

The Free Press Short Story
THE BOOSTER
 BY ERNEST L. THURSTON

"Della!"

Halted in mid stride, as if the sharp ring word had been a bullet, Paul Eldridge whirled on one heel, to face up the Armstrong walk to an opened door and a beckoning arm. He grinned as he obeyed the summons.

Della Armstrong awaited him, her slender, brown-clad figure stiff, her chin up. Moreover, the hazel eyes under the crop of reddish-brown hair were hot and the cheeks pink. Paul looked at her admiringly. "A little pepper is very becoming seasoning for you," he informed her.

Ignoring that she pronounced judgment: "You've gone and done it again!" "Golly, without redeeming circumstances," he chuckled. "Where and what?"

"Booted Alfred Dixon into Green & Company."

"Did he get it? Fine! He'll make good."

"But," snapped the girl, "if you'd fought for it, you'd have won it. Alfred didn't ask you to help him out. It was an open field."

"Not exactly, Della," explained Paul slowly. "Will heard of that vacancy while on that surveying party up Dalton way and was hot after it before the news leaked to me. I just couldn't try to grab it from an old friend, you know. So I just helped; got friends of mine to boost him. I—"

"Well," Della side-stepped that, Kennedy offered you a place and you refused that. Don't you ever intend getting into engineering, Paul?"

"Sure!" The boy stiffened in turn.

"But," Della turned and sarcastically delivered her speech to the air, "he starts into the profession by taking a clerkship behind a grocery counter. He expends his engineering ability on a set of books in a general store—and so on—instead of going out and seeking work in the profession he professes to love."

"Oh, come now, Della," protested Paul, coloring to his brown hair, "you know why I passed up the Kennedy offer. And you know I want to make my place in this friendly little town. I love it and—"

"Stagnate," completed Della. "Friendly, of course, when you boost everyone, but where does this little one-horse place—"

"Corroct," interpolated Paul. "Bradley owns the only equine left; the rest have turned to flyovers. As to stagnate, it's only the good in me I boast."

"Right!" Della shrugged her slim, expressive shoulders. "Loaf along then." Her eyes caught sight of a book in his coat pocket. "And spend spare time in idle reading, as always. Here, what is it?" She jerked the book out, glancing swiftly at the title, and then rich color flamed. Her eyes softened, her lips colored as her mind grasped the significance of the few words, "Civil Engineer's Handbook."

Paul thought her exceptionally attractive then, as she hauled him into the house and over to a chair, exclaiming, "Porgive me! It's just because I want you to win out, you know."

Old friends and that were, they talked it out then, and talked over other affairs of the little town, too, before Paul had to leave. They parted with joking ease and take, to hide deeper feeling, for Della might not wholly approve of his course, but she was loyal to her friends to the core.

Paul sobered as he strode homeward. He had ranked as honor man well above Alfred in the engineering department of the college they both attended. He could have won the place with Green, and he could have had other positions which were far off from the little town of Newmarket. He longed to get into his profession, but deeper yet was the desire to work and serve and make his place in the small town that had always been his home, and where his father, as a doctor, had been known and loved by all.

His greatest difficulty was that the first step had seemed never to open. That was the reason he, a college-trained man, had accepted the grocery clerkship, and then moved up to keep books for old Andrew Baker. There seemed so little engineering and construction opportunity in the neighborhood, only two or three contractors who worked in a small way. There was also Richard Kennedy who absorbed the larger jobs that involved masonry and iron work. Kennedy wanted Paul, but the standards were too low to appeal to the boy's nature and training. He longed to do good work, not shoddy. There was Green & Company, who were just reaching out from its city headquarters, but had no local work as yet. Paul had nearly come to the conclusion that no opening would come unless he made it in an independent way. Not even Della knew yet that dollar by dollar he was saving up a tiny capital with which to swing some minor construction job.

He was up early the next morning, working on a cement curb, sidewalk, and gateway for the old home. That was his amusement and recreation—on engineering construction on a small scale. Some of the neighbors, seeing the paths he took with it, thought it a joke; but he meant to keep his engineering sense alive by making a perfect job.

Richard Kennedy, headed downtown in his sedan, did not laugh. He was a young fellow with money and brains, and he was making more money; some of the neighbors said, putting his brains into

I'm proud of you for doing it. I've no use for people who have had you stand up for the good in them, and yet you won't see the squareness in you. I'm standing up for you," she giggled, "except for a minute's backsliding. And, oh, do hurry; I'm taking lessons down at the telephone exchange so, on occasion, I can do a bit of snubbing. Good-by!"

