

The Free Press Short Story

FRED HARTLEY'S REVENGE

By LESTER E. BERRY

TOM SUMMERS and Fred Hartley were young farmers for whom a successful future was prophesied by the residents of the Milton district. Both were several years under the thirty mark, both had been raised on a farm, both were hard workers and both were bachelors. Purchasing farms on the plan of crop payments and being blessed with good crops each year, they, at the time this story begins, owned the land which they farmed.

One of the factors which had caused them to work as hard as they had done had been a growing spirit of rivalry between them. At first this rivalry had been of a healthy character. But as prosperity came, a touch of jealousy entered into their attitude towards each other. This had slowly grown till now either was ready to openly betray his hostility to the other at the slightest provocation.

With their land free from debt, each was looking for a chance of improving his position and of getting ahead of his rival, as neither had got the best of it in the race to make the final payment on their farms.

One day Fred learned a farmer some distance away was getting rid of his stock. It was pure bred, and in the herd were several prize winners at the fairs. Fred at once got on the phone and made a bid for them. His offer proving satisfactory and being accepted he promised to be over early the next morning and close the deal with a cash payment. It was late in the afternoon when he did this.

The following morning he was away as soon as he had helped his hired man with the chores. Arriving at the farm after thirty miles of a drive, he saw no sign of either farmer or cattle. Getting out of the car he made his way to the house. The door was opened by a woman, the wife of the farmer.

"Mr. Shields around?" he asked.

"No. He's gone to town," the woman replied.

"Come to town? Why I told him I was coming to get the cattle this morning," Fred protested.

"Oh, the man fetched them last night," the woman said.

"Man! What man?"

"I think his name was Winters. Or something like it," was the reply.

"Was it Summers?" Fred asked, with sudden foreboding.

"Yes, I guess that was the name," the woman smiled.

Fred looked at her in a helpless way. "And you say that Summers was here and took the cattle?"

She nodded.

"But your husband had accepted my offer for them over the phone," he hinted.

"I don't know anything about that. All I know is that I heard him say that he had been offered a big price for them and had let them go on condition that the man took them away that night."

"I guess I know the reason why he made that stipulation, and why he isn't here this morning," Fred said bitterly. "He knew I'd be along for them."

The woman only shrugged her shoulders. Fred turned away and, climbing into his car, drove to Tom Summers' place. The cattle were there, all right, and their new owner was tending them.

"Put one over on me, eh?" he snapped driving close up to where his rival stood.

"What do you mean?" the other asked, with pretended innocence.

"Why I bought these cattle yesterday over the phone. And you knew it when you called!"

"Did you pay for them?" Tom Summers asked sarcastically.

"No, but the owner as good as closed the deal. And I've just been over to get them."

The other smiled.

"Made a monkey of me, didn't you?" Fred fired.

"I offered a bigger price, that's all," he retorted.

"All right. Maybe you'll need something of me some day." Fred put his foot on the starter.

"Not much chance," the other laughed. Fred's face set hard. "You'd better not, that's all. I'm through with you. So long as we live here I'll remember the dirty trick you've played me. You think you've put one over on me. Well, maybe you have and maybe you have not. The game isn't over yet; and I'll get back at you if I have to wait twenty years to do it!"

"Having said which, Fred threw his car into gear and drove off.

It soon became known that there had been a break between Fred and Tom, and that Fred had vowed revenge. Some smiled over the way Tom had got ahead of his rival, while others declared that Fred had ground for grievance.

For a week or so life went on much the same as ever, except that there was no further intercourse of any kind between the rivals. Then early one morning while it was yet dark, Fred, awakening from his sleep, saw the red glow of a fire through his bedroom window. He jumped out of bed to get a closer view. A blazing mountain of fire met his gaze as great flames leaped heavenward from the direction of Tom

Summers' buildings. Fred stood contemplating the huge burning mass for a few minutes. Then, pulling on some clothing, he left the house and, getting out his car, drove over. Stopping on the road, a little distance away, he watched. Men were standing looking helplessly on. The barn, stored with hay and other inflammable stuff, had gotten too far ahead before any of them could get there to do anything. Fortunately, the wind was blowing the flames and sparks away from the house so that there was little danger of it catching fire. But barn, stock, car and tractor, everything in and adjacent to the barn, was being wiped out or had already been wiped out in that flaming holocaust.

Once, in the light of the fire, Fred caught sight of Tom walking agitatedly to and fro perilously near the leaping flames. Then he saw a couple of men run across and draw him away. A few minutes more of gazing and Fred turned for home.

That afternoon Tom Summers openly declared that he had left nothing in or around the barn that would possibly have caused fire, and that there was only one man in the district who would be guilty of such a deed. He didn't mention any name, but the others knew to whom he was referring.

Fred heard of his statement and challenged him to say whom he meant. But he got no satisfaction, even though Tom was almost insane with his loss, except that of hot words and near blows, if they were worth anything.

Seeding time came a few days later, the frost coming out of the bare ground to make seeding possible, and the farms soon became scenes of daily activity, all except Tom Summers'. There was no stir upon his farm; no sign of either implement or horse in action. Time passed with still no attempt at seeding on the Summers' place and word went around that Tom's recent loss had not only taken away his stock and machinery but also his ambition. Fred, working hard, soon had all his wheat and most of his coarser grains sown.

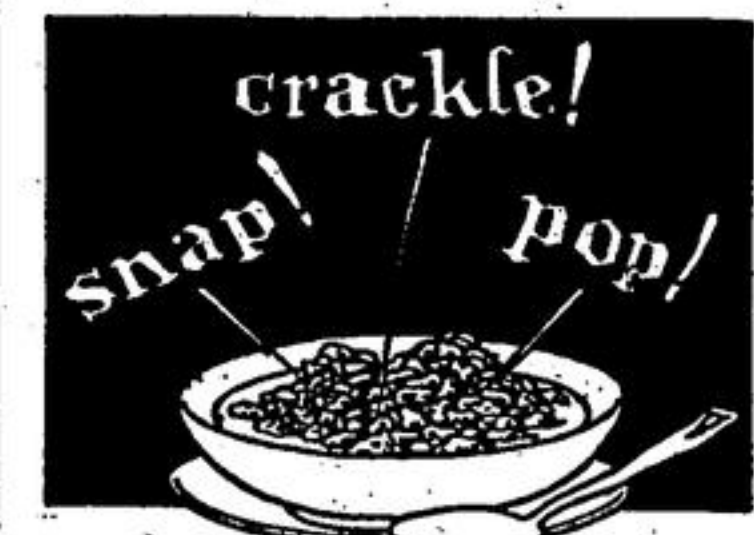
One evening, as he stood alone in the little village store waiting for his proprietor to appear, a written notice attracted his attention. It was one the student-missionary, who had begun services in the village school for the summer months, had placed there.

For several weeks these had appeared without arresting Fred's eyes. But this one did because of the subject announced for the following Sunday.

"