

The Free Press' Short Story

THE GRIM CONTEST

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It was quite seven o'clock before Grace Martin returned home from business one evening. Her sister, Nan, delicate from a recent illness, laid aside her work on some paper novelties and set the dining table with the Grace exchanged street clothes for a dainty house gown.

"I know, and I mean to, too; but Irene wanted to leave early, and..." "Irene, again! Just what do they pay her for, please, when you're the one who does practically all the work?"

"But you don't understand, Nan, it's true that Irene shirks, but so much of her and my work overlaps that it would be hard to prove to Mr. Hinton just which one of us was delinquent. For my own safety I have to make good Irene's shortcomings."

"But there ought to be some end to it, Grace. Mr. Hinton ought to be made to see..." "See! My dear, Mr. Hinton has been so panicky and nervous for the past few months that I wouldn't dare approach him with a complaint about Irene, even if I wanted to, which I don't. Mr. Hinton spent June at his Adirondack lodge, and the past week he's been in Albany, I think. His business moves of late have been very secretive. Anyway, he's due home to-morrow and I wanted everything in my department straight."

"Oh, yes, of course," Nan conceded gently, and then repeated dreamily, "Adirondack lodge." "Where you ought to be," added Grace, with the usual concern over her younger sister's slow gain in health.

"Where I'd like to be, of course," Nan acknowledged with a wistful smile. "Where you're going to be, too," Grace promised earnestly, "as soon as August comes, and I get my vacation."

"But I don't need an Adirondack lodge exactly," protested Nan. "Oh, no, but at least some good mountain air. Wouldn't it be glorious if we could live in a nice high, dry climate? I suppose," Grace finished, discounting her courage disdainfully, "if I had one ounce of bravery, I'd quit my job, move upstate somewhere, and trust to luck to get work there. Let's hurry to do these dishes, Nan, and go to work on the favors."

The dishes, manipulated by two pairs of deft hands, were soon cleared away, and the girls resumed the task that had occupied Nan before Grace's homecoming. Nan divided her days between the keeping of her simple home and the making of paper novelties for a local manufacturer. The latter work, though not highly remunerative, was fascinatingly creative and quite suited to Nan's frail health, since the raw material was brought to the house and the finished work collected at the same time. Evenings Grace often helped in the designing.

The next morning, which was Saturday with its usual half-business season, when Grace reached the office, Irene Durham was already present. Although the latter had devoted a good hour at home to the construction of a perfect toilet, she was already stealing furtive glances into a vanity mirror, and reading just her hair between listless spurts of uncovering her typewriter and laying out her morning's work.

"I'm by no means late," Grace observed. "You must have come early, Irene." "I have to leave early," Irene confessed without a quail. "Oh, Irene, and on Mr. Hinton's first day back. Suppose he misses you?"

"He'll be gone by the time I want to leave. I've an appointment with Madame Elise to wash my hair." "At that moment Mr. Hinton entered the room. He greeted the two girls in a pleasant but absorbed way. He asked for some sales sheets which Grace readily found for him; then moved briskly into the interior office. Here he spent the best part of the morning in low-voiced conference with first one superintendent, and another, of the huge textile factory of which the office was but a small part. At eleven-thirty when Irene left, quite as complacently as if she were not supposed to remain until twelve, Mr. Hinton was still conferring. Grace, after Irene's departure, lived in terror of his re-appearance and breathed a prayer of thankfulness when at twelve o'clock she was herself free to leave, without being obliged to explain Irene's absence. Letting Grace lifted her desk for the week end, missing over Irene's easy acceptance of responsibility. As she rose to go, Mr. Hinton's voice, for the first time that morning, floated clearly through the partition.

"Well," Grace heard him say quite plainly, rapping his desk apparently for emphasis, "we can stand it till the last of July. After that either Miss Martin or Miss Durham must go."

Gravely, humbly, she further cited the situation, Grace unconsciously strained her ears for more. "Miss Martin or Miss Durham must go." Grace repeated the words to herself parrotlike, while she nervously donned hat and coat, as if the combination were a sort of formula not to be forgotten. "Miss Martin or Miss Durham must go." Reduced to its lowest terms the statement meant simply that either she or Irene was to lose her job! What basis would govern the choice

of which one Mr. Hinton would retain? Time of service would not determine opening of that branch of the business, two years previous. Quality of work? Who could judge that, Grace asked herself, because although in her inmost heart she knew herself to be more thorough and conscientious in service, yet a certain charm seemed to hover over Irene that kept her immune from the censure of the office men. Charming person, plus Grace's apparently unimpaired efforts to keep Irene's work up to par, even if that effort meant hours of painstaking corrections of her co-worker's mistakes. She had protected Irene to the extent of her own undoing. As a result, perhaps, Nan, who depended upon her so implicitly, must sacrifice the mountain trip that they had so joyously planned, in detail just the evening before. However, until the possible tragedy was more certain, Nan must not know.

