

The Free Press Short Story

SOFT SOAP--AND HARD

HENRY CARLETON

THE professor harangued the gaping crowd, silver words, honeyed words, smooth, forceful, and delightful words poured from a mouth set in a quite enormously pink, round, and smiling face. The professor was a most ingenious man.

"This soap," shouted the orator, "is absolutely and positively the greatest development of modern science. A cake should be in every home. No--dozens of cakes should be in every home."

His voice rumbled pleasantly, and as he warmed to the subject nearest his heart, he launched into that form of expression which is typically American. The hyperbole. "This soap," he declared, "is good for cuts and bruises, it cures warts, hay fever, and mean dispositions. Then he smiled hugely and his audience knew that he was joking.

Back in the dimly lit depths of the big green-and-white striped body of the motor truck Billy Young smiled with appreciative glee. He was filling a basket with little green-and-white striped boxes containing the soap whose virtues were being extolled by the professor on the platform outside. The professor was telling a funny story, and it was a new one. Billy suspected that each was invented for the occasion, for a story was seldom told twice.

"And now," concluded the professor, "the young assistant, attendant of the temple of cleanliness, servant to the high priest of that which is next to godliness, will pass among you with packages of this essential to good health, good manners, and good nature."

"This was Billy's cue to emerge with his basket.

For a few minutes selling was brisk, and the boy's pockets jingled with quarters as the visitors to the county fair crowded about him, still under the spell of the silver-tongued speaker's magic.

"Step a little closer, folks," urged the professor, as some were still a little reluctant to buy, "I want to show you what fine, clear, durable suds this super-soap will make. Cold water, warm water, soft water, hard water; it is all the same to Kleenzeit." He produced the incomparable suds in a huge, snowy pile, and blew great, glistening bubbles. "See!" he exclaimed, "even the wind does not blow them away. Have you ever seen such beautiful suds?"

No one had, it seemed, and Billy's supply of green-and-white striped cubes grew smaller. No one knew that the durability of the suds and the bubbles was due to a few drops of glycerin mixed with the water; that was the professor's secret.

Again there was evident a certain reluctance to buy, and again the professor was inspired. Selecting another cake, he bit off a corner and chewed it with gusto. "It is even edible," he proclaimed. "If you run out of bread, eat Kleenzeit. It is healthful internally as well as externally. It will make the thin fat, and the fat thin."

To this last demonstration Billy was as attentive as any of the others. It was something new. Later he protested, "Supposing they do try to eat it?" and the professor answered airily, "Oh, won't hurt them--aside from making them somewhat nauseated."

"Oh," said Billy, relieved, "I was just wondering."

Billy liked the young professor, who, unlike so many soap-vending fakirs, was really entitled to the distinction. Professor Joseph Hoefelmeyer held the chair of Industrial Chemistry at Inland University. His soap selling was his summer diversion, and it was highly profitable. Billy had thought himself fortunate when Professor Hoefelmeyer had offered to help him earn the money with which to enter college in the fall.

"I invented the soap," the professor had told the boy, "and it is really an improvement over any other on the market. Just now, however, I can't afford to make it in sufficient quantity to market it in competition with that made by the big manufacturers, though at twenty-five cents a cake there's a good profit for me. And it's a relief from teaching classes."

The professor was a round, little man, with a merry face and twinkling eyes. His sober attitude of dignity seemed strangely out of place, but this dropped from him when once he was on the road with Billy and the green-and-white striped truck. "Call me 'professor' when customers are around," he told his companion. "Other times I'm Joe."

There was an irresistible charm to the nomadic life, a charm intensified for Billy by the delightful personality of his employer, who was a clever student of human nature. He taught the boy many lessons he could never hope to learn in schools.

There was, too, an element of mystery which gave added zest to the summer adventure, for each day the professor would seclude himself to make his soap. "The process is a secret," he explained. "I don't want to expose you to the temptation of learning it." So Billy contented himself with wandering about a new town each day while Professor Hoefelmeyer made the soap. "Any soap maker could analyze this and learn the ingredients," the professor told Billy at another time. "The process is the secret."

