

Loaf the Bootblack

“Shine ’em up? On’y five cents!”

This was Loaf the bootblack.

He was nicknamed “Loaf” by his friends because he was the hardest working, toughest little bootblack known to the fraternity. The “On’y five cents!” was a call for trade, and not by any means intended to be taken in a literal sense; and most of Loaf’s customers saw it in that light, especially when aided by the miraculous polish which the boy invariably brought to the surface of the most disheartening clodhoppers; and few ever refused the “tenner,” or asked change.

Loaf’s legitimate appellation was Clem (short for Clement) Brown.

His mother was an American woman, whose husband had gone the way of many other good Americans in his national pride of country, as exemplified by his fondness for the national beverage, *Bourbon!*

The senior Brown, who had been a handsome, meritorious, and successful barkeeper, had discovered Annie Carter, the daughter of a wealthy man in a retired country village, Malden by name, and in the guise of a “young man about town”—“town” being supposed to represent the metropolitan city of New York—had wooed and won that rustic maiden, with the hope of setting up a bar, billiard-room, and bowling-alley himself, as near to Broadway as might be, on the elder Carter’s money.

But, unhappily for these dreams of future bliss, the elder Carter, having discovered the character of the youthful Brown’s calling, and thereupon refused his consent to the match, had, on discovering that the matrimonial plan had been completed, presented his daughter with twenty-five dollars, and a repetition of an ancient proverb referring to the chamber-maid’s art, and beginning, “as you make your bed”—had thereupon announced his intention of having nothing further to do with the happy pair; and, contrary to the usual custom in light literature, had steadily held to his promise.

The disappointed dram-distributor, taking these unexpected alterations in his programme to heart, had devoted himself too earnestly to his profession, and had eventually died, leaving behind him a widow, too proud to return to the father who had cut her off, the son above-mentioned, and two more youthful Browns, who have no special position in this story.

As Mrs. Brown was, unfortunately, not in the enjoyment of robust health, she was able to do but little toward the support of her family, and that little she did with her needle—a laborious but not remarkably lucrative employment. Consequently it fell to happen (as the French say) that the chief income of this branch of the Brown family was derived from the daily labor of the aforesaid Loaf or Clem Brown, a youth of about twelve years of age.

Now Loaf, besides the education which he had obtained from the university of the streets, had also derived some benefit from his attendance for a few years at the public schools; and being a

sharp boy and quick to learn, was not by any means as ignorant as might be supposed. Evening-school had in winter received some of his attention, and he could “read, write, and cipher,” knew a little about geography and history, and a good deal about other things that boys of his age might perhaps be better off without knowing. He was, however, not a bad boy, either naturally or by association; possessed a very American independent spirit; and was, after all, a type of a species that exists in our large cities to a more general extent than is usually imagined.

His independent spirit had kept him out of the “Bootblacks’ Union,” with all its attendant benefits; yet, though he insisted on “going it alone,” he was quite a favorite with that guild of young professionals, since he never interfered with their “beats,” was generous and good-natured, and a capital hand at the “national game,” when business was slack—never otherwise.

His portrait, if painted by Eastman Johnson, would probably look something like this: A corner of a street (say Broadway and Eighth Street); time about seven o’clock of a snowy evening in December; leaning against a railing, a stout, stunted boy in woolen jacket and pants (patched); thick shoes with the toes kicked out; a greasy cap on one side of a curly head, with a broken visor hanging over a round, blue-eyed, freckled face. Hands in pockets; one leg drawn up, from cold; and by his side the little box and foot-rest, insignia of his trade. The snow showering down in feathery lightness all over him; carriages and omnibuses driving briskly up and down; lights shining brilliantly in the shop-windows, and wayfarers tramping hurriedly up and down—this latter part would be the part of the picture not shown, but experienced on the evening concerning which I have to relate. This picture, cabinet-size, by Eastman Johnson, as aforesaid, would attract attention at the Academy of Design; the original attracted none from the passers-by.

Until, half an hour later in the evening, a handsome coupé drove rapidly up to the curb-stone, and, just as the melancholy sound of “Shine ’em up? on’y five cents!” died away in the snow-storm for perhaps the hundred and fiftieth time that evening, the door of the carriage was opened, and a light-colored kid glove beckoned to the boy. The owner of the light-colored kid glove placed his foot on the foot-rest, just inside the coupé, and Loaf proceeded to “shine ’em up,” according to promise.

