posed you was lost in the stock-room, or twenty thousand leagues under a truck, or up the elevator to the North Pole, or captured by the trouble-hunters of 84," invented Teddy derisively.

Harry smiled whimsically. "I was in the stock-room, but not lost. I was in a truck, but not twenty thousand leagues under it. I went up the elevator, but only as far as the tenth floor, and I met a trouble-hunter, but wasn't captured."

"You talk like the answer to a riddle," snickered Teddy.

"And *you* talk like a catalogue of boys' books," retorted Harry good-humoredly.

"I don't feel like one," grumbled Teddy. "I feel hot under the collar. I'm mad. I'm so mad the freckles on my face hurt." The boy's black eyes blazed an accompanying declaration of wrath.

"What has happened?" Quick concern was mirrored in the sympathetic glance Harry shot toward Teddy. Evidently his chum's day had not been free from annoyance.

"It's that old Percolator," was the somewhat mystifying response. "He's got it in for Mr. Everett."

[30]

The announcement that so innocuous an article as a coffee-pot should aspire to revenge might well have amazed Harry. The pronoun "he" was enlightening, however. Teddy was merely resorting to his disrespectful naming habit.

"I suppose 'he' looks like a percolator?" The corners of Harry's mouth twitched suspiciously.

"Yes, he does," snapped Teddy. "Round and fat and shiny and hard. He's the new assistant buyer and he makes me sick."

"Have you told him his new name yet?" teased Harry. Privately, he had jumped to the conclusion that Teddy's grievance was not very serious. "What did he call you down for?"

"This is no joke," flung back Teddy. "It's serious." He plunged into a recital of his encounter with the stout young man, ending with Hickson's confidence. "I asked Mr. Hickson if I could tell you about it," he added, "and he said he guessed you could be trusted to keep still."

"That was nice in him." Harry looked pleased. Through the agency of Teddy he and the red-haired salesman were on very friendly terms. "And you say that this Mr. Jarvis is an efficiency man?"

"Yep; he's crazy. That's just the same thing. I'd like to say something about him to Mr. Everett, but I don't know what to say or how to say it."

[31]

"You'd better not." Harry shook his head. "If Mr. Everett doesn't know it, I don't believe he'd like to hear it from his stock boy. If he does know it, then telling him that you know it, too, wouldn't help him any. All you can do is to keep your eyes open and your mouth shut. If you see a chance to do something nice for Mr. Everett, go ahead and do it. But don't try to injure this other man. That would put you on the same level with him."

"Oh, I'll let him live," assured Teddy sarcastically. "I won't say that he'll have a real happy life,

though. Can up the Percolator before he does his winter canning's goin' to be my motto."

"Look out that *you* don't get canned," was Harry's warning advice.

"I'd rather it'd be me than Mr. Everett," Teddy returned, ungrammatical but loyal. "I'll watch myself. I gotta stay in 40 now to fight for the man that's good to me."

"I know how you feel. I hope you're mistaken about this Mr. Jarvis. Maybe he's just fussy and not really underhanded."

"Time'll tell," prophesied Teddy gloomily. "What happened to you to-day? You said you'd something to tell me."

It was Harry's turn to make a recital of his day's difficulties. A brief stay in the book department after luncheon had put him in possession of several facts that pertained strictly to his disagreeable acquaintance of the stock-room. The boy's name was Leon Atkins. He was the son of the man in the book receiving room. Fred Alden had left the store directly after Harry had gone on his vacation and Mr. Atkins had asked Mr. Rexford to give his son the position thus open. The boy had made regular application in the employment office and at Mr. Rexford's request had been placed in Department 84. He was far from a model stock boy, but Mr. Rexford had been out of the city for over a week and, consequently, was not aware of the youth's delinquency. All this Harry now related to Teddy, who listened with due solemnity. [32]

"I guess he'll get fired when Mr. Rexford comes back," was his sage observation when Harry had finished. "I wouldn't stand for a lazy kid like that. He might make folks think you wasn't any good either."

"I've thought of that. Still, I wouldn't care to complain to Mr. Rexford. Mr. Denby told me that poor Mr. Atkins has had an awful time with this boy. He was expelled from school and after that he went to work. He's had half a dozen positions and lost them all. Mr. Atkins only gets twenty dollars a week and he has a wife and six children to support. This boy is the only one old enough to work, and his father needs his help. I'm sorry for Mr. Atkins." [33]

"I'm sorry for *you*," snorted Teddy. "You'll be sorry for yourself, too, if you let this fellow put it all over you and say nothing."

"He sha'n't impose upon me." Harry's lips set in a decisive line. "I'm going to do my work just the same as if he weren't around. Then he can't hurt me."

"If he gets too smart just show him to me." Teddy puffed out his chest like a belligerent bantam rooster.

"Ha, ha!" Harry's boyish laugh rang out.

"You think I couldn't settle him?" sputtered Teddy.

"He's twice as large as you, Ted. Thank you, just the same, but I'm not afraid of him. All I ask is for him to let me alone."

"I'll bet I could lick him." A mere matter of size was nothing to the undaunted Teddy. Privately, he registered a vow to get in immediate touch with the bully and find out his weak points.

"There isn't going to be any fighting if I can help it. That's not what I'm in the store for. Maybe if he sees that he can't bother me, he'll mind his own business. I hope so. By the way, Teddy, I'm going to start for the store to-morrow at the same old time."

The two boys had reached the point where their ways diverged as Harry made this announcement. [34]

"I'm not. Catch me getting in before I have to. Eight o'clock for mine."

"Then I won't see you here in the morning. Good night." Harry turned away.

Teddy's freckled face fell. "Aw, rats!" he muttered. "Hey, there!"

Harry turned, trying hard not to smile. He knew how to deal with Teddy. His decision had been reached after sober thought. He was confident that it would be wise for him and his chum to adhere to their original hour for entrance in the store. He had expected a revolt on Teddy's part and calculated accordingly.

"You wait here for me in the morning," commanded the little boy. "I guess I can stand seven-thirty, if you can. Good night. Don't you forget. I'll be here same as ever."

"I'll wait for you. Good night."

With a farewell wave of his hand to Teddy, Harry set off to cover the few blocks that lay between him and home, his mind busy with Teddy's problem rather than his own. He had already chosen his own course and intended to stick to it. A happy little smile played about his lips as he recalled his partner's ungrudging loyalty not only to him but to Mr. Everett. Were Mr. Rexford in Mr. Everett's position Harry felt sure that he would leave no stone unturned in his effort to be of service to this esteemed friend. He hoped, however, that Mr. Everett would have no need of his chum's kindly offices. Close acquaintance with Teddy had taught him that the inflammable youngster was quite apt to catch fire from a single spark. That which loomed large on his horizon to-day was likely to dwindle into insignificance to-morrow. Before the end of the week, Teddy's opinion of Mr. Jarvis might undergo a marked change. [35]

Taking the narrow stairs two at a time, Harry burst into the tiny living-room, and swooped down upon his mother as she sat stitching away for dear life on a half-finished blouse.

"My land, Harry, you are a regular cyclone," she protested. Her sewing slipped from her lap as she wound her arms about her tempestuous son and returned his bear-like hug.

"That's because I'm anxious to let you know how much I love you, Mothery. After spending every day for two whole weeks with you, you can't blame me for trying to make up to-night for missing you to-day."

"I've missed you, too." The little woman sighed and patted her son's curly head. "I am afraid that two weeks in the country completely spoiled me. I certainly had a wonderful rest, but now I must sew as hard as I can to pay for taking a holiday."

"You needed it, Mothery. I wish you could have lived in that dandy bungalow all summer." Harry's happy face clouded. "It's a shame for you to have to come back to this hot old city and sew, sew, sew."

[36]

"We ought to be thankful for even two weeks away from it, Son," reminded his mother gently. "How did you get on at the store to-day? You are awfully late to-night. I waited to eat supper with you, though. I can't bear to eat alone. I suppose I'll have to, when you begin night school."

"Only two nights a week. It doesn't begin until October. I had a pretty good day. Mr. Rexford's away, so I couldn't see him. I saw Miss Welch. She's as pretty and funny as ever. The stock boy that worked with me has left. I met the new one to-day, but he isn't much like Fred. His name is Leon Atkins, and his father is in the receiving room of 84."

Mrs. Harding listened interestedly as Harry rattled off this information. She was always glad to learn of his doings at the big store, yet she never made the mistake of questioning him too closely.

"Speaking of Mr. Atkins reminds me, Mothery, that I want to ask you something. It would be very hard for a man to support a wife and six children on twenty dollars a week, wouldn't it?"

"I should say it would." Mrs. Harding nodded with emphasis. "It would take pretty close managing to do it. With rent and food and clothing—children are so hard on shoes—twenty dollars would melt away like snow in the sun. But what made you ask me that?"

[37]

"Oh, Mr. Denby, the new fiction salesman, told me that about Mr. Atkins. I was thinking that he must be glad that his son can work and earn something to help him. You see, Mothery, it's just like this. I don't like this new boy very well, and I'm afraid he doesn't like me. It isn't going to be pleasant for us to work together. I feel as though I ought to be nice to him because he's helping his father earn their living. But it's going to be hard to get along with him."

"What sort of boy is he?" Mrs. Harding regarded her son with an anxious face. "I hope he isn't a bad, worthless boy, Harry?"

"He's a big bully, and he hates work." Harry's young voice rang with disapproval. "He wanted to fight me in the stock-room this morning. Of course, I wouldn't think of doing such a thing in the store. But if he tries to bother me outside the store, I'm afraid I'll have to pitch into him and give him a good licking. I don't want to do it. If Mr. Keene heard of it he might discharge us both. He needs the work and so do I."

"What does Teddy think about it?" Mrs. Harding did not appear shocked at her quiet son's sudden warlike attitude.

"Oh, he says he'll do it himself if I say the word. Only this boy's about twice as big as Ted."

Their eyes meeting, mother and son laughed. Mrs. Harding's face grew grave instantly as she said: "I don't like to think of your getting into a fist fight, Harry. Such things are brutal and better avoided. But you must not forget that you have as much right to stand up for yourself as any other boy. I believe if you try hard you can find some other way to make this boy respect your rights."

[38]

"I'm going to try, of course. But, Mothery, if I should come home from work some evening with a black eye, you'll know what's happened. I'm only telling you this beforehand so that you'll understand if anything like that *does* happen. If you say I mustn't then I won't, no matter what he says or does."

Mrs. Harding looked long at the earnest young face of her boy. "I'm not going to say you mustn't," she returned rather wistfully. The realization that Harry was rapidly coming into man's estate filled her with a curious sense of sadness. The curly-haired baby whose first tottering steps she had so patiently guided had little to do with this resolute, keen-eyed youth at her side. "You must do as your own conscience dictates. Above all things, Harry, I wish you to be a good man and true; the kind of man your father was. If you were to pick a fight with some boy merely because you didn't like him, you'd only be wronging yourself. But if it were the other way round, remember even a worm will turn. But if some of these fine evenings you *do* come home with a black eye, well—I suppose I'll doctor you up, cook you an extra good supper and ask no questions."

[39]

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## CHAPTER V

### AN UNPROMISING DAY

[40]

On entering the stock-room the following morning Harry was agreeably surprised to find no trace of his unwilling fellow-worker. Far from feeling the loss of the pugnacious Leon's presence, he flung himself energetically into loading his truck with tempting bargain books, designed to arouse the enthusiasm of heat-fagged shoppers, and put new life into sluggish mid-summer trade. During the hot, breathless days of July and August those who have the wherewithal to buy books, turn their steps resolutely away from the scorching cities to the revivifying atmosphere of seashore and mountain. At such season, the lure of even the newest fiction wanes into insignificance. It is only when hazy September flashes forth her first faint signals of nearing Autumn that the reign of literature begins anew and comes rapidly into its own as the nights gradually chill and lengthen.

Due to Mr. Rexford's tireless effort, the book department of Martin Brothers' never languished, even during the sultry summer months. Year after year he had labored to build up trade that would withstand the attacks of hot weather and vacation flitting. The sale for which Harry was now preparing was an annual event, which invariably brought satisfactory patronage. As he placed pile after pile of gaily-jacketed books for boys and girls into the deep truck, he halted briefly now and then to peep between the alluring covers, wistfully wishing that he might own them all. Purchased by Mr. Rexford from a firm that had fallen into the receiver's hands, this particular lot of juvenile literature, though undamaged, had been marked down from higher prices to the modest sum of fifty cents.

"My, but I'd like to have some of these," murmured the lad, as he fingered an especially attractive volume. "Fifty cents is too high for me, though. If I ever get rich I'm going to have all the books I want. But I must stop looking at these beauties or I'll never get my truck filled."

Thrusting temptation resolutely aside, Harry rapidly emptied the contents of the bin into the waiting truck and trundled it out of the stock-room in the direction of the freight elevator.

"Jerk those books out o' there and hustle back t' the stock-room," ordered a surly voice, as he wheeled his load into the midst of the tables reserved for the sale. "Think I c'n wait all day for you? I gotta get this table filled up."

"Oh, good morning. I was wondering what had become of *you*. I thought you might be lost or overcome with the heat. It's very warm this morning, isn't it?" Harry addressed the black-haired, scowling youth of the previous afternoon's encounter with ironic politeness.

"Fresh as ever, I see," sneered the other. "But I ain't going to notice you now. I gotta work. Put those books on that table and don't be all day about it."

His loud tones were purposed to reach the ears of a man who was striding down an adjacent aisle. The man paused. Three or four long steps brought him to where the lads were standing.

"What's this? What's this?" he snapped. "You go on about your business and let this boy alone. He wants to work if you don't."

The rebuke fell directly upon Harry, for the man was Mr. Barton and he had deliberately and without justice espoused the cause of the real offender.

Harry measured the aisle manager with a cool, direct glance. Without a word he turned to the truck and began the work of unloading his freight. For an instant Mr. Barton glared at the boy's back, then went on his ill-natured way minus the satisfaction which an angry retort on Harry's part would have afforded him. He had never forgiven the lad; the very sight of him aroused animosity. After the trouble over the missing money he had deemed it prudent to keep very quiet. In Mr. Rexford, Harry Harding had a champion whose influence Mr. Barton respected and feared. Now though he had come upon Harry purely by chance, he had been unable to resist showing his spite.

His blue eyes blazing, poor Harry was making short work of his task. He was perfectly sure that Leon Atkins had designed to make him appear in the wrong. Knowing Mr. Barton's fault-finding disposition he had thus raised his voice with malicious intent.

"He, he, he!" chuckled Leon. "That's the time you got yours. How do you feel now, Smarty?"

Harry made no reply to the taunt. Diving into the truck for the remaining books, he piled them on the table, then paused, undecided whether to commence their arrangement or to take his truck and be off. As it was his usual custom to help with the tables, he peered about in search of the highest stack of one title. Finding it, he shoved it into position at the back of the table and began to build up smaller piles around it.

"Never mind that, 45. Hurry back to the stock-room and bring down some more books." The querulous voice of a saleswoman interrupted his cogitations. "Don't stand there and dream. Mr. Brady is anxious to have these tables ready before the customers get here. I am to have charge of them during the sale. Leon will fix the books as soon as you bring them down. Now run along and don't keep me waiting."

"All right." Pleasantly obedient, Harry started away, pushing the truck before him. As assistant buyer, Mr. Brady's wishes were law in Mr. Rexford's absence. Yet, as he proceeded toward the elevator, the boy experienced vague resentment toward the dictatorial saleswoman. He had frequently suspected that she disliked him, and he often wondered why. Now he pondered a trifle bitterly on the change that two short weeks had wrought in his beloved realm of books. Yesterday he had been briefly disappointed at the absence of Mr. Rexford. Following that had come the annoying meeting with Leon Atkins and the news of Fred Alden's departure from the store. This morning it was again Leon Atkins; and Mr. Barton, too. Harry had fancied himself free from the

aisle manager's further persecution. Now Miss Breeden had spoken sharply to him. He longed with all his heart for Mr. Rexford's speedy return. Everything went so smoothly when he was about.

"It's babyish in me to mind such little things," was his inward reproof, as he shoved his truck out onto the tenth floor. "That Atkins boy isn't worth minding, and I am not surprised to have Mr. Barton call me down. I always thought he'd do it if ever he got the chance. I guess Miss Breeden didn't mean to be cross. She's only anxious about getting the tables fixed."

This philosophical view of things brought a ray of comfort to light the gloom of the morning. Bravely shaking off his depression, Harry rolled the truck into position before a partially filled bin of cheaper books for boys that would presently flash forth their own special merits for public approval and purchase. He was back on the selling floor with them in an incredibly short time, where Miss Breeden not being in evidence he had surly directions from Leon to "dump 'em down there on the floor and get out."

Directly afterward he was sent out to a neighboring store to purchase a copy of a book which was out of stock. Failing to secure it there, he went on to another store, and, still unsuccessful, tried a book shop several blocks further down Commerce Street. In so doing Harry knew that he was within his own particular province. Mr. Rexford himself had issued the instruction that whenever he was sent out of the store in quest of a special book he was privileged to go from shop to shop until he obtained it.

It was twenty-five minutes past nine when he left Martin Brothers, but it was a quarter to eleven when he returned, the product of his search under his arm. Casting his eyes over the stretch of tables he spied the assistant buyer in the clutches of a customer, whose flushed, indignant face showed patent indications of her displeasure. On one side of Mr. Brady ranged Mr. Barton, wearing a thundercloud frown; on the other was Miss Breeden, looking equally glum.

"But, Madam," Harry heard Mr. Brady expostulate, "you can see for yourself that the price mark in this book is '50 cents.'" His forefinger pointed out the pencilled symbols on the white of the pasted inside leaf at the back of the book. "It was originally a dollar book, marked down to half price."

"Then why do you stick up a sign advertising your books at thirty-five cents, when they're fifty? That's what I'd like to know. This salesgirl takes the book and makes out a check for thirty-five cents. When it's handed to the girl at the desk, *she* says it's half a dollar. How am I to know that you're not overcharging me? I must say this book doesn't look as if it was worth half a dollar, let alone its ever having been a dollar. I can go to Dunlap's and buy all the boys' books I want for a quarter apiece."

"Come with me, Madam. I will show you that there is a noticeable difference between this and a thirty-five cent book. No doubt this book has merely been laid on that table by mistake and become mixed with the cheaper stock." With the patient air of a martyr, Mr. Brady led the way to the fatal table. He was followed by a procession of three. Picking up the first volume on which his hand chanced to rest, he said: "There, you can judge for yourself, Madam."

The customer stared, then judged. "Why, they're almost alike!" she exclaimed. "If that," she touched the book the buyer had chosen for comparison, "is thirty-five cents, this one isn't worth any more."

Before she had finished judgment, Mr. Brady's face had turned a dull red. He cast a dark glance at the pricemark of his unlucky choice, muttered unintelligibly and, one after another, hastily examined a succession of books. Fixing stern eyes on Miss Breeden, he said shortly: "This is really too bad. You have made a thorough jumble of this table. Part of these books are one price; part another." His tone prophesied further reckoning when the customer had departed.

"But do I get this book for thirty-five cents?" persisted the customer impatiently. "Please don't keep me waiting. I have to make a train."

"No, Madam, that book is fifty cents. I regret to say that a serious mistake has been made in the arrangement of this table."

"Then I don't want it. Give me my money back. I'll go to Dunlap's, then I'll know what I'm paying for." The now irate woman made a determined bolt for the desk, pursued by Mr. Barton and Mr. Brady.

Miss Breeden's face also registered wrath, as she watched the trio descend upon the desk of remittal. Happening to catch sight of Harry, who was quietly awaiting the opportunity to deliver his purchase into Mr. Brady's hands, she darted up to him.

"*You* made all that trouble," she hissed. "That was all *your* fault. I told you not to meddle with the books on that table. Now the store has lost a customer who will go out and tell people that we have two prices for a book. Mr. Brady will blame me for your carelessness, and Mr. Barton will rave because he has to void my check. This isn't the first trouble you've made for me, either. Last Spring—"

Angry as she was, the young woman broke off abruptly, leaving Harry uninformed of the nature of at least one offence. Under the scathing tirade he had grown very white. He had heard the beginning of the customer's complaining, and, although he had not followed the quartette to the table, he guessed what had happened. He knew if no one else knew that Leon Atkins rather than he was the author of the unfortunate mix-up.

"Miss Breeden," he replied, his low, even accents contrasting sharply with the woman's shrill

tones, "you told me not to stop to fix those books, but you *didn't* tell me not to put them there. You *saw* me do it and you didn't say a word about that. When I brought down these cheaper books you weren't around and that new stock boy told me to put them on the floor. I supposed they were to go on another table. I would have had more sense than to mix them like that."

"That's right. Try to crawl out of it. Just you wait until I tell Mr. Brady." Miss Breeden flounced off in a rage, leaving Harry to stare soberly after her. It was evident she did not believe him.

"I guess I'm in for it," he shrugged. "If she had let me fix that table I'd never have made such a mistake. Where was she that she didn't notice it herself? It was Leon who mixed those two lots of books, but it's her fault that they stayed mixed. I can't tell Mr. Brady that. It isn't nice for a man to shift the blame onto a woman's shoulders." Harry had decided ideas on the subject of chivalry.

Though Harry did not know it, the charge of the special sales tables had not troubled Miss Breeden seriously. On entering the store that morning she had immediately asked for a shopping pass, returning to her post only a moment or two before Harry had deposited his first load of books. After giving him directions to go back to the stock-room, she had wandered up the aisle to gossip with another saleswoman, leaving Leon to arrange the books at his own sweet will. [50]

As has been already stated, Leon Atkins and the proverbial busy bee were not even distantly related. While Miss Breeden's eyes were upon him he worked, but the instant she went shopping his brief energy vanished. The number of fifty-cent books that Harry had brought down had been sufficient to fill the table. Due to his lack of skill in arranging them, a good-sized vacant space appeared on the table when he had finished. His knowledge of books and prices being limited and his interest in them still less, he carelessly bundled the second consignment of cheaper books into that vacant space. To complete the outrage, he hastily consulted the back of one of that lot, confiscated one of the two "35 cts." signs that graced the next table, and hoisted it triumphantly over the havoc he had created.

The instant the customer was lost to view around an elevator shaft, Mr. Barton and Mr. Brady formed themselves into an inquiry committee.

"What do you mean by allowing that table to get in such a mess, Miss Breeden?" censured the assistant.

"Give me your book," ordered Mr. Barton. "That check must be voided. It seems to me——"

With lips compressed for fight, Miss Breeden tendered her salesbook to the aisle manager. He made cabalistic signs on it with a blue pencil and scrawled a huge "voided" across the page. Before he could deliver the stinging reproof that lay on his lips, a summons from the exchange desk sent him galloping up the aisle. [51]

"That table was all right when I came back from shopping," was Miss Breeden's angry defence. "It was 45 who put those books there. I told him not to when he brought down the first load, but you can see for yourself how much good it did."

"You should have noticed it," was the unfeeling rebuke.

"How could I? I was busy. I never thought 45 would keep on putting books there when I told him not to. I waited on several customers for thirty-five cent books and didn't notice anything out of the way." Miss Breeden craftily refrained from stating, however, that the books she had sold were from the next table.

Her excuses, however, were not sufficiently good to ward off Mr. Brady's sharp lecture. Strange to say she made no mention of Leon's disastrous hand in the matter. Unfortunately for Harry, Mr. Brady also had not observed the other boy at work at the table. The assistant had been engaged with a traveling salesman in Mr. Rexford's office. From there he had been called to the selling floor in time to officiate as pacifist to the offended customer.

In consequence of all this, Mr. Brady was not in a lamb-like mood as the boy approached to deliver the book he had been sent out to buy. Harry squared his shoulders to meet the impending scolding. He knew he was doomed to receive a rebuke which he did not merit. [52]

"See here, Harding," lashed out the man, "why don't you do as you are told? If you can't, this department doesn't need you." The arraignment that followed cut Harry to the quick. He longed to cry out the truth, but boyish chivalry to a woman and the distaste for shifting the blame on the shoulders of a boy who needed work held him silent. All he could find words to utter was, "I am very sorry, sir. It won't happen again."

"You won't be here if it does," were the assistant's parting words. Seizing the book Harry proffered, he turned on his heel and strode into the buyer's office.

Sick at heart, Harry walked dejectedly toward the table of disaster. Miss Breeden was already there, engaged in separating the figurative sheep from the goats. Pausing uncertainly for a moment, he directed his course toward the elevator. Again he wondered painfully why it was that the young woman appeared to dislike him so heartily. What did she mean by saying he had already made trouble for her? He could recall no such instance. Why had she said "last Spring," then abruptly checked her speech? His distressed mind reviewed the events that had transpired since his advent into Department 84. He could recall but one disquieting incident. It had to do with the exposure of Mr. Farley, the thieving salesman, and in no respect even remotely touched Miss Breeden. [53]

"I am afraid my Year of Promise isn't going to be very promising," was his rueful thought. "I don't know why Miss Breeden doesn't like me and I certainly sha'n't ask her. I'll just find out for

myself. As for that Atkins boy, I've a few things to say to *him*, and I'm going to say them before this day is over."

[54]

## CHAPTER VI

### HARRY SPEAKS HIS MIND

For reasons best known to herself, Miss Breeden had chosen to make Harry the scapegoat for Leon Atkins' sins of omission. In her heart she knew exactly who was at fault. Although she had shielded Leon from the assistant's displeasure she did not intend that he should escape scotfree. The moment she had finished bringing order out of disorder, she set out on a diligent hunt for him about the department. The object of her search, however, was elusive as well as lazy. After a fruitless march about the narrow aisles of 84, she gave up her quest and directed her attention strictly to the business of selling books.

Thus the real culprit dodged at least one evil. After leisurely strolling about the first floor on pleasure bent and being ordered out of half a dozen departments in which he had no excuse for loitering, he retired to the stock-room for a nap. But there he ran into another evil, full tilt.

"I've been waiting for you," was Harry Harding's sharp salute as the tall, ungainly youth slouched into sight.

[55]

"Well, you see me now, don't you? Whada you want?" With Leon, this last had become a challenge to be used on the world at large.

"I want to tell you that the next time you make a mess of a table, like the one you fixed this morning, you are going to take the blame for it." Harry was advancing on the newcomer with an air of purpose that brought the latter to a sudden standstill.

"What's wrong with you, you boob?" he growled, doubling his ready fists. "Whada you mean by such smart talk?"

"Just what I say. You took that last lot of books I brought down and put them on the wrong table. You got me into trouble by it. I stood for it because—well, it doesn't concern you to know why. But I won't stand for it again. The next time I have books to bring down I'll fix them on the table myself and don't you dare interfere with me. I thought perhaps we could work together, just as Fred and I always did, but I see we can't. Hereafter you do your work and I'll do mine; then I won't be blamed for your faults."

"You're a nut," sneered Leon. "You're so crazy you don't know what you're talkin' about. I guess I can fix a table a whole lot better'n you, freshie."

"Can you?" Harry smiled bitter sarcasm. "Just ask Miss Breeden about it and see what she says."

[56]

"You've been tellin' lies about me! I'll fix you!" Leon made a vicious lunge at Harry, his voice rising to a howl.

"Here, here!" Mr. Atkins had recognized the familiar bellow of his offspring and hurried to the scene. "What's all this racket about?"

"He won't let me alone, Pa. He keeps pestering me all the time." Leon pointed a grimy, accusing finger at Harry.

Mr. Atkins rose to the duties of fatherhood. "You let my son alone, you young puppy, or I'll report you to Mr. Rexford as soon as he comes back," he threatened, glowering at Harry. "Now get to work, both of you."

"I'm not bothering your son, Mr. Atkins," burst forth Harry in indignation, "and I'm not going to let him bother me, either."

"Don't talk back to me." Mr. Atkins' small, black eyes snapped fire. "Do as I say. Get to work. Leon, you come with me."

"I wish he'd stay with you," muttered Harry under his breath, as the persecuted one shambled off after his parental bulwark of defense. "I'd like to tell Mr. Rexford a few things, too. But I won't. I've warned that boy to let me alone, and I'll see that he does it without any help from other people."

Nevertheless, his sturdy determination to keep his grievances to himself could not prevent Harry from seeing that his future path was more than likely to be carpeted with nettles. It hurt his pride to feel that, instead of advancing, he seemed doomed to be thrust back into the unhappy rut from which Mr. Rexford had rescued him. What hurt him most was the knowledge that he was in no sense to blame for the train of unfortunate events that had dogged his return to the store. From those who were most intimately concerned in them, he could expect neither fair dealing nor justice.

[57]

As he took up his half-completed task of making the untidy stock-room presentable, Harry mentally lined up the disturbers of his peace and gave himself over to sombre speculation. First of all, there was Leon. It was useless to dream that this slothful, quarrelsome boy and he could ever be friends. They had nothing in common. The only solution of this problem lay in an alert

avoidance of the ill-natured youth.

Second came Mr. Brady. He was laboring under a false impression. Conscientious, daily work, perfectly performed, would perhaps counteract it. Third, Mr. Atkins was now arrayed against him by reason of the family tie. Then, too, there was Miss Breeden's strange hostility to be considered. If only Fred were here, he might be able to discover the source of it. He had always cheerfully affirmed that he "knew the book department like a book." Without his help there was small chance of learning the cause of the saleswoman's grudge. [58]

Last of all, there was Mr. Barton. Harry regarded him as the least of his woes. Mr. Rexford could be relied upon to see that *he* kept his place. Mr. Barton always "walked softly" when the energetic buyer was about the premises of 84. The very fact that the crabbed aisle manager had dyspepsia was sufficient to excuse him. Harry wondered if Miss Welch knew that the man was thus afflicted. As his mind reverted to the pretty exchange clerk, he was inspired with a sudden idea. He would privately ask Miss Welch to find out for him, if she could, what it was that Miss Breeden cherished against him.

