

"No," he murmured to himself, "it can't be done. I've got to see the light ahead before I take advantage of Queenie's youth and ignorance of economic conditions."

His soliloquy was interrupted by old Mr. Tamm, the bookkeeper, who crooked a finger in his direction and bade him approach. Mr. Tamm was a statistic fiend and his desk was littered with sheets of penciled figures.

"I've been keeping tabs on the salesmen, Reuben," said Mr. Tamm, "and for the fiscal year ending June 30th you have led the staff. You have sold exactly 22,341,262 feet board measure in excess of your sales last year, and 6,457,181 feet in excess of Mr. Hedden."

"Hum," grunted Reuben K. "And Hedden gets two hundred. Is J. B. inside?" he jerked his thumb toward the door of the manager's private office.

"Sure thing," whispered old Mr. Tamm guiltily. He was a weak creature, whose body belonged to J. B. Skinner and his immortal soul to Mrs. Tamm, and as he was a failure himself he hated to see J. B. Skinner consummate another in the person of young Reuben.

"I'm going in and spraddle the old man for a raise," announced Reuben K. Pitcher firmly.

OLD Mr. Tamm hastily gathered up his statistics and hid them in a drawer. "Don't say I showed you these," he quavered. Pitcher assured him that he would hold him harmless in the event of trouble, and stepping to the door of the private office he rapped smartly thereon. Old Mr. Tamm trembled. He was used to scratching at that door. He trembled again, as Reuben K., failing to receive an invitation to enter, boldly opened the door and passed in.

J. B. Skinner glanced up in mild surprise as his star salesman entered. Mr. Skinner had patriarchal side-whiskers and a long, calm, benevolent face, like an old mare; only his gray gimlet eyes belied the philanthropic whiskers and quickly confirmed one's second estimate of his character, to-wit: that like an old mare, he would kick and squeal and create a hiatus on less than a second's provocation. The intruder sat down by his boss's desk.

"Well, sir," began Skinner brusquely. He clawed at his whiskers cattishly and commenced flipping his nostrils in and out, for he scented trouble. He resolved, therefore, to start it himself.

"I've been looking for you, young man," he continued sternly. "Where you been the last three days?" And without waiting for an answer (for he knew perfectly well Mr. Pitcher had been down in the San Joaquin valley doing a nice business) he commenced to growl and find fault and cite cases of trivial or imaginary infractions of selling etiquette on the part of young men in general and one young man in particular. He unbosomed himself of a deal of advice on salesmanship, which while couched to a large extent in the language of a sermon was really a "call down."

Reuben K. Pitcher laughed in J. B. Skinner's face. "I want more salary," he said evenly.

"You don't get it. How much do you want?" sputtered Skinner.

"Three hundred per." It had suddenly occurred to Pitcher to ask three hundred in order that he might slip gracefully to two fifty.

Skinner was cautious on the instant. He resolved to temporize.

"Got another job, Rube?" he asked, a little more kindly.

"No, sir."

"Then why the swelled head?"

"Because I'm delivering the goods."

J. B. Skinner favored Pitcher with a smile of pity. "Twenty-five a month more is the limit, Reuben. Property has its rights and I don't intend to let this company be raided. If you don't want your job at a hundred and seventy-five there are a lot of crackerjack salesmen that will take it and be glad to get it."

Reuben K. Pitcher stood up smiling. He held out his hand to J. B. Skinner.

"THEN you hire one of those cheap salesmen, J. B.," he said. "I'm too good for you. I quit. You started a retail yard on a bundle of cedar shingles and an armful of loose lath, and I guess I can do the same."

"Give you two hundred, as long as you feel that way about it."

"The pardon comes too late. I'm through."

"I'm sorry, Reuben. So you're going into business for yourself, eh? In what line, pray?"

"I'm going to open an office and sell lumber on commission, and negotiate a vessel charter once in a while. I'll take a chance that I can make three hundred on my wits."

J. B. Skinner's nostrils flew in and out at a dangerous speed.

"Got any money?" he sneered.

Pitcher dug down into his trousers pocket and counted out forty-two dollars and ten cents. "I also have my mouth's salary," he said.

"All of which will last you about as long as a bottle of beer at a clam-bake. You're making a mistake, Reuben, my boy. Think it over and don't act hastily. You may repent at leisure."

The cock-sureness of the old pirate; the paternal irony in his remarks smashed across Mr. Pitcher's youthful pride with something of the impact of a particularly aged egg on a cement sidewalk. That remark accomplished everything except what J. B. Skinner expected it to accomplish, and in that moment an offer of a thousand a month would not have chained Reuben K. to another man's fortunes.