In the pleasant companionship of the delightful Professor Hoefelmeyer, Billy spent, as he termed it, his happiest of summers. It was exhilarating to empty

With a weary, hurt look, the girl took his arm. "Yes, it's good soap," she admitted, "but come with me. I've something to show you."

Billy followed her to her own home, and she led him to the shed back of the house. "Look there," she commanded, pointing to a pile of empty boxes. "Yes, it's good soap," she said ironically. "Soap boxes!"

But they were not green and white ones.

"Your professor was out here all this morning," continued Ruth, "melting up that soap and putting it into new models. Didn't you know that?"

"No, I didn't know."

"Then, forgive me, but you do know what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to find him."

With Ruth's dramatic exposure of the professor's duplicity, all of Billy's plans crumbled, their very foundations torn from under them. Gone was his hope of college. Gone was everything for which he had been working. For, of course, he could not go on now. He found the professor still at the fair grounds.

"So you've fooled me--all summer!" Billy said with a low voice, when they were together in the green-and-white striped car. "You've made me no better than the shell game men, the crooks. And you said you loathed 'em. Why, you--you're no better than any of them!"

The professor listened carefully, thought for a while, and then smiled slowly. "Billy," he said quietly, "you're excited about something. What is it?"

"Soap!" The word burst from the boy with all the suddenly loosed vehemence of his pent-up wrath.

"Ah, yes," said the professor in a smooth voice, seemingly undisturbed by the unexplained anger, "quite right. It is soap, isn't it?" He waved his hand gaily at the pile of green-and-white cakes at his back. "Kleenzeit, best soap in the world, greatest boon to mankind--all that sort of thing. Superlatively good for man or beast."

"See here," interrupted Billy, "I did not come down to hear you tell about green-and-white soap. I'm here to tell you that I'm through with it, and through with you, and that in the morning I'll give back every cent I've taken from you. I can't use it, that's all."

The professor regarded him with mild surprise, and a flash of something almost like quiet amusement crossed his mind. "Better keep the money," he advised. "You'll need it."

"But not so badly that I have to get it like the shell game operators do." To speak in this way was an effort, for Billy knew he was throwing away his chance of college for another year. It would take months to earn as much money as he had made in the few weeks of summer. Then, too, he liked the professor, and it was hard to say all he felt was necessary.

The other smiled disarmingly. "Am I that bad? Or is it just that some one has been telling you they couldn't eat our soap? Come now, what is it?"

Billy rose to his feet, trembling nervously. He wished the interview were over. Suppose he should be wrong--but no, he couldn't be. Ruth had told him, and he had seen the empty boxes, too. If additional proof were needed. "Do you think," he demanded slowly, "that I'd have kept on with you if I had known you were melting up somebody else's soap, and making two twenty-five cent cakes out of every nickel one?" In his words were all the bitterness and contempt that was in his heart, and the older man seemed to shrink visibly under his accusing gaze. A look of contrition passed over the smiling face.

When the professor found words to

reply, there was none of the old gaily in his voice. He spoke in a low tone, which quivered and trembled over his answer. "I'm sorry, Billy boy," he faltered. "I shouldn't have done it. Worse still, I shouldn't have dragged you in it."

"You lied to me."

"No, Billy, I didn't lie to you. I simply didn't tell you. When we started out, I was making my own soap. And really it was better than any but the most expensive on the market. Well, one day I couldn't get the ingredients I needed; so I just went out and bought a lot of this other soap--it's good, too, incidentally--and melted it up and with my own coloring and perfumes, and sold it as my own. He stopped to look at Billy approvingly, as a small boy who has been whipped.

"And the profit was enormous," was Billy's cold accusation.

"Yes, it was pretty big. When I saw how much there was in it, I didn't have the moral courage to go back to the old way, with its little margin of profit."

"So you dragged me into it."

"I know. I know. I should have told you at first, I suppose, but I liked you, and wanted you to have the money. You are a good salesman, too, you know. So I let it go on, thinking maybe you would never find out."

"Well, I found out. And I'm through. I can't go on with it."

"No?"

"No."

The professor started rummaging in the lockers under the little laboratory table. After much nervous fumbling, he said, "Billy, I'll make you a proposition, and I hope you'll accept, for perhaps it will help to make up for what you seem determined to throw away. Now we have nearly three weeks left. You stick with me, and I'll start making my own soap again. We'll work for all there is in it and sell as much as we can. Then if you haven't enough for your share, on a fifty-fifty basis, I'll lend you whatever you need to start school."