At lunch time he paused at exchange desk Number 10, only to find Miss Welch busily engaged in ministering to a long line of petitioning shoppers. Directly after luncheon he left Teddy to volubly mourn his loss and hurried back to the exchange desk, determined to devote the last fifteen minutes that were his to the business of inquiry. To his deep disappointment, the line had lengthened and he was forced to leave the questions he longed to ask until a more convenient season.

Afternoon brought him the task of moving and rearranging a colony of popular-priced shelved books that were to take up their residence on the other side of the department. He did his work so well as to win from Mr. Brady the somewhat grudging admission, "I see you can do things right when you try, Harding." Even this doubtful praise sounded sweet to Harry and he forgivingly crossed Mr. Brady off his black list of oppressors. [59]

It was well after five o'clock when the last of his charges found itself tightly fitted into its new home. Harry glanced at the clock, then at the exchange desk. It was invaded now by a lone woman of meek aspect. He saw Miss Welch's dimples in evidence as she called a messenger, then pointed down the aisle with her pencil. This meant that she was in a good humor.

"This ought to be a good time to ask her," decided Harry, as he watched the customer leave the desk. "I won't wait to wash my hands. I'll go over there now while I have the chance."

"There goes one woman that's willing to do as she's told. Ain't it funny, the difference in some people?" Miss Welch straightened up with a sigh of relief and pushed back a refractory curl. "Well, if here isn't 45! What have *you* got to be trotted back into stock? I s'pose that cut glass punch bowl you bought don't go good with the kitchen furniture. Or mebbe you bought the 'Lives of the Presidents,' thinking it was 'My Great Aunt's Last Stand as a Cook.' If you've read it you can't bring it back and exchange it for a tennis racquet. We're strict here, we are." [60]

Miss Welch's ferocious scowl vanished in a merry laugh as she saw Harry's grave face break into smiles. "That's more like it, old Sobersides. I thought you'd come to tell me you was dead and what kind of a floral piece you wanted us to take up a collection for. But now I see you're no dead one. What's on your mind, Kiddy? Tell your troubles to your old friend Irish."

"That's just what I'm going to do. I mean, I'm going to ask you if you'll help me about something."

"Sure I'll help you. What is it?" Miss Welch leaned forward, her blue eyes two shining signals of good will.

"It's about Miss Breeden," began Harry in a low voice. "She—I—always had an idea she didn't like me, and——"

"You should worry," interrupted the listener with a boyish grin. "She didn't put the 'u' in universe. You ought to feel happy. She's got some healthy little hate for yours truly, but I'm not crying my eyes out about it. After what happened in 84 last Spring you couldn't expect we'd be her bosom friends, could you?"

Harry pricked up his ears at the words "last Spring." It looked as though he had come to the right person for information. Miss Welch evidently knew something hinging on that fateful season that he did not. His hands nervously gripped the edge of the desk as he regarded the exchange clerk with a puzzled frown. He could think of but one incident in which he and Miss Welch had been concerned at that time. [61]

"But I don't see how——" His perplexity deepened.

Miss Welch's keen mind had already grasped the situation. "So *that's* the way the wind's began to whistle, has it?" A knowing smile curved the corners of her red lips. "I guess I ought to of wised you to a few things, Innocent, but I never thought of *her*. Anyway, you ain't supposed to run a social register. You see it was just like this, Kiddy. When you spotted Farley helping himself and a few others to Martin Brothers' goods, you put an awful crimp in Breeden's plans. She was, mebbe she is now for all I know, getting ready to be Mrs. Farley."

"What?" Harry gasped his amazement.

"You heard me say it. They was going to get married. Just like that. Now you know why Farley was trying to annex upholstery and a few other departments. Poor Breeden didn't know he was crooked. I give her credit for that. Still, she wasn't exactly hilarious when he got fired for

stealing. That's why you can't never be her little brother Harry. She isn't thinking about adopting me for a sister, neither."

"Oh!" A sorrowful expression settled on Harry's sensitive features. "I never knew. I'm sorry all that had to happen. But I couldn't—"

"Course you couldn't," comforted Miss Welch. "You did what was right, Harry. You wasn't to blame any more'n I was. Nobody was to blame, but Farley. When you've held down a store job as long as I have you'll know that such things can't happen without hurting some innocent party. What's she been doing or saying to you?" Miss Welch became fiercely inquiring.

Harry reluctantly repeated the saleswoman's words to him. "I couldn't think what she meant," he ended. "I suppose she thought I knew. I can't blame her now, but I'm sorry she feels that way toward me."

"You can't stop Niagara Falls, so you might as well let 'em go on falling," consoled Miss Welch. "Just you keep out of her way and don't let her get anything on you. If she gets too gay, put me wise and I'll read her a few lines that she won't find on her application card."

"Oh, you mustn't ever say a word to her, Miss Welch," entreated Harry. "Now that I understand, I'll try not to make her mad. I'm not afraid, you know. My mother says no one can really hurt a person if that person isn't doing wrong himself."

"Some straight talk," nodded Miss Welch, "but it don't always work in a place like this. I've seen pretty good people get theirs because somebody else had a knife out for 'em. You can't always squash the trouble-bug by being an angel. Mind, I ain't saying she's out for *your* scalp. Only just you be careful and don't let her double-cross you."

"I will," promised Harry. "Thank you ever so much, Miss Welch."

"Anything else on your mind? Now's the golden dumping time."

"No." Harry shook his head. "Oh, yes; there is. I wanted to ask you if you knew what makes Mr. Barton so cross?"

"Ask me something easy. I never could guess riddles. I don't believe he knows himself." Miss Welch shrugged her shoulders.

"A boy told me that he has dyspepsia," informed Harry. "He says Mr. Barton goes up to the hospital almost every day."

"I've heard that myself. I never sent him a card of sympathy, though. Dyspepsia don't excuse the way he performs. I tell you he's got crankitis and there isn't no cure for that. Forget him. What do you care what he has, so long as he lets you alone? Here he comes now, the precious pet. Beat it before he chases you."

Harry glanced over his shoulder, but did not move from his stand before the desk. He had no mind to scurry off like a frightened rabbit at Mr. Barton's approach. Nevertheless, he braced himself for a scolding. The aisle manager was sure to accuse him of loitering. Greatly to his surprise, the man paid no attention to him, but passed on hurriedly in the direction of the little room where he kept his supplies.

"Never even saw you," congratulated Miss Welch. "I guess you was wise not to run. He looked kind of sick, didn't he? Mebbe I'd better send him that card, after all." She giggled at the thought.

Harry smiled absently. His thoughts were on the tall, gaunt aisle manager, who had made his early days in the store so unhappy. But it was not of those dark days he was thinking. He dwelt only upon the haggard face and pain-filled eyes of the man who had just passed. A curious wave of sympathy swept over him. He wondered if Mr. Barton had a home and someone to care for him when his hard day's work was done. But he did not dream as he stood there how much was yet to come from that random, kindly thought.

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## CHAPTER VII

### TEDDY BURKE, AVENGER

The return of Mr. Rexford to Department 84 marked the beginning of a respite from the misfortunes that had visited Harry. Two days after his unexpected clash with Miss Breeden the buyer walked into the department and resumed his kindly but undisputed sway. Mr. Rexford was a man who thought twice and spoke once. Consequently, his speech was productive of instant results. Conscientious to a degree he worked untiringly for the good of the firm who employed him and insisted on the same loyalty from the members of his department.

It did not take him long to reach a correct estimate of Leon Atkins. After one exceedingly brief but crushing interview with the man in authority, Leon turned over a new leaf in a hurry and made craven promises to "do better." Privately, however, he had no intention of redeeming himself. When under Mr. Rexford's critical eye he proceeded with the utmost caution. When the stock-room sheltered him from the latter's observation, his pretended energy fell from him like a cloak.

After the mid-summer sale was over and the stock that remained unsold was again put to rest in the tenth-floor bins, to reappear later when the fall trade had quickened, the book department settled down to the inevitable lull that August always brought. This did not mean that no one wanted to buy books. There were always the libraries which required attention at all seasons of the year. Their needs helped swell the summer trade, and many regular customers browsed about 84's tempting aisles. The mail-order, also, gave good account of itself and with the various consignments of new books that were continually arriving, Harry Harding always found plenty to do.

The very fact that Leon was a shirker incited Harry to do his utmost to keep things moving. To frequently stumble upon the sluggard, asleep in a bin or deep in a book, was naturally an aggravation. Yet Harry never complained to Mr. Rexford of his companion's worthlessness, neither did he appear to notice what went on day after day under his very eyes. For one thing he was at least thankful. Leon no longer persisted in his former mania to fight. Not that he had relinquished it. Although Harry could not then know it, the other boy was merely biding his time. While trade was dull and Mr. Rexford was so much in evidence about 84, it behooved him to go cautiously. Later, when the department had swung into its usual business stride and Mr. Rexford had his hands full, he resolved to renew his persecution of Harry. So long as the latter allowed him uninterrupted liberty to shirk and was foolish enough to do double work in consequence, Leon was content to let matters rest.

[67]

Yet patient, long-suffering Harry Harding was not the only one who knew the exact truth about Leon. Mr. Atkins was well aware of his troublesome son's deficiencies. Far from taking him to task for them and insisting that Leon should do his share of the work of the stock-room, he stolidly ignored the truth and on all occasions treated Harry with a gruffness that was both unnecessary and unreasonable. The marked contrast between this neat, industrious, courteous boy and his own untidy, lazy, impudent son galled him beyond measure.

Instead of admiring Harry for his good qualities, he appeared to resent them. Harry's devotion to duty made his son's lack of it altogether too apparent to suit him. He was in constant fear that some day Harry might suddenly turn and make a complaint to headquarters that would result in Leon's discharge from the store. With that thought ever before him, he kept up an attitude of menacing suspicion toward the boy, hoping thus to intimidate Harry into remaining silent regarding Leon's laziness.

[68]

Quick-witted Harry was not slow to discover this. He understood that Mr. Atkins feared him on account of Leon and felt sorry, rather than indignant. More than once he was on the point of going to the man and assuring him that he could rest easy on that score. Only the possibility of being misunderstood held him aloof. Manfully ignoring that which he could not change, he delved unceasingly through the long, hot days of August, making silence and endeavor his watchwords. As the majority of his orders emanated from Mr. Brady, he was able to keep fairly clear of Mr. Atkins, whose work lay, for the most part, in the receiving room. Nevertheless, the lad was always on his guard against squalls which were quite likely to blow from that quarter in the twinkling of an eye.

The middle of September brought with it vast consignments of new books from the numerous publishing houses. It also brought a heat wave that July might well have envied. Day after day the sun beat down upon the city, as though determined to visit a special penalty upon its wilted inhabitants. Even the nights obstinately refused to be cool, and as one fierce, sultry, rainless day merged into another, the heat became well-nigh unbearable.

"You don't catch me walking home this night," grumbled Teddy Burke, as he and Harry met on the corner at the end of a particularly trying afternoon. "Me for a street car. I don't b'lieve it's ever going to get cool. Maybe it wasn't hot in 40 to-day. Even the old wash boilers and coffee pots were jawing about it."

[69]

"You don't say so!" Harry raised amused brows. "I suppose you heard them?"

Teddy grinned. "Well," he confessed, "I fell over a wash boiler and it groaned, and I dropped a coffee pot and it rattled. I s'pose that was about as much as they could do. Mr. Hickson says that even the ice-boxes had a grouch. One of 'em pinched his finger when he went to shut the door of it."

"You're a funny boy." Teddy's quaint fancies were always vastly entertaining. "Sometimes I almost wish I were down there in house furnishings with you. You and Mr. Hickson always find something to laugh at."

"What's the matter with books?" inquired Teddy. "Don't you like 'em any more?"

"Oh, books are all right and so is Mr. Rexford," sighed Harry. "Only I wish some of the people in 84 were like Mr. Hickson. I miss Fred Alden a good deal. He was always cheerful and funny and wasn't afraid of work."

"How's the Clothes-pole behaving?" On first glimpse of the lengthy Leon, Teddy had immediately likened him to the above wash-day prop. "He's about as fat as one," had been his discerning comment, "only he isn't half so useful. Still, that's what he looks like, and that's what I'm going to call him when he isn't around." Thus named, Leon was destined so to remain in Teddy's imaginative mind.

[70]

"The Clothes-pole, as you will call him, is the laziest boy I ever saw." Harry's voice quivered with vexation. "When he's in the stock-room he doesn't do much except read and sleep. It's a shame! I've been doing his work all summer, but I'm getting pretty tired of it. His father knows it,

too, but he doesn't seem to care much. I just wish Mr. Rexford would come up some day and catch him asleep in one of those bins."

"Maybe he will." A daring idea had sprung to life in Teddy's fertile brain. His freckled face grew preternaturally solemn; a sure sign that he was planning mischief.

"He hardly ever comes up to the stock-room." Harry had failed to catch the significance that lay behind Teddy's casual remark.

"Is that so?" Teddy relapsed into sudden silence, as he considered ways and means of bringing Leon's ill-timed siestas to an end. "Aw, see here!" He had become aware that they had left the corner behind them and were well up the street. "Didn't I say I wasn't going to hoof it home?"

"Come on," urged Harry. He had slyly begun the homeward walk, knowing that Teddy would keep pace with him from sheer force of habit. "You don't want to ride in one of those crowded cars. It's a lot better for us to be out in the air, even if it is so warm."

"Might as well keep on now," grumbled Teddy. "Say, when does the Clothes-pole generally take his nap?"

"Whenever he gets a chance. There's one big bin at the end of the stock-room that he is fond of. He goes to lunch at one o'clock and as soon as he gets back he crawls into it. He puts a truck close to the bin. After he gets in he rolls the truck in front of it and then no one can see him."

"Lazy loafer," was Teddy's scornful opinion. "But see here, Harry. You ought to report him. Don't you know what it says on the application card about reporting anyone you see doing something against Martin Brothers? You signed it, you know."

"Yes, I know. I've thought of that a good many times, but I can't make up my mind to report him. I've tried to even up for it to the store by doing his work. You see I know what it is to be poor. My mother had a hard time taking care of just the two of us before I went to work. Even with what help I give her, it's pretty bad. Everything costs so much now. If it's hard for us, what must it be for poor Mr. Atkins with that large family of his? It's better for this boy to be with his father. He might be a good deal worse off away from him. Mr. Atkins is afraid I'm going to make a fuss about Leon. That's why he is so cranky to me. He never used to act like that before his son came to the store to work."

"You make me tired." Teddy's impish face registered his disapproval. "I wouldn't be good to folks that treated me so mean. I'd treat 'em mean, too. What's the use of working your head off for that Atkins pair? Either one of 'em would get you fired if he could. I'd do as I promised on my application card, if I was you. Suppose somebody found out about the way the Clothes-pole loafs? Then you might get blamed for knowing about it and not saying a word."

"I've thought of that, too," confessed Harry, "but I guess I'll have to take chances against it. As long as I keep the stock-room looking neat and tidy, no one can say much. What Leon does when he's downstairs on the floor is none of my business."

"I hope he does something awful then," scowled Teddy. "Anyway, he won't last long. See if he does."

On just what grounds the resourceful Teddy based his prophecy he neglected to mention. The following morning, however, he was hardly in his department before he approached good-humored Mr. Duffield and asked solemn permission to leave the floor.

"Very well, Teddy, you may go. Don't stay away long and don't get into any mischief." The placid little aisle manager felt it necessary to add this last mild admonition.

"I never get into mischief." But the roguish gleam in the boy's black eyes told a different story.

Mr. Duffield merely smiled behind his stubby gray mustache. He knew Teddy Burke.

Straight through Department 40 toward the nearest basement stairs Teddy flitted.

"What's your hurry?" called out Sam Hickson as Teddy flashed past him with a grin.

"I've got business to 'tend to," he flung back over his shoulder.

"More likely it's mischief," muttered the salesman. "I can always tell when that youngster is up to something."

Up the stairway route to the third floor Teddy scurried, scorning to wait for an elevator. Reaching the third-floor landing, he steered directly for Mr. Keene's office. There Teddy had a friend on whom he proposed to call.

"Why, good morning, Teddy." The brown-haired, pink-cheeked girl glanced up from her typewriter with a welcoming smile. She had ushered himself and Harry into Mr. Keene's office on the day they had applied for work.

"Good morning, Miss Phelps." In the presence of this delightful person for whom Teddy cherished unbounded respect, Teddy's usually ready speech left him.

"Did you come to see Mr. Keene?"

Teddy shook his ruddy head. "No; I came to see you." His bright eyes met the young woman's surprised gaze rather shyly. Since his advent into Martin Brothers he had come to know Miss Phelps fairly well, but he was now not at all sure of how she might regard him once he had explained the nature of his visit.

"Well, what can I do for you?" asked Miss Phelps, quickly noting the lad's embarrassment.

"Oh, I thought—I wanted to ask you— Say, do they use this kind of typewriters all over the store?"

"Yes." Miss Phelps secretly wondered at the question. "At least, I believe so."

"If you wrote a notice on this," Teddy touched the machine, "and didn't sign any name to it, then no one would know where it came from?" he continued eagerly.

"I suppose not. But what a funny question!" A faint pucker appeared between Miss Phelps' dark brows.

"Um-m!" Teddy studied the typewriter with due solemnity. Fishing in his coat pocket he brought forth a bit of paper on which appeared a single sentence. "If I asked you to typewrite this for me, would you do it?"

Miss Phelps took the paper and studied it with some curiosity. "I can't do it unless you tell me why you want it," she said.

Teddy turned red and was silent. Then his impish grin came slowly and widely into evidence. "All right. I'll tell you."

[75]

He had not proceeded far before his listener began to smile. Then she laughed outright. "You are a naughty boy," was her indulgent reproof, "but I'll help you out this time. Your intentions are good and I don't know but I'd do the same if I were you. Wait a minute."

Opening a drawer of her desk she selected a small-sized sheet of office stationery, fastened it in the machine and began a rapid clicking of the keys. "There you are. Take it and run, and don't you ever tell anyone I typed it."

"Thank you ever so much. Hope I can do something for you some day." Teddy clutched the sheet of paper and darted away with as much speed as was decorous to that vicinity. The further progress of his plan meant the climbing of two additional flights of stairs, but he mounted them with gleeful abandon.

At the extreme end of the fifth floor was a tiny railed-in space that held a single desk. As Teddy approached it he became joyfully aware that it held no occupant. Luck was certainly with him. Noiselessly swinging the wooden gate behind him, he slipped to the desk, and, drawing out a slide, deposited his precious paper carefully upon it, then discreetly fled from the spot. He had successfully carried out his part of the plan. It remained for others to carry out the rest.

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## CHAPTER VIII

### A SANE LUNATIC

[76]

At precisely two o'clock that afternoon, Leon Atkins sought the seclusion of the cradling bin, where he was wont to take his afternoon nap, and shoved a sheltering truck in place before it. After a strenuous morning's labor in the book department, to which he had been driven by Mr. Brady like a lamb to slaughter, Leon felt the need of rest. But the god of sleep had scarcely weighed down his willing eyelids when he was brought back to earth by the loud, protesting rumbles of the screening truck.

Forgetting his limited quarters, the slumberer sat up with a jerk that brought his head in violent contact with the top of the bin. "Ouch!" he ejaculated, ruefully rubbing the injured member. This mishap faded into insignificance, however, as his drowsy eyes came to rest on an angry face peering into his stronghold.

"Come out of there, you young loafer," commanded a sharp voice. "This is a nice time to sleep! Where do you think you are? If this is a sample of these bins, I guess they do need inspecting."

[77]

Leon hastily emerged amid a torrent of sarcastic rebuke that fell from the lips of a small, energetic man whose sharp eyes seemed to cut straight through him.

"Whada you want?" The usual challenge fell from the lips of the transgressor.

"You'll find out." The man turned on his heel and began a shrewd peering into the adjoining bin. Around the stock-room he went, examining every nook and corner of it with the air of a bloodhound hot on the scent of a criminal. Every now and then he ran his finger over a stack of books, or about the inside of a bin, then examined it with the air of a scientist.

Leon watched him in open-mouthed consternation. As it happened he had been alone in his glory until disturbed by this strangely-acting intruder. As the man continued to peek and prowl, the watcher began to wonder if he were crazy. A coward at heart, he promptly decamped for the security of the receiving room. His father, not he, should deal with this lunatic.

"Pa, there's a nut in the stock-room," was his alarmed cry, as he sighted his parent. "He's peekin' in the bins and actin' like he was crazy. He jumped all over me."

"In the stock-room?" Mr. Atkins raised startled eyes from a pile of books and headed for the scene of danger on the run. He, at least, was valiant. Several young women who were engaged in marking books dropped their pencils and followed him. From the safety of the door a group of frightened faces viewed the little that was to be seen of the madman. For the moment the major

[78]

part of him was lost in the depths of a bin.

"Stand back, girls." Mr. Atkins forged boldly toward the danger spot. The lunatic was now slowly backing out of the bin. His attention arrested by the sound of voices, he peered owlily over one shoulder. Mr. Atkins gave a gurgling gasp of amazed disgust. In the madman he recognized an inspector whose business it was to wage unending warfare against dust.

The dust man straightened up and favored the unexpected audience with a scowl. He was far from pleased with the results of his investigation. The immaculate cleanliness of both books and bins did not accord with the typed notice which he found on his desk, which stated, "Kindly inspect bins in book stock-room, tenth floor, at 2.00 P. M." Trained to implicit obedience of orders he had followed this particular command to the letter, expecting to discover a liberal coating of his enemy, dust, on everything in that vicinity. He had set forth on his mission with blood in his eye only to stumble upon a lazy boy and lay bare a dustless condition of affairs that filled him with indignant disappointment. He had a feeling of having been cheated and he determined that the sluggard who had roosted in the bin should pay for it.

[79]

"You won't find any dust in this place." Mr. Atkins had fully recovered from his recent shock. "I'd like to know who reported such a thing."

This was exactly what the dust man yearned to know. Still, he had no intention of admitting it. Someone had made a mistake, that was certain. He had not the slightest suspicion that he had been sent on a wild-goose chase. At the "front" was an august body of individuals who explained their motives to no one. He had been sent on the trail of dust and dust was missing. All he could do now was to return whence he had come. His mission had not been without fruit. He would at least have something to say to the book buyer. Without deigning to reply to Mr. Atkins' hostile comment he marched out of the stock-room and to the nearest elevator.

The total collapse of Leon's madman theory sent a very sheepish group of employees back to the marking room. Mr. Atkins lingered, however, to inquire into details. But Leon had none to give him. He was craftily mute regarding his interview with the indefatigable dust destroyer. Now that he knew the man's business he was no longer alarmed at his threat. Very likely the fellow had forgotten about him already.

[80]

Thus comforting himself, Leon made a pretence of work until his father had vanished into the receiving room. After a few minutes' interval, during which no one appeared, he deemed himself safe from interruption.

Again coiling his lazy length to fit the limits of the bin, he was about to draw his truck in place when the sound of brisk approaching footsteps assailed his ears. Giving the truck a vigorous shove he was about to crawl from the bin when a stern voice addressed him.

"So this is the way you do your work, young man."

Leon scrambled awkwardly to his feet to confront a person who in no sense resembled a lunatic. This severe-featured person, who fixed him with a withering eye, was Mr. Brady.

"I wasn't doing nothin'," he mumbled, hanging his head.

"I know you were not, but I propose you shall. If you can't be trusted in the stock-room we don't want you. If I catch you lounging in a bin again, or even hear that you are shirking I'll see that you don't stay long in this store. Now get downstairs and don't come up here again this afternoon unless I send you. Go to Mr. Denby and he'll give you something to do that will keep you awake."

Mr. Brady waited only long enough to see Leon on the move, then he strode into the receiving room.

[81]

"Atkins," he called sharply, "if you can't make that boy of yours work, he can't stay in this department. We are not going to pay him for lounging in the bins when he ought to be hustling."

"I am sure there has been some mistake," began Mr. Atkins apologetically. "Leon never——"

"Don't tell me that. I caught him coming out of a bin. I'm not the only one who has seen him using the bins for a bed, either. See that he keeps busy or out of the store he goes."

Without further words Mr. Brady stalked from the receiving room. The discomfited father muttered under his breath, then hurried into the stock-room in time to meet his erring son at the door.

"Were you in one of those bins when Mr. Brady came up here?" he snapped, taking Leon by the collar.

"Aw, let me alone," whimpered Leon. "I was just lookin' in the bin and he thought I was loafin'. He don't know what he's talkin' about. I'll bet that fresh Harding kid tattled somethin' about me and that's why Brady hot-footed it up here."

Mr. Atkins slowly relaxed his hold. Mr. Brady's words, "not the only one who has seen him using the bins for a bed," struck him forcibly. Strangely enough he did not connect the dust man's visit with that of the assistant. Resentment of Harry made it easy for him to fix the blame on the industrious lad.

[82]

"Where is Harding?" he growled.

"Downstairs, I s'pose. How could he send Brady up here if he wasn't? That smarty has it in for me, I tell you. He's jealous of me."

"I'll 'tend to him," menaced the wrathful father, "but you see to it that you behave yourself."

"I'm behavin'. Now quit jawin' me. I gotta go downstairs and help Denby. Brady just said so."

"Go on then, and don't fool along the way." Mr. Atkins gave his son an ungentle push through the doorway and returned to his own domain, inwardly vowing vengeance on that "tattle-tale" Harding.

Serenely unconscious of the shoals ahead of him, Harry entered the marking room late that afternoon to meet with a stormy reception. Mr. Atkins pounced upon him with a flow of vituperation of which every word was "tattle-tale."

"I don't know what you mean, Mr. Atkins," he said helplessly. "I haven't said a word to Mr. Brady about your son."

"Don't lie to me. Who told him Leon used the bins to sleep in, if you didn't? You know it isn't so."

"I know it *is* so." Harry sprang into nettled defense at the ugly word "lie." His blue eyes grew steely. "Your son takes a nap in that end bin every day. I supposed you knew it." Harry could not resist this one thrust. "But you must not say to me that I told Mr. Brady so, because I didn't." [83]

"I'll say what I please. You told Brady and I know it. You don't like Leon and you pick on him all the time. But it's got to be stopped. You let him alone or you'll be sorry."

"I came up here to say to you that Mr. Rexford wishes to see you in his office before you go home." Completely ignoring the man's threat, Harry wheeled and walked into the stock-room, wondering with all his might what had happened to raise such a storm.

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## CHAPTER IX

 [84]

### THE PARTY OF THE THIRD PART

"Something queer happened this afternoon," were Harry's first words, as he and Teddy started homeward that night.

"Is that so?" Teddy shot a sidelong glance at his companion, then sternly repressed his ever-ready grin. "What was it?"

"Oh, someone told Mr. Brady about Leon going to sleep in the bin. I don't know much about it. I don't even know how it started. But Mr. Atkins blamed me for it and gave me a terrible talking-to. Everything has gone wrong since that boy landed in 84. I don't care so much about the scolding, but he told me I lied and that's pretty hard to swallow."

"Who do you s'pose told him—Mr. Brady, I mean?" Teddy tried hard to keep his voice steady. He wanted to shout with laughter. His scheme had worked. The next moment he began to feel extremely serious. He had not reckoned on involving Harry in it.

"I don't know. I suppose somebody besides me saw him asleep there. Really, I'm glad of it. Mr. Atkins isn't nice to me, anyway. What he said this afternoon doesn't hurt me because it isn't true." [85]

"And you don't care at all?" inquired Teddy anxiously.

"No, I don't. Isn't it funny, though? I said only yesterday that I wished Mr. Rexford would catch Leon asleep in the bin. I got my wish; only it was Mr. Brady who found him out instead of Mr. Rexford. Or else somebody told Mr. Rexford and he sent Mr. Brady up to the stock-room. He wouldn't come himself for anything like that. But whichever way it was, I had nothing to do with it."

"But *I* did," announced Teddy, visibly proud of his achievement.

"*You?*" Harry stopped short in his tracks and stared incredulously at Teddy. "Did you go to Mr. Rexford, or—"

"I did not." Teddy glared offended innocence of tale-bearing. "What do you think I am, anyway?"

"You are as clear as a dark night," jeered Harry. "First you say you did and then you say you didn't. How am I to know what you mean?"

Teddy's grin rivaled that of the famous Cheshire cat. "Some puzzle," he snickered. "I'll bet you can't guess who it was that told?"

"I sha'n't try." Harry rested a grateful hand on the red-haired boy's shoulder. "Whoever it was, you were back of him. You're a loyal pardner, Ted." [86]

"It was the dust man." Teddy's revelation ended in a gleeful chuckle. "It was this way," he continued. Then followed a detailed account of his ingenious method of exposing Leon.

Harry could not help laughing immoderately as Teddy proceeded with his story. "I don't see how you ever happened to think of the poor dust man. He has troubles enough of his own without being dragged into such a scheme. You are a dangerous person, Ted."

"He didn't know he was the goat," asserted Teddy humorously. "What he doesn't know won't make his head ache. All I'm sorry for is that the Atkins man jumped you."

"Don't let that worry you," returned Harry lightly. "As long as I do my work he can't say anything very terrible about me."

"I'm glad of that." Teddy appeared vastly relieved. "If he gets too smart, let me know. I might make *him* behave, too."