The younger girl was jubilant over a motoring invitation when Grace reached home. Friends had invited them both for that afternoon. Grace pleaded sewing as a barrier to her own acceptance, but encouraged her sister to go without her. Nan's absence, she figured, affording an opportunity to collect her scattered wits, would be a boon.

Left alone, Grace slumped dully across a couch. With that terror which pursues a soul so distraught Grace pictured herself walking the streets wildly in search of a job as remunerative as her present one, Nan deprived of proper nourishment, an ever-expanding hole in their meagre savings. Across the darkness gleamed suddenly a light; the odds were all in her favor! Irene did not know of the contemplated change! All Grace need do was to preserve her own high standard of service, let Irene be swallowed in her slipshod habits, and thus automatically the other girl would be dismissed and Grace's permanency assured. Grace enjoyed this selfishness for a few moments; then rose with sudden strength. "But I just can't do that," she cried aloud. "Irene must have her chance!"

By Monday morning the tempter departed permanently as having lost the battle. "Nan, I won't be home till about eight to-night; I'm dining out," Grace, rather hollow-eyed after a restless night, made this announcement with mock airiness.

"Dining out? Whose guest are you, Grace?" "I happen to be a hostess. I'm taking Irene to dinner." "Irene!?" Nan exclaimed in disgust. "You're a goose, Grace. The worse Irene means you with her selfishness, the better you treat her."

"It's business to-night, Nan. That's the method business people employ when they have something confidential to discuss. They take their opponent out to dinner." "If Nan had been surprised, Irene Durham was no less so when Irene repeated in wide-eyed amazement, "With nothing to-night? I'm dining out." Grace, rather hollow-eyed after a restless night, made this announcement with mock airiness.

"Sure, I mean it. We'll go to the Golden Pheasant tea room." "Across the daintily-laid table that evening, Grace studied Irene keenly. This was the first time their lives had ever touched socially. From enmities of Irene's construction at odd times Grace had guessed that the girl was quite a belle in her pleasure-mad crowd; she saw frequent evidence that Irene had attained amittitence of wardrobe that she herself had never reached; but whether or not Irene possessed any stability of background for the maintenance of these heights, she did not know. It was this lack of knowledge that warned her to head tactfully up her subjects. They were beginning a dessert of strawberry shortcake with whipped cream when Grace opened, "Irene, do you really need your job? If Mr. Hinton were to demote you, say, in July, would you be terribly upset?"

"The would skin me!" Irene whispered in awed alarm. "Say, is it—am I—what?" "Grace had never seen Irene so bewildered. "Well, listen," she began, and told the remark she had overheard on Saturday.

"I know it's going to be me," Irene shuddered, and laying her spoon across the unfinished dessert, folded cold hands in her lap.

"There's no proof of that. If it were decided upon he wouldn't have put it as he did—either Miss Martin or Miss Durham. Here's the reason I told you, Irene: I need my job, and I'm going to work hard to keep it. I've told you all I heard so as to give you the same chance if you need yours. I'm not going to make good any more of your deficiencies. I'm going to let it go through and come back on your head if you're guilty. That is fair, isn't it?"

Irene nodded, but seemed unable to speak, so Grace hustled her out of the crowded tea room and into the brazenly spring night.

The grim contest opened formally next day. Irene exhibited early in the morning a nervousness that was reflected in her typing, but Grace noticed that she used most of her noon hour to do the work over and turn out perfect copies. Beyond this, except for a slight loss of color whenever Mr. Hinton passed

through the room, Irene displayed no noticeable disturbance in equanimity. Grace, however, suffered almost untold tortures that required a supreme effort of will to quiet, but after a few days she settled down to her usual poise and gave her utmost self to the battle that was on. As the weeks advanced and Mr. Hinton gave no hint of a change in the office force, Grace found herself needing to fight a bitterness toward him for that which seemed to her gross injustice. Surely anyone was due to receive a notice of a contemplated change so that she might hunt other work and so fortify herself against a period of non-employment.

One July morning Mr. Hinton burst in upon Irene and Grace, agog with excitement. "Just a few minutes, young ladies," he began hurriedly. Grace shivered inwardly; Irene spilled a box of paper clips over her desk.

"I'm expecting a Mr. Corey any day now. He's an elderly gentleman, and a bit fanatical and eccentric, but without meaning what you think. For the good of all of us, Corey's visit must proceed without any unpleasant hitch, and I just wish to ask you, if it falls the lot of either of you to meet him first, to see that he receives proper attention, will you? If he wishes to go through the factory, by all means drop everything and escort him." With a short "thank you," Mr. Hinton departed.