"I'll do it," replied Billy.

Instantly the professor lit the burners under the melting pot. "We'll start out a batch to-night," he said. "Then we'll be all ready for to-morrow. You stay here and help. Fifty-fifty from now on."

Until nearly morning the two worked in the dimly-lighted car, amid the pungent, almost sickening odor of the cooking soap. When they had finished, there was a huge pile of the little cakes, all wrapped and stacked ready for selling. There was more soap than they had ever sold in any one day. "Zowie," exclaimed Billy, "we'll sell every last scrap of it."

Far from being tired, the two started their work with a zest and a spirit that surpassed even the fervent enthusiasm of former days. Never before had the young professor been so eloquently convincing. Never before had Billy smiled and talked with such engaging ingenuousness as he went among the crowds with his huge basket slung from his shoulder.

In the crowd that afternoon was a disconcerting presence, however. That presence was a tall, gray man, well dressed and wearing with the air of habit a manner of confident authority. He watched Billy and the professor closely, listening intently to every word of the professor and buying a cake of soap from Billy every time he approached with his basket.

As the day wore on, and the gray man was still in the crowd, Billy noticed that the professor regarded his best customer with anxious eyes. When, during a lull in the crowd, he moved away to watch the free acts in front of the grandstand, Billy voiced his question--the professor answered, "That's Ashley?"

"And who is Ashley?"

"You don't know? You should. He's the biggest soap manufacturer in the world, and we've been selling his stuff almost all summer."

"Lucky we quit when we did, then."

"I wouldn't be surprised," the professor admitted dryly.

The next turn in events was not altogether unexpected, perhaps, but all the same Billy was somewhat surprised to find, when he reached the fair grounds, that the professor and Mr. Ashley were absorbed in conversation.

"Come here," the former called, as Billy approached, "you'll be interested in this. Mr. Ashley, this is Mr. Young."

Mr. Ashley's kindly eyes twinkled. "Best salesman I've seen for a long time," laughed the man. "And now we can talk business?"

"Any time," agreed the professor. Billy started away.

"No, now that you're here, you stay," ordered the professor. "Mr. Ashley's time is more valuable than yours. He can't afford to wait for you."

The great manufacturer chuckled to himself, as at some huge joke. Then he said, "I'm ready to make my proposition, Professor Hoefelmeyer. It's this: I'd like to manufacture your soap. I can give you a royalty of two cents on every cake sold, and that, incidentally, is a very large royalty, for we will sell a great deal of it. You soap is better than anything our chemists have been able to develop, and we will be able to market it as a high grade toilet soap, at a moderately high price, the latter to depend largely upon production costs. What do you think about it?"

Professor Hoefelmeyer thought for a moment, and made some calculations on the back of an envelope. "I'm ready to sign a contract to that effect," he announced, "if--"

"If what?"

"Why, if my partner is agreeable."

"I see. And what do you say?" Mr. Ashley turned inquiringly to Billy.

"Me?"

"Of course. Fifty-fifty," said the professor.

"But I haven't anything to do with a thing like this. That fifty-fifty proposition was just--well, just for the rest of our summer, wasn't it?"

"It was fifty-fifty for the whole shooting match," explained the professor. "Anyway, if it hadn't been for you, we wouldn't have been here now. But for you we--we'd be somewhere else by this time, I imagine."

Billy grinned. "Green and white stripes?"

"Maybe not green and white."

Mr. Ashley grinned broadly. "Oh," he said, as Billy stammered and tried to recover the words, "I know all about it."

"I told him the whole thing," confessed the professor.

"Now that's over with," said the great manufacturer with a smile, "I'll have the contract ready this afternoon. You might as well quit this little two-penny business."

"And it's your fault, Billy," the professor accused mockingly.

Mr. Ashley started to go away, then turned back. "Young man," he said severely, "don't think for a minute that you're through selling soap. When you are not in school, I expect to find you at your desk in our sales office. And, Professor, I've already wired our chief chemist that his successor will be there in two weeks."

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