The boot was a small and very elegant specimen of the article, and the wearer was a young man, fashionably dressed, embellished with a heavy black mustache, and wearing a black soft hat. As the boy proceeded with his task, in his most masterly manner, the young man kept his eyes fixed upon him, and seemed to be turning some idea over in his brain. As he changed the polished boot for the other, in answer to the tap on the sole customary with the fraternity, the boy looked up, and observed that he was being looked at, and also that the eyes performing that mission were very black and very brilliant; then he commenced operations with the second boot. As he concluded his work, put up his brushes in a methodical manner, and arose, the young man said to him, “Boy, would you like to earn half a dollar?”

The boy signified that he had no objection to earning any number of half dollars.

“Can you read writing?”

The boy could read writing.

“Take this note to where it is directed, and wait for an answer! Come back here and meet me in half an hour. Go!”

The boy took the note, slung his box over his shoulder, gave a glance at the superscription by the light of the gas-light, and started on a run. The carriage-door was closed and the carriage rapidly driven up Broadway.

Mrs. Brown lived on the third-floor of a tenement-house in a little court leading out of University Place; and as the superscription of the note led Loaf in that direction, he took the opportunity to leave his box with his mother, as he knew the half hour would give him ample time to do the errand and return. Now the room next to Mrs. Brown’s was occupied, for the time being, and for special reasons, by one of the shrewdest and most successful members of the New York corps of detectives. It may be remarked here that one of the special reasons that influenced this minion of the law, for he was well-to-do, and owned a house, was nothing more nor less than a hankering after the widow Brown herself, for she was a young woman, comely withal, and the detective was a good-looking bachelor of forty, with, if report spoke truly, no objection to exercising his vocation in discovering a suitable helpmate. So it happened that when Loaf entered his mother’s room he found, as he had frequently found before, Mr. Garth, the detective, cozily seated by the widow’s cooking-stove, enjoying at once the pleasing warmth of that useful culinary utensil and the not less pleasing, though perhaps less warm, conversation of Mrs. Brown.

Loaf dashed in in a hurry, threw his box in a corner, shouted “I’ve got a job, mother!” and was rushing out again without further words, when the note, which he had placed in his jacket-pocket, accidentally fell upon the floor and was picked up by Mr. Garth, who, following his natural and professional impulse, read the superscription. “Hullo, Loaf!” said he, starting up energetically; “where did you get this?”

His manner exhibited so much surprise, and his tone was so decided, that, time being short, Loaf answered him at once, in place of “running” him a little, as he otherwise would have done. “A gentleman gave it to me to take for him, and I am to meet him in half an hour.”

“Where?”

“Corner of Eighth Street and Broadway.”

“Mrs. Brown, let me have a little warm water in a tea-cup. Quick, if you please.”

Mrs. Brown at once filled a cup from the tea-kettle, and placed it on the table; when, what was the surprise of widow and son to see Mr. Garth quietly moisten the adhering side of the envelope with the warm water, and then as quietly open the same, extract the note contained therein, and read it carefully through. Having done this, he reenclosed the note in the envelope, closed the latter, and holding it before the stove for a moment to dry, laid it upon the table, to all appearance the same as before this curious epistolary burglary had taken place. Then he rose, put on his over-coat, and saying to the astonished Loaf, “Come along with me,” the two went out, leaving Mrs. Brown in a highly bewildered and deranged frame of mind.

As this lady had, however, the most unquestioning confidence in Mr. Garth; and, moreover, had her own very feminine reasons for not wishing to distrust him in any particular, she presently sat down again and tranquilly resumed her sewing.

Mr. Garth hurried down the stairs and out into the court, with Loaf following closely behind him. Loaf's ideas of *meum* and *tuum* were more rigid than those of the average bootblack; but looking upon Mr. Garth as the authorized personification of the majesty of law, he tried to reconcile his conflicting ideas, and said nothing.