"When I'm licked it will be time enough to run to the cover of a job," he retorted.

"Well, come and see me when you're licked," snapped Skinner.

"Certainly, sir. Rustling around as a free lance the way I expect to do, I may come across a bargain once in a while—something I can sell you at a price cheaper than you can afford to make your own retail yards."

"You've been with this company long enough to know that we never turn up our nose at a bargain. Any time you have a car or two of No. 2 V. G. flooring at three dollars off the market, drop in.

Good afternoon, Reuben."

Skinner had now entirely recovered his temper. Not for a retail yard doing a flourishing business would he let this rebel know that his goings or his comings could make any material difference to the welfare of the Arago Mill & Lumber Company. Pitcher rather liked him for it. He hated a man who admitted his mistakes too hurriedly and he knew from experience that Skinner could take a beating with better grace than any man on the street.

"Thank you, Mr. Skinner," he replied, as he shook hands. "However, don't forget that I'm going to have an office motto."

"What is it?"

"Caveat emptor."

"Hum," grunted Skinner. "That's French for something or other, isn't it?"

"It means: 'Let the buyer beware.'"

"Oh, I always protect myself in the clinches," retorted Skinner.

"You'll have to, if we ever do business together, J. B. If I ever get my hooks into you, you'll bleed for a month of Sundays."

"Get out," said Skinner, "you're too young to broil."

RETURNING to the general office, Rube Pitcher draped himself over Queenie's desk and prepared to watch the effect of a verbal bombshell.

"Queenie," he said, "I've just quit the Arago Mill & Lumber Company."

Queenie looked up quickly and her eyes were wide with trouble.

"I'll be sorry to see you leave us, Rube," she answered; and Pitcher strained his ears in a vain endeavor to detect a quaver in her voice.

"Yes," continued Pitcher, "I'm going into business for myself. Open an office and sell lumber wholesale on commission, you know. And when I get a nice healthy little business worked up, Queenie—I lowered his voice to a whisper, "d'ye know what I'm going to do?"

Queenie trembled, paled and flushed alternately, while Reuben K. fixed her with hungry eyes.

"Really—Rube—I could never guess," she lied miserably.

Mr. Pitcher read those signals of distress, of ecstatic anticipation. He, too, had of late commenced to experience some of that same exquisite pain that fringes the borderlands of happiness; and he was not deceived.

"Well, Queenie, dear, I'm coming back to this office some day and—and—" In frantic terror he had suddenly bethought himself of The High Cost of Living and the old Persian proverb that a shut mouth catches no flies. Why, then, arouse hopes in Queenie's breast? Hopes that might never be fulfilled—

"Yes," prompted Queenie softly, "you're coming back to this office, Rube, and—"

"Oh, by George, Reuben," called old Mr. Tamm from his high desk across the room, "I've made a mistake in these statistics. Dear, dear me! How could I possibly have done such a thing? Why, I haven't made a mistake in addition in I don't know when," and grasping his sheaf of figures he came trotting toward them.

"I've made a terrible mistake, I fear," he continued. "I figured eight eighths too much in stating your excess of sales this year over last, and I did Mr. Hedden a grave injustice. He leads you by 231 board feet. Oh, dear! oh, dear! I must be getting old."

REUBEN K. PITCHER burst out laughing. "Statistics are such a joke," he said, and fled from the office. In the doorway he paused and looked back.

"Three cheers for Mr. Tamm," he shouted, and gave them himself. "He's a rotten statistician and the best good fellow on earth. He's cost me my job."

"I wonder," said poor Mr. Tamm a moment later, "if Reuben has been drinking!"

Let us here interject a succession of asterisks. \* \* \* \* \* They represent many things. For instance, the rental of desk space at five dollars a month in an office that rented for ten, the sub-rental of desk space to R. K. Pitcher carrying with it a half interest in the telephone franchise of that office and permission for Pitcher to use the number on his letterhead.

They represent also the purchase of a small table with one drawer in it that was furnished with a respectable lock, and which vagrant piece of furniture served Mr. Pitcher as a desk.

They represent the purchase of a second-hand typewriter on the instalment plan, at five dollars down and the balance whenever the collector might be fortunate enough to find Mr. Pitcher in. Also, they represent the purchase of five hundred pale blue engraved letterheads, with a thousand envelopes to match, and five hundred business cards to shove under the noses of the trade.

All of these matters attended to, Mr. Reuben K. Pitcher became obsessed (Continued on Page 12)



Rube Pitcher draped himself over Queenie's desk