"You mustn't try to fight my battles, old fellow," objected Harry. "You might get into trouble. I'm much obliged for what you did. It was kind in you and you really did the store a good turn as well as helping me. No one got hurt by it except Leon and it was coming to him."

"It wasn't anything," deprecated Teddy. "I wonder what happened when the Dustless Duster blew into the stock-room? I wish you'd find out'n tell me."

[87]

"I will," promised Harry. "How are things going in your department? You haven't said much lately about that Mr. Jarvis."

"Huh!" snorted Teddy. "The old Percolator is still percolating around 40. Now that the Clothes-pole's had a good walloping, I've got to see what I can do in the coffee-pot line. Mr. Everett's been having an awful time with him. He butts in everywhere and talks like a book about efficiency and such stuff. He's always bubbling up at nothing. Somebody ought to can him and jam the lid down tight." Teddy did not add that he cherished fond hopes of being that "someone." His method was to do first and crow afterward.

For several days following his triumph in Harry's behalf, Teddy patiently lurked in Mr. Jarvis' wake, the light of mischievous purpose in his bright eyes. Thanks to him, Harry was no longer inflicted with Leon's slothful presence in the stock-room. Mr. Brady had decreed that the idler should remain on the selling-floor where he would be under close supervision. When sent on necessary errands to the tenth floor, he was too rigidly timed to admit of his lingering there. Thus Harry came into the luxury of deserved peace and Teddy turned his active mind to a study of his own affairs.

[88]

The advent of Mr. Jarvis into Department 40 as assistant buyer had announced the beginning of trying days for the inhabitants of that useful realm. Nathan Jarvis was an efficiency crank of the deepest dye. Furthermore, he had an ambition to rule, which a prospective king might have envied. From assistant to buyer was only a step. Secretly he had determined to take that step. In his own estimation he was far more capable to buy house furnishings than Mr. Everett, and he purposed that sooner or later those in authority at Martin Brothers should be made to see it.

Their wits sharpened by constant contact with humanity, the salespersons in 40 were not slow to see what was afoot. One and all they were up in arms. Under Mr. Everett's firm but kindly direction they had been happy. He had treated them as equals, and they had ever shown their appreciation by loyal, painstaking effort. He put them upon their honor and rarely interfered with them. His assistant, Chester Willard, had also followed his chief's example. Now he had gone and in his place had bobbed up a strange, unfriendly person who buzzed about the department like a huge blue-bottle fly, and blazed a trail of rebellion wherever he buzzed.

Had those active in the management of the big store known the disturber's true character, Mr. Jarvis' outlook would not have been rosy. The "square deal" was among the most revered traditions of Martin Brothers. Nathan Jarvis had been careful to create the impression of a man eager and ready to make every moment count toward the good of his employers. He lectured earnestly and convincingly to the superintendent on the beauty and necessity of efficiency as an asset to commercial success. Hailing him as a really valuable acquisition he was already regarded by those who put result before method as a person of unusual judgment and ability.

[89]

Black-eyed Teddy Burke, however, entertained no such fallacies regarding the lively Mr. Jarvis. What he did entertain was a growing desire to worst the usurper at his own game and thus glorify Mr. Everett. While Mr. Jarvis secretly planned to oust the man who stood between him and authority, Teddy was equally resolved upon displaying Mr. Jarvis in his true character.

This was easier planned than accomplished. As a mere stock boy, his influence amounted to less than nothing. But the will to wage war amounted to a good deal. So did his respect for Mr. Everett. These weapons, in conjunction with so devastating a force as the ingenious Teddy, spelled breakers ahead for the ubiquitous assistant. To all outward appearance the red-haired boy was innocence personified, but secretly his mind was a maze of darkly designed pranks. He only lacked the opportunity to let them loose on the offender and he was serenely confident that said opportunity would presently knock at his door.

[90]

Late one afternoon, as he sat on the lower shelf of a table tightly wedged between two immense stewing kettles, the sound of an unpleasantly familiar voice smote his ears. It proceeded from the other side of the very table under which he had crouched for a moment's rest after a long, busy day on his feet.

"What this department lacks, Mr. Seymour, is an efficient hand to guide it," purred Mr. Jarvis. "The old methods of doing things are rapidly disappearing. To-day our motto must be, 'Save time by eliminating all unnecessary motion.' Think what glorious results we should have from this department if we adhered strictly to this rule. Since my appointment here, I have endeavored to do this. But in the face of the opposition which I am obliged daily to encounter from *all* sides, I find it uphill work. Mr. Everett is, unfortunately, of the old school." The assistant sighed audibly.

"You have the right idea, Mr. Jarvis," was Mr. Seymour's hearty reply. "We need such men as

you in the store. I am sure that Mr. Edward Martin would be interested to hear your views in regard to the changes you advocate in this department."

"I hardly feel that I ought to go to him," deprecated the assistant modestly. "It might appear to Mr. Everett as though I were taking these matters above his head. It puts me in a rather delicate position. You understand?" [91]

"Perfectly, Mr. Jarvis," rejoined Mr. Seymour. "But don't let that trouble you. I will speak to Mr. Martin myself. My position here insures me the freedom of doing so. I am sorry that Mr. Everett does not uphold your views."

"It makes my position here a trifle difficult." Hypocritical sadness lurked in the wily assistant's answer. "If we could only work together without so much needless friction, then——"

The remainder of this deceitful speech was lost to Teddy, as the two men walked on up the aisle, unaware that a certain thin, ruddy-haired youngster had been an unwilling listener to their talk. Teddy had deemed it indiscreet to betray himself. It meant a double lecture on lounging, which he felt he did not deserve. After a moment's safe silence had ensued a mop of red hair, followed by a small, tense body, rose from its kettle fortress. Teddy watched the satisfied pair, as they paraded the length of the department. He made a derisive face at their retreating backs.

"So that's the way he does it," pondered the little boy. "No wonder Mr. Everett got jumped on at the front when he tried to help Miss Newton. The old, slippery Percolator is certainly working hard to get Mr. Everett out of here. I s'pose eliminate means to cut out. I've got to get on the job and do something for my best boss. I've got to begin my Fall canning." [92]

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## CHAPTER X

 [93]

### TEDDY BEGINS HIS FALL CANNING

As the early October days waxed and waned, Teddy trailed his quarry with the watchfulness of a sleuth. But Mr. Jarvis was not to be caught napping. His self-lauded efficiency guarded him like a sentinel. He buzzed, bubbled, nagged and tyrannized all in the name of the store. Whatever and whoever he set out to reform, he pounced upon with an awe-inspiring energy that none could combat. Even the Gobbler in her most offended moments could not out-gobble him.

"I never saw the beat of that man!" she exclaimed almost tearfully to Teddy. "I can't do a thing to please him. Here you and me have spent pretty near a whole morning stacking these pans the way he wants 'em and now he says it's not the way he told me. I'd go to Mr. Everett about it, but after what happened that other time I don't like to. He has enough to bother him since this miserable fault-finder came down here."

"It's too bad," sympathized Teddy. "Mr. Hickson told me what he did to Mr. Everett when you went to him. Never mind, Miss Newton, p'raps he won't be here always." [94]

"He'll be here long after poor Mr. Everett's gone," was the woman's gloomy prediction. "He's one of the under-handed kind that won't play fair. When you think you've got him he switches things so as to make you look like the guilty one."

"Sixty-five! Boy!" sounded the call.

"Gotta go. I hear his gentle voice. I'm awful sorry, Miss Newton. I'll come back as soon as I can and help you." With a genial nod of promise, Teddy trotted off in the direction of the call.

"Here, boy. Get these buckets out of the way." Mr. Jarvis stood surrounded by a vast array of large galvanized pails. From an almost bare table, Sam Hickson was removing the last of them to a place on the floor beside others of their kind. The salesman's close-cropped red hair seemed positively to be standing on end with rebellion. His good-humored mouth drooped sullenly, and he looked as though he yearned to say unutterable things.

"Get a step-ladder. Be lively now. These buckets must all be put in place instantly. I can't understand why it should take so long to do such a simple task. *I* could have done it easily in ten minutes."

"You couldn't if you stopped to wait on customers," flashed Hickson, coloring angrily. [95]

"That's no excuse. It should have been done before the customers began to arrive," blandly reminded the assistant. "Now you are wasting time arguing. Get to work and fill this lower rack with buckets. By the time you've finished the boy will be here with the ladder. The idea of allowing all that space on those racks to lie idle!"

"Those racks are very unhandy for buckets," retorted Hickson. "We tried them and the saleswomen had so much trouble reaching up to them that Mr. Everett said not to use them."

"Never mind what Mr. Everett says. *I* am doing this. Don't talk back to me, either. Get busy." Mr. Jarvis took decided umbrage at the mention of Mr. Everett.

Hickson said no more. Fighting savagely for self-control he laid hands on a couple of the largest-sized pails and moved toward the despised rack.

"Not those large buckets," objected the taskmaster. "Use your brain. The smallest sizes must

go on the lower rack; the larger ones above.”

Hickson accepted the correction in morose silence and with a shrug of his broad shoulders endeavored to carry out instructions.

“Ah!” Mr. Jarvis emitted a satisfied cluck. “Here is our ladder. It took you long enough to get it, boy. I could have done it in half that time.”

“Could you?” Teddy simulated a solemn, wide-eyed admiration that nearly convulsed the abused Hickson.

“I could.” Mr. Jarvis took his questioner seriously. “Set it there. Now Mr. Hickson——”

“Young man, will you please wait on me?” A plaintive voice was heard at the assistant’s elbow.

“Certainly you shall receive attention.” Mr. Jarvis beamed patronizingly on the woman. “What can we show you this morning?”

“I’d like to look at a small oven. You see I do light housekeeping and——”

“What *you* need, Madam, is a fireless cooker. You have no idea of the time and labor you can save by installing one in your home. Now the fireless cooker which we principally handle is a marvel of——”

“I wouldn’t have one in the house.” The plaintive tones took on a shade of belligerence. “I came to see an oven and it’s an oven I want. If you don’t care to show it to me I guess I can go somewhere else. If I don’t know my own mind, then I don’t know who does.”

“Hickson, show this lady what she *says* she wants.” Mr. Jarvis lost interest suddenly in the customer. He waved her away as though in a hurry to be rid of her. “Here, 65, you can put these buckets on the top shelf. *I* will hand them up to you. Set the ladder right there. Now, hustle.”

Teddy ran up the five steps of the ladder with the agility of a monkey. The assistant seized a bucket in each hand, and, rising on his capable toes, delivered them to the waiting Teddy. For the next five minutes the efficiency man was in his glory. From a safe distance several salespeople watched the scene with scornful grins.

“I gotta move my ladder.” Teddy skipped down from his perch and shoved the ladder along a few feet.

“A little farther the other way. Right there. Now step lively. Two minutes more will see us finished.”

Teddy again ascended like a bird and waited. Four more buckets clanked to rest on the heights. Only a lonely duo now adorned the floor. Mr. Jarvis swooped down on them, then poised one of the pair in reach of Teddy’s thin fingers. Teddy gazed soulfully down upon the round, up-turned face of his helper. He leaned a trifle forward as though to take the bucket. The ladder gave a sudden, threatening lurch. In a wild effort to regain his balance, he waved the huge bucket over the efficiency man’s head. Very curiously it turned upside down and descended.

The remaining bucket in Mr. Jarvis’ hand left it and careered down the aisle with a wild rumble. But the bucket that had recently parted from Teddy’s hand was denied that pleasure. It had found a resting-place and remained fixed.

Then the delighted spectators to the moving scene were treated to a spectacle that furnished them with hilarious memories for many a long day afterward. The hitherto inanimate bucket became miraculously endowed with a short, pudgy body and a pair of furiously flapping arms that had formerly belonged to Mr. Jarvis. Down the aisle it staggered, crashing full tilt into a table of saucepans, a number of which bounced to the floor in noisy resentment of the invasion.

Stranger still, the magic bucket came into possession of speech. A tumult of unintelligible sounds, such as only an animate infant bucket could be expected to make, flowed forth from under it. Then its brief debut into the animate was over. Violently it severed connections with the body it had appropriated and hit the floor with a rattle and roll.

“Oh, Mr. Jarvis, did it hurt you?” Two round, solicitous, black eyes met those of the sputtering efficiency man. While Mr. Jarvis’ head was imprisoned in its galvanized cast, Teddy had indulged in a silent extravagance of glee that nearly spilled him off the ladder. He was now as solemn as a judge. Angelic pity shone from his freckled face.

“You—you——” Mr. Jarvis was absolutely bereft of speech suitable to the crime.

“I almost fell off the ladder myself,” comforted Teddy gently, “but accidents have to happen sometimes. I guess I better pick up those saucepans. If Mr. Seymour came along and saw them all over the floor he mightn’t like it.”

“What are all these pans doing on the floor?” a stern voice broke in. Mr. Everett had come upon the scene just in time to miss the accident. “See that they are put straight at once, Teddy. Such a litter is a disgrace to the department, Jarvis.”

Mr. Everett marched on down the aisle, secretly exultant that for once he had caught his obnoxious assistant to rights. The efficiency man’s face took on a poppy-red hue. For once he was dumb. The rapidity with which things had happened fairly dazed him.

“Pick up those pans,” he muttered. With one awful glance at the author of the disaster he took himself off to the far side of the department to think things over.

Teddy gazed dreamily after him. Reaching into his coat pocket he drew forth a tiny, leather-

[96]

[97]

[98]

[99]

covered book. From another pocket he produced a stubby pencil. Resting the book on a step of the ladder he wrote briefly, "October 6. Canned the Percolator." After it he made a long, black mark. "Some time he'll stay canned," was his sage prophecy.

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## CHAPTER XI

### THE MARTIN MINUTE MEN

[100]

"Well, Reddy, you did it." Sam Hickson regarded the grinning knight of the ladder with mirthful eyes. Half an hour had elapsed since Mr. Jarvis' temporary eclipse, and the redoubtable Teddy had purposely sought out his friend to hear his views on the subject.

"It was just like a play, wasn't it?" chuckled Teddy. "Where the villain gets canned in the last act and the hero comes up and gives him the ha, ha! I was glad Mr. Everett got a chance at him. It took all the bubble out of him."

"I'm glad you haven't got it in for me," retorted Hickson. "You're not a safe person to be on the outs with."

"Friendship is a golden tie," murmured Teddy. "My last year's copy-book said so, and I say so, too."

"Much obliged." The salesman slapped Teddy on the back with appreciative vigor.

"I didn't say anything about knocking your friends down, though." The affectionate blow caused Teddy to ruefully rub the spot between his thin shoulders where it had descended. "I'm not made of wood."

[101]

"You're made of mischief," laughed Hickson. "You're chuck full and running over with it."

"P'r'aps. Say, did that funny woman who wanted the oven buy one?"

"No, she's poking around here yet. She says she can't make up her mind until she looks things over. Maybe she wasn't mad at Jarvis. She says he thinks he is too smart. I hope she buys. It's going to be a dull day. Somebody just told me that it's raining outside."

"Hm-m!" Teddy cast a roving glance across the department. "I guess I'd better do a little work for a change. I'll see you later." He sauntered off in the direction of the spot devoted to the display of ovens. From afar he had glimpsed the woman who did not admire Mr. Jarvis. "Maybe I can help her pick out an oven and get a sale for Mr. Hickson," was his kindly thought as he approached the undetermined customer.

"I'll open that door for you, Madam." The woman was tugging fruitlessly at the obstinate door on an oven that had caught her fancy.

"Oh, thank you." She favored this unexpected helper with a pleasant smile. "Why, you are that boy who was standing there when that horrid man tried to tell me that I didn't know what I wanted. Who is that man? I asked the salesman who showed me these ovens, but he didn't hear me, I guess." There was a note of menace in her question that was not lost on Teddy.

[102]

"Oh, that is our assistant buyer. His name is Mr. Jarvis. He's an efficiency man."

"He's not half so efficient as he might be," snapped the woman. "Now that I know his name I'm going to report him. This seems to be a good oven." Engaged now in peering into it, she did not mark the seraphic joy on a small freckled face.

"It's a very good oven," assured Teddy glibly. "If you'd like to buy it I'll get Mr. Hickson to wait on you."

"Very well. Have you a pencil and paper? I wish you'd put down that man's name and the number of this department. I shall write to this firm about him."

Teddy got out his notebook and pencil. With deep satisfaction he tore a leaf from the back and inscribed on it, "Mr. Nathan Jarvis, Dept. 40." Before he put the book away he turned to the front page and wrote, "October 6. Canned again by a customer." A second sinister mark followed this pertinent item. "That's pretty good for one day," he murmured, as he tucked the record of the morning's preserving in his pocket. "If he gets bottled a few more times, he can have a label and be put in Martin Hall for a decoration. Pickled Percolator would look nice." Teddy giggled to himself as his whimsical imagination pictured the plump assistant unhappily confined in a huge glass jar, a gigantic, awe-inspiring monument to the pickler's art.

[103]

Although Teddy's sworn crusade against Mr. Jarvis might easily be criticized, it must also be remembered that his motive, at least, was prompted by loyalty alone. Had the assistant been merely a disagreeable factor in the department the lad would have accepted him as such and foreborne to play on him more than an occasional mischievous prank. Mr. Jarvis, however, was engaged in an enterprise of the most contemptible nature. By false words and gross misrepresentation he was laboring to cut the ground from under Mr. Everett's feet.

Teddy knew this. His sturdy boy nature revolted at the very idea of such unfairness. What he yearned to do was to expose the assistant's shortcomings to the public. He was too shrewd to be deceived by Mr. Jarvis. He knew, as well as others in the department knew, that the man was not

even a truly capable assistant. His knowledge of the stock he burned to become buyer of was not sound. Moreover, his methods of running the department were too unsettled and flighty to insure success. His superiors had yet to learn this. Now that the bugle call for efficiency was blaring its warning note throughout the business world, he was possessed of a valuable ally. Teddy believed that his duty lay in catching the plotter in his own net.

[104]

For a week after the fatal bucket episode, Mr. Jarvis had considerably less to say than usual. The sixth of October had not been a red-letter day for him. First of all he had been made the victim of what he privately knew to be an intentional accident. Mr. Everett's untimely appearance on the scene had spoiled the arraignment he had purposed to let loose on Teddy. The buyer's reprimand had put him to rout. Later he was glad he had said nothing to the lad. The red-haired boy's air of calm innocence would have proved impregnable.

Three mornings afterward he had been summoned to the superintendent's office as a result of blandly accusing a woman of not knowing her own mind. In the face of the indignant letter that he had been coldly requested to read, his volubility deserted him. He was forced to listen to a number of pointed remarks relating to courtesy to customers and admonished that it was the policy of the store to humor rather than antagonize the public. Nothing was left him save to apologize hypocritically for what must "surely have been a misunderstanding," and retire with dark thoughts concerning "meddlesome women."

"The Percolator looks as if he'd like to bite to-day," confided Teddy to Harry Harding several days later, as the two sat eating their noonday luncheon. Although Teddy was not aware of it, Mr. Jarvis had that morning been taken to task by Mr. Everett for making a change in the arrangement of certain stock, contrary to the buyer's order. In consequence, the assistant was immersed in his own wrath, and presented a most war-like appearance as he marched up and down the confines of 40 on the hunt for trouble.

[105]

"You'd better be careful he doesn't bite you," was Harry's playful caution.

"He's afraid of me," grinned Teddy. "I'm such a good boy I scare him. If he got after me, Mr. Everett'd take my part."

"But suppose you did something so bad that Mr. Everett couldn't help you?" Harry was merely teasing, but Teddy took it seriously.

"I never do anything bad," he boasted, elevating his sharp chin to a lofty angle. "I'm s'prised at you, Harry Harding."

Harry's boyish laugh rang out. "I was only joking, Teddy," he apologized. "I know you wouldn't do anything very terrible. Dustless Dusters and buckets that walk are your limit."

Teddy acknowledged his crimes with a snicker. "I've gotta turn over a new leaf," he announced. "Night school's going to begin to-morrow. Did you know it?"

"Yes; I found out this morning. Mr. Marsh sent a messenger around the store with a notice. I suppose you signed it, too."

[106]

"Yep. I wonder if we'll like night school? Last year I was mad as hops because I had to go to day school. Remember?"

"I certainly do. How about it this year?"

"Oh, I'd just as soon go. I don't want to grow up a dummy. Besides, it's only two nights a week. I hope Mrs. Martin'll give us a good supper," ended Teddy waggishly.

Both boys giggled at the bare idea of the stately wife of the senior partner in the rôle of cook for a horde of hungry boys.

"I don't care much what I have to eat. It's school I'm thinking of." Harry's eyes glowed at the prospect of resuming his studies.

"Huh!" snorted Teddy. "I guess when I work all day I oughta have a good supper. If I don't like the stuff they give us to eat, I'll make up for it when I get home. What I like best is that we are going to be soldier boys. We'll be joining the 'Martin Minute Men' now. Some name."

"I suppose it came from the Minute Men in the Revolutionary war," mused Harry. "It's a dandy name. Seems fine to think of being men instead of just boys. We are to drill an hour after supper each night before school begins."

"Yes, and we'll wear khaki uniforms like the real soldiers and in summer we can go to camp, and whenever our country needs us we'll be all ready to go. Hurrah for the good old United States!" Teddy's voice rose shrilly as he waved his spoon fantastically on high.

[107]

"Sh-h-h!" cautioned Harry. The little boy's joyful outcry could be heard above the clatter of dishes and busily humming voices.

But Harry's warning came too late. The roomful of lively boys had heard the cheer and now echoed it with a noisy fervor that made the walls ring.

"Now are you satisfied?" laughed Harry, as the tumult gradually subsided.

"I didn't think I was hollering so loud." Teddy appeared a trifle abashed. "Anyhow, who's going to care? Nobody that loves his country could scold you for hurrahing for it."

Teddy was still more confused when in the next moment he found himself and Harry completely surrounded by a crowd of merry-faced boys, all talking at once.

"What's the matter with the U. S.?" demanded Arthur Worden joyfully. "And what's the matter with Teddy Burke?"

"Nothing's the matter with either of 'em," was Howard Randall's tribute. His fat face was beaming approval of Teddy. Out of their early squabbles had sprouted firm friendship.

"We were talking about school," explained Harry, "and Ted got excited over being a Minute Man."

"We're all crazy to get our uniforms," put in another boy eagerly. "I hope I'll be in the same company with you fellows. We all have to go up to Martin Hall to-night."

[108]

The lads lingered about the table until the last moment of their lunch hour. Teddy and Harry were deservedly well-liked and outside of Leon Atkins' dislike for Harry, neither had an enemy among the boys of the store.

Teddy's fears in regard to the supper that night were groundless. The management of Martin Brothers furnished for their young men a plain but substantial meal that was exactly suited to their needs. Both lads were supremely happy as they sat at table in the great dairy lunch room with a goodly number of other young men, still the raw material from which was to come the new life and blood of the great establishment that housed and protected them.

Again they thrilled with pride as they sat beside their comrades in Martin Hall and listened to the inspiring speeches of Mr. Keene and Mr. Marsh. Then came a general looking-over and registering of the two companies. These were named Company D and Company E to distinguish them from those of the store messenger force who had yet to graduate from day school. All those whose last names began with one of the first thirteen letters of the alphabet were consigned to Company D. The others fell to Company E.

Company D, to which Harry and Teddy now belonged, had Tuesday and Friday assigned to them for their school work. Company E went to school on Monday and Thursday nights. At the conclusion of the registration and assignments Mr. Keene again mounted to the stage and addressed his flock.

[109]

"Boys," he said, "I am glad to see that you are glad to come back to school. You've shown us that to-night by your attention and enthusiasm. This year you are going to do more than be good pupils. You are going to be good soldiers. That means a great many different things. I know that there isn't a boy here to-night who wouldn't willingly lay down his life for his country."

Mr. Keene was interrupted by a frantic burst of cheers. He smilingly waited for the demonstration of applause to die away. Then he continued:

"Your cheers prove you are patriots. Love of country is the highest form of patriotism, but there's another kind of patriotism that counts, too. It is loyalty to the house that employs you. If you try to do the best that is in you for those who are trying to do their best for you, then you are patriots. A patriot at work will become a patriot at war. Wherever you may be placed, boys, whether it's in this store or in the trenches, be loyal to your trust; obedient to your orders. Whether it means business or war, remember you are on the firing line and must prove yourselves to be good soldiers. That's all."

[110]

Mr. Keene smilingly nodded down at the rows of upturned faces. As he left the stage he received a tribute of boyish adoration that echoed and re-echoed through the great hall. There was but one Mr. Keene.

"I guess anybody'd want to be a good soldier just to please Mr. Keene," glowed Teddy, when, half an hour later, the chums trotted homeward together through the crisp, starry October night.

"He's splendid." Harry reinforced Teddy's enthusiasm. "Isn't it wonderful, Ted, that we can work in a store like this?"

"Yep. I'm going to stay in Martin Brothers' store till I'm dead. When I get too old to be superintendent, I'm going to get a job in the transfer gathering up packages."

"If you ever got to be superintendent, you'd have money enough to live on when you were too old to work," smiled practical Harry.

"That's so," admitted Teddy, "but I wouldn't have much fun. I'd rather hustle a truck than get old and sit in the sun and have only crackers to eat and think about the Dragoness and the Clothes-pole and the Percolator and all my dear friends. I guess I won't grow up. I'd rather stay a red-haired boy with 65 for a number."

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## CHAPTER XII

[111]

### THE BOY WHO COULD FORGIVE

With the beginning of school a fresh era of interest arrived for Harry and Teddy. As October waned, faded and finally gave up the ghost in the icy arms of November, the two boys found themselves in the thick of many happenings. Being soldiers was a never-ceasing source of delight to them. They looked forward with the eagerness to their semi-weekly drill which preceded lessons. Companies D and E were recruits to the regular Minute Men of the store and were under

the efficient guidance of a retired officer of the National Guard. A wound received while with his regiment on the Mexican border had unfitted him for the further strenuous service required of the regular militia, but he proved an admirable instructor and Martin Brothers were highly gratified to obtain him for their purpose.

The night school was a true commercial institute. Its curriculum of study included such subjects as would be most useful to a working boy. Arithmetic, English, spelling and simple book-keeping were taught in the first year's course. One evening was devoted to arithmetic and English; the other to spelling and book-keeping. As the night school did not take the students from their store duties, it remained in session until the last week of December to reopen immediately after the annual counting of stock. [112]

As a soldier boy Teddy was in his glory. When not at drill, he marched about, his thin little body erect with military precision. At home he was never tired of going through the manual of arms for his proud mother's benefit, and more than once in Department 40 an obliging broom or mop furnished him with a make-believe gun with which to exploit his newly learned tactics of war for the benefit of his friend Sam Hickson.

Affairs in house furnishings had been progressing a trifle more smoothly of late for Mr. Everett. A two-weeks' illness had removed his guileful assistant from the lists. During that time the department had thriven and rejoiced, and the worried expression on the buyer's clean-cut face had completely disappeared. In the fervor of being a good soldier, Mr. Jarvis' absence suited Teddy down to the ground. "I'm sorry for anybody that's sick, but I can't cry because the Percolator's not percolating for a while. I gotta lot of business of my own to tend to and if he was flying around here I'd just have to fly after him." Teddy had confided this to Hickson, who laughingly agreed that Mr. Jarvis' absence was a good thing for everybody all around. [113]

In Department 84, Harry Harding was also proceeding far more peacefully through November than he had hoped. Mr. Atkins was too much rushed by the heavy consignments of books that daily poured in upon him to trouble himself greatly about Harry. Since Mr. Brady had established lazy Leon on the selling floor, where he could be watched, a load had been lifted from both Mr. Atkins' and Harry's shoulders. The latter could readily have given points to the proverbial busy bee. Work, when uninterrupted by the disagreeable Leon, was a pleasure, and he waded into it for all he was worth.

The early part of November found him dividing his time between the stock-room and the department. On the selling-floor he was at everyone's beck and call, where he was so uniformly cheerful and willing as to create a constant call from the various salespeople for his services. Miss Breeden alone held aloof. Whatever she wished done she ordered Leon to do and this showed Harry plainly that she had not forgiven him for the unfortunate incident of last year.

It was while he was helping Mr. Denby arrange a table one snowy morning that he made a discovery. Mr. Barton was missing from his usual environment. As the day passed he failed to materialize and Harry wondered vaguely where he was. Three days passed and still he was not among those present. A strange young man walked about the missing aisle manager's domain and from Mr. Denby, Harry learned that Mr. Barton was ill. In answer to his query, "What is the matter?" the salesman shrugged and replied that he didn't know, nor did he seem to care. [114]

"What ails Mr. Barton, Miss Welch?" It was now the fourth day of the man's absence and after making fruitless inquiry about the department Harry had come to the pretty exchange clerk for information. Why he was so anxious to find this out he did not know. From within had sprung a certain strange prompting to inquire into the cause of Mr. Barton's malady.

"Poor Smarty Barty's in bad," informed the exchange clerk. "He's got something the matter with his stomach, I guess. He was sicker than the sickest the last day he was here. I almost felt sorry for him. After all it ain't no fun to be down and out in a boarding house with no one to care whether you live or croak."

"I thought he had a home." Harry frowned thoughtfully.

"Now who'd wanta live with him?" demanded Miss Welch with fine disgust. "He'd wear out the patience of a saint. Just like that." She snapped her fingers. "Say, it's awful for me to talk so, now isn't it? But never mind, maybe I'm just a teeny bit sorry for him. Poor old Smarty." [115]

"Of course you are," nodded Harry. "You are too nice and kind not to care when someone's in trouble."