Mr. Garth walked briskly down University Place to Tenth Street, and down Tenth Street to the police-station there located, and, desiring Loaf to wait at the door, entered. Presently he came out followed by two men in plain clothes, and the four started rapidly in the direction of Broadway. Arrived at the corner of Eighth Street, Mr. Garth and his two friends ensconced themselves in a doorway out of sight, while Loaf, under the direction of his superior officer, placed himself by a shop-window, having a piece of paper, with which he had been provided by the detective, in his hand. Presently the elegant coupé rattled up to the curb-stone, and Loaf sprang forward as the carriage-door opened, apparently to hand the note to the young man whose head was leaning out of the carriage; by some accident, however, Loaf dropped the note, and as he was engaged in searching for it in the snow, the attention of the young man in the carriage being closely directed to his movements, the two companions of Mr. Garth stole silently round, and suddenly pounced upon the gentleman in the carriage, dragged him therefrom ignominiously, and as he struggled and remonstrated in a very violent manner Mr. Garth himself laid a heavy hand on his shoulder, whispered something in his ear, and in less time than it takes to write the circumstances that crest-fallen young gentleman was again seated in his carriage, with one of the individuals in plain clothes by his side; the other individual in plain clothes had mounted the box by the side of the driver; the horses were turned down Eighth Street; the small crowd which had collected dispersed as wise as they came; and Mr. Garth, with Loaf, now thoroughly dumfounded, trotting along by his side, walked briskly westward.

As they went on Mr. Garth kindly consented to satisfy Loaf's evident, if unspoken, curiosity, and proceeded to communicate with him in the following language:

“Loaf, you've done a big thing to-night. Do you know who your friend in the coupé is?”

Loaf expressed his entire ignorance of every thing concerning the individual, except that he had lost half a dollar by having his errand interfered with. He said this in a very lugubrious tone, but with a twinkle in his up-turned eyes, for Loaf was cunning enough to see that he would not lose by the turn of events.

Mr. Garth laughed a dry sort of laugh, and continued: “That chap is the latest and smartest importation from London. He is the cutest and most successful burglar I ever knew of, and we have been looking after him for a month, with nothing but a bit of his writing to identify him. He writes a mighty queer stick when he's off his guard, or writing to his pals; but he's an accomplished forger, and can do any thing with a pen that that useful but rather dangerous instrument is capable of. My memory is good, and I knew his hand the moment I laid my eyes on

it on the back of that note; and the note itself settled his case. It was risky, certain; but the game was worth the risk, so I took it. After all the risk wasn't much, for I know your mother and you are all right; but still, I wouldn't have liked to open the wrong man's letter."

"What has he been doing? What have you got him for?" said Loaf.

"Half a dozen things on suspicion and one sure thing, which he was fool enough to write about in that note. Three weeks ago he went up to a little town in the northern part of this State—Malden, I believe it's called—and broke into the house of the richest man in the place; robbed him of about a hundred thousand dollars in bonds, bank-notes, and plate. Carter was the old chap's name—" "Carter!" suddenly ejaculated Loaf. "Why, that's my grandfather's name—mother's father—and Malden is where he lives; I've heard her say so." By this time they had got to the corner of Sixth Avenue; and as Loaf said these words Mr. Garth stopped, caught the boy by his collar, and turned his face so that the light from the bakery shone full upon it. He looked at him for about half a minute, and then gave a very long and very loud whistle, which caused a policeman passing to turn round, who, seeing Mr. Garth, nodded familiarly and went his way. Then Mr. Garth made the following prophetic remark in a very sententious manner: "Loaf! if you are not mistaken, and I guess you're right, you're a made man." With which saying they crossed over to West Tenth Street and together entered the police courtroom.

Loaf was not mistaken; and when, two days after, Mr. Carter, who was telegraphed for, arrived in New York and was informed of the circumstances attending the capture of the burglar; when, moreover, he learned that the restoration of his property, which followed, was owing accidentally to his own grandson; when, also, he discovered—for he was in utter ignorance of the fact that his objectionable son-in-law was no more of this world—for Mrs. Brown had been too proud to communicate the melancholy tidings to her long-ago repentant father; when, finally, he met that pale but industrious and hopeful widow, the paternal heart warmed so freely toward her, her two junior offspring, and specially toward the happy cause of this happy meeting, that the paternal pocket could not do enough to show his affection, gratitude, and general benevolence. Toward Mr. Garth he was particularly friendly; and when he learned that the wily detective was becoming weary of his arduous profession and pined for rest and a country-life, and was made aware also that Mr. Garth was moderately provided with this world's goods, he hesitated not to invite him to accompany himself, daughter, and grandchildren on a visit to the paternal homestead at Malden; and as Mr. Garth accepted the invitation, and was known no more of the metropolis, and as Mrs. Brown not many months later put off her mourning apparel and began to spell her name with a "G," it follows that this is the end of the story of Loaf the bootblack.

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