

Article ★ Story

Essay ★ Poetry



Ten years is a long time to wait for nothing

By Charles Bourke.

It was late. Ted's eyes were burning and his tired mind was swirling. He had been at the office overtime trying to straighten out one of his accounts. He had checked thoroughly a dozen times but couldn't find the error. "It's no use," he muttered to himself. "I can't find the damn thing. The hell with it." He closed his books, locked them in the files and put on his coat and hat. He didn't need his key to get out, as the office door was ajar. He wondered why it was open, but such a matter wasn't important. What was important was that he get some sleep. "I'll come back at six and try to put this mess in order before the boss gets here," he decided.

Outside, he found it was too late to take a trolley; and he couldn't afford a cab. He lived only nine blocks away, and decided to walk it. When he entered the hallway of his rooming house, he noticed that the front door was open. "Keys don't mean much tonight," he thought, as he climbed the stairs to his room. Outside his door, he stopped, surprised. The light inside was burning!

He was alone.

"Who the hell would be here at two in the morning?" he questioned. Cautiously, he opened the door. He was alone in the room. Nothing had been disturbed as far as he could see. But why was the light on?

"Aw, nuts," he mumbled. "The landlady probably forgot to turn off the light after she cleaned out." His gaze went to his dresser and fell on a picture of a pretty young woman.

"Sally," he murmured. Sally was the girl he loved, whom he hoped to marry some day. Ever since college, he and Paul had vied for this young woman's affection. Paul had been his roommate and his best friend during four years at Wisconsin's school of accounting. Following

graduation, Ted had found a job in a large accounting office in Milwaukee. Paul had yet to draw his first week's salary. Every once in a while the two met and reminisced. Ted did his best to get Paul on at the office, but he was more concerned now with holding his own job than with finding work for his friend. Tonight's search for mistakes had been his third search in a month. The boss was displeased with him when the mistakes were so careless and especially when it was so easy to find the difficulty when he inspected Ted's work.

Paul, a good dresser.

Funny thing about Paul, though; although he couldn't find work, he somehow managed to wear decent clothes, to take Sally to dances and shows, and to enjoy life as though he were prospering. He never complained of his "tough luck." Ted often wondered how Paul did it. He concluded that Paul's folks were still supporting him, although he never asked Paul about his source of income. Another thing Ted couldn't figure out was who Sally loved. She went out with both men, and both men had pictures of her. She liked them both, he knew that. Tonight, or rather this morning, Ted was too tired to ponder long over these unsolvable problems. He finally switched off the light and went to sleep.

Ted dreamed often and tonight was no exception. Sally's face, radiant and smiling, formed a pattern behind his dreams. Ted loved her deeply and worried about his chances of ever marrying her. He saw himself sitting at his desk with his hair tousled and his fingers tapping on the glass desk top while he tried to correct his mistake. He dreamed of finding a new job. He saw Paul married to Sally. After tossing all night, he rose mechanically from a tangled pile of blankets and sheets at six o'clock when the alarm went off, shaved, dressed, and left for the office, determined to set his books in order.

Anything wrong?

At eight, the boss came in, went straight to Ted's desk and asked him if he had discovered what was wrong.

"No, sir. I haven't run across it yet. I should be able to find it soon, though. If you'd—"

"You numbskull!" the boss fumed. "Look at that entry there!"

Is that where it belongs?"

"Why, I-I. No, sir—that's the trouble alright—why I should have—"

"Yeah. You should have seen it before. Just like the other mistakes you make. I don't think you know much about keeping accounts; in fact, I'm sure of it, so sure that you'd better report to the cashier, get your check, and forget you ever worked here!"

"But, sir, I—"

"You—you nothing! I'm disgusted with you. There are plenty of other accountants who can do this work and do it right." The boss turned and went into his private office.

Ted just sat at what was his desk and stared at a calendar on the wall. Over the calendar was a blue sign that read, "Keep Smiling."

"I'll need it."

"I might as well get my check. I'm sure as hell going to need it now," he thought.

Suddenly, the boss stomped out of his office, his face white, his eyes large and round. "Rogers!" he yelled. Ted jumped up from the desk and whirled around.

Yes, s-sir."

"Get in here!"

Ted hurried to the inner office. "How late were you here last night?" the boss demanded.

"Till about one-thirty, sir. Why, is there anything wrong?"

"That's a silly question for you to ask, you, you—sit down over there and don't move. I'm calling the police!"

"The police! What for?"

"You know damn well what for. You needn't try to fox us, you smart punk. Fifty thousand would have come in handy. Too bad those bonds aren't negotiable."

"Fifty thousand? Bonds? Not negotiable? I don't understand. Negotiable? I don't understand..."

"Shut up!"

The cops come.

Ten minutes later, three uniformed officers and a plain clothesman walked into the office. The boss told his story. Fifty thousand dollars worth of non-negotiable bonds was missing from the office safe. Ted had been in the office from closing time until one-thirty in the morning and had come back at six-thirty. The bonds were in the safe when the boss left the evening before and he was the last to leave, except for Ted.

"You'll probably find 'em in his room," snapped the employer.

Handcuffed, Ted showed the way to his room, where the police started turning things upside down. In a few minutes, the plain clothesman had found the bonds, much to Ted's astonishment. They had been under his mattress, two of them torn across the middle.

"What was the hurry sticking 'em under there, Sonny?" the detective inquired.

"I didn't know they were there, honest..."

"Sure, sure. It ain't time to confess yet kid. Wait a while," laughed one of the cops.

Dirty work afoot.

Ted saw it all now. Someone who knew him or at least knew where he lived, and who knew he was at the office last night had stolen the bonds while he worked late. Finding them non-negotiable, the thief had evidently come to Ted's room and disposed of them. That accounted for the light being on earlier that morning.

Ted didn't have a chance. Everything pointed to his guilt. Broken by the preponderant weight of circumstantial evidence, by Sally's refusal to see him, and by Paul's cold sneer during the trial, he gave up. He was sentenced to five years in prison, subject to pardon in three years on good behavior. Without money, he couldn't appeal his case. Without friends, he didn't care to appeal it. He went to prison moody, broken-hearted, feeling he had nothing to live for, almost wishing the sentence pronounced had been longer. What would he do when he was released? With a record, he could never get a decent job. He lost faith in God, in everything. He became bitter.

Out of prison.

Three years of living inside cold stone walls and spending endless days thinking of justice, liberty

and other abstract things passed. Ted, feeling the weight of ten more years on his shoulders, wearing a new prison made suit, and with twenty dollars in his pocket came down the outside walk with the warden. He was free again.

"Goodbye kid," the latter said. "Here's luck to you. You deserve it and you'll need it. Your record here is a fine one. You shouldn't have too hard a time."

"Thanks, Warden," Ted gulped. "But whether I've been a good prisoner or not, I've still got a record. Whether it's good or bad in your opinion means nothing. It's bad out here. I'll try hard, though, and thanks for the encouragement."

He was hungry.

Ted walked to the highway and thumbed his way to the city. It was cold tonight and he was hungry. He had to take it easy, though, because his twenty dollars had to last him until he found work. Hungry more for news, however, than for food, he bought a newspaper; why, he hadn't seen

one for three years! Prison rules.

He devoured the thing. Every inch of the paper read like a beautiful story; every inch until he turned to the society page. There, clear and lifelike, was Sally's picture! Under it, he read: Mrs. Paul Jackson... he couldn't read any more.

So Sally had married Paul! Ted should have expected that. If he couldn't have her, he would have wanted his best friend to have her. Sure, that was alright; that was the best way.

What Ted didn't know was that Paul had stepped into his job a week after he went to prison.

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