"Listen to him. Soft soap, Kiddy, soft soap." Miss Welch dimpled prettily at the compliment.

"It's not soft soap. I mean it. Where does he live, Miss Welch?"

"You've got me, boy. Wait a minute now. Come to think of it his address is kicking around this desk somewhere. Was you thinking of paying him a visit?" The girl's voice held a note of good-natured raillery. She fumbled obligingly about her desk. "Here it is. Amos Barton, 6143 Wayland Street. That's way up on the north side."

From his pocket Harry took a note-book and gravely copied the address. "Want to go with me, Miss Welch?" he asked. "I'm going there to-night as soon as I've had my supper."

"Sure I'd go, but I've got a date with a coupla girls to take in a show. The tickets are bought, too. Don't you get lost out there."

"I can find it. I'm sorry you can't go. I'll tell you about how I came out to-morrow."

"Be sure you do, Harry. Is this the pattern counter?" She repeated the question of a sad-faced [116]

man who peered timidly at her through his glasses. "I hope not yet." Her dimpling sally made the sad man smile. "Over the other side, two aisles to the right.

"Now what do you think of that?" she giggled, after watching the man depart. "The idea of sending a *man* out to buy a pattern. I'll bet he can't tell a bath-robe from an evening dress. No wonder he looked like a whole buncha gloom."

"Maybe he's a tailor," guessed Harry. "I must go. Thank you for the address."

"Keep the change and buy an aeroplane. Give my regards to *Mister* Barton and tell him I miss him. You needn't say it's a good miss, though."

More than once during that day Harry debated within as to whether or not he had best call on Mr. Barton. He had told Miss Welch that he intended to go, but still he was not quite sure that it was the thing to do. On the way home he confided his project to Teddy, who received it with derisive hoots. "Catch me going to see that old crank!" was the little boy's scornful exclamation.

Mrs. Harding, however, viewed it from a different angle. "If you feel that it is right to go, Harry, then go by all means. I am glad to see you can sympathize with another in distress."

That settled it. The moment he had finished his supper, Harry put on his hat and coat and set out through a blinding flurry of snow that had begun to fall before Teddy and himself had reached home that evening. It was several blocks to the point where he could catch a Wayland street car, but he plodded manfully along, frequently brushing the snow from his face.

It was a fairly long car ride to 6143 Wayland Street. The house in which Mr. Barton lived was a four-story brick structure set in the middle of a row of similar residences. A stout, gray-haired woman with hard blue eyes answered his ring. When he timidly asked for Mr. Barton she frowned as though seized by an unpleasant memory.

"He's not here," she said shortly. "They took him to the hospital yesterday. I'm too busy to wait on a sick man and he didn't have any place else to go. He groaned and took on something awful. He owes me for his board for this week, but I suppose I'll get that. Are you any relation of his?"

Harry smiled faintly. He was dreadfully disappointed. "No; I work in the same store he does. Will you please tell me to what hospital he was taken?"

"To the Cameron. Did you come here with his salary? If you did, I'll just take care of it. I can keep his board out of that."

Harry had hard work not to betray the indignation he felt as he answered: "I only came to see how he was. I don't know anything about his affairs." The woman's unfeeling attitude made him doubly sorry for the helpless man left to the mercy of strangers.

"Well, he's not here. You'd better go to the hospital." She closed the door in his face with a decisive slam.

Harry walked away from the house undecided what to do next. He had no idea of the location of the Cameron Hospital. "Maybe I'd better look for a drugstore and telephone. I can't go home and rest until I find out about him," was his thought. Two blocks further up the street the red and green light of a drugstore shone. He hurried there, hastily consulted a telephone directory and taking his only nickel, his carfare home, telephoned the hospital.

He was informed that Mr. Barton was there and "doing nicely." Harry did not know that this trite phrase was used to describe all conditions of a patient, whether lightly or seriously ill. No, he could not see Mr. Barton in the evening. He was in a ward. Visiting hours were on Monday and Friday afternoons between two and four o'clock. He could come then.

"A lot they know about it," smiled the nettled lad, as he hung up the receiver. "I'll have to ask for some time off and go. Thank goodness, to-morrow's Friday. It looks pretty bad. Poor Mr. Barton. Now I'll have to walk home. I'll get there late, too. Mothery'll be worried."

It was half-past ten when a veritable snow-man stamped into the Harding's little living room. Harry was wholly correct in thinking that his mother would worry.

"Child alive, what made you stay so late?" she cried, her brown eyes full of anxiety. "I thought something awful had happened to you."

"Not a bit of it. Wait till I get off my coat and I'll kiss you."

"Take off those wet shoes and clothes and get into your pajamas and bathrobe. Hurry now, or you'll catch cold. I'll fix you some hot milk." The little woman bustled about in behalf of the returned wanderer.

Ten minutes afterward Harry was comfortably arrayed and curled up at his mother's feet, a cup of steaming milk in his hand. "My, but this is comfy. Now listen, Mothery, while I tell you about Mr. Barton."

"The poor thing!" Mrs. Harding brimmed with sympathy at Harry's story. "Be sure you get off to-morrow and go to see him. But why didn't you wait till morning, Son, to telephone? That was an awful walk for you to take."

"I couldn't, dear. I couldn't rest until I found out about him. Are they good to folks in hospitals?"

"If you have the money." Mrs. Harding's reply was tinged with bitterness. "It's all right if you can pay. If you can't they do the best they can for you, I suppose. They have so many patients who are too poor to pay their way that they get so they don't sympathize much with them. I

[117]

[118]

[119]

[120]

should think an aisle manager could pay his way. He must get twenty-five dollars a week."

"I don't know. I'll have to find out." Harry viewed his cup of milk with a sober gaze. "I was just thinking how much I've got to be thankful for. You and health and work and a home. And Mr. Barton hasn't anyone. I never told you, Mother, but he wasn't very good to me last year. I thought then that I hated him. I found out just lately the reason he was so cross. He's had dyspepsia for years. He might have been real pleasant if he'd been well. It just shows that one person never knows much about what's going on inside another person, after all."

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## CHAPTER XIII

### THE ERRAND OF MERCY

[121]

"**A**nd he's in a hospital! Well, what do you know about that?" Miss Welch regarded the bearer of this astounding information with the air of one who is completely flabbergasted. "The Cameron, did you say? That's not so far from here. 'Bout a mile, I guess. And you're going to see him. Well, take it from me, you're the whitest kid I know."

Harry colored a trifle at this blunt tribute to himself. "I'm going this afternoon. Mr. Brady said I could."

"Did you tell him what you wanted to get off for? I'll bet you my hat you didn't."

Harry's color deepened as he shook his head. "I thought I'd find out all about Mr. Barton first," he explained. "If I had told Mr. Brady that I went to Mr. Barton's boarding house last night, he might have thought it funny. Maybe he wouldn't have let me off. He might have said it wasn't necessary and just telephoned the hospital himself. That wouldn't suit me. I want to see him myself."

[122]

"Foxy little kiddo," commented Miss Welch. "That's just about Brady's speed. Talk about hospitals! You might as well try to pry open a safe with a toothpick as to get those frosties to talk over a 'phone. They'd say, 'he's doing nicely' if he was at his last gasp. That's a little sidetrack they're fond of laying. I know. I had a brother down with typhoid at the Stevenson a coupla years ago. I almost had to break down the doors to get to see him."

"The man on the telephone said last night that Mr. Barton was doing nicely," admitted Harry. "I didn't know they always said that. It's a good thing I asked off. After I've seen him I'll know if there's anything I can do for him. That lady where he boards didn't seem to care for anything except what he owes her."

"She's no lady," contradicted Miss Welch. "She must have a chunka rock for a heart. I wonder if poor old Barty had any coin? It's a chilly day for him if he's broke."

This was a point which Harry also had gravely considered. "Would the store pay him his salary just the same if he were sick a long time?" was his anxious question.

"Nope. They hardly ever do it in such a big place as this. Of course, there's the store beneficiary. He'll get something every week from that as long as he's sick. Not more than six or seven dollars, though. That might see him through, but seven-dollar-a-week patients don't get any better treatment than the free ones. They chuck 'em together in the same wards and serve 'em all alike. That's what they did to my brother, and we paid seven."

[123]

Harry left the exchange clerk's desk considerably enlightened on the subject of hospitals. Now that he was ready to embark on his errand of mercy, he was somewhat concerned as to his reception at the Cameron. "I suppose hospitals have to be as strict as stores," he reflected. "Probably they have so many poor folks to look after they can't afford to treat them better." In reality this is the precise truth as regards the majority of hospitals in a large city. Except in the case of those which have been liberally endowed, a constant struggle goes on to meet the heavy demands made upon them by poverty-stricken humanity.

The boy's heart beat a trifle faster that afternoon, when at five minutes to two o'clock he stopped for a moment at Miss Welch's desk to tell her he was about to set forth on his pilgrimage of comfort.

"Have you any word to send to Mr. Barton?" he asked. "You said for me to stop and see you when I was ready to go."

Miss Welch gave a short, embarrassed laugh. Reaching under her desk she brought forth a long, narrow pasteboard box, bearing the name of a nearby florist.

[124]

"I couldn't let you beat me to it, Harry," she said almost apologetically. "When I went to lunch this noon I blew myself to these carnations. They ain't much, but mebbe they'll help some." She did not add that the silver dollar they had cost her was her week's spending money.

"Oh, Miss Welch, you are splendid! I know he'll like them. It will help me, too, to be able to give them to him. Then he won't think it queer of me to go to see him. Besides, he'll be glad to know you remembered him and are sorry he's sick."

"Away with you!" Miss Welch's eyes were misty as she waved Harry off on his errand. "Who'd ever thought I'd be sending posies to Smarty? It's that blessed boy's fault." She dashed her hand

across her eyes and plunged with relief into crisp discussion with a woman who vainly strove to exchange a wedding present of silver for cash.

The Cameron Hospital was situated on the corner of Tremayne and Harris Streets, a distance of about fourteen blocks from Martin Brothers. It was a huge, overwhelming, gray stone building, extending almost the length of the block. Harry felt curiously timid and insignificant as he mounted the wide stone steps. He had never before entered a hospital and the prospect dismayed him. Half expecting to be rebuffed by the grim-faced man at the door, he was agreeably surprised to receive prompt attention when he had explained his errand. [125]

The ward in which Mr. Barton lay ill was on the fourth floor. Carefully following directions, he presently reached it to be challenged at the door by a white-capped nurse. Again Harry was called upon to state his business, then followed the young woman into a long room and down a wide aisle formed by row after row of narrow white beds.

"Here is a visitor for you, Mr. Barton." The nurse had halted beside the very last left-hand bed in the row. Standing directly behind her, Harry's heart was filled with pity as he caught sight of Mr. Barton's familiar features, now too plainly stamped with suffering. He lay with closed eyes, which opened languidly at sound of the nurse's voice. An expression of unbelieving amazement swept his gaunt face as he recognized his caller.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Barton." Harry smiled and held out his hand. "I heard you were sick, so I thought I'd come to see you."

Without speaking, the man weakly clasped the proffered hand. In his tired eyes was a dumb agony of contrition that words could never have expressed. "I'm glad to see you, my boy. It was kind in you to come," he said faintly.

"I would have come to see you before, but I didn't know you were so sick. I've brought you some flowers. Miss Welch sent them. She is sorry for you, too." Briskly Harry opened the box and displayed the pink, fragrant token of sympathy. "Aren't they cheerful?" he asked, holding them up. "Before I go I'll ask the nurse to put them in water and set them on that little table. Then you can see them all the time." [126]

To his utter consternation, Harry saw a tear roll down the sick man's cheek. "This won't do at all," he decided. "I've got to cheer him up. I'd better pretend not to notice and start in and tell him about last night." With a gay, boyish laugh he began: "I went to your house last night, Mr. Barton, and got caught in a snow storm. I was a regular snow-man by the time I got home. It was an awful night, but it's nice out to-day, only the streets are full of snow."

To his relief no more tears fell. A flash of interest crossed the sick man's face as he heard this information. "What—did—the woman at my boarding-house say to you?" he inquired.

"Oh, she said you had left there for this hospital yesterday. So I telephoned right away to ask about you. I wanted to see you because—well—I hoped I could do something to help you. I wish, if you feel you'd like to, that you'd tell me just how things are with you."

Mr. Barton studied Harry in silence. Something in the lad's direct, friendly gaze compelled confidence. He sighed, then said huskily, "Things look pretty bad for me, Harry." It was the first time he had ever addressed Harry by name. Formerly it had always been, "Boy," or "45." [127]

"Would you care to tell me just how bad they are?" queried Harry gently. "You can trust me, you know."

"I know that." Mr. Barton sighed again. "You're a good boy and I've been very unjust to you."

Harry made a quick gesture of dismissal. "Just tell me about yourself," he urged. "How serious is your sickness and must you stay here long before you're well again?"

"It's my stomach," replied the man. "I've had trouble with it for years. I always thought it plain dyspepsia, but there's a complication that only an operation will cure. But it's too expensive. Not only the operation, but afterward. I'd have to rest for several months. I can't afford to do that, and yet I can't afford to lie here. I don't know what to do. I've never saved any money. I've just been able to live on my salary and send a little each month to a sister who's an invalid." His speech trailed to a despairing whisper.

"I see how it is," Harry nodded seriously. "If you could somehow get enough money for the operation and afterward, you'd be all right. Perhaps if you'd send for Mr. Edward Martin and tell him this, he might help you." [128]

"I couldn't do that." The aisle manager shook his head stubbornly. "I've never asked anyone for help yet and I'd rather die than do it now." A dull flush of humiliation rose to the pale cheeks. "He has so many demands made on him. I couldn't do it. Could you?"

"I don't believe I'd like to," confessed Harry. "Still, there ought to be some way out for you. I'm going to try to find it. I'll think as hard as I can and next Monday I'll try to come here again. If I can't I'll write you."

"You're a good boy; a good boy," repeated Mr. Barton. "I don't deserve it. I never did anything for you except make you trouble. You shame me, Harry." Again he appeared on the verge of breaking down.

"Now, Mr. Barton," Harry laid his hand lightly on that of the sick man. "You mustn't think of that. It's not good for you. We're going to be friends from now on and I'm going to help you. I must hurry back to the store at once. Oh, yes, I wanted to ask you, will your beneficiary money

pay your board here?"

"Yes; it's seven dollars a week and that is what I am entitled to draw. There is one thing I'd like to ask you to do. Draw the salary that's coming to me from the store and pay my board at Wayland Street. It's nine dollars. There's just about money enough owing me to pay it. Ask the nurse for a pen and paper and I'll write you an order. Give it to the pay-master and he'll give you the money. I haven't anyone else that I can ask. I could write to the store, but it would be quicker for me to have you attend to it. Will you do it?" he quavered anxiously. [129]

"Of course I will." Harry's pity was doubly aroused. What a dreadful thing it was to be so lonely and friendless!

As Harry left the hospital with the order for Mr. Barton's salary in his pocket, his mind was painfully bent on how he might accomplish the impossible. He was not afraid to go to the senior partner of the store with Mr. Barton's case, but in the face of the man's strong objection he was loath to do so. During the balance of the afternoon he devised a number of wild schemes to help the stricken aisle manager, every one of which he renounced as impracticable.

It fell to Teddy Burke, however, to present him with an idea that he marveled he had not thought of himself. Harry related the details of his visit to Teddy as they trudged home from work through the snowy night. Although the little boy kept up a running fire of skeptical comment, he was none the less deeply impressed.

"I know what I'd do if I was you," came Teddy's inspiration. "I'd give a show and then take the money and give it to his nibs."

"A show!" Harry looked startled. "What kind of a show and where could we give it?"

"Well, let me see." Teddy considered owlshly. "You could have—I know what you could have. You could have a show in Martin Hall with singing and dancing and such stuff. You'd better go to Mr. Keene and tell him about this Barton fellow and why you want to have a show. Then, if he says it's a go, I'll ask Miss Verne to help. She knows all the people in the store that do stunts. We could have it the evening before Thanksgiving and have notices all over the store that it's a benefit for a sick employee. You don't have to say who he is." Teddy paused after this brilliant outburst. [130]

"Teddy Burke, you're a real genius. That's a dandy idea. I'll see Mr. Keene to-morrow."

"I'd just as soon sing if you want me. That ought to count some," offered Teddy pompously. "Everybody made a fuss over me when I was in that play last year."

"Oh, you will be the star performer," promised Harry happily. "We'll have to hurry to do it, though. It's only a little over two weeks until Thanksgiving."

"I'll do my part, if you do yours. If we make a lot of money for old Smarty, who's had all the smartness taken out of him, we'll be some folks with the people in the store."

"See here, Ted, I hate to say it, but if we do this we ought not to let anyone know that we were back of it. It would be better to have Mr. Keene and Miss Verne take the credit. We are just boys, you know. If we went around saying it was our show, people might not care to come. I don't want any glory. I want the money for Mr. Barton." Harry shrank from the thought of letting his right hand know the deeds of his left. [131]

"I s'pose that's so." Teddy saw his dreams of becoming a public benefactor vanishing in thin air. "Folks might say that a show got up by a coupla kids wasn't much. We'd better let Mr. Keene and Miss Verne run it. That is, if we have it. Anyhow, I'm going to sing, and believe me, I'll be some little old singer, just to make up for that time I called Smarty a crank and got you into trouble."

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## CHAPTER XIV

 [132]

### TEDDY SCENTS A MYSTERY

Mr. Keene's astonishment at Harry's proposal, made on the following morning, was soon swallowed up by his readiness to carry out Harry's laudable plan. "It takes a pretty broad-minded boy, Harry, to suggest helping a man who once made matters uncomfortable for him," he said with a significance that brought the blood to the boy's cheeks. Mr. Keene had learned from Mr. Marsh of Harry's trials of the previous year.

"He needs help," was Harry's quiet reminder. "I think giving a show would be a nice way to help him. Teddy Burke was the one who thought of it. I didn't know what to do. We don't care to have anyone but you and Miss Verne know that we had a hand in it."

"I will talk with Miss Verne about it this afternoon," promised Mr. Keene.

Here Harry's part in the plan ended. Confident that Mr. Keene would set things in motion, he went light-heartedly back to his department, patiently to await further developments. Already he felt assured that Mr. Barton's chances for proper treatment and health were rosy. [133]

True to his promise, Mr. Keene sent for Miss Verne that very afternoon. An hour's earnest consultation put Harry's plan in a fair way of being speedily accomplished. The next day Miss

Verne went about the store interviewing those whose special talents would be needed for the coming benefit. Mr. Keene also busied himself in seeing to it that a goodly number of typed notices were established at various points of the store where they would attract the most attention. At his own expense he gave orders for the printing of tickets of admission, setting the price at the modest figure of thirty-five cents. He had wisely reckoned that a crowded house at the price was more to be desired than one half-filled at fifty cents.

By the time the tickets were ready, the performers were diligently rehearsing for the event and the whole project proceeded with a smoothness that promised brilliant fulfillment and many dollars.

Aside from Teddy, Harry, Mr. Keene, Mr. Marsh and Miss Verne, only one other person in the store had been let into the secret. Privately, Harry had confided the whole affair to Miss Welch. The exchange clerk expressed her delight in her usual warm-hearted, if inelegant fashion, and clamored to be allowed to sell tickets. Mr. Keene had already given ten tickets to each boy on the store messenger force with smiling orders not to return one of them. He had also shrewdly offered a prize of five dollars to the boy who should sell the most tickets and competition ran high. [134]

Several days previous to the entertainment, the first lot of tickets ran out and another lot was hastily printed. Many of them had been purchased by the employees of the store who were ready and willing to contribute their mite to so worthy an object. But customers and members of employees' families rallied to the cause and it was generally conceded by those intimately interested in the benefit that on the great night Martin Hall would be filled to overflowing.

Teddy Burke was down on the programme for two songs. In consequence, he was highly pleased with himself. Every night he rehearsed them at home with his mother at the piano. On the evening before the benefit, Mrs. Harding and Harry were to take dinner with the Burkes, and Teddy was to sing them for his friend's edification. Mrs. Burke and Mrs. Harding were, of course, in possession of the inside facts of the benefit. It was in the natural order of things for Harry to confide in his mother. Teddy, however, who delighted in being impressive, had exacted his mother's solemn vow of secrecy before imparting to her the information. [135]

The one bitter drop in Teddy's cup of satisfaction was Harry's interdiction which forbade him to acquaint his friend Sam Hickson with the inside facts of the coming benefit. The red-haired salesman obligingly bought two of the tickets Teddy had for sale with the flattering comment, "I guess it won't kill me to hear you sing, Reddy." His accompanying smile plainly said that it was solely on that account that he bought them.

"Are you going to take your girl?" was Teddy's pointed question.

"Do I have to tell that?" grinned the man.

"Sure you do, when I ask. You tell me that and some day, 'bout two years from now, I'll tell you something that'll s'p'rise you."

"What if I'm dead by that time?" teased Hickson.

"Aw, keep it to yourself." Teddy prepared to take himself off. "I don't want to know, anyway."

"Then I'll tell you. I'm going to take my mother. She's my best girl."

"My mother's going to be there, too. Let's introduce our mothers to each other. You wait till the benefit's over and I'll bring mine around to where you are."

"That's a go." Hickson looked well pleased.

"I've sold twenty-eight tickets," boasted Teddy. "I've got two more yet to sell. Guess I'll ask the perky Percolator to buy 'em. Just for a joke, you know." [136]

"Better not," advised Hickson. "He's as cross as two sticks since he came back. Being sick upset his calculations, I guess."

"Oh, I was only fooling." Teddy really meant it. Yet later in the day, when the two tickets still reposed in his pocket, he changed his mind. Sidling up to the assistant, his black eyes two wells of seraphic confidence, he said sweetly: "Would you like to buy a coupla tickets for the benefit, Mr. Per—Jarvis? They are only thirty-five cents apiece. It's to help a man who's very sick."

Mr. Jarvis threw up his plump hands in an impatient gesture. "Don't say tickets to me, boy. I have been asked a dozen times to buy tickets for that ridiculous affair. Benefits are a needless nuisance. If this man, whoever he is, had saved his money he would not have become a public burden. He failed to practise efficiency; now others are asked to pay for his failure to provide for himself. Such improvidence is disgraceful."

Teddy's freckles stood out darkly against the angry red that burned behind them. "S'pose you got sick and hadn't anyone or anything to help you. Wouldn't you be glad if somebody gave you a benefit?"

"I cannot imagine any such situation," came the pompous answer. "My efficient methods protect me against any emergency. Instead of wasting Martin Brothers' time selling tickets, you had better attend to business. Come with me and I will give you something useful to do." [137]

"Something useful" turned out to be the distasteful labor of transferring a flock of unwieldy kettles from their abiding place on the under shelf of a table to the same lowly position beneath another. When Teddy had thumped the last one into place he rose to his feet filled with wrath and bedecked with dust. Thoughts of compassion for Mr. Barton, which had swayed him since the

preparations for the benefit had been in full swing, were now obliterated by his old desire to torment Mr. Jarvis.

"Wish I could make him eat his old efficiency," was Teddy's savage reflection, as he started for the lavatory to wash his grimy hands. "I've been so busy selling tickets I'm 'fraid I've neglected Mr. Jarvis. I'll have to get on the job again. My efficiency tells me it's about time to do some more canning."

Yet for several days following Teddy's renewal of his crusade, Mr. Jarvis bustled about house furnishings, triumphantly uncanned. Anxious to make up for lost time the assistant had again resumed his badgering of the salespeople in 40. He and Mr. Everett were continually at loggerheads, and the old, worried frown had returned to the buyer's brow. Teddy was indefatigable in his efforts to catch Mr. Jarvis at a disadvantage, but the latter trotted about the department, scathing in his fault-finding, himself unscathed. [138]

Three days before Thanksgiving found Teddy divided between anticipation and despair. Anticipation of the entertainment which was to be held Thanksgiving eve; despair of catching Mr. Jarvis off his guard. As he stood eyeing his pet aversion, who was superintending the disposal of a consignment of long-handled floor brushes with the gentle behavior of a section boss, Teddy wished with whimsical cruelty that said brushes would suddenly rise up and thump him.

"Why, Teddy Burke, how are you? I haven't seen you since you left day school." A soft voice broke in on his vengeful meditations.

Teddy whirled about at sound of the clear, sweet tones, to confront Miss Leonard, his teacher of last year. The young woman smiled radiant pleasure at sight of her pupil and held out her hand. The boy shook it with joyful fervor. He was very glad to see Miss Leonard.

"I'm ever so glad to see you," he said, looking up rather more shyly than was his wont. "How did you happen to be down here? Don't you work in the store now?" He noted that Miss Leonard wore her coat and hat. "You used to be in the mail-order department afternoons, didn't you?"

"Yes. I am still in the store. I teach in the mornings, but in the afternoons I go about the store and do a great many different things. Some days I am in the Correspondence or the Bureau of Adjustment. Then, too, I work in the Catalogue or Comparison departments. But just now, well, I'm doing something else." She smiled mysteriously. "If you happen to see me down here now and then in the next few days, don't be surprised." [139]

"I won't." Teddy wondered mightily as to the nature of Miss Leonard's enterprise, but he asked no questions. He had a conviction that it would not be proper. If Miss Leonard had wished him to know she would have told him. Nevertheless, his ever ready curiosity came to the front. When she left him after a moment's pleasant conversation, Teddy had fully decided to find out a few things for himself.

After Miss Leonard had left him to walk slowly about the department, he flitted after her, keeping at a safe distance. He watched her eagerly as she stopped Miss Newton. He saw Miss Newton wag her head and point toward an elevator. He noted, too, that instead of going directly to it, Miss Leonard waylaid Sam Hickson and addressed him. Hickson's lips moved in an answer. Miss Leonard nodded and smiled. Instead of proceeding to the elevator she turned and walked out of the department in an opposite direction.

"Say, do you know that pretty young lady with the brown hair? She spoke to you." Teddy had hastily pursued Hickson to ask the question. [140]

"What lady? Oh, I know. You mean that woman who asked me where she could find down pillows? No; I never saw her before."

"Humph!" ejaculated Teddy. "That's funny."

"Why is it——" began Hickson, but Teddy had already scuttled up a side aisle to where Miss Newton was laboriously counting her sales.

"Did a brown-haired, pretty lady just ask you where the elevator was, Miss Newton?" quizzed the boy, his black eyes full of curiosity.

"Why, no." Miss Newton looked up from her sales book. "A young woman asked me where school supplies were. I told her first floor, and directed her to the nearest elevator."

"Thank you." Teddy had departed as suddenly as he appeared. A moment afterward his red head bobbed up in the immediate vicinity of Sam Hickson.

"You back again!" teased Hickson. "Where did you beat it to so quick?"

"See here, I've got something on my mind. It's the Mystery of Miss Leonard; or, why does a teacher ask questions?"

"You've got me. Talk English. I'm no mind reader." Hickson leaned against a table and beamed tolerantly at his small questioner.

"That lady that spoke to you is Miss Leonard, my teacher last year. She's been in the store quite a while. She knows where everything is, but she goes and asks you and Miss Newton 'bout where things are. I was talking to her just before she stopped you. She used to be in the mail order afternoons. Now she says she goes all over the store. She said I needn't be s'prised to see her down here again soon. Now what do you s'pose she's doing?" ended Teddy, bent on unravelling the mystery. [141]

"How should I know?" Hickson said lazily. "I'm not hired to keep tabs on her. By George!" His

indolent expression vanished. "I wonder if she's being sent around as a spotter? I'm glad you told me that, Teddy."

"What's a spotter?" Teddy demanded.

"A spotter is one who spots," defined Hickson humorously.

"Clear as mud," jibed Teddy. "Spots what?"

"Salespeople, of course. This girl has been sent around to find out if we know where the different departments are. Customers are always kicking because they get directed wrong. Every once in a while the front sends girls around to ask questions. They ask you where such and such a thing is? If you don't answer correctly, they get your number and report you. Then the front gives you a call down. Salespeople are supposed to know where everything is, so that they can direct customers. See?"

[142]

Teddy considered. "Could she report anyone; buyers or assistants or aisle men?"

"Anyone at all. The higher up they are the worse it is for them," was Hickson's cheering information.

"I guess I'll go'n take a look at the demonstrator. She might give me a hand out. She's been making little cakes all day. I've had three already. I might bring you one."

Teddy strolled toward the stove-haunted regions in charge of the kindly demonstrator. But his mind was not on cakes. He stared at that stout, amiable person with vacant eyes, and when she presented him with cake number four he thanked her and absent-mindedly stuffed it into his pocket, thereby reducing Hickson's promised treat to crumbling ruins.

No; Teddy Burke's mind was not on cakes. His fertile brain was seething with a brilliant idea in which cakes played no part.

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## CHAPTER XV

[143]

### THE PLOT THICKENS

Thanksgiving Eve saw Martin Hall crowded to the doors. With the prospect of a day's rest and feasting ahead of them, the sympathies of those in attendance had gone out to the lonely sufferer in the Cameron hospital. A few of the employees had guessed his identity, though they could not be sure of it. In so vast a business establishment as Martin Brothers it was hard to trace the comings and goings of one particular individual. It was gossiped about Mr. Barton's domain that he was the man for whom the benefit was to be held, yet so well did the few who were in the secret keep it that no one knew the exact truth of the matter. The very fact that the sufferer's identity had not been disclosed lent a piquant air of mystery to the benefit.

