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cused it—but there wasn't. That was the only time there was ever the slightest question, and a good many people let it swamp their real knowledge of Ezra Loring. There were others who couldn't, because they knew him too well.

"I see," said the boy wonderingly. "One's action in an emergency isn't always a test of one's bravery. The regular every-day life tells what you are."

"Yes, that's it," said the little mother. "I knew you'd understand. That's why I waited so long before telling you—so you would be old enough to understand. Your father's whole life was a sweeping denial of anything like cowardice, yet most people judged him by the one incident of the fire. He lived it down a hundred times over—did a score of brave acts—but they couldn't forget. I've come to think that the opinion of such people doesn't matter, that one's own opinion is all that counts."

They sat before the fire a long time and talked of many things. Then John, with a sigh at the importunities of the present, related the little scene that had taken place in Leander Wayne's office, finishing with, "And I gave him a week's notice, mother! I'm through there!"

"O John!" There was great dismay and alarm in the mother's voice.

"I'll get something else, mother, just as good. Yes, I know I've an uncommon chance to rise at Mr. Wayne's, and I know how much my being there means to you—but I can't stay, mother! I'd rather dig in the streets than work for Leander Wayne!"

"I think you are giving up the opportunity of your lifetime,

John," said the little mother quietly. "Leander Wayne isn't half as bad as he sounds. He prides himself on his frankness. But he's just, also, and if he knew your father's story as I know it—and be sure I intend he shall, one day soon—he could hardly have spoken as he did today. I wouldn't have you stay if I thought otherwise. You had best think the matter over very carefully before you decide."

"I've decided already!" said the boy passionately. "I'd rather dig in the streets than work for Leander Wayne!"

The week's notice given by John Loring to his employer passed rapidly. John did his work as usual, holding his young head arrogantly high. Out of office hours he made the rounds of the other offices in the town, but no one seemed in need of his services. This didn't change John's decision in the least; in fact, he never dreamed of changing it for any reason whatsoever. Old Leander Wayne, looking on, regretted for the hundredth time his hasty words—the issue had been so trifling and the expression so strong, that as he thought things over the two hardly seemed to "fit."

"I believe you're fond of the boy," he said, testily to himself, going into his private office on the last morning of John's stay. "You're not just regretting the loss of him in the business—it's the boy himself you're regretting."

Old Leander Wayne hurried into the outer office again. "Look here, John," he said. "I'm terribly sorry I hurt you. As you said the next day, appearance are not always the most important. At any rate, who am I to judge anyone? It was a cruel thing to say to you—a hideous thing—and I'm sorry. Now, John, you fit the business—you're meant for it. I don't mind telling you that I have great hopes for you in it—especially—especially when the time comes that the heft of it falls on young shoulders. You are the youngest employee I have, but I've thought of you. I've done my part, boy, in reclaiming myself—you do yours. I ask you to stay."

The boy listened with flushing cheeks. The amends were ample—the prospects beyond belief alluring. Then the word "coward" flashed vividly through his brain—nothing could wipe that out. "No, Mr. Wayne," he said firmly, I cannot stay. I cannot work for you any more."

John Loring did not "dig in the streets," but he walked them pretty thoroughly for the next few weeks—walked them with his head high, but with his heart sinking into his boots. Well, he wasn't to be called a coward, anyway. Office after office did John visit, starting forth each morning with fresh hope, only to be turned away disappointed at each place. Every office position in the whole small town seemed to be filled and filled permanently. The little mother said nothing, but her anxious looks bespoke her feelings. From worrying over John's chances of rising in the world she came, more and more pressingly as the weeks went on, to worrying over the provisions of their daily living. It was a poor season of the year for sewing, so her own little income had dropped, and, at any rate, John had been used to provide the greater part of their living expenses. It had been his pride to bring home his salary each week and give it to the little mother. Still Mrs. Loring said nothing. It was not her way to talk. She had strong convictions on one particular point—and that was that each one was capable of managing his own life. She felt that John was old enough to work out his destiny for himself. Yet the stress and anxiety told upon her frail constitution, and she came before long to look thin and white.