Paul felt somewhat better after that. Moreover, Della had calmly let out a bit of his plans. The attitude of others was more understanding, he was adding to his needed capital, and he was gaining knowledge of machinery processes.

The fall drew on with rawness and chill and threat; yet real winter held off. Paul noted that Kennedy was driving his big building to get it roofed in before the storms struck. He got in the habit of walking by when he could and slowly he grew anxious. The work was hot, and as a trained man, he felt just what could he do about it? Kennedy and the town authorities were responsible.

He noted one raw, gummy, dull day, at noon, that Kennedy in his race for the roof level, was running his side walls far too high, without cross support. Paul knew that with this sharp temperature drop, the cement in the walls would set slowly, perhaps be permanently weakened. Clearly the builder knew it, too, for he was huffing him about covering exposed floor sections with straw. The young engineer overheard instructions to the chief foreman, something about a train, and then saw Kennedy hurry off.

Paul ate a hurried lunch and walked back to the shop fighting a rising wind that had a raw edge the moment he shifted. He did not work with his usual spirit that afternoon, and he started sharply when a great door crashed to, under the impulse of an exceptional gust.

"Winter's hitting with a blizzard," growled Docherty. "Snow's begun."

"Let me off, on private business, Docherty?" asked Paul, on impulse.

In three minutes he was forcing his way into a wind that again had shifted, coming from an ugly quarter and driving before it needlelike snow. By the time he struggled down to the big new office structure, he was dodging branches and blinds. The foreman, he found, had fainted work because of the danger of flying boards caught up from scaffolding trends.

"Why not rope off the walk, to avoid injuries to passers-by?" Paul suggested to old James Blake, the general foreman, whom he knew.

"Good idea," snapped Blake. "They fellows treat some of that rope we used on the spare tackle. Lively, now, so we can get away."

"How about those green, unsupported walls up there?"

Blake shot him a swift glance. "They will stand, I guess."

"But suppose they don't?"

"You don't expect me to go up and steady 'em with my hands?" growled Blake, irritably. "Whop's in charge here, anyhow?"

"You, with Kennedy away," whipped back Paul, "and you're wishing you were not. You know there's danger. If that near wall comes down on that weak Converse house next door, it may bring it down with death or injury to office people and to the switchboard people in the top story. Better warn 'em out!"

"And be sacked for it if the walls stand," said Blake undecidedly. "It would be a confession of weakness in the work. Wait for some sign—"

"This gale won't give warning ahead. Blake, get your men together and brace that wall from the Converse roof." "And have my men blown off? Not I!"

"Then I'll warn 'em next door," declared Paul. Eviding the grasp of the foreman, he stumbled away, whirled by the wind, and slid and skidded into the doorway. Soon he was running from office to office, gasping his warning to all at work and struggling up one floor to another until he broke into the local switchboard room and confronted a steady-eyed young woman, who whitened at his warning, but kept her lips firm and her eyes steady.

"I can't leave," she responded quietly. "I'll have you out by force," snarled Paul.

"It's—duty," replied the girl. "You won't!"

Paul nodded. He turned to fly down the steps and to a hopeless foreman, who muttered, "No go! The men won't volunteer. Danger's too great."

"Volunteers!" yelled Paul. "Those telephone girls won't leave. We must protect 'em. Men without families come on. Those who won't volunteer, get some who will."

As the first timber started up by the hoist, for which fortunately there still was power, Paul led his band onto the Converse house roof, above which the new wall towered threateningly. They added, tumbled, and were forced to lie flat in the worst gusts, but they worked like mad between. Once only a flying tackle saved a man from shooting overboard. Suddenly an odd, grinding noise sounded above the whirling wind. "The wall's falling," yelled a man, swinging for the trap.

"Stand by!" shrieked Paul. "It's the other wall."

There was a wild, crashing, shattering note. The braces shook, the roof under them jarred, and irritating dust was whirled in their faces. "Come and carried the floors with it," gasped Blake.


"More necessity to hold this," rasped Paul.

Hence by plea, somehow, the bracing timbers went up. Men fell braced, one was carried down with a broken limb. Hands grew numb in the cold. About the struggling hand the wind roared and the braces cracked, showing the strain.

"Look out!" shrieked Blake. "Back! It's coming down!"

Paul swung about. The rear edge of the wall as yet unbraced, was crumbling. He leaped for the nearest workman,

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