It is always the needy who respond first to the call of charity. Those who know best the pinch of poverty give most ungrudgingly of the little they have. Those who work hardest for their daily bread understand best the tragedy of being caught unawares by sickness. Although many of the higher-salaried men and women of the store had bought tickets, only to pass them on to others or return them to be resold, the greatest rallying to the standard had been done by the humbler employees.

[144]

An unusually good programme had been arranged, for the store boasted of many clever singers, dancers and elocutionists. Miss Verne had worked unceasingly. Aided by one or two professional friends outside the store, several attractive singing and dancing numbers had been perfected and from beginning to end the audience was delighted with what was offered for their amusement.

The honors of the evening, however, were divided between Teddy Burke and a young girl whose really remarkable dancing proved a veritable sensation. Teddy's high soprano voice had never rung out more clearly and sweetly. Miss Verne had taken great pains in the selection of his songs and he was encored until he positively rebelled and refused to show himself further on the stage even to bow.

But the wildest demonstration of the evening occurred when immediately preceding the final number, Mr. Keene made a speech, thanking the audience and announcing that over four hundred dollars had been cleared as the result of the benefit. He wished them all a happy Thanksgiving, and sent them home with the pleasing reminder that they had helped to bring a wonderful Thanksgiving to one in need. If Mr. Keene had had his way he would have liked to call Harry Harding to the stage and introduce him as the author of the affair. He even suggested this to the boy, who became so distressed that he relinquished the idea.

[145]

Down in the audience, seated between his mother and Mrs. Burke, Harry Harding's earnest face irradiated happiness. He had no desire for glory. He was glad that he would not even be called upon to go to see Mr. Barton again. Mr. Keene had taken all that off his hands. Harry had visited the sick man three times. On his second visit he had told the aisle manager that his case had been laid before Mr. Keene and that plans for a benefit were in progress of being carried out. Of his own part in the affair he had said nothing, and so adroitly had he managed that Mr. Barton had accredited the benefit to Mr. Keene. He was intensely grateful, however, to Harry for his

kindness and humbly promised the boy that, once back in the store, he would make ample amends for the past.

Due also to Harry's suggestion, Mr. Keene had interviewed the superintendent, who promised that Mr. Barton should be reinstated in his former position whenever he was able to return to the store. Thus Harry was content to remain a nameless force for good, but he could not know that the results of his splendid behavior were to be far reaching. [1476]

"Maybe that wasn't a great little show," was Miss Welch's opinion, as she left the hall that night in company with several girl friends. "I'll bet Barty'll sing a Thanksgiving hymn. I know one person that ought to get a lotta stars in his crown for that benefit." She neglected to state the identity of that person. Miss Welch could keep her own secrets.

On Thanksgiving Day the Burkes and the Hardings made merry together under Mrs. Burke's hospitable roof. Teddy and Harry spent a long, delightful day with Teddy's numerous games. It ended after supper with an old-fashioned sing at the piano, when everybody warbled with a will and no one criticized the quality of the singing.

The Friday after Thanksgiving was a busy day for Teddy Burke. While he did his work in his usual brisk, commendable fashion, he kept a starboard eye out for the return of Miss Leonard. To his intense disappointment she did not appear. Still he had strong hopes of Saturday. It was usually a banner day in house furnishings, and should Miss Leonard be sent there, she might easily trip a busy salesperson who was too much rushed to use caution in replying to her apparently innocent inquiries.

"The Percolator is pretty perky to-day, isn't he?" remarked Teddy to Hickson, as he stopped for a word with the salesman when on his way to lunch. [1477]

"He's the limit," growled Hickson. "Do you know what he did yesterday? He told Seymour that the way Mr. Everett ran this department was a disgrace to the store. Someone, I won't say who, heard him. You know Seymour. He believes everything he hears and runs to Mr. Edward Martin with it."

"But can't Mr. Everett prove that it isn't so?" Teddy frowned in troubled fashion.

"How can he, except by his returns?" demanded Hickson savagely. "If this fellow keeps things in such a hub-bub here, we're going to lose sales and the department'll run behind. He keeps Mr. Everett in such a stew that he can't do as well as if he wasn't half worried to death. The best man can't stand everything. This dub has made 'em believe that he's the king of tin pans. How's anyone going to prove that he isn't until Mr. Everett's out of here and he gets a chance to queer himself? When the mischief's done, it'll be too late. If Everett once goes out of here, because of this ignoramus, he'll get something better. He'll never come back here. These people up above can't see it. I can."

"So can I," agreed Teddy. "If Mr. Everett goes, I'll go too. I guess that'd be some loss to Martin Brothers!"

"Ha, ha!" jeered Hickson. "You certainly think a lot of yourself, don't you? Who are you, anyhow?" [1478]

"I'm *Mr. Burke*, and I've got feelings. I'm going to lunch." Teddy stalked grandly toward the elevator. The moment he had turned his back on Hickson he snickered. Then his mirth died away as he muttered: "I hope I see Miss Leonard to-day."

About the middle of the afternoon Teddy's hopes were realized. He spied his former teacher at the far end of the department moving slowly up and down the aisles formed by the tables, her interest apparently absorbed by the various engines of housekeeping. As she continued to wander innocently about, every now and then she halted a salesperson to converse briefly. At the conclusion of one of these momentary interviews Teddy saw her take a little book from her shopping bag and write in it. Directly after that she stopped Mr. Duffield as he hurried by her. The alert watcher then noted that she pointed out to the aisle manager the salesperson she had just addressed, and again jotted something down in her book.

"Mr. Duffield's in it," was the boy's wise conclusion. "Guess I might as well get in the game, too."

Marching jauntily up to the teacher, Teddy boldly addressed her. "Good afternoon, Miss Leonard. Looks as if you'd catch a lot of folks this afternoon. It's so busy down here, though. You can't blame the sales much if they give you a wrong direction." Teddy presented the acme of affability as he launched this dart. [1479]

It struck home. Miss Leonard flushed to the roots of her brown hair. She frowned with vexation, then she laughed. "You are a wise little boy, Teddy. Who told you so much?"

"Oh, I'm not 'sactly blind." Teddy grinned cheerfully. "Say, Miss Leonard, I know a fellow here who doesn't know where some of the things in this store are. He thinks he does, but he's got another think coming. One day he sent a man clear to the fourth floor for sporting goods. They're on the balcony, you know." Teddy's sad experience of the previous year with a refractory baseball had irrevocably fixed in his mind the location of sporting goods.

"Those are the very persons I wish to trip," returned Miss Leonard. "You see, Teddy, of late there have been so many complaints from customers who have been misdirected by employees of the store that something had to be done about it. Just a little while back the management distributed printed lists of the location of every department in the store, which every person was

supposed to study. I wish you'd point this man out to me. I'll test him."

"See that fat man over there?" Teddy pointed toward a not far distant spot where a plump, sleek individual stood raptly gazing at a select company of blue and white agate ware that adorned a long, low shelf. "He's the one. Ask him—ask him where soda straws are. His name's Jarvis. He's an efficiency crank and our assistant buyer."

[150]

Miss Leonard looked a trifle blank. As a matter of fact, she herself did not know the answer to this simple question. Privately, she determined to find out. Still it would never do to admit such ignorance to this guileful child.

"Thank you, Teddy," she said with an elaborate carelessness that in no wise deceived the wide-awake youngster. Her change of face had already informed him of her defective information.

"If he doesn't answer right will he get reported?" was Teddy's eager question.

"He surely will," smiled Miss Leonard. "If he preaches efficiency he ought to practice it."

"That's what I think." Teddy wriggled with wicked satisfaction. "If I see you writing in your book after you ask him, I'll know that he didn't know."

Miss Leonard cast a quizzical glance at the small plotter. "Would you like me to report him, Teddy?" was her amused question.

"Well, if a fellow doesn't know where things are, I s'pose he ought to be reported." Teddy took an evasive but firm stand for duty.

"I suppose so." The teacher flashed Teddy a mischievous glance and moved briskly down upon the unsuspecting victim. Assuming the bewildered air of a shopper who implores guidance she paused before the smug assistant and inquired sweetly, "Will you please tell me where I can find soda straws?"

[151]

"Soda straws?" Mr. Jarvis repeated uneasily. "Oh, yes. Certainly, Madam, delighted to be of service to you. Soda straws are—they are—at the soda fountain, of course."

"But where is the soda fountain?"

"It is——" Mr. Jarvis gulped nervously. His efficient manner of living flouted the delectable concoctions of the soda fountain. Hence he was unprepared to disclose the location of so useless a haunt. "You will find it on the first balcony." Providentially, he had chanced to recall seeing ices served there at small tables. He wildly guessed the soda fountain to be in the immediate vicinity of these tables.

"Thank you." Miss Leonard turned abruptly away in time to hide the dimpling smile that lighted her attractive features. Retiring to a safe distance she gleefully recorded Mr. Jarvis' wild attempts at direction. She had no doubt that from some safe nook a pair of mischievous black eyes were bent on her as she made the fatal record. But before she wended her steps officeward, she passed through a wide, high-arched doorway that divided house furnishings from a flourishing commercial village devoted to women's wear. On and on she went through busy seas of feminine apparel; through an enterprising display of trimmed hats. At the very end of the basement, where a huge sign spelled "Subway," she turned a corner and brought up at a hissing marble fountain, surrounded by long counters before which sat rows of persons busily engaged in the partaking of delicious cheer.

[152]

Leaning over an end of the counter she beckoned a white-jacketed young man. "Can I buy soda straws here?" she questioned.

"No, Miss. We don't sell them here. You'll find them all the way back in house furnishings." He darted away to appease a clamoring patron.

"The little imp!" muttered Miss Leonard. She was not referring to the white-coated young man. Nevertheless, she smiled and continued to smile as she made further notes in her faithful journal, then sought a nearby elevator.

Meanwhile, in Department 40, Teddy Burke was also engaged in making a few notes. A new line now appeared in his tiny leather-covered book. It read: "November 30th. Canned again."

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## CHAPTER XVI

### AN UNLUCKY DISCOVERY

[153]

On the following morning Mr. Jarvis was distinctly nonplussed by a summons to the office of the system manager of Martin Brothers. Once there he was shown a neatly typed report of his lapses of yesterday and sarcastically taken to task for his lack of knowledge in regard to store geography, and, yet more reprehensible, his ignorance of a certain very humble portion of his own stock, namely soda straws.

To complete his humiliation he was handed a printed list of the store's departments and their location and curtly requested to study it. The manager's dry comment, "One of the first principles of store efficiency should consist in a thorough knowledge of the store itself," rankled in the assistant's soul. He left the office consumed with a dull, helpless rage against the unknown

spotter who had brought him to grief, little dreaming that the prime offender marched daily about Department 40.

In some peculiar manner, explainable only by a certain Titian-haired youth, the story of Mr. Jarvis' fatal attempts at direction crept about the department and the salespeople of 40 enjoyed a good laugh at his expense. Although Teddy could not know it, his little joke on the assistant had been the means of striking the first definite blow for Mr. Keene. The shrewd system manager had not been impressed by Mr. Jarvis, and he mentally ticketed the assistant as a man of pretension rather than worth. Later this secret opinion was destined to be brought to bear on a number of conditions in house furnishings hitherto unrevealed.

[154]

But while Teddy Burke was sailing serenely along from one day to another, Harry Harding's working hours were not filled with unalloyed content. With the beginning of December the book department saw the first stirrings of the rush, which, until Christmas, made it one of the busiest spots in the store.

The vast amount of books that had to be carted from the stock-room to the department made Leon Atkins' frequent presence on the tenth floor a disagreeable necessity. The moment he was out of Mr. Brady's sight he fell back into his slothful habits. True, he no longer napped in the bins, neither did he distinguish himself by any really useful effort.

He deemed it prudent, however, to let Harry strictly alone. He firmly believed that Harry had been the one to call Mr. Brady's attention to his derelictions, and he was a trifle afraid to court a further exposure. Intent on exacting petty revenge, he made it a point to aggravate Harry by every possible means that would defy detection. To return from his luncheon only to find a certain bin he had left in perfect order reduced to chaos was a common occurrence with Harry. Books which he placed in one bin had a trick of mysteriously disappearing at the very time they were needed. Later, after he had listened to the grumbling of the salespeople because he had failed to produce instantly the stock they required, a distracted search would reveal them roosting placidly in an alien bin.

[155]

Harry knew only too well by whose hands his truck was spirited away on a busy morning when he needed it most. Unable to secure the loan of another truck he had toiled wearily throughout a whole day lugging heavy piles of books downstairs by hand. When in desperation he had spent almost the whole of the following morning in frantic search for his missing truck, he had finally discovered it in a remote corner of the tenth floor securely chained and padlocked to a staple in the wall.

Harry felt that he was above noticing such petty meannesses. Were he to accuse Leon as author of them he knew that the latter would make loud denial. He had no wish to reopen the squabbles of early Fall. Still, the frequent admonitions of the impatient members of the department, "Now do try to hurry those books down, 45," or "What makes you so slow, boy?" cut him to the quick.

[156]

Of late it seemed to him that Mr. Rexford had treated him a trifle less kindly than was his wont. He sadly wondered if anyone had complained of him to the buyer. Before he had gone on his vacation he and Mr. Rexford had been on the most friendly terms. As a matter of fact, the increasing business of the department had completely occupied the buyer. Only one adverse criticism against Harry had reached his ears, but that was a long one.

In speaking to Mr. Brady of the boy's usefulness, the assistant had said with a shake of his head: "Harding is not the boy he was last year. You've spoiled him by making too much of him. That Farley affair, together with winning that prize for his address last June, has given him a swelled head. He's one of the sly, quiet kind that pretends to be an angel, but just the same he's careless and a trouble maker. When he's in the stock-room he picks on Atkins' boy all the time. Atkins himself told me so. He's getting so he can't be relied on to fix a table right. He mixed one for Miss Breeden a while ago and we had a row with a customer over two-priced books under a one-priced sign. I called Miss Breeden down for inattention to her stock, but it was more young Harding's fault than hers."

"It is hard to believe all that, Brady," had been Mr. Rexford's incredulous reply.

[157]

"Can't help it. It's the truth," Mr. Brady had insisted. He was really honest in this. Mr. Atkins and Miss Breeden had done their best to thus impress him.

Mr. Rexford had silently reserved judgment of Harry until hearing the boy's side of the story. Twice he had set out to seek the lad and question him. Both times he had been interrupted in his quest. Afterward business stress had driven it from his mind. If he had chanced to encounter Harry face to face an understanding would have no doubt ensued, but, as it happened, he saw him only from a distance and at times when he was occupied with other things. And thus an intangible shadow rose between the boy who was ever earnestly striving to do his best and the man whose good opinion he valued above all.

Several mornings after Harry had rescued his truck from durance vile, his work took him to the selling-floor for the morning. A long row of shelves that ended where the jewelry department began were awaiting a refilling of titles temporarily out of stock. The shelves were under the charge of a pleasant young woman who handled the rebound fiction and her confidence in Harry was sufficient to allow him to go on with the work she had begun while she served a steady stream of customers. From his position before the shelves, he glanced now and then toward the exchange desk where Miss Welch reigned supreme. He also had an excellent view of the jewelry department and in his boyish way he marveled at the number of people who were able to

[158]

purchase the costly articles that lay beyond his reach.

At either end of a counter very close to him which was devoted to the display of expensive rings lounged a detective. During the month of December the great department stores are obliged to keep an especially vigilant watch over their jewelry sections. At such a time light-fingered gentry are always abroad and each year the stores suffer from their depredations.

It was in one of the occasional glances which Harry leveled at the ring counter that his cursory attention became fixed on a well-dressed woman who was engaged in critical examination of a small tray of rings. Harry watched her in fascination as she tried on one ring after another and held up a plump white hand to view the effect. Now and then she turned for approval to her companion, a slender, very blonde young woman with shifty blue eyes. By the alert watch which the salesman behind the counter kept on the tray Harry knew that the rings must be valuable.

At length the woman narrowed her field of selection to one ring, a good-sized ruby set between two equally large diamonds. She held it up for her companion's inspection. The blonde girl shook her head and shrugged her disapproval of it. Harry noted that she immediately turned her eyes to another part of the tray. While the elder woman focussed the salesman's attention, Harry saw the other's slim fingers dislodge a ring at the extreme edge of the tray. She regarded it casually, made a move as though to return it to its velvet bed, examined it again and carelessly laid it on the counter close beside the tray. Had the salesman been less occupied he might have noticed this. His attention, however, was on the prospective buyer of the other ring. The woman was holding it toward him, her forefinger on the ruby. As she touched it she shook her head vehemently. The man smiled a refutation of her protest. Reaching into a coat pocket he drew forth a small lens. Holding it to his eye he took the ruby ring from the older woman's hand and peered at it through his glass.

[159]

Just then Harry saw something which made him grow hot and cold. While the salesman was thus engaged, the older woman kept her eyes directly on him. One plump hand lightly grazed the edge of the tray as she leaned far forward. With the swiftness of lightning it left the counter and dropped to her side, carrying with it the ring which the younger woman had carelessly neglected to replace.

Amazement of the daring theft dazed the boy for an instant. Then he realized that he must act with all speed. It was evident that he had seen something which had not been observed by even the detectives. He glanced toward one end of the counter to note that one of them had disappeared. At the other end stood Mr. Prescott, his gaze focussed on a group of women near him.

[160]

For a second the obnoxious duty of fastening theft upon a woman caused Harry to falter briefly. Then he squared his shoulders and walked resolutely to where Mr. Prescott stood. A backward glance informed him that the two pilferers were still at the ring counter. Had he looked back once more he would have discovered that the blonde young woman was no longer in evidence. Her companion alone remained there, still deep in conversation with the salesman over the ruby ring.

"Mr. Prescott." Harry's voice sank to a breathless whisper. "Come quick. I saw a woman steal a ring. She has it in her coat pocket now. She's still at the counter talking to the salesman."

Mr. Prescott's eyes narrowed. His face became an emotionless mask as he muttered without perceptible movement of the lips, "Which is she? Don't point. Walk toward her, stop for a second directly behind her, then walk on. Don't look back at me."

Implicitly Harry followed the detective's directions, then went back to his work. He dared not look again toward the ring counter, although he knew nothing would happen there. Mr. Prescott would trail the woman entirely out of the store before seeking to detain her. When an hour later he was summoned to Mr. Prescott's office, he went trembling in every limb. Having done his duty to Martin Brothers, a painful experience was ahead of him.

[161]

As the door of the detective's office closed behind him, he instinctively felt that something had gone wrong. True, the prisoner was there, seated on an oak bench, the picture of raging innocence. Mr. Prescott, too, looked like a thundercloud as he beckoned Harry to his desk. "Is this the woman you say you saw steal a ring?" he coldly questioned.

Harry quailed inwardly, but his tones were firm as he replied: "Yes, sir. This is the woman."

"He lies," burst forth the prisoner furiously. "I wouldn't dream of doing such a dreadful thing!"

"Please be still, Madam," snapped the detective. "I'll hear what you have to say later." Scowling at poor Harry, he continued: "What kind of a ring was it? Tell me what you saw."

"I can't describe the ring, sir." Harry went on to relate what he had seen.

"It's not so," shouted the accused. "I was alone. A young woman who stood beside me asked me several questions about the prices of the rings in that tray, but she was a stranger to me. I never saw her before. I merely spoke to her because she spoke to me. Your store will pay for this insult! I'll bring suit against Martin Brothers."

[162]

"Now, now, Madam. Not so fast. If you have been unjustly accused we will do all in our power to make reparation. I have sent for one of our woman detectives. You will have to submit to being searched."

"Let her search me then," defied the prisoner. "I am not afraid. The idea of taking a boy's word against a customer's! Oh, you'll regret this."

"You may go, Harding." Mr. Prescott's face was an angry red as he issued the stern command. The woman's censure had flicked him on the raw. Remembering Harry's clever work in the case of Farley, he had taken the boy's word and made the arrest. Now he wondered if he had made a fool of himself.

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## CHAPTER XVII

### DECORATING A DÉBUTANT

[163]

Sick with humiliation, Harry hurried from the office. He was conscious of having done his duty, yet the woman's amazing willingness to submit to search filled him with consternation. He had seen her drop the ring into her coat pocket. If it were not there now, then where could it be? What had become of her companion? Ah, that was it. In some mysterious fashion, known only to a shoplifter, she had passed the ring into the blonde girl's keeping. Yet she declared that her companion at the counter was not her companion but a stranger. Harry did not believe this statement. Yet how was he to prove that she had spoken falsely? If the ring were not found in the woman's possession, it would place him in an unenviable position. He was quite sure of that.

The moment he returned to the department, Mr. Brady pounced upon him. "Where were you, 45? I've been looking for you for the last twenty minutes."

On receiving the summons from Mr. Prescott, Harry had not asked permission to leave the floor. His work took him so constantly from the department to the stock-room that he had not counted on being missed. Not wishing to explain the nature of his brief withdrawal, he had for once taken a chance.

[164]

"Mr. Prescott sent for me," he replied in a low tone.

"What!" exclaimed Mr. Brady. Sudden suspicion leaped into his face. "Why did he send for you? What have you been doing?"

Harry grew distressed. "I haven't been doing anything wrong," he faltered. "A woman took a ring; I saw her take it and reported her to Mr. Prescott."

"Humph! You'll gain more by attending to your work and letting the detectives run their own affairs," grumbled the assistant. "Now get busy and finish those shelves. Then go up to the stock-room and bring down a load of those 'Children's Classics.' Miss Porter's waiting for them."

Harry was thankful that Mr. Brady did not exhibit much interest in his disastrous attempt at sleuthing. He wished with all his heart that he had not seen the theft of the ring. Where and how would the affair end?

Directly after luncheon a second summons came from Mr. Prescott. This time Harry was careful to obtain Mr. Brady's permission. It was grudgingly given and the boy had hardly turned away before the assistant made straight for Mr. Rexford's office, disgust written in his face.

[165]

Harry's second interview with Mr. Prescott was one that lingered long and painfully in his memory. The prisoner had departed, vindicated and threatening. A thorough search of her clothing by a woman detective had revealed no trace of a ring. The salesman had been interviewed and declared that he had missed none of his stock. Privately he was not at all sure of this, but he was too cowardly to say so. A missing ring meant trouble for him.

Mr. Prescott was in a fine fury. He had taken too much for granted and he knew it. Were he to complain of Harry to the front, he was quite likely to court censure for acting merely on the word of a boy, without waiting to see for himself. He had been too sure of Harry. On this account he was doubly bitter and the scathing words he hurled at the cause of his discomfiture would ordinarily never have issued from his lips. He ended with, "You've made a nice mess of things. This woman will sue the store for heavy damages and it's all *your* fault. But *I'll* be the one that will have to take the blame. Now get out of here, and, after this, try to mind your own business."

Harry went with flaming cheeks and quivering lips. But another ordeal was still before him. He had hardly returned to the floor when he received notice from Mr. Brady that Mr. Rexford wished to see him.

[166]

"What is this Mr. Brady tells me, Harry, about you seeing a woman steal a ring?" Although the buyer's tone was kindly, it lacked much of its old heartiness.

Harry's heart sank. He read faint disapproval of himself in the question. Briefly he rehearsed the sordid details of the affair. Mr. Rexford listened thoughtfully and not without interest.

"You may be right about the other woman being a confederate," he mused. "Still the whole thing looks rather bad for you. I wouldn't think too much about such things if I were you, Harry. Leave them to the detectives. That's their business."

"But I *saw* her take it, Mr. Rexford," was Harry's distressed cry. "If I saw someone stealing a book from your department, wouldn't you want me to report it to the detectives before they got away with it?"

This was a poser. Mr. Rexford's grave face relaxed a trifle. "I suppose I would. Still you may have been mistaken to-day."

"I wasn't mistaken. I saw her take it. I know the other woman slipped away with it. I'm going to keep my eyes open. If I ever see that light-haired woman again I'll know her."

Mr. Rexford frowned. "I'm afraid that Farley affair put foolish ideas in your head, my boy," he said with a touch of impatience. "You must remember that you belong to the book department, not the detective bureau. Brady tells me that you are not so dependable as you were last Spring before that happened. I think a great deal of you, Harry, and I'm anxious to give you every opportunity. But you can't succeed in this business if your mind is on something else. Think it over and see if I'm not right."

"I try to do my very best, Mr. Rexford." Utterly crushed by the unexpected and undeserved lecture, Harry could think of nothing else to say. "I'm sorry about to-day. I thought I was doing right."

"I won't say that you weren't. Still you'll find it better in the long run to busy yourself so thoroughly with your own work that you won't have time to watch what goes on outside your department. I'm saying this to you in all kindness."

"Thank you. I'll try to follow your advice." For a moment he stood silent, fighting back his outraged feelings. He longed to tell Mr. Rexford that Mr. Brady had somehow received an entirely wrong impression of him. He wished he could find words to tell him about Miss Breeden and Leon Atkins, but he could not bring himself to the point of doing so. With a long, sorrowful glance at the man whom he revered, the man who did not understand, Harry turned and left the office. His wonderful Year of Promise bade fair to be a Year of Failure.

When on the way home from work that night Harry poured forth his woes to Teddy, the little boy was divided between the excitement of the shoplifting episode and wrath against Leon Atkins.

"The old Clothes-pole's to blame for it all," he sputtered. "All the things he is Mr. Brady thinks you are. It's a shame. Why didn't you tell Mr. Rexford every single thing? Catch me keeping my mouth shut and gettin' blamed for what that dub does. Mr. Rexford must be a fathead or he'd see with his eyes."

"You mustn't speak so of Mr. Rexford." Harry became immediately on the defensive. "He's a splendid man. Just think of all he's done for me."

"He'd better get busy and do some more then," grumbled Teddy. "I'm going to watch out an' can the Clothes-pole before he cans you."

"Let him alone, Ted," Harry warned sharply. "I'm not going to see you get into trouble on my account. I've told you that before. I oughtn't to have said a word to you about it."

"Huh, I'd find it out anyhow," boasted Teddy. "Don't you worry. I c'n take care of myself and you, too."

"Thank you." Harry smiled at Teddy's boast. "I know you'd fight for me to the finish. You mustn't bother trying to get even with Leon. It isn't worth while."

Teddy's views in this matter differed widely, however. Although he said no more on the subject, he privately singled out Leon Atkins as his next experiment in the canning line. With the innocence of a dove and the eyes of a hawk he made it a point now and then to ask permission to leave the floor. Once out of house furnishings he was prone on these occasions to bob up in the aisles of 84. As it happened, Harry never chanced to meet his little friend on one of these brief excursions. The nearer drew the holidays the more he was confined to the stock-room. Leon Atkins, however, was much in evidence on the selling-floor, and Teddy had a splendid chance to study Harry's enemy and decide what he could do to worst him.

This proved a hard nut to crack. Teddy was not at home in books, therefore he dared take no liberties. Still, he did not despair. According to his philosophy, something was sure to turn up at the psychological moment.

Several evenings after he and Harry had enjoyed their confidential chat regarding Harry's troubles, Teddy received the glorious privilege of an early pass home. It meant that instead of waiting until twenty minutes to six for the closing bell, he was free to leave the store at fifteen minutes past five. With the gracious sanctioning bit of paper in his hand, Teddy scudded joyfully for the time desk. Slipping on his overcoat as he ran, he hurried out into the keen, wintry air. A minute saw him hustling confidently in a customer's entrance of the store. Straight toward the book department he headed. His bright eyes peered eagerly over that realm of literature until they glimpsed Harry at the far end laboriously bending over a truck.

"Have you 'The Stock Boy's Revenge; or, Cutting the Clothes-pole up for Kindling?'" squeaked a high falsetto voice in Harry's ear.

Harry straightened up with a start to see an impish, freckled face grinning down at him.

"Teddy Burke! How you startled me! What in the world are you doing here, with your hat and coat on?"

"I'm out early. It's a reward for bein' good." Teddy's grin widened. "Ain't you glad I came?"

"Of course. Wish I was through work, too. Never mind, it's almost half past five. Take a walk around the department, Teddy. I'm busy just now. You'll have to go as soon as the bell rings. Wait for me across the street."

"All right. So long." Teddy strolled away on the hunt for the Clothes-pole. He had seen Leon at

[167]

[168]

[169]

[170]

a distance as he entered 84, now he yearned for a closer inspection. "Don't he think he's it?" was his mental opinion as from behind a protecting table he watched the ungainly youth. His black head cocked a little to one side, Leon was trying the effect of a large black and white picture at various points of a table he had apparently just finished arranging. Disposing of the picture to his satisfaction, he next fished a fat blue pencil from his pocket and proceeded to sharpen it, glancing about furtively as he did so. A stentorian call of "56" from the aisle man sent him suddenly ambling off in the direction of the voice. [171]

Hardly had he responded when Teddy left his post of observation and planted himself squarely in front of the table. With a gurgle of joy he pounced upon the pencil that Leon, for some unknown reason, had left lying on a pile of books. Teddy examined it thoughtfully. He was about to tuck it securely between two towering piles of books where it would defy detection, when his eyes came to rest on the picture which Leon had jauntily set upright on a central wedge of books. It represented a very pretty young woman in a low-cut, much befrilled evening frock. Underneath the figure appeared the words, "The Débutante, by Marcia Sheldon."

Teddy slowly spelled the one mystifying word. It did not specially please his fancy. "Some name," he murmured. "Maybe it's Rooshun." Making a face at the smiling girl, Teddy went back to the pencil. He drew it gently across the back of his hand. The result was a wide blue mark. With the mild eyes of a ministering angel, he glanced calmly about him. No one was paying the slightest attention to him. Scattered about the department the salespeople were busily engaged in counting up their books. [172]

Teddy reached a stealthy but powerful hand toward the lonely young débutante and whisked her off her literary perch. A thin little hand, clutching a blue pencil, traveled with amazing swiftness over the young woman's radiant features.