"Well, I certainly was scared," Irene confessed, retrieving the scattered clips. "I thought sure he was going to say—" "I'm scared yet," Grace interrupted. "You can see that the outcome of this man's visit is most uncertain and most important!"

Grace nerved herself for the possible going through of this new ordeal. Irene lunch between twelve and one, while Grace was out from one to two. One afternoon, a week or so after Mr. Hinton's request, when Grace returned to the office for the last half day's work, she found Irene all aflutter. The awaited Mr. Corey had arrived a half hour ago and Irene had entertained him a full fifteen minutes before Mr. Hinton appeared.

"It was awful," wailed Irene. "I didn't know what to say to him, Grace. If it had only been you, now. You talk so nice." "Oh, hush, Irene! I'm sure you did all right. Are those cards ready to file?" Grace could trust herself to make no further comment lest she betray the disappointment that consumed her. She had prayed, too selfishly, perhaps, that the opportunity of meeting Mr. Corey might come to her; but fate had chosen Irene for the honor. That Irene had scored a great success was shown when Mr. Hinton entered later on, smiling effusively. "I want to thank you, Miss Durham," he said. "Your handling of Mr. Corey was all that could be desired."

After this episode, the office work sank again to its usual routine, but Grace, without malice, felt that the contest for her was lost.

August entered with a week of torrid temperatures. All over the eastern section of the country cities contended with one another for the winning of the heat pennant. Grace watched Nan apprehensively as they battled one sleepless night after another. After the third day of record-breaking humidity, the younger girl lay in a stupor for hours. Grace had no thought but to minister to her stricken sister. She telephoned Mr. Hinton immediately and again a day or so later when it became apparent that she would be out perhaps a week more in Nan's behalf. Mr. Hinton consoled courteously and added, "Don't worry, Miss Martin. Miss Durham is tussling down the work nicely."

This was hardly consoling, but Grace did not dwell upon it lengthily until the heat wave broke and Nan showed signs of improvement. Her old worries, plus the new, returned.

When Nan was at last out of danger, Grace engaged a woman to stay during the day, and herself went back to her work after a two-day's absence. She had been at her desk only an hour when Mr. Hinton sent for her. She remembered long after how Irene rushed to her as she rose nervously to obey the summons and hugged her fervently.

At the close of the day Grace gave Nan a vivid account of the ordeal. "You see, Nan," she finished, "I took the wrong meaning of the remark I overheard. When Mr. Hinton said 'Miss Martin or Miss Durham must go,' he meant to this new update office. He's so glad I'm willing to go, he said; I told him that mountain country is what you need and I'm glad to have an opportunity for us to move there. Irene's to remain in the office here and they'll get a new girl to work with her. She's tickled, too—says she'd never have made good if I hadn't misunderstood Mr. Hinton and warned her so that she worked out of her careless ways."

We wish that a dog who can bite his tail would teach us the secret of making both ends meet.

BEER, BOOTS AND BARLEY  
seventy-eight breweries in Canada made reports to the Dominion Bureau of Statistics for the year 1929. They had a total capital invested of \$70,200,147, employed 4,879 persons, and expended in wages \$7,134,256. The boot and shoe manufacturers (leather) in the Dominion in the year 1929, the latest record available, with a total capital of \$21,433,028, employed 15,505 persons, expending in wages \$14,962,698. (Canada Year Book.)

If the capital of the breweries had employed a proportionate number to that of the shoe manufacturers, the seventy-eight breweries would have employed not 4,879 persons, but 34,721, or more than seven persons for every one actually engaged, and the wages would have been not \$7,134,256, but \$33,551,587.

The \$70,200,147 brewery capital in the making of its product called for \$19,135,208 worth of raw material. The boot and shoe manufacturers, with a capital of \$21,433,028, used \$26,263,042. If the brewery business had made proportionate demand for raw material it would have used not \$19,135,208, but \$59,081,367, or more than three times the amount actually used.

The demand for raw material, obviously means trade and employment in the occupations affected, reverberating through wide circles of industry. It looks as though it would pay the farmer to feed his barley and sell the hides—from the office of Ontario Prohibition Union.

TRY A ROLLING PIN  
"You hit your husband with a chair. Pray tell, why did you do it. It brought you into court you see. Before I'm through you'll rue it."

"I always hit him with a chair, I'll do it while I'm able. And why, you say? Oh, just because I cannot lift the table."

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Answer—"A bird that lives on icebergs."

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Fully registered bonds, the interest on which is payable direct to the owner by Government cheque, will be issued in denominations of \$500, \$1,000, \$5,000, \$10,000 and \$100,000.  
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