

MR. PITCHER BUCKS THE GAME

Taking a Hazard in Love and Lumber

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AT sixteen years of age Mr. Reuben K. Pitcher had started his commercial career as a stenographer, at the munificent salary of thirty dollars a month in one of the retail yards of the Arago Mill & Lumber Company. At eighteen he was making forty and was content until he discovered he was the possessor of a body designed by nature for the "muling" of lumber. Lumber handlers were paid two dollars and fifty cents a day six days in the week, and young Pitcher saw very clearly that with good health to obviate any lost time, he might hope to earn from sixty to sixty-five dollars a month; and forthwith he resigned his stenographership to join the overalled and pitch-fingered laborers in the gangways.

Here Pitcher had "learned" lumber; how to load and unload it from the wagons, grade it and pile it. Life in the open air suited him; the resinous smells of the yard were as sweet to him as Florida water to a negro; and in time he rose to the dignity of a yard clerk at three dollars a day. A year of this, and then one bright day a piece of 16x16"—18' slid from a wagon and provided a vacancy in the staff of tallymen; whereupon young Pitcher became a tallyman at four dollars a day.

At twenty-two Reuben K. came to the conclusion that he had had enough yard experience, and at his own solicitation was transferred to one of the sawmills on Willapa Harbor, up in Washington, where for two years he had devoted himself to the manufacturing end of the game. Rounding that period he had returned to the San Francisco sales office, and old J. B. Skinner, president and general manager of the Arago Company, had shot him out on the road to battle for business, on a salary of one hundred and fifty dollars a month.

ALAS! Reuben K. Pitcher was a spendthrift. A keen desire to secure business made him hanker for popularity with the trade. Popular he was, indeed, but it cost him his salary and the Arago Mill & Lumber Company an expense account that was productive of heart failure to J. B. Skinner whenever he looked at it. He would have discharged Pitcher very early in his selling experience had it not been for one thing. Reuben K. delivered the goods. Better than that he delivered in bulk, and a still small voice whispered to J. B. Skinner that there are times when silence is not only golden but platinum. So he bore patiently with Mr. Pitcher and never let slip an opportunity to impress upon that young man the fact that he, Pitcher, was absolutely the most mediocre salesman in the wholesale lumber trade of the Pacific Coast.

Affairs were at this pass and Reuben K. Pitcher was entering upon his twelfth year in the lumber business, when the crisis came. It was in the form of a golden-haired stenographer, the possessor of wide dark blue eyes with little vagrant shadows under them. This vision answered to the name of Miss Natalie McQueen. She had spent two years with a rival company at fifty a month, and J. B. Skinner had stolen her for ten dollars extra because of her lumber and shipping experience.

At his very first meeting with her, Reuben K. Pitcher was sensible of two gigantic impulses. The first of these manifested itself in a passionate desire to call the new stenographer Queenie; the second to engage a large muscular man to boot him up and down California street for failure, during the hey-day of youth, to provide a small sinking fund which he might lay, together with his bleeding heart, at the No. 3 feet of Miss Natalie McQueen. And it may be remarked in passing that Reuben K. Pitcher was only twenty-eight. Also, it may be remarked, at the imminent risk of appearing obvious, that as Reuben K. Pitcher stood by the window of the Arago general office, gazing out over San Francisco Bay, and sighed for freedom, he sighed also for Miss Natalie McQueen;

for after six months' acquaintance with that most desirable, cypress-slender mistress it had occurred to him that she might not be at all averse to a proposal of marriage from him.

HOWEVER, there was a large black bug in Mr. Pitcher's amber. He was confronted with The High Cost of Living. He had compiled statistics more or less accurate, upon the cost of maintaining the kind of domestic establishment over which he desired the fair Queenie to preside, and after each computation he had ended invariably with a deficit. On the other hand he had, of late, been viewing with the utmost horror the prospect of working on a salary all of his days. The microbe of ambition had nipped him, and something told him that if he married on a salary, on a salary he would doubtless remain. Old J. B. Skinner would have him down then; the old wolf would proceed, according to his code of business ethics, to suck his life blood and rob him of his youth and energy for a tithe of what Pitcher privately considered himself to be worth.

He turned and cast a quick glance at Queenie's golden head, bent over her typewriter.