"There, I guess she is ready to go most anywheres," he chuckled, as he set the picture in place.

Clang! It was the first closing bell.

"Guess I'll have to leave you." Teddy giggled and wagged his head at the picture in derisive farewell. "Good night, Deebuttanty. Don't be s'prised if some other folks are s'prised when they see you to-morrow morning." Hastily depositing the blue pencil at the foot of the picture, Teddy shook the dust of 84 from his feet and flitted through a nearby entrance to the street, well pleased with his fantastic conception of art.

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## CHAPTER XVIII

### A QUEER TWIST OF FATE

 [173]

The first person to receive the surprise which Teddy Burke had predicted was Mr. Brady. What amazed and displeased him the following morning was to behold a hilarious crowd of customers and salespersons gathered about a table which displayed for its feature the remarkable novel of modern society entitled, "The Débutante."

"What's the meaning of this?" was his curt question as he forged into the middle of the group. As the query left his lips he became petrified with astonishment at the mysterious and cruel change that had assailed the much-heralded society bud over night. Her sweetly smiling lips were now decorated with a huge, bright-blue, upcurving mustache for which a certain gentleman of royalty might well have yearned. Her soulful eyes were hidden by round blue goggles, through which she appeared to squint at the world. Around her hapless throat hung an ornamental blue chain that would have more fittingly graced the neck of a benighted heathen. Worse yet, her pretty ears had been extended to triangular points. Altogether she was a most remarkable specimen of original but terrifying art. [174]

"Who did that?" Mr. Brady choked with rage as he ripped the offending picture from the table. "Why didn't some one of you take it down at once?"

"It was so funny," giggled Miss Porter.

Scenting trouble in the air the few customers who had happened to swell the group now moved off with smiling faces.

"It's a disgrace to this department," stormed the assistant. "Go and attend to your stock, all of you." He shooed the lingerers away with an impatient sweep of his arms.

Remembering that he had set Leon Atkins to arranging the table the previous afternoon he immediately suspected him of the outrage. The next instant saw him clumping down the main aisle of the department, the decorated débutante in one hand, on the trail of the miscreant. His search ended when he bumped squarely into Leon Atkins, who was lumbering toward him from the opposite direction.

"Whada——" began Leon. This tone underwent a quick change. "Oh, excuse me, Mr.——"

"I'll excuse you. Look at this!" The assistant thrust the blue and white outrage before Leon's eyes. [175]

Leon caught one glimpse of the picture and burst into laughter.

"You'll laugh on the other side of your face, young man, before I'm through with you. You did this."

"Aw, cut it out. You're daffy!" Amazed at the accusation, Leon forgot to whom he was speaking. "Aw, excuse me, Mr. Brady. I didn't mean that. I was so taken back I spoke 'fore I thought. D'y think I did that?" He pointed to the picture. "Not on your life."

"But you were the last one at that table," persisted Mr. Brady.

"Can't help it. It wasn't me that done it. Catch me carryin' a blue pencil. It's against the rules of the store, 'less you're a boss." Leon delivered this reminder with an air of virtuous wisdom. "Mebbe it was 45 that did it. Seems to me I've seen him with a blue pencil up'n the stock-room. I won't say for sure."

Although Leon was by nature a sluggard, his wits now sprang to work. Only too well he recalled laying down the blue pencil he had been sharpening to answer the call of the aisle manager. He now wondered what had become of it. He calculated shrewdly that if it had been found on the table Mr. Brady would now have it in his possession. Further, he would have demanded of Leon if it belonged to him. Leon decided within himself that the pencil had somehow escaped notice. He determined to hunt for it as soon as he could and summarily dispose of it. [176]

Mr. Brady stared at him, as though half inclined to credit the insinuation against Harry which Leon had just voiced. "This doesn't look like Harding's work," he declared. "How could he have done it without your knowing it? It was after five o'clock last night when you came to me for this picture. It was all right when I gave it to you. Besides, he was away over on the other side of the department unloading a truck. I remember seeing him."

Leon shrugged his shoulders. "I can't tell you nothin' about it, 'cept that it was pretty near half past when I set that there picture on top of a stacka books. It was all right then. Just's I did it, Mr. Drayton calls me and I goes to see what he wants. After that the bell rang and I beat it outta here."

"Humph! Then how did *this* happen?" Mr. Brady again thrust the offending picture at Leon.

"How do you s'pose I know?" whined the boy. "How do lotsa things happen 'round this dump? How did Miss Breeden's table get mixed up that day? You better ask 45 a few things. I ain't done nothin'."

"This department is not a dump," rebuked Mr. Brady severely. "Don't let me hear you again refer to it as such. As for this outrage, I'm going to sift it to the bottom. If I find you've lied to me, I'll have you discharged." [177]

"I tell you I didn't do it," called Leon after the assistant's retreating form. "Gee," he reflected. "I gotta find that pencil. If I find it I guess I know where I can hide it."

Making his way to the table from which the cruelly transformed debutante had been mercifully snatched, Leon prowled cautiously about it, at the same time keeping up a prudent watch for danger. Making sure that he was not under special observation, he leaned upon a corner of it, his black eyes roving desperately over its closely packed contents. Of a sudden he emitted a grunt of satisfaction. Coily resting between two piles of books he had glimpsed the object of his search. When Teddy Burke had flung it aside to beat a hasty retreat, it had rolled off the book on which he had placed it and dropped to a shallow shelter between the two stacks of volumes where Leon had discovered it.

"I gotta hustle," was his next thought as he moved with unusual speed toward a stairway. Once on the tenth floor he hoped fortune would favor him. Whether he could put into execution the cowardly act that he purposed depended on two things.

Up in the stock-room Harry Harding was manfully endeavoring to bury his sorrows in zealous toil. The instant he had reported to Mr. Drayton that morning he had gone directly to the tenth floor. A huge bulk of surplus stock was awaiting a brief abiding place in the bins, and Mr. Brady had decreed that it must be put there without delay. An innate sense of neatness prompted Harry always to remove his coat while performing a task of this nature. When Leon slouched into the stock-room, Harry was energetically at work in his shirtsleeves, his back turned to the other boy. [178]

Leon halted to grin sardonically at the patient, hurrying lad, too deeply engrossed in his task to discover that he was not alone. His straying, furtive glance leaped from Harry to a blue serge coat that hung on a nail within easy reach. Breathlessly Leon tiptoed to it. His hand glided into a convenient pocket. Then, silently as a shadow, he withdrew and darted toward a stairway. He preferred the labor of ascending and descending nine flights of stairs to risk being seen on an elevator.

Toward noon Harry finished his work. He was just about to draw on his coat when Mr. Atkins appeared in the doorway of the stock-room. "You're wanted downstairs, 45," he said roughly, then vanished into the receiving room.

Hastily donning his coat, Harry caught the first elevator down to the department. The summons no doubt meant nothing more than the appointment to some new task. Despite Mr. Brady's disbelief that Harry was up to the mark, he depended on the boy a great deal more than he ever took the time to stop and realize. [179]

"Where's Mr. Brady?" was Harry's question of Mr. Denby. "Have you seen him lately?"

The fiction salesman cast Harry a curious glance. "He's in the office with Mr. Rexford. You're due to catch it. It's too bad. I'll bet my week's salary you didn't do it. Don't let Brady put it all

over you, Harry.”

“Didn’t do what?” Harry’s voice rose in bewildered anxiety. “Oh, Mr. Denby, please tell me what you mean.”

“By George, I will. I’ve got a right to warn you before——”

A hand suddenly dropped on Harry’s shoulder. “You’re wanted in Mr. Rexford’s office, 45. Don’t loiter here.” Mr. Drayton was frowning down upon him.

With one desperate, appealing look at Mr. Denby, Harry started for the buyer’s office, his heart in his throat.

“Good morning, Harry,” greeted Mr. Rexford as the boy entered. Mr. Brady merely glared and said nothing. Other than the boy, only the two men occupied the office. The buyer swung round from his desk and leveled a peculiarly searching glance at Harry. Reaching to one side of his desk his hand settled on something. “Do you know anything about this, my boy?” He held the ill-fated picture up to Harry’s gaze.

For an instant Harry was seized with a wild desire to laugh. No one could view Teddy’s fanciful handiwork unmoved. With an effort Harry kept his features sober. Amazement quickly conquered his inclination for mirth. “How could I possibly know anything about it?” His reply contained a note of wonder.

“There, Brady. I hope you are satisfied.” Mr. Rexford’s comment was tinged with cool reserve. He had given small credence to the tale the assistant had brought him.

“I’m *not* satisfied. I wouldn’t take the word of any of these boys. They are all alike when it comes to mischief. Now listen to me, 45. Are you positively sure you know nothing of this?”

“I am.” Harry lifted his head in a proud gesture of denial. “I know nothing whatever about it. I can’t understand why and of what you are accusing me. Won’t you please tell me?” His blue eyes sadly sought Mr. Rexford’s.

“Between five and half-past five yesterday afternoon, Harry, someone deliberately took this picture from a table, spoiled it and then returned it to the same table,” related Mr. Rexford. “Mr. Brady at once suspected young Atkins. He denied it, but said something that led Mr. Brady to suspect you of having a hand in it.”

“Oh-h!” Harry drew a long, agonized breath. Again he had Leon to thank for this new difficulty in which Mr. Brady seemed determined to place him.

“It is not only the spoiling of the picture that matters,” continued the buyer gravely. “You see it has been marked with a blue pencil. You know the rule regarding blue pencils.”

“Yes, sir.” Harry’s response was very faint. Suddenly he brightened. “But I never carry a blue pencil, Mr. Rexford. I wouldn’t dream of doing so. This is the kind I always use.”

Harry’s hand went to his left coat pocket. He made a curious, gasping sound, then allowed it to remain there.

“Let’s see the kind of pencil you use,” rasped the assistant. In that audible intake of breath he read guilt.

Slowly Harry’s clenched hand left his pocket and unclosed. On his outstretched palm lay a blue pencil.

“I knew it!” exploded the assistant. “You see now, Mr. Rexford? He lied.”

“Harry, I can’t believe——”

“You mustn’t believe, Mr. Rexford.” Harry’s interruption rang out with a fierce intensity that made the two men stare. All the pent-up bitterness of his young soul flashed into hot words. “This pencil doesn’t belong to me. I never put it there. I won’t stand for such injustice. I won’t be accused of what I didn’t do. Do you hear me? I won’t! I won’t!”

“Harry, Harry!” remonstrated the buyer. Yet he gloried in the lad’s vehement outburst. The boy’s whole bearing indicated truth and innocence.

“I can’t help it.” Harry refused to be thus checked. “Ever since I came back from my vacation things have gone wrong for me. Neither of you will ever know what I’ve had to put up with, because I’m not going to tell you. But I’m not to blame for this. I’m going to leave the store as soon as you’re through with me. There are some things a fellow can’t and won’t stand.”

“You are not going to leave the store,” put in Mr. Rexford firmly. “I believe you, Harry.”

“I don’t,” contested Mr. Brady stubbornly. “I’ve told you again and again that this boy’s a sneak. If you choose to pet him and shut your eyes to——”

“That will do, Brady.” Mr. Rexford held up an imperative hand. “Whatever I may choose to do is no concern of yours. Now I wish this matter dropped. Don’t let me hear of it again.” With a decided hand he ripped the troublesome picture across and dropped it into the waste basket. “You may go,” he commanded the assistant.

“Have it your own way,” Mr. Brady flung back over his shoulder as he sought the door.

Alone together man and boy faced each other. “Now, Harry, I wish you to tell me what you meant by saying that things have gone wrong with you.” Mr. Rexford rose and laid a kind hand on Harry’s shoulder.

[180]

[181]

[182]

[183]

The boy's lip quivered. He made no reply. Gradually mastering himself, his mouth set in the old firm line of secrecy. "I'm sorry, Mr. Rexford, but I can't tell tales. You—oh, please don't ask me to."

"All right, I won't. I know you didn't use a blue pencil on that wretched picture," mused the man. "Yet the other boy insists that he didn't. It may have been some mischievous messenger from another department. Around half-past five he would not have been noticed."

Harry lifted a startled face to the buyer. He never heard the word "mischief" without associating it with Teddy Burke. A swift flashing panorama of facts crossed his brain. Teddy had sworn to be even with Leon. Teddy had visited the department at that time last evening. Leon had been arranging the table. It was all plain except the blue pencil. Yet he could not betray Teddy. As he fitted the pieces of the puzzle together he became painfully aware of Mr. Rexford's acute survey.

"What is it, Harry? I believe you have guessed the guilty party. Whom do you suspect? Speak up. I told Brady to drop it just for your sake, but if it is one of the messengers, I'll take it up. I won't countenance strange boys making my department ridiculous."

Harry wavered between affection for Teddy and loyalty to Mr. Rexford. "I'm not sure, Mr. Rexford. I do suspect someone. I can't tell you his name."

[184]

Mr. Rexford looked displeased. Harry's secrecy piqued him. Under his quiet, kindly exterior lay a strong vein of stubbornness. Harry had aroused it. Yet his dignity would not permit him to continue the argument. "Very well," he said coldly. "I won't try to force your confidence. You may go."

As Mr. Rexford abruptly turned away from him to his desk, Harry saw a towering wall suddenly erect itself between him and the man he revered. His lips moved as though to make a last appeal, but no sound came from them. With a long, anguished look at the stern figure before the desk, Harry left the office with the bitter knowledge that one small boy's mischief had been the means of cutting him off from his best friend.

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## CHAPTER XIX

[185]

### TEDDY'S DARKEST HOUR

Once outside the office Harry's thoughts were again directed toward leaving the store. Nothing would ever be the same again between himself and Mr. Rexford. The old friendly relations were now broken forever. Mr. Rexford had defended him, and he had repaid the buyer's kindness by refusing to reveal the identity of the author of the mischief. Yet he had not found it within his heart to betray Teddy. Had he done so, Mr. Rexford might have decided to take the matter higher. That would have meant dismissal from the store for Teddy. Harry could not bear to think of it.

But should he leave the store under a cloud? He knew himself to be guiltless of any wrong doing. To leave Martin Brothers now would appear as a direct admission not only of guilt but of failure. Resolutely Harry put that thought away from him, also. He would stay. Some day the clouds might lift. Some day Mr. Rexford might understand. There was also the question of Teddy to be considered. Were he to acquaint the impish little boy with the havoc he had created, Teddy would rush to Mr. Rexford and confess his sins. He was too much of a man to allow Harry to bear the brunt of his iniquities. That would probably mean Teddy's dismissal, too. Harry resolved that he would bear his cross in silence.

[186]

If Harry had entertained any doubt of Teddy's innocence, it would have been rudely dispelled by a question which the latter asked at luncheon that day.

"Say," he blurted, fixing his round, child-like eyes on Harry. "What's a deebuttanty?"

Harry did not fall into the trap. He divined instantly that Teddy was burning to know the result of his prank. Assuming an elaborate carelessness he was far from feeling, Harry replied, "I guess you mean *débutante*." He spelled the word.

"Yes, that's it. Is it Rooshun?"

"No; it is a French word. It means a young lady who is just coming out in society. What made you ask?"

"Oh, I just wanted to know." Teddy's face fell. He wondered if his splendid effort had amounted to nothing. "Very likely the old Clothes-pole saw it and took it away 'fore anyone else got a look at it," was his disappointed reflection. He was on the point of telling Harry what he had done. Then he changed his mind. It might not strike Harry as a particularly clever trick. Nevertheless, as he returned to house furnishings that afternoon he felt rather pleased with himself. At least he had done his best to get the obnoxious Clothes-pole into trouble. It was not his fault that Leon had thus escaped. Had he known the true state of affairs he would have been a most distressed and repentant Teddy.

[187]

As Christmas drew nearer, however, Teddy was privately worried over the peculiar change in Harry. He seemed sad and dejected. On the way home after work he said little, allowing Teddy to

do most of the talking. The merry, boyish laugh with which he usually responded to his chum's funny sallies had quite deserted him. He had also ceased to confide the annoyances he daily underwent at Leon's hands. Teddy became possessed of the idea that Harry's subdued demeanor was entirely due to fresh persecution. He longed more than ever to worst Harry's enemy by holding him up to the whole store in his true colors. Since the affair of the picture he had not dared to more than skirt the book department. It was now overrunning with salespersons hired for the grand Christmas rush. Whatever he might find to do to add to Leon's discomfiture was certain to be observed.

Night school was also an unsafe place for his operations. Unsafe in that Teddy did not choose there to court risks. His semi-weekly drill was the pride of his heart. While at it he had no inclination for mischief. Although Leon was in company D, to which Teddy belonged, the little boy kept his distance. Love of drill and school were too strong to admit of trifling. To Teddy they were as things apart from his usual prankish self. Occasionally while at his studies he would forget himself far enough to make a derisive face at the ungainly figure lounging at a desk on the opposite side of the room. He would then concoct elaborate methods of "getting even," only to let them die a quick death as he made a fresh attack on his lessons. [188]

On the last evening of school, preparatory to its close until after the holidays, Teddy left the dairy lunch for the fifth-floor barracks, feeling unutterably lonely. Due to an overwhelming amount of night work to be done in Department 84, Harry had been excused from school. He had eaten supper with Teddy, then hurried back to work, leaving his chum to make his disconsolate way upstairs to drill.

In this dark mood Teddy scornfully eschewed taking one of the few elevators now running and clumped dejectedly up the long flight of stairs, pausing at each landing for a brief rest. Rounding the corner of the third flight he halted to peer aimlessly down the long aisle that opened into the picture department. Of a sudden his gaze came to a focus on a tall, ungainly figure, bobbing about the decorative entrance that was one of the beauty spots of the store. In that bobbing form Teddy instantly recognized Leon Atkins. Here and there he flitted, poking at one object, laying irreverent fingers on another. Now he dipped grotesquely forward to seize what looked like a long, slender, black stick. Pausing, he juggled the stick, catching it in one hand or the other, balancing it first on the end of his nose then on the tips of his long fingers. His eyes becoming riveted on something directly in front of him, Teddy saw him raise the long, black stick on high and leap forward as though about to annihilate an enemy. [189]

"What's the Clothes-pole up to?" wondered Teddy. Soundlessly he stole along the polished floor toward the cavorting Leon. The entrance to "pictures" was illuminated by an overhanging arc light turned on for the benefit of the night workers, most of whom were now at supper. By its white radiance Teddy was able to discern clearly the object of Leon's capering attentions. It was a huge oil painting reposing on a strongly built easel.

On either side of the entrance to the galleries an imposing bronze dragon supported from one upraised, gripping paw a gaily-colored lantern of painted silk. These fantastic beasts were of Chinese origin. In consequence, they owned many tortuous curves, from which terrifying spines and points stood out in every direction. Under the lanterns their savage heads drooped low, with glaring eyes, snarling jaws and an array of sharp-pointed, bristling whiskers. A little to the right of one of them stood the easel, its precious freight apparently under the crouching watch of his formidable dragonship. [190]

Unaware of an audience to his manoeuvres, Leon brandished his weapon and went through the performance of charge, retreat and charge again. Curious to discover why the picture should call forth such unusual action on the part of the sluggard, Teddy took advantage of the other's preoccupation to slip softly nearer.

If in the past Dame Fortune had attended Teddy Burke, for once she basely deserted her small favorite. As Teddy noiselessly advanced, he had just time to glimpse a remarkably realistic representation of a battle scene with a regiment in furious attack. Then something happened. He caught a fleeting vision of a lengthy body plunging riotously forward. This time Leon charged farther than he had intended. Unable to check himself he dashed plump into the easel and fell sprawling under it. The heavy canvas swayed, tottered, poised briefly in air and descended sidewise like a huge avalanche.

Crash! The major part of the heavily framed painting hit the floor with a noise not unlike thunder. Simultaneous with the crash came an ominous ripping sound. The baleful Chinese guardian had added to the effect by impaling a side of the ill-fated painting on one of his numerous murderous horns. [191]

Teddy darted forward, uttering a shrill cry of horror. Leon, however, stood not upon the order of his going. Picking himself up, he tore off in the direction from which Teddy had come and clattered down the stairs, craven fear lending wings to his feet.

"Stop!" yelled Teddy. Turning to pursue Leon, he felt himself being spun about by the momentum of a heavy gripping hand on his shoulder.

"Caught in the act!" roared a fearsome voice. It proceeded from the owner of the gripping hand, a big man, who glared threateningly down upon his captive. "Tried to run away, eh? But I got you, you young vandal!"

Teddy tried to twist himself free of that iron grasp. "Let me go," he choked, his black eyes blazing. "I didn't do it. You've got the wrong boy."

"Oh, no, I haven't," was the sarcastic reply. "Don't try to put anything like that over on me. You're the only boy I've seen so far." Not for an instant did the cruel hold relax.

Having heard the ominous crash from the interior of the picture department, two more men now came running to the scene.

"Whew!" ejaculated one of them. Both stared aghast at the wreck. Stooping over the other grasped the maltreated painting, partially raising it from the floor. The man who had indulged in the horrified exclamation now sprang to the assistance of his companion. Between them they disengaged it from the dragon's horn and held it upright. [192]

But it was a sorry sight. The spiked bronze protuberance had been the means of ripping a long gash in the canvas, which cut in two a particularly fine figure of a soldier.

"This is a positive crime," burst forth the big man. "The picture's ruined. It's one of the Martin collection, you know. Belongs to Mr. Edward. It used to hang above the central archway on the third floor. He had it moved up here over Christmas because he thought it would look nice at this entrance. I was telling him only yesterday that I wouldn't risk a valuable painting like that on an easel. It *was* worth five thousand dollars. It's not worth five now, thanks to this little ruffian." He cast a withering glance at poor Teddy.

"I didn't do it," shrieked Teddy, his freckled face white with righteous rage. "I won't be blamed for something I didn't do!" Unknowingly, Teddy had uttered Harry's very words of a few days past.

"Tell that to the marines," sneered the big man. "If you didn't, who did?"

"It was another fellow. I'm not saying who. He was here before I got here. He had that in his hand." Teddy pointed to Leon's hastily discarded implement of warfare. It was a woman's black silk umbrella, tightly rolled. It lay on the floor precisely where Leon had fallen. "I was going up to the barracks and when I got to this floor I saw this fellow waving it around in front of that picture. I wondered what he was doing, and I came up to see. Just's I got here, he smashed into the easel with it and tipped it over. Then he ran down those stairs. I yelled at him, but he kept on running. That's the truth. I never went near the old picture." [193]

"You're a pretty foxy kid to cook up a mess of yarns as quick as all that," jeered his captor.

"They're not yarns," contradicted Teddy. "I don't tell lies."

"Oh, keep quiet, you little rat," growled the big man, giving Teddy an ungentle shake.

"What do you suppose Mr. Edward'll say when he hears about it?" said one of the two men who had run to the scene.

"Search me," retorted the big man gloomily. "He's got himself to blame for putting the picture here. He'll fire this rowdy, but what's that amount to when the damage is done?"

It amounted to a good deal to Teddy Burke. "Won't you please believe me?" he pleaded, very near to tears. "I told you the truth. I did, I did." His voice rose to a desperate wail.

"Maybe the boy is on the square," suggested the other of the two men. He had been somewhat impressed by Teddy's plea. [194]

"Forget it," growled the big man. "These boys are all alike. You can't believe any of them. They're always ready for mischief and just as quick to wriggle out of it. I'm going to take him to Keene. He's up at the barracks. These kids all work for him. He'll read the riot act to this one and can him. If he don't, Mr. Martin will. He'll froth at the mouth when he sees this." He jerked his head toward the picture.

Teddy's dejected face brightened at mention of Mr. Keene. There at least, was someone who would believe him. "I wish you *would* take me to Mr. Keene," he cried out vehemently. "He'll see, if you won't, that I'm telling the truth."

"My, what a brave boy!" jibed the big man. "Come on. We'll see how much stock Keene'll take in that fairy tale of yours."

To the little red-haired boy came the most dreadful moment of his short life when he was marched into the well-filled drill room ahead of the determined picture salesman. His Titian head drooped in shame as the man loudly recounted the misdeed in which he had played no part to the superintendent of the store messenger force.

Mr. Keene made no comment as the salesman blared forth the wretched tale. His kind eyes rested gravely upon Teddy, as though he could not believe what he was hearing. [195]

"Leave this boy to me," he said, when the man had finished his recital. "Go over there, Teddy, and sit down. I will talk with you later."

Burdened with shame, Teddy sought a bench at one side of the room. He seated himself upon it too crushed even to think. Five minutes afterward the drill began. Teddy watched it with unseeing eyes. To him the ranks of uniformed boys were as so many shadows. He did not even try to ascertain if Leon were among them. But Leon was not there. He, too, had been excused that evening to help in Department 84. His presence at the entrance to the picture department had been due to one of the numerous jaunts about the store which he was prone to take whenever the fancy seized him.

The next hour seemed a year to poor Teddy. Would the endless tramp of feet never cease? Those boys must be tired. It was ages since they had begun to drill. Ah, it was over at last. They

had broken ranks and now were trooping to the smaller side room to put away their equipment. Mr. Keene would soon be ready for him. The superintendent was looking toward him. Teddy sat up from the despondent attitude into which he had fallen. From his usually rougish face every vestige of color had fled. But one thought lived behind his anguished eyes. Would Mr. Keene believe him?

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## CHAPTER XX

### ALL FOR THE SAKE OF TEDDY BURKE

It was noon the next day when a red-haired boy, his black eyes blurred with tears, stumbled his way to the coat-room and called for his hat and coat. Teddy Burke was no longer an employee of Martin Brothers. After the hardest morning he had ever known, Teddy had been discharged from the store. He had not gone down easily to defeat. Neither had he been unaided in his efforts to establish his innocence. Mr. Keene had believed in him. So had Mr. Marsh and Mr. Everett. All three had fought for him, but without avail. Mr. Edward Martin, highly incensed at the wreck of the picture, had decreed that the boy who was responsible for it should be discharged.

If Teddy had not clung so tightly to his own peculiar code of honor, he could easily have cleared himself. No amount of quizzing had succeeded in making him reveal the identity of the boy whom he had declared guilty of the outrage. Mr. Keene, Mr. Marsh and Mr. Everett understood Teddy's code and respected it. Usually lenient, for once Mr. Edward Martin was adamant. He believed Teddy to be the author of the mischief and that he was merely trying to foist the weight of his own depredation on another's shoulders.

It was all over now. He, Teddy Burke, was an outcast, while Leon, the coward who had run away from his guilt, was still working in the store. And Harry, too, was as yet ignorant of his dismissal. Teddy had not seen Harry after leaving the barracks on the previous night. In some way he had missed Harry and been obliged to tramp gloomily home alone. He had not tried to see his chum that morning, but had taken a street car to the store. He had not confided to his mother what hung over him. He had hoped that matters might turn out all right. Now he was going home to tell her all. In the evening he would wait across the street from the store for Harry. He preferred to pour out his sorrows then as they once more trudged the dear old path together.

But when Harry met him that evening on the corner, he was already in possession of the whole story. "I knew you'd be here," he greeted, as he caught Teddy's outstretched hand in sympathetic pressure. "Ted, it's awful. I couldn't believe it. I know you didn't do it."

The quiet assurance in Harry's voice caused Teddy to gulp briefly. "You're a real chum," he faltered. "Course I never did it. It was that—that Clothes-pole." He jerked out the appellation as though it burned his tongue.

"Teddy Burke! You don't say so?" Harry cried out in amazement. His mouth set hard as he said crisply, "Tell me everything that happened."

Teddy complied, his tones gradually steadying as he related what had taken place on the night before. "I tried to get even with him for your sake, but he canned me all right," Teddy concluded sadly.

"It's the most unjust thing I ever heard of," was Harry's indignant protest. "Really, Teddy, it seems as though you should have spoken."

"You wouldn't've," retorted Teddy. "You wouldn't've told, any more'n I did. I thought I was going to tell on him, but I couldn't."

"He deserved it," reminded Harry sharply. "I don't know whether I would have kept still about him or not. I haven't said a word about what he's done to me. Still I believe I'd just as soon go to Mr. Martin with what he's done to you."

"Don't you dare! I won't have it. If you did, every fellow in the store would be down on you. I can stand it. I'm going to try to get a job in another store. Mr. Keene said he'd give me a good reference and so did Mr. Everett. It can't ever be the same, though. I thought a lot of Martin Brothers' store. It's a good thing they're having that Christmas house-party show of fashions in Martin Hall. If they'd had a play and I'd been in it, it would've been pretty bad for me. Never you mind. Some day Mr. Martin'll know it wasn't me that smashed his picture. Things like that always come out some time."

Harry comfortingly agreed with Teddy, doing his best to console the injured boy as they walked slowly home together. Secretly he was resolved to try in some way to prove Teddy's innocence. If he could think of any means to entrap Leon into a confession he would do his utmost to bring it about.

At home with his mother, Teddy's plan of seeking employment in another store met with a decided check. "I never heard of such injustice," sputtered Mrs. Burke. "The idea of accusing my boy of such mischief and of lying! No, Teddy Burke, you can either go back to school or stay at home with me. I'll not have you run the risk of any more trouble in stores. I'd go and tell this Mr. Martin exactly what I think of him, if you weren't so determined that I shouldn't."