John, whose mind was full of himself and his woes, tried to overlook the little mother's worn appearance. There was a certain strained feeling in his heart toward his mother—he felt her desire for him to return to Leander Wayne's office, and he resented it. He knew also that he should be bringing home money to keep the home going, that their tiny resources must be well-nigh drained. All this together seemed a mighty weight, becoming ever and forever more heavy. John looked feverishly for work, no longer particular as to the kind of work—butcher shops, shoe shops, drygoods. No one wanted a helper; everything was filled. One day on his dreary quest he came face to face with his former employer, and, looking into the familiar, kind old countenance, almost wished he were back once more at the old desk, the desk that Leander Wayne had said would be waiting for him. Then, flash-like, the bitter thought rushed through his mind, "He called me a coward!" "Good day, sir," said John curtly, and was passing on when old Leander Wayne stopped him.

"Can't you overlook an old man's mistake, boy?" he said whimsically.

And John Loring, with his head high, only said again, "Good day, sir," and moved away.

The larder in the Loring home daily became more scant; the rent was nearly two months overdue. About this time the little mother took to spending her days in frying doughnuts for sale, and her nights tearfully praying that her boy might not turn out to be a coward after all. For John Loring, trying to flee from his mother's sick face and his own responsibility in the matter, had commenced to spend his evenings away from home.

By an extraordinary use of the will persons of certain make-up keep themselves going when they are really ill. The little mother was this sort of a person. These people, when they go under, go under hard. And that is what the little mother did. There came a night when John Loring came home to find her streeted upon the floor in the kitchen insensible. A heaping platter of doughnuts on the table bore witness to her task, and close by her head lay the long doughnut fork. John Loring, as he picked up the wasted little figure in his strong arms and carried it to the bedroom, heard a great throbbing voice that seemed his own, yet not his own, thundering in his brain, re-echoing through every nerve in his body—"You are a coward! You are a coward!" For in that few moments' transit with that beloved thin figure in his arms the boy suddenly saw all things as they were.

"Yes, sir," said John Loring, his clear eyes looking frankly into those of old Leander Wayne, "I've come back. And if you want to give me back my job, I'll be glad to take it."

A certain informing expression came into the elder man's eyes. The whole affair was, somehow, instinctively understood between them. "If I had ever really thought for a second that you were cowardly, boy—which I didn't—this moment would have proved you were not. You've come back like a man." Old Leander Wayne had strong need at this point to wipe his moist old eyes, for he was tremendously fond of the boy. To avoid this he looked fixedly out of the window for a second, then he turned to John and said simply, "There's your desk, and here's my hand. Will you give me yours?"

John hesitated a moment. "I want you to know," he said thickly—"my mother—I came home last night and found her unconscious—done up by the whole thing. The doctor says she has a good chance to pull through.

Here John took his turn at staring at the blank wall without the window. "So before we shake hands"—the boy faced about again—"it took that," he said firmly, "to make me see that I truly was a—"

"Don't say it, lad. We all have our weak places. And how is one to judge another?" Solemnly the old man held out his hand to John, and as solemnly the boy laid his within it. "Now, boy, tell me of your mother."

"Doctor Beatty said that with care and nursing she'd probably come out all right. And I knew"—John looked at his desk—"I knew that this would do more than anything. Even if I'd gotten another, it would have been the same. You see, mother has set her mind on my rising."

"You've a good head for the business," said the old man. "I don't mind telling you that I've missed you in it. You've a knack for it, lad. Now, I tell you, the salary commences from to-day, in advance this time, but you are not to return to work until the mother picks up a bit. Oh! yes, John, let an old man have his way. How about nurses and all that?"

"Doctor Beatty arranged it all, sir. He's a good friend to mother and me. And we are to settle it later at our convenience—perhaps when I'm—when I'm—risen a bit, sir."

The pillow on which the little mother's head rested was scarcely whiter than her own thin face, but the eyes gazing into John's were lustrous. "I feel as if I were strong enough now to get up," she declared. "There's no tonic like good news. And you're going back! And you'll have your chance! O John!" Underneath this outward thanksgiving was something stronger yet—the mother's heart, which was saying jubilantly, "John has found himself! He has faced the situation like the man he is. Oh! I knew my boy was no coward!"

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