Teddy chose to remain at home. He had a firm belief that sooner or later he would be

[196]

[197]

[198]

[199]

vindicated. School had no charm for him. He wished to work, and to work in Martin Brothers. He resolved to keep up his studies at home and patiently await the day of recall to the store he loved.

[200]

Every night, fair or stormy, found him on the corner waiting for Harry, always with the wistful question, "Heard anything to-day?"

Christmas had come and gone. January was almost over. The two boys had spent as merry a Christmas day together as was possible under the existing cloud that hung over Teddy. Yet it lacked much of the joy of that of the previous year. Thus far, Harry had gleaned nothing in the way of even the most indirect admission of his fault from Leon. Harry's own days were far from happy. He seldom saw Mr. Rexford nearer than across the department, and never spoke to him except to pass the time of day. Of late Leon Atkins had been unusually innocuous, for him. He was still cowering under the weight of his guilt, and was in constant fear that the day might dawn when he would be found out and discharged from the store.

What worried Teddy most of all was his inability to help Mr. Everett. True, he had done much toward vanquishing the ambitious Mr. Jarvis, yet he had been always on the lookout for a chance to turn the balance in Mr. Everett's favor. His wonderful plan that had to do with the unmasking of the pretentious assistant could never be carried to a finish now. Since the morning of his dismissal, Teddy had not set foot in the store. Twice, however, while waiting for Harry, he had encountered his friend, Sam Hickson, to learn from him that Mr. Jarvis was still doing his best, or rather his worst, to supplant Mr. Everett. His fault-finding had been the means of causing two of the salesmen to resign, who had been longest in the department. Miss Newton was muttering darkly of sending in her resignation. Even Hickson himself declared that he wouldn't stand it much longer. He brought a grain of comfort to poor Teddy's sore heart by telling him how greatly he was missed in house furnishings. The boy who had replaced him was far from satisfactory. Mr. Everett, too, deplored the loss of his little friend. He had expressed very plainly to Hickson his disapproval of Teddy's discharge.

[201]

Harry Harding was the only person, however, to whom Teddy spoke his mind freely. Harry alone knew the inside facts of the picture disaster. It hurt him severely to see his chum so unhappy. He missed the funny sayings and the air of exuberant jollity that belonged to the old Teddy. The new Teddy went about immersed in a gloom utterly foreign to his usual sunny self. Harry sometimes wondered if the sober-faced, sad-eyed lad that greeted him so wistfully at the close of each day could be the same boy whose cheerful chatter had made the road home merry.

"If only I could do something to help Teddy," was Harry's constant wish. In his desperate desire to restore his chum's good name, Harry sought the quick-witted, far-seeing Miss Welch. Omitting only the name of the real culprit he laid Teddy's case before her one morning in early February.

[202]

"Hmm!" commented the exchange girl as she mentally balanced the pros and cons of the affair. "Your little chum has certainly got in wrong, Kiddy. He oughtta've squealed on the other fella. Too bad no one else was around. If I was a certain red-headed youngster I'd watch for that sneak that did it. One of these nights I'd give him a beating he'd remember. That's what I'd do. I'd make him tell or I'd punch his head off." Miss Welch doubled a small white hand and waved it threateningly.

"He couldn't, Miss Welch. The boy that's guilty is twice his size. Teddy's small for his age. He's strong, though, but not strong enough to tackle the other boy and punish him."

"Well, why don't you do it for him?" urged Miss Welch. "I'll bet you could fight if you got good and mad. Now's your time to do it."

Harry regarded Miss Welch in stupefaction. How had she guessed what had been in the back of his head ever since Teddy's discharge from the store? Long ago he had hinted to his mother that the day might come when he would be forced to use his fists on Leon Atkins.

"Miss Welch," he said solemnly, "more than once I've thought of doing that. After Ted left the store I made up my mind that the first time this boy interfered with me, I'd fight him. But I hate to start on him unless he does something to earn his licking. If I did, he might not confess, but he *would* make a big fuss. Then I'd get discharged and Teddy's case would stay just as it is."

[203]

"I get you." A shrewd twinkle lurked in Miss Welch's blue eyes. The phrase "the first time he interfered with me," had caused her to put two and two together. Harry, it seemed, had reason to believe that the culprit would interfere with him. This could hardly come about unless the two were frequently brought together. Miss Welch had already learned by using her eyes that Leon Atkins was as a thorn to Harry's flesh. So he was the real offender. She calmly stored up this information against a time of need.

"You've been ever so good to me," Harry continued, "and I know that if you could help me in this, you would. I'm going to ask you to keep your eyes and ears open in case you might find out something that would help Teddy get his place back again."

"You can count on me, Harry. I'll say a good word or do a good deed for both you and your friend, if the chance comes my way. Count on Margaret Welch to the last drop of the hat."

Harry left the desk feeling more hopeful than he had for days. Miss Welch was so clever. If anyone could help Teddy, she was the very person. And she had advised him to give Leon a whipping. Harry smiled. Despite her slangy manner of speech she was so delicately pretty that the advice sounded strange from her red lips.

[204]

As February dragged its changeable way toward March, the thought of pummeling the truth from Leon took a decided stand in Harry's mind. Often as he watched the hateful coward,

shambling about the stock-room, he experienced a savage desire to spring upon him and compel the truth from his lying lips.

"This won't do at all," he reflected one Saturday morning as he found himself halting in his work to stare longingly at Leon. Under a flimsy pretense of work, the latter sat Turk fashion before a bin, deep in the reading of a paper-covered dime novel he had smuggled into the store inside his coat. "It's awful for me to be always wanting to hit him."

The intense concentration of Harry's gaze beat across the narrow space between them, causing Leon to stir uneasily. Slowly, as though against his will, his eyes left the paper-covered book and came to rest on Harry. "Well, whada you gapin' at?" he growled.

"Nothing," retorted Harry. Disgust of Leon overcoming prudence, he added, "Oh, pardon me. I believe I was looking at *you*." Swinging about, Harry returned to his task of filling a truck. [205]

Two seconds later he became aware that an angry face was peering down at him over the truck. "Think I'm nothin', do you? You'll find out who I am!" He gave the truck a vicious shove that sent it rumbling down the room.

Harry sprang to his feet. It may be said in his favor, however, that in spite of his private pugilistic desires, he had not intended to draw Leon into a quarrel. His sarcastic answer had been nothing more than an outward expression of his contempt for the bully. Given that he had determined to punish Leon with his fists, he would never have selected the store as a battleground.

"Let that truck alone and go on about your business," he commanded. "I want nothing whatever to do with you." Turning abruptly away he started in pursuit of the dislodged truck. A clutch on his shoulder caused him to whirl about, his eyes blue steel. "Take your hands off me, you *coward!*" The word slipped out unawares.

With a wrathful howl Leon made a lunging pass at him, his right fist doubled. The blow landed squarely on Harry's chest, knocking him backward against a bin. Before he could recover his balance Leon swept down upon him like a hurricane. For a moment or two Harry was completely at his mercy. But the tide soon changed. Realizing that the fight for which he had yearned was now thrust upon him, he forgot everything except the knowledge that the time had come to strike for Teddy's honor. [206]

Although shorter than Leon, Harry was strong and sturdily built. More than once he had engaged in friendly wrestling bouts with the boys of the Winthrop school. Never before had the experience of a real fight been his. Nevertheless, he gave good account of himself. Now on his mettle he fought his way free of the bin and rapidly took the aggressive. Leon struck out wildly, too much amazed at Harry's whirlwind tactics to fight with any degree of skill. Step by step, under a hammer of relentless blows, he was being forced back into a corner of the stock-room.

"I've got you." Harry slammed him into the corner with both hands. "Now listen to me, and don't you dare yell for your father. If you do, you'll be licked to a finish before he can get to you. You and I are going to settle a few things right here. You are the one who spoiled that big painting. You've let Teddy Burke suffer for it because he was too white to give you away. You're going to tell me that you did it. Now tell me, or I'll begin punishing you all over again." Two determined hands pinned him back with an iron grip.

Leon began to whimper. "You'll tell on me if I say I did." Indirectly he had confessed. [207]

"No; you're going to tell on yourself. Promise to go downstairs and tell Mr. Keene the whole thing, or take another licking. You've got one black eye. You might as well have two. Hurry up now, or——" Harry jammed the thoroughly cowed Leon a little harder against the bin. He hated to do it, yet what he had begun must be finished.

"I did it! I'll tell him! Lemme go!" Regardless of Harry's warning, Leon emitted a loud howl of "Pa-a!"

Harry relaxed his hold. There was no need of further punishment. He had wrung from the coward the desired confession. But he did not intend to stop there. He was resolved to escort Leon to Mr. Keene's office without further delay, no matter what Mr. Atkins might say or do. Keeping a grim watch on Leon, he vigorously brushed his dusty clothing with his hands, smoothed his disheveled hair and straightened his collar and tie.

Though the door between the stock and receiving rooms was closed, the anguished howl of his offspring was borne to Mr. Atkins' ears. Flinging open the barrier that separated him from his son, he crossed the stock-room on the run.

"Pa," wailed Leon, "*he* almost killed me. Look't my eye! He pitched onto me and I wasn't doing nothin'." The hopeful scion of the house of Atkins was indeed a sorry sight. [208]

"You young scamp!" The enraged Mr. Atkins made a dive for Harry.

"Keep your hands off me, Mr. Atkins." Swerving quickly to one side, Harry eluded the man's grasp. His tense voice held a note of command that caused Mr. Atkins to lower his too-ready arm.

Unbeknown to those concerned in the little drama there had been an unseen witness to the fight. With the coming of Mr. Atkins, a man who had stood in the half-open door at the lower end of the stock-room had slipped quietly away. Who he was and how much of the turbulent scene he had understood was something which Harry was later privileged to learn.

"I'm pretty near dead, Pa," whined Leon miserably. "My eye's shuttin' up. He made me tell a

lie. He said he'd half kill me if I didn't."

"That's not so," cut in Harry, his eyes an accusing flame. "You told the truth a minute ago because I made you. You're not telling it now."

"You be careful what you say about my son," stormed the father. "I'm going to send for Mr. Rexford to come up here and tend to you. I'll show him how you've abused Leon."

"I wish you would," defied Harry. "Send for Mr. Keene, too. Leon has something to tell him. If you don't send for him, I'll make your son go to him." [209]

"I ain't," shrieked Leon. "Don't you do it, Pa." He began to weep noisily.

"Leon!" admonished Mr. Atkins. "Don't be a baby. I'm not going to send for Mr. Keene and you are not going to his office. Come into the other room, both of you. Don't *you* try to run," he warned Harry.

Harry made no reply as he walked quietly into the receiving room ahead of the belligerents. But his heart had become suddenly heavy. Under present circumstances Mr. Rexford was the last person he wished to see. Over him rushed the sickening sense of defeat. He had given Leon the long-deferred whipping, only to realize that in all probability it would be productive of nothing save his own dismissal from the store. He had no one to prove that Leon had attacked him. No one had heard the confession he had forced from the other boy. It was his word against Leon's, and Mr. Atkins was wholly on his son's side. Undoubtedly Leon would now whine out a fabrication which Harry had no means of proving was false. If Mr. Rexford still had any faith in him, he would soon lose it. Worse, he might forbid Harry to send for Mr. Keene.

If Leon stuck to his own brand of story, Harry would then find himself precisely in the position of Teddy Burke. Suppose he were to reveal the true story of the damaged picture? Would Mr. Rexford believe him? Harry believed that he would at least investigate the matter. Leon was too cowardly to stand out long under any such investigation. Yet there was Teddy and his inexorable code. Teddy had followed it. It had led him out of the store. Now it was about to claim Harry, for he had resolved that, even to save himself, he would not tell what Leon refused to confess. [210]

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## CHAPTER XXI

 [211]

### AN UNEXPECTED FRIEND AT COURT

Mr. Atkins' telephoned summons soon brought Mr. Rexford to the stock-room. He listened without comment to Leon's garbled account of Harry's transgressions. He allowed Mr. Atkins to say his say, uninterrupted. When they had both relieved their injured feelings by forceful speech he turned sternly to Harry. "And what have you to say to all this, young man?"

Harry winced at the harshness of the question. "I did not force a fight on this boy," he quietly denied. "I warned him to let me alone. He wouldn't. I gave him something of what he deserved. I am sorry that it had to happen here. I am very glad that I whipped him in an unfair fight. I would not have done him up so thoroughly except for a certain reason which I won't tell. He knows that reason, but he is afraid to tell it. I made him promise to go to Mr. Keene on account of it. I know now that he never intended to do it. I was going to send for Mr. Keene to come here, but it wouldn't be of any use. That is all I have to say." [212]

Mr. Rexford studied Harry long and earnestly. What had come over the lovable, courteous Harry Harding of last year? What was all this mysterious talk about a "certain reason" and "going to Mr. Keene?" Why had this frank-faced boy become so curiously secretive in the past few weeks? And that affair of the blue-pencilled picture. Harry had also refused to reveal whatever he knew of that. With a flash of that rare breadth of spirit which made him the great man he was, Mr. Rexford suddenly experienced a feeling of the utmost tolerance toward Harry. Ranged beside the too-spiteful father and the bullying son, Harry looked every inch the man. He was secretly glad that the latter had trounced lazy Leon. No doubt he deserved it. Mr. Rexford had never liked him. Only out of pity for the father's hard lot had he allowed the boy to remain in his department.

"Come with me, Harry," he commanded not ungently. "I'll talk with you later, Atkins. And you," he frowned upon Leon, "take this to Mr. Drayton." As he spoke he had drawn a pad and pencil from a coat pocket. On it he now scribbled, "Send this boy home for the day. Rexford."

Leading the way to the stock-room, he entered, Harry following. "Close the door," he said. "Now, Harry, what is all this about? Can't you trust me?" [213]

A quick rush of tears blinded Harry's eyes. Somehow the shadow had lifted. Boy and man had once more set their feet on the old friendly ground. Harry now saw Mr. Rexford in a new light. Here was, indeed, a friend, his father confessor, to whom he might pour out his heart without fear. "I'll tell you everything," he said simply. "Just as I'd tell my father if he were living."

"My boy, I never imagined that such a state of affairs existed." The buyer's brows were drawn together in a scowl that had deepened as he listened to Harry's terse sentences. "When I think of all you've had to endure from that young rascal! It must be stopped. And it was your friend Teddy who decorated the advertising card. No wonder you didn't care to tell me. About the painting, I don't know what to say. It's my duty to straighten out that snarl."

"Teddy wouldn't like it," pleaded Harry. "I've spoken of it to you as I would to my father. Unless Leon owns up of his own accord, Teddy wouldn't feel right about it if either you or I took it to the front. If someone else outside had seen it happen—but no one did."

"You boys have set for yourselves a strenuous code to live up to," mused the buyer. "In itself it is commendable. Yet in this instance I think you have been over-scrupulous. But I won't have this Leon in my department. That's settled." [214]

"His father needs his help," reminded Harry. "He has a very hard time to get along. His son is better off with him."

"Yes; I know that is true. Still there is my side to consider. I can't harbor useless lumber in my department. I'll have to think things over. I'm not sure yet what ought to be done about that painting."

Harry's heart sank as the buyer left the stock-room. What did Mr. Rexford intend to do? He sighed as he laid hands upon his truant truck and rolled it into place. Now that Mr. Rexford had gone he hoped Mr. Atkins would not seek him to deliver further condemnation. Half-heartedly, he took up his work on the bin he had begun to dismantle when Leon had attacked him. He became suddenly erect as he heard the sound of an opening door.

"Are you 45?" In the lower doorway of the stock-room stood a store messenger.

"Yes." Harry's heart began to pound violently. "Did you want me?"

"Uh, huh. Mr. Keene sent me up here after you," grinned the boy.

"Did you go to the department for me?" was Harry's anxious question.

"Nope. He knew you was up here. He sent another kid over to 84, though. Something doing, all right." [215]

"I'll go with you." So Mr. Rexford had decided that it was his duty to break the confidence. Harry sighed. What would Teddy Burke say? He wondered if his chum would ever forgive him. His dignity forbade questioning the boy, who seemed bursting with something he longed to but dared not say.

Mr. Keene's office held two occupants besides the superintendent. One was Leon Atkins, livid with fear. He had not found time to seek the aisle manager with Mr. Rexford's note before Mr. Keene's messenger had swooped down upon him. The other—Harry viewed him in silent amazement.

"Come here, Harding." Mr. Keene waved Harry into a chair at one side of his desk. "I understand you and this boy," he nodded toward Leon, "had a fight in the stock-room this morning."

"Yes, sir." Harry raised steady eyes to the superintendent.

"How did it happen?" Mr. Keene's tone was kindly rather than harsh.

"I'd rather not say." A quick flush sprang to the lad's cheeks.

"Did you begin it?"

The flush mounted higher. "No, sir."

"Aw, he—" burst forth Leon.

"Be quiet!" thundered Mr. Keene. "I am not yet ready to talk with you. Now, Harry, I happen to know that you"—he paused significantly—"did not begin the fight. I know a number of things which I am very glad to learn. I understand why Theodore Burke left the store under a cloud. I know, too, who was responsible for the injury to Mr. Edward Martin's painting. I am not sure that you and Burke were quite correct in your behavior, but I am sure that you were inspired by what you believed to be the best of motives. Ordinarily I would not countenance a fight such as came off on the tenth floor this morning. Such things have no place in a store like this. Yet it is a pretty poor sort of boy who won't stand up for himself." [216]

"Now, Atkins." Leon began to quake visibly as Mr. Keene addressed him. "You are to tell me exactly how you came to do the mischief to Mr. Martin's painting."

"Aw—" Leon's voice forsook him. He gulped, sighed, then dashed a hand across his eyes. "I—was—goin' to drill," he stammered brokenly. "I—I saw a pitcher of a—lotta—men fightin'. One—of—'em had a sword—and was—leadin' the rest. Then I saw—a—rain stick—standin' by the railin'. Some'n had forgot it. I was tryin' to do like the—fella in the pitcher—and—I—I—smashed into the thing it stood on. It—it—fell down—an' I run. Just's it keeled over—I saw that—red-headed kid from house furnishings. He'd been lookin' at me. He yelled at me—but I beat it." Leon was now too frightened to tell anything save the plain truth. [217]

"Is this what Burke told you?" Mr. Keene asked Harry.

"Yes, sir," came the low reply.

"You tried to make this boy come to me and confess?"

"Yes, sir," still lower.

"That is all I require of you, Harry. You may go. Oh, yes. I am sure you will be glad to know that I am going to send word by messenger to Theodore Burke. Do you think he will come back?"

"I *know* he will." Harry's face broke into sudden radiance. How he wished he might be with his

chum when he received Mr. Keene's message.

"Would you like to be that messenger?" Mr. Keene smiled at the boy's delight.

"Oh, Mr. Keene!" Impulsively Harry's right hand shot out. He had quite forgotten that there was a difference in their positions in the store.

The superintendent met it with his own. "We can't afford to lose such boys as you and your friend," he said simply. "I am sure Mr. Edward Martin will agree with me. Come back in half an hour and I will give you a note for Theodore."

Harry had a wild desire to shout at the top of his lungs as he sped down the stairs to his department. It was all so marvelous; so unbelievable. And Mr. Rexford had had no hand in bringing Leon to justice. [218]

It was precisely one hour later when Mrs. Burke called down the stairs to her son, "Do answer the door-bell, Teddy."

Teddy, however, was already on the way to answer that jubilant, insistent ring. "I guess it's the laundry man," he muttered. "I'll tell him we're not deaf." Opening the door to confront the clamorous purveyor of laundry, Teddy's black eyes grew saucer-like. "Harry Harding!" he shouted. "Are you fired, too?"

Harry's gay laugh held a note of exaltation that Teddy instantly caught. His freckles stood out darkly under his suddenly paling skin. "Is it—is it——"

"It is," caroled Harry. "Read this." He thrust a square envelope into his chum's hand.

Teddy tore it open, his hands shaking. The next instant a resounding war-whoop rent the quiet hall and floated up the stairs. Mrs. Burke wondered vaguely if the laundry man had suddenly gone mad. That unearthly whoop had surely not emanated from her listless, sober little son. In his exuberant joy, Teddy Burke did something of which he was ever afterward a trifle ashamed. He flung his two wiry little arms about Harry and hugged him.

Seated side by side on the living-room davenport, Teddy and Harry spent a blissful half hour in rejoicing over the wonderful way in which Teddy's vindication had come about. [219]

"But see here, Harry, you haven't said yet who the fellow was that put me straight with the store. How did anybody know, when you didn't tell 'em? I know you said you told Mr. Rexford everything, but you will have it that he wasn't the one."

"I've been saving it for the last," smiled Harry. "Oh, Ted, you can never guess in a thousand years who it was that told. It was," Harry's smile grew broader, "your friend—the Dustless Duster!"

Hearing a second whoop more blood-curdling than the first, Mrs. Burke descended to find, not a demented laundry man, but a small, red-haired son whose fantastic capering about the room pointed strongly to the suspicion that insanity lurked within her own gates.

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## CHAPTER XXII

 [220]

### THE BEAUTY OF EFFICIENCY

When on the next morning Teddy Burke returned to Department 40 he was hailed as a hero and petted outrageously by his delighted friends in house furnishings. Mr. Jarvis, however, appeared not to see him. He was deeply disgusted to behold "that red-headed imp" again entering into what he fondly dreamed of making his undisputed domain. He had never reckoned Teddy Burke as an obstacle until after it had slowly dawned upon him that a Teddyless department was highly conducive to his peace of mind. Luck had recently favored him in that two days before Teddy's return Mr. Everett had succumbed to a severe attack of bronchitis that promised to keep him away from house furnishings for at least two or three weeks. Mr. Jarvis was now bent on making his temporary reign of buyer a permanent one. He did not, therefore, classify the reinstatement of 65 as an undisguised blessing.

"Where's Mr. Everett?" was Teddy's first inquiry of Sam Hickson after making the rounds of 40 and receiving its joyful approval of his return. "I want to see him most of all. He fought like a good one for me the day I got fired. That was some day! Whew! I'll never forget it." [221]

"Mr. Everett's sick," informed Hickson gloomily. "He's got bronchitis. Couldn't have come down with it at a worse time. Your friend the Percolator worried him into it, I guess. Poor fellow, he's had his hands full with the crazy loon."

"That's too bad." Teddy showed real concern. "Where does he live? I might go'n see him."

"I wish you would!" exclaimed Hickson heartily. "He thinks a lot of you, Reddy. Maybe you could get him to change his mind."

"Change his mind about what?" Teddy's face registered round-eyed alarm. He wondered if Hickson could mean——

"He's going to resign." The salesman spoke Teddy's thought. "Just before he was taken sick he told me that another store'd made him a good offer. More salary than he gets here. He'd rather

not take it. He's built up this department and he loves it. But he can't stand Jarvis. When you spoke of going to see him it just came to me that you'd be the very one to let him know how much we need him here. He's promised to take me with him. I'll go, of course. But I hate like sixty to leave Martin Brothers. They've been fine to me."

[222]

Teddy gasped. His whole world seemed to be on the verge of tumbling down about him. Without Mr. Everett and genial Sam Hickson, what a desert spot 40 would become! He would go, too. Still, there was Harry to think of and Mr. Keene. Besides, no other store had a school like Martin Brothers, or a military company like the Minute Men.

"It's *awful*," he breathed, aghast at the dreadful prospect. "If I hadn't got fired I'd have done my last canning before this and sealed up the can."

"You had your own troubles," sympathized Hickson, "but you behaved like a brick. I'm glad that young sneak got his. The story's gone all over the store."

"I guess I'm some hero." Teddy puffed out his chest.

"You'll do, but don't go and spoil it all by getting a swelled head," was Hickson's dampening advice.

"I won't." Teddy grinned, quite unoffended at this jolt. "I've got to get busy an' look after the perky Percolator. He must have missed me a lot."

"I noticed he did run up and kiss you this morning," jibed the salesman.

"I'da punched his fat face if he had," threatened Teddy, looking utter repugnance of such a horrible possibility.

[223]

At luncheon that day, the first with Harry in many weeks, Teddy remarked sourly: "I lost a lot of time by getting fired. The old Percolator's been buzzing around to beat the band. Mr. Everett's sick. Mr. Hickson says he's going to resign from kettles and pans. I'm going to see him one of these nights. I found out where he lives. Mr. Hickson says Mr. Everett'll be glad to see me."

"I'm sure he will," nodded Harry. "Oh, Ted, I've got something funny to tell you. One day while you were out of the store I was talking to Miss Welch about you. I didn't tell her that it was Leon who spoiled Mr. Martin's painting, but she said that something I said made her suspect him. You see I asked her to watch out and if she ever heard anything that might help to prove you didn't do it, to let me know. Of course she doesn't get much chance to leave her desk, but she remembered a man in the store who goes all over it. She's known him ever since she came here."

"The Dustless Duster?" guessed Teddy.

Harry nodded. "Miss Welch told him the whole story. She even told him Leon's name and described him. Mr. Ferris, that's the Dustless Duster's real name, said he knew Leon was a bad boy. He told her about reporting him for sleeping in the bin, and that he'd seen Leon poking around the store in all sorts of places where he had no business to be. He began to keep his eye on the precious Clothes-pole. He thought if he could catch him doing any more mischief, he would take him to Mr. Keene and scare him into telling about the painting. So, to please Miss Welch, every once in a while when he was near the book stock-room, he'd poke his head in the lower door to see how Leon was behaving. But he never caught him at anything until the morning we had the fight. We didn't see him but he saw us and heard everything we said. So you see you owe a whole lot to the kind Dustless Duster."

[224]

"I wish I could do something grand for him," replied Teddy, his small face aglow. "I'm going to if I ever get a chance. Say, Harry, what a lot of nice men there are in this store."

"The finest in the world," came the enthusiastic response. "Mr. Rexford's first with me, though, and Mr. Keene next. A while back I thought my Year of Promise was going to be a big fizzle, but it's getting better every minute. There's only one thing I wish was different. I wish that business about the ring hadn't happened. It makes me feel silly every time I think of it. Still I know I wasn't wrong."

"Oh, I wouldn't care about that," consoled Teddy. "You did your best. These people that steal for a living are too sharp for boys like us."

"I never dare look at Mr. Prescott. I always feel ashamed. I haven't seen him much lately, but I suppose I shall next month. There's going to be a great big sale in silverware, so he'll be around jewelry, I guess." Harry did not seem elated at the prospect.

[225]

"That's nothing to cry about. Think of me and the Percolator. Some little puzzle." Teddy looked as solemn as though his was the responsibility of bearing the weight of the world upon his thin shoulders.

Afternoon found him trailing his plump aversion with a will born of his devotion to Mr. Everett. Now alone at the helm, Mr. Jarvis was rapidly discovering how difficult it was to be in half a dozen places at once. If he remained in the office to receive and argue with the numerous traveling salesmen who were forever dropping in, he was obliged to let the department run itself. Then, too, he was not fitly equipped to meet these bland-faced, smoothly-spoken sons of commerce whose business it is to exalt their own wares above those of a rival manufacturer. Their steady flow of irresistible argument bewildered him. To hide his ignorance of this branch of Mr. Everett's work he met these men with a high and mighty manner intended to cover up his lack of knowledge of house furnishings.

Naturally, they went away highly disgruntled, to talk him over among themselves when they

[226]

chanced to encounter one another in a certain hotel in the city to which most of the travelers engaged in selling house furnishings gravitated as a kind of wayside home. It is the most usual thing in the world for traveling salesmen who carry similar lines of goods to hang together when their day's work is done. Rivals though they may be, their favorite pastime consists in congregating to talk about the lines of goods which they make their living by selling. Among them Mr. Everett was known and respected, whereas Mr. Jarvis was dubbed a "joke" and a "mistake."

Mr. Jarvis, however, was not aware of these very personal opinions of himself. Privately, he yearned to put aside his haughty manner, to buy right and left of these insistent clamorers. He had been ordered, however, to buy lightly and use the utmost judgment in purchasing that little. Martin Brothers were not taking chances on a man who had still to prove his superiority over Mr. Everett. True, Mr. Jarvis was in line for promotion, should Mr. Everett resign his position, as it was rumored that he intended to do. But Mr. Jarvis' future as buyer of Department 40 was still vague.

But while the ambitious assistant wrestled with the buying problems of Mr. Everett's department, the salespeople in kettles and pans heartily welcomed his frequent absences from the selling floor. The rumor that Mr. Everett intended to resign had been wafted about the department with the result that it went far toward ruining the strict but kindly discipline the buyer had ever maintained. A curious spirit of insurrection, which had long lain dormant, sprang suddenly into life. Threats of "The day Mr. Everett's resignation goes in, mine goes in, too," became a familiar mutter about the department. [227]

When first the news of the buyer's illness had been received, his flock had been inspired with the desire to do their level best for his sake. They had continued to remain in this beatific state until word of his impending resignation had reached them. Then their good resolutions were swallowed up in revolutionary mutterings. Their minds continually on this sore subject, their salesmanship suffered in consequence. No longer did they work with might and main to make the day's receipts count. They served with due courtesy customers who wished to buy, but no one went out of his or her way to bring in additional sales. They made no concerted plan to revolt. They simply did so, each in his own fashion.

The second week of Mr. Everett's absence Mr. Jarvis was taken to task for the falling off of sales in Department 40 and admonished to do better. The next evening he held a meeting of the salespeople under his charge after the store had closed. He lectured touchingly on the beauty of efficiency in selling to a company of young men and women who listened to him with the stolid faces of wooden Indians. And the next day's receipts dropped a trifle lower. [228]

"Halt!" challenged Sam Hickson late one afternoon as Teddy Burke flitted past him.

Teddy halted, assuming a strictly military carriage.

"March!" ordered the salesman. "March back here a minute. I've got something on my mind."

"I'm s'prised," beamed Teddy, trotting back. "I never would have thought it."

"That'll do," warned Hickson. "Look here, I thought you were going to see Mr. Everett? If you went, you kept pretty still about it."

"I didn't go." Teddy came to instant sobriety. "I've been waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

"To jam on the lid. Don't you understand? If I could go to Mr. Everett and say, 'Don't resign. The perky Percolator's canned,' he'd come back to 40 when he got well."

"You'll never go then," predicted Hickson. "You're crazy, Reddy. You can't wish the fellow out and watch him go. It would take something pretty serious to rush him out of here. You and I aren't the kind to try any crooked work."

"I wouldn't do anything dishonest to him for the world." Teddy flared up like a torch. "You must have a nice idea of me, Mr. Sam Hickson." [229]

"Now don't get excited," placated the man. "Didn't you hear me say that you and I weren't that kind?"

"Y-e-s. Anyhow, something might happen."

"It'll have to happen in a hurry then, or it'll be no use," was Hickson's disheartened opinion.

"I'm going to go and sit on one of those big whales o' clothes hampers down by the office an' think," announced Teddy. "I don't want you to come talking to me'n disturb my think-tank, either."

"I've got something better to do," laughed his friend. "I'm going to count up my book."

With a backward grin over one shoulder, Teddy strolled thoughtfully toward the clothes hamper. Testing it carefully to insure that even his light weight upon it would not result in catastrophe, the boy seated himself. Chin on hands, buried in thought, he resembled a wise young owl on a perch.

"Where can I find Mr. Everett?" A crisp voice broke up Teddy's meditations.

"At home in bed," leaped to Teddy's lips, but courtesy prevailed. "Mr. Everett is sick, sir," was what he did say. "He hasn't been here for over three weeks."

"You don't say so! Hmm! Who is his assistant and where will I find him?" [230]

Teddy was about to go in search of Mr. Jarvis, but changed his mind. He decided that he felt like indulging in a little further conversation with this tall, good-looking stranger who smiled upon him so pleasantly.

"His assistant's Mr. Jarvis. He's an efficiency man."

"You don't say so!" repeated the stranger, raising his eyebrows. His amusement appeared to deepen.

"Yep." Teddy forgot himself. "He knows all 'bout efficiency."

"And does he like to talk about it?" a peculiar gleam shot into the man's eyes.

"Does he?" Teddy warmed to the subject. "He eats it alive. He c'n talk yards of it and never lose his breath."

"That is good. I am interested in efficiency myself. Where did you say I would find him?"

"I didn't say." Teddy's brief liking for the pleasant stranger vanished. Here was another efficiency crank. Sliding from his makeshift throne he peered up and down the department. "There he is, down among the ice-chests." The little boy turned a scornful back on the man and marched off. "Wait till he tries to sell the Percolator a ton of tinware or a kitchen stove," muttered the lad. "He'll get his head froze off. Funny. He looked nice. Not a bit like a fishy old fishiency fish. Guess I'll watch him get the freeze."

Teddy watched and saw something that made him open his eyes. At first glance it looked as though his prediction would be verified. Almost instantly the assistant's haughty stare broke up in a fatuous smile. "What do you know about that?" wondered Teddy, as he saw the two men shake hands. "I s'pose they found out that they were both fishy fishes."

[231]

In this Teddy had made a most accurate guess. Thanks to his own yearning for conversation he had put in the stranger's possession a most valuable method of approaching the unapproachable assistant. As it happened the man represented a house against whom Mr. Everett had a grudge of long standing. For several years he had refused to buy of them, due to a fault which they had of taking orders at one price and delivering them at another a trifle higher than quotation. Mr. Everett had been supported by the firm in his refusal to deal with them, and for a long time they had not ventured to send a representative to call on him.

The pleasant stranger had heard of the assistant from a friendly traveler staying at the same hotel with him and had determined to take advantage of Mr. Everett's absence to try to place an order. It is to be doubted whether he had any extreme interest in efficiency, but he hailed it as a trusty bridge on which to place his feet.

Mr. Jarvis was naturally delighted at last to meet a man after his own heart. In triumph he led him into Mr. Everett's office, there to extoll the beauties of efficiency to his heart's content. At the end of a two-hour session the smiling stranger left with a good-sized order on his book, while Mr. Jarvis was equally certain that he also had done well.

[232]

The result of his well-doing did not become manifest until several days had passed. A call to the system manager's office sent him hurrying there in the hope of being informed of Mr. Everett's resignation as buyer, followed by his appointment to the position. His interview with the manager was totally different from expectation. He was informed that he had bought neither wisely nor well. In a heart-to-heart talk with that august individual it soon became evident that Mr. Jarvis knew very little about the relative merits and prices of kettles and pans and less about the firms that manufactured them. Efficiency of his sort withered beside the clear business judgment of Mr. Everett.

But the worst was yet to come. The following day Mr. Jarvis again held down a chair in the assistant manager's office to learn what that far-seeing individual thought of him as a business man. He had not been placed in his proper sphere, the manager concluded and suggested pertinently that if he cared to remain in the store another position suitable to his somewhat peculiar abilities might be found for him.

At the end of that session Mr. Jarvis returned to the department which he in a few short weeks had so nearly succeeded running into the rocks. But he did not remain there. No, indeed. He collected his possessions and shook the dust of Department 40 from his feet without so much as a farewell word to kettles and pans. And the next elevator bore him upward to that mysterious haunt known as the Bureau of Adjustment, where in settling the claims of a claim-hungry public his fatal efficiency might soar unheeded and undisturbed.

[233]

"Who stole the perky Percolator?" demanded Teddy Burke on the morning following Mr. Jarvis' flight from house furnishings. "I haven't seen his sweet face this morning."

Sam Hickson laughed happily. "You won't see it unless you go up to the Bureau of Adjustment. He bubbled up once too often, I guess, and the system manager got him."

"Why, when, what for?" almost shouted Teddy in wild excitement.

"I don't know much about it. I only know he's gone. Duffield just told me. I hope Mr. Everett hasn't sent in his resignation yet. If he hasn't, he might come back."

"And is the Percolator canned for good?" gasped Teddy.

"He sure is."

"Then I'm going to see Mr. Everett to-night." Teddy skipped joyfully up an aisle to interview Miss Newton on the subject. Miss Newton was busy, however, with a customer. She looked so

[234]

amiable and smiling that he decided she had heard the news. Seized with a brilliant thought he jerked the little leather-covered book from his pocket. There was just room on the page for one more item. So he wrote, "March 14. Canned for good, but not by me."

And it was not until some time afterward that Teddy Burke learned just how important a part he had played in the final canning of the "perky Percolator."

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## CHAPTER XXIII

### A BELATED RECOGNITION

[235]

When Teddy Burke left the store that night to make his call on Mr. Everett he was in a most jubilant frame of mind. A great honor had come to his friend Sam Hickson. Hardly had Teddy left him to interview Miss Newton when Hickson had been summoned to the system manager's office. There he received the surprise of his life. He was notified that he had been selected to replace Mr. Jarvis as assistant buyer. Mr. Everett had been consulted by telephone and approved the proposed change. It was expected that Mr. Everett would be able to resume his duties on the following week. Hickson thrilled with joy at this news. It was equivalent to saying that his chief had not resigned after all.

As a matter of fact, Mr. Everett *had* done so, by formal letter, on the day previous to Mr. Jarvis' downfall, his resignation to take effect one month after date of notification. Beyond the terse statement, "for personal reasons which I shall not divulge," the buyer had set forth no direct cause for his act. The system manager was in possession of numerous facts which he shrewdly brought to bear upon the matter. Mr. Everett had not advocated Mr. Jarvis' appointment as his assistant. Instead, he had wisely recommended Samuel Hickson as best fitted to serve in that capacity. He had been overruled, however, by others, who had believed Mr. Jarvis to be the right man for the position. As the system manager himself had emphatically sided with Mr. Everett, it now gave him exquisite pleasure to be able to say, "I told you so." A long telephone conversation had ensued between him and Mr. Everett, which resulted in the removal of Mr. Jarvis to the Bureau of Adjustment.

[236]

Teddy Burke was ushered into Mr. Everett's comfortable bachelor quarters that evening, his freckled face alive with friendly joy. He had planned to conduct himself in a manner befitting one who makes a call. The sight of his beloved buyer completely banished his laudable ideas of dignity. He behaved exactly like red-haired, roguish Teddy and no one else. Seated opposite Mr. Everett, who lounged luxuriously in a big easy chair, Teddy forgot himself and proceeded to convulse his chief with a somewhat sheepish account of his numerous experiments in the canning line. He proved himself such good company that Mr. Everett insisted that his young entertainer should dine with him. Accordingly, Mrs. Burke was consulted by telephone and Teddy, in the seventh heaven of bliss, remained to break bread with his chief.

[237]

That was a gala evening for him. For days afterward he was prone to dwell fondly upon the glories of that dinner to Harry Harding. On his part, Harry was only too willing to listen to whatever it pleased Teddy to tell and retell. During the long winter so much unpleasantness had befallen the chums that their common misfortunes had strengthened wonderfully the bond between them. With Leon Atkins' discharge from the store, peace and safety had come to Harry. With Mr. Everett again in Department 40 and Sam Hickson acting as his assistant, Teddy's cup of happiness overflowed.

"There's only one thing that makes me feel sorry that the perky Percolator's gone into the adjusting business," confided Teddy to Harry as they strolled home under a reddening March sunset. "To-morrow's April Fool's Day. I wanted to give him the Zoo's number and ask him to call up Mr. Lion. I might write it and leave it up at the Bureau to-morrow before he gets there."

"Don't you do it," advised Harry. "Let him alone and stick to kettles and pans. Then you won't get into trouble. You've had enough for one year."

"I guess that's right." Teddy squinted reflectively. "Mr. Everett says if I watch my p's and q's I might be his assistant some day. Only I'll have to grow a lot. I'm an inch taller'n last year, anyhow. That's growing up some."

[238]

"I'm almost three inches taller than I was last year," said Harry with pardonable pride. "I hope I'll grow up to be as tall as Father was. He was six feet."

"You better get a grow on then," grinned Teddy. "I saw Miss Verne to-day. She wants me to sing at an entertainment. It's to be the last of May in Martin Hall. It's a benefit for another sick man in the store."

"That reminds me, Mr. Barton's coming back next week. Miss Welch told me. He wrote her a letter. He said in it he was going to write to me, too. He's entirely well. Isn't that fine? He'll be back at a busy time. Next week's the big silver sale. I suppose Mr. Prescott'll be in jewelry. He must hate me. He scowls at me every time I meet him as though he'd like to gobble me up."

"I guess I'll have to give him a name," suggested Teddy. "Let me see. Three Eyes sounds pretty good. He's s'posed to have one eye in the back of his head. If he'd used it, p'raps that woman wouldn't've got away with the ring."

Harry laughed a little at Teddy's inspiration. "You can't ever make him believe she took it," he remarked with some bitterness. "I hope nobody tries to steal anything next week while I'm looking at him or her. If I reported it, Mr. Prescott wouldn't believe me."

"Oh, I don't s'pose anyone will," was Teddy's cheerful comment. "Silverware'd be pretty hard to steal."

Harry agreed that it would and dropped the subject. Mr. Prescott's appearance in the jewelry department on the following Monday afternoon again brought it to mind. The big sale had begun with a rush of customers that made jewelry a hive of industry. The sale was an annual event and many persons took advantage of it with a prudent eye to future wedding or holiday gifts.

Up and down the humming aisles walked Mr. Barton, strangely transformed from the crabbed, hard-faced aisle manager of the past to a pleasant, mild-mannered man whose eyes still held a hint of suffering. He was thinner than of old, but moved with an alertness that bespoke a return of strength and health. Whenever he chanced to encounter Harry he smiled at him in a fashion that bespoke his everlasting gratitude. As for Miss Welch, she and "Smarty Barton" were in a fair way to become excellent comrades of work.

Though jewelry buzzed with importance, books had slid into an unusual state of placidity after an early Easter. Gardening and nature study were now coming rapidly to the front and a great changing of tables went on daily.

[240]

As the week progressed, the jewelry department grew busier.

"Beats everything I ever saw the way these people spend their money," grumbled the cashier in jewelry, whose cage was situated next to the exchange desk. Her remark was addressed to Miss Welch. The latter had just concluded an elaborate argument with an irate woman who insisted that she exchange a damaged cut glass bowl for a perfect one.

"You're lucky," was Miss Welch's grim assurance. "You can take their money and keep your mouth shut. But me! I have to take their sass and talk like an angel. If I told that customer once, I told her ten times to take that bowl to the Bureau of Adjustment. But no, she couldn't see it. She bought it here and here's where she's going to stick till she gets another. 'Madam,' I says to her, 'you can stand here till the store closes if you want to, but I can't do nothing for you.' But she wouldn't believe I was giving it to her straight. So I had to call Barton and he led her away, she telling him about 'that snippy girl' as far's I could hear her. If I don't come to work to-morrow you'll know I died of a broken heart over being called a snip. If to-morrow wasn't Saturday I'd take a rest. This desk is the main pavilion of Trouble-hunters' Resort."

"I'm glad to-morrow's Saturday," sighed the cashier. "This has been a heavy week. Three or four times a day this cash box runs over. I've got about a thousand dollars in it now. I hope Mr. Wiggins sends someone down pretty soon to get it. He generally has a messenger down here after it before this. Must be he's forgot."

[241]

"It oughtta be a man," declared Miss Welch reprovingly. "It ain't safe to trust all that money to a girl."

"Oh, I don't know. The elevator's only a step and these boxes the messengers carry are safe enough. They're lock boxes. He's always had special messengers to do it. They're not cash girls. They're grown up women and oughtta know their business. All this talk about girls not being able to do as well as men makes me sick." The cashier pouted, looking rather nettled. "I b'lieve in woman's rights, I do."

"Don't get huffy," dimpled Miss Welch. "I'm something of a suffragette myself. I was only saying what I thought. This is a free country, ain't it, Kiddy?" This to Harry Harding, who had stopped before her desk to speak to her. Harry was the bearer of a note from his mother asking Miss Welch to take supper with the Hardings on the next Friday evening. Harry had intended to deliver the note that morning. A call to the stock-room had caused him to forget it until that very moment. He now extended it to her, saying, "Here's a note from my mother, Miss Welch. What was it you asked me?"

[242]

"Forget it. I'm busy." Miss Welch began a hasty exploration of the square white envelope. "Aren't you the nice kid?" she beamed as she finished reading the prettily worded missive of invitation. "I'll be there, both feet first. For goodness' sake, don't tell your mother that. She'll think I was brought up in a barn. I'll write her an answer to this before I go home. I hope the whole town don't get the exchange craze while I'm trying to do it. I'm liable to write, 'Dear Mrs. Harding: No, we don't exchange men's shirts at this desk. You better see the aisle man. I accept with pleasure your kind invitation to go two aisles to the right and all the way back, etc.' That's about what I'd be writing." Miss Welch indulged in a merry laugh at her own expense in which both Harry and the cashier joined.

"You're awful funny," giggled the cashier. "I—oh, here you are! About time someone got busy with this." She wagged her head toward the well-filled cash box.

A slender, fair-haired young woman dressed in the customary store black, relieved only by a wide, white collar, stood before the desk, lock box in hand.

"How much have you for me? Tell me quickly. I must get back upstairs." She spoke imperiously, at the same time producing a small receipt pad and pencil.

[243]

"Oh, I guess you can wait a minute. You kept me waiting," was the cashier's stolid retort.

Shrugging her shoulders, the young woman stepped into the cage beside the cashier and began

to transfer the bulk of the money to the now open lock box, leaving only a small percentage of notes for change. Scribbling a receipt for the amount she had taken, she signed it with an illegible scrawl and prepared to depart in a hurry.

"Wait a moment." A boyish form resolutely barred the messenger's path. A determined hand caught her by the arm. With a haughty stare at the offender she jerked herself free.

"Let me go," she hissed. "What——"

Harry Harding's fingers clutched the young woman's arm in a tighter grip. Her appearance at the desk had awakened in his brain a curious recollection of something unusually unpleasant. As he continued to stare at her, that which at first had been merely a disagreeable impression deepened to an alarming knowledge.

"I will *not* let you go," he returned, his young face set and stern. "Mr. Barton!" Raising his voice he hailed the aisle manager, whom he sighted a short distance off. Miss Welch and the cashier were staring in dumb surprise. An instant and Mr. Barton was at his elbow.

"What's the trouble here, Harry?" he asked, amazed at the strange tableau. [244]

"Make this boy let go my arm. He must be crazy. I'm in a hurry. Make him let go, I say." A pair of pale blue eyes, scintillating with rage, flashed an accompaniment to the furious command.

"She's not a messenger from Mr. Wiggins' office," Harry cried out. "I know she isn't. Send for Mr. Wiggins and let him identify her. She's the ring woman, Miss Welch!"

"Great goodness!" exploded Miss Welch. "Hang on to her, Mr. Barton, good and hard. I'll bet Harry knows what he's talking about."

Dropping the cash box the young woman made a furious struggle to break away. Her action was in itself so suspicious as to condemn her. Harry relinquished her to Mr. Barton's stronger guardianship. By this time a crowd had begun to collect. Miss Welch was already busy telephoning Mr. Wiggins. A man at the far end of the department glimpsed the crowd and now came toward it on the run.

"What's all this?" he asked gruffly.

"Mr. Prescott," Harry's tones held a suspicion of triumph, "this is the woman who got away with the ring last Christmas. I told you I'd know her if ever I saw her again. Ask her about it. Ask her, too, what she was trying to do with that cash box."

Before Mr. Prescott could answer, a second man pushed his way to the center of the crowd. "Is this the girl?" he questioned, his voice unsteady with fright. [245]

"That's the one." It was Miss Welch who answered.

"I never saw her before. Where's the money?" The query ended almost in a shout.

"It's here, and you may thank this boy for it." Mr. Barton nodded over one shoulder, still holding firmly to the now cowering imposter. "This is your case, Prescott. Better take charge of it."

The detective's face was a study as he moved forward to collect his own. "You'd better come with me," he said to Harry. "I may need you."

Harry was not at all proud of making one of the trio that set out for a neighboring elevator. Yet this time he knew that what he had done was beyond criticism. It remained now for Mr. Prescott to extract the true story of the ring from his prisoner. Once shut off from all means of escape, the woman's remarkable assumption of bravado in a measure left her. She could not very well deny the raid on the cash box, but pretended ignorance of the affair of the ring. It was a long, wordy battle to which Harry was compelled to listen. In the end the woman broke down and confessed not only the theft of the ring, but that she was also one of a gang of professional thieves. No amount of argument, however, could persuade her to reveal either their identity or their whereabouts. [246]

It was at this juncture that Mr. Prescott allowed Harry to go, with, "I'll see you later, my boy. I've a good deal to say to you."

Meanwhile, down in the jewelry department a radiant-faced young woman was singing Harry's praises to Mr. Barton.

"That boy's shooting upward like a rocket," she exulted. "What's more he's going to stay up. He's got a wise head on his shoulders. I'm glad he got a chance to show Prescott a thing or two."

"He's a smart boy and a good one," agreed the aisle manager. "He did a great deal for me. You know he spoke to Mr. Keene about me when I was sick. That's how Mr. Keene came to know of it and started the plan for the benefit."

"Mr. Keene nothing," retorted Miss Welch. "He's the one that cinched the idea for that benefit. Him and that red-headed kid he runs with. They planned it out, but kept it under their hats because they was afraid to let folks know it for fear they'd think the show wasn't much if two youngsters steered it. He's a wonder, that boy. I supposed you knew the rights of it, if no one else did. Well, I guess Mr. Keene and me must have been the only ones in the know. It's only one more star in Harry's crown."

"I never knew. I——" Mr. Barton wheeled and walked away, too much overcome for further speech. He wondered if Mr. Edward Martin knew the truth. He determined to find out from Mr. Keene. If the senior partner were not in possession of the facts, then his own duty lay before him. [247]

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## CHAPTER XXIV

### ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

[248]

“So you are Harry Harding. Sit down here, Harry. I should like to talk with you.” The senior partner of Martin Brothers waved a distinctly embarrassed boy into a chair opposite his own and surveyed the lad with an earnest, kindly gaze.

Inwardly Harry was wildly cogitating the reason for this interview which had been thrust upon him. It could hardly pertain to the affair of the cash box. It was four days since that had happened. In four days an excitement of that nature has ample time to die out in such a busy world of trade. Yet Mr. Martin did not seem displeased; quite the contrary. His singularly youthful dark eyes, which contrasted so sharply with his gray hair and mustache, were filled with friendliness.

“Mr. Keene has told me so much that is good of you, I thought I should like to see the boy who has looked out so thoroughly for my interests and for those of my employees. Your prompt action saved the store a loss on last Friday. You are greatly to be commended for it.”

[249]

“It was all in the day's work, sir,” Harry replied, his already flushed face turning pinker. “I only remembered the woman's face and suspected she wasn't a real messenger.”

“It takes a pretty smart boy to remember a thing like that at the right moment,” smiled the senior partner. “Mr. Prescott tells me you were instrumental in breaking up that chain of thieving last year. He says he would like to have you on his staff. Do you wish me to place you there?”

“Oh, no, sir!” Harry expressed emphatic disapproval of such a change. “I shouldn't like to be a detective in the least. I just happened to get into both those affairs.”

Mr. Martin smiled whimsically. “You're rather different from the average youngster. Most boys would jump at a chance to become a sleuth. What would you like to become?” he questioned, staring hard at Harry.

“A business man, sir. I'd like to learn a lot about a big store like this; about the way things are done here. Then if ever I had a chance to go into business for myself, I know just what to do and how to do it.”

“So you'd prefer becoming a business man. I should say you had already made a fair start. How would you like some day to be a book buyer?”

Harry's answer came somewhat haltingly.

[250]

“I don't know,” he said. “I've thought a good deal about that. In one way I'd like it and in another way I wouldn't.”

“Tell me just what you mean,” tactfully urged the man.

“I think——” began Harry. “You see it's like this. If I were some day to go into business for myself I don't believe it would be in books. I don't know yet just what it would be. I won't know, either, for a long time to come. I'd like to stay with Mr. Rexford, of course. Still in another year I ought to be something more than a stock boy. I don't want to be a salesman, and even if I knew enough I couldn't be an assistant by that time. I'd still be considered too young for such a responsible position.” Drawn out to speak of what lay nearest his heart, Harry had quite forgotten his brief embarrassment. He was opening his mind to his interested listener in the same frank fashion in which he might have talked to Teddy Burke.

“I understand,” nodded Mr. Martin. “As you say you are still rather young to talk with any certainty of your future. But you've made a good start, young man; a good start. Keep on in the same way and some day you'll find yourself where you hope to be. You can't do it in a day, or a month, or a year. You must build your future, stone upon stone. It won't be easy. Nothing worth having is easy to get. Remember that. Now, Harry, I am very glad to have met you; glad to have such a boy as you in my store. I shall not forget you. Every now and then I shall send for you to come to me to ask you how you are progressing.”

[251]

“Thank you, Mr. Martin,” Harry rose, believing the pleasant interview to be at an end. “I shall try always to have good reports to bring you.” He was about to say “good morning” and depart when the senior partner halted him.

“Wait a moment,” he commanded. Picking up a sealed envelope on his desk he tendered it to the amazed boy. “This is for you, with Martin Brothers' heartiest thanks. You are not to open it until you are in your own home.”

Harry drew back, the ruddy color leaving his cheeks. “Oh, I couldn't——” he stammered.

“This envelope does not contain what you think it holds,” returned Mr. Martin, his eyes twinkling. “Whatever it contains I insist that you accept it.”

Reluctantly Harry took the envelope. A sudden mist flashed across his blue eyes. He tried to speak, but could not. For an instant the whole room became a blur. Then he managed to

articulate an unsteady, "I thank you, Mr. Martin. Good morning." Completely unnerved by his astonishing good fortune, he cast an eloquent look toward the man at the desk and hurried from the office.

Regaining Department 84 his first move was to seek Mr. Rexford's office. He felt that he ought to tell the buyer of his recent call on the senior partner. The day following the affair of the cash box, Mr. Rexford had come to him and said: "Well, Harry, I hear that you saved the store considerable money yesterday. Hereafter Prescott will have to look out for his laurels. I understand he is anxious to have you transferred to his office. You don't want to go, do you?" And Harry had answered with a decided, "I do not." Mr. Rexford had appeared vastly relieved at the reply and offered Harry his hand in unspoken apology for certain brusque speeches he had given utterance to, directly after the trouble over the stolen ring. [252]

It was now most disappointing to the boy to find Mr. Rexford's office deserted of his presence, just when he wished most to see him. Later he learned from Mr. Brady, who, since Leon's removal, had grown quite friendly, that the buyer had gone out of the city for a day or two. So Harry hugged his good news until lunch time, when he could relate it to Teddy.

Teddy was vastly impressed. "I guess you're it," he observed, his black eyes glowing. "What do you s'pose is in that envelope? Let's see it."

Harry took the envelope from a coat pocket. Teddy hefted, pinched and fingered it in crafty speculation. "It's quite heavy. Maybe it's a picture of Mr. Martin," he guessed. "He might want you to have it to remember him by." His accompanying grin belied the seriousness of his guess. "Wouldn't you like to have me walk clear home with you to-night?" he asked slyly. [253]

"You funny Teddy," laughed Harry. "Of course I would. I was going to ask you to."

There was one other person to whom Harry felt bound to confide his good news. That person was Margaret Welch. On his way from luncheon he sought her desk.

"Why, here's Nick Carter the second!" exclaimed the jolly exchange clerk.

"Don't tease me," protested Harry, smiling. "I want to tell you something." Modestly he spoke of the honor that had so recently been his.

"Well, I never!" Miss Welch became all smiles. "You certainly are the candy kid. Be sure you tell me to-morrow what was in that envelope. And Prescott's aching to get hold of you! But none of that Sherlock business for yours. Say, Harry, I wanted to ask you something, but I kept forgetting it. How did that girl put over that cash box stunt? You was up in Prescott's office when she was. Did she tell? Now don't cry. I know you hate to talk about it. Still you can oblige your friend Irish for once. Her middle name's Rubber."

Harry's face had clouded as Miss Welch brought up the subject he had resolutely put behind him. Her final speech made him smile. "She told Mr. Prescott that she had been watching the cashier in jewelry for a week. She had a cash box made to look like those in the store. The receipt pad she had was almost the same as those they use in Mr. Wiggins' office. She thought no one would notice the difference until after she got away. It was easy enough to dress in black like the store girls, I suppose." [254]

"Hm! She must have figured out the whole cash system pretty well," mused Miss Welch. "Say, Harry, did you know Breeden's going to leave Saturday night?"

"No." Harry showed some surprise. "It's funny, Miss Welch, but Miss Breeden has been quite nice to me lately. I never thought she would be after what happened last Spring."

"Ha, ha!" Miss Welch seemed vastly amused. "There's a reason, and this is it. Breeden's going to be married soon, not to Farley, but somebody else. She and Farley smashed their wedding ring plans right after New Year's. I heard about it just a few days back."

Harry went back to his work feeling that the last ghost had, indeed, been laid.

"Let's take the street car home," was Teddy's audacious proposal after work that night.

"You're more curious about what's in that envelope than I am," laughed Harry.

"Course I am. I want to see Mr. Martin's picture," grinned his unabashed chum.

It was a thrilling moment for Harry when with Teddy at his left, his mother at his right, he tore open the concealing envelope, to find a small pasteboard-covered book, bearing the printed legend, "Martin Brothers' Bank." Underneath was written, "Harry Harding." [255]

"Hooray!" shrieked Teddy.

Harry had already opened the book. He gasped, then overcome, hid his face against his mother's ever ready shoulder. "Mothery!" he whispered in choking ecstasy.

Harry suddenly raised his head from his mother's shoulder, his blue eyes shining. "I thought last year that the twenty-dollar gold piece was splendid. But, a hundred dollars! I'm going to give it straight to you, Mothery!"

"You'll do no such thing," declared Mrs. Harding with a shake of her head. "This money is yours and you must keep it in the bank and try to add a little to it whenever you can. That's what Mr. Martin means you to do."

"I'm going to write a letter to Mr. Edward Martin to-night," announced Harry. "I'd like to have him know how much this means to me." Fondly he patted the bank book.

"Summer's coming," observed Teddy irrelevantly, his black eyes dreamy.

"So it is. I know what made you think about it just now, too. You're remembering last vacation and——"

"The Year of Promise," supplemented Teddy. "It's been some year, hasn't it?"

[256]

"Yes, it has. When we sat under that tree last summer and read that story, I never thought we were going to have such a queer winter in the store. My mother says nobody can become great or broad-minded without having troubles," mused Harry.

"I think my mind *is* broader," returned Teddy seriously. "My head's bigger than it was last year."

Harry burst into rollicking laughter. Teddy glared reproof, then giggled. "It's so," he contended. "I wear a size larger hat'n I did a year ago. That's a sign, all right."

"There are lots of other signs besides that," reminded Harry warmly. "I'm lucky to have you for my chum, Teddy Burke."

"You mean just the other way 'round." Teddy's thin hand sought Harry's in a firm renewal of their boyish covenant. Built upon the foundation of loyalty, theirs was a friendship that would defy time and change.

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.

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HARRY HARDING'S YEAR OF PROMISE \*\*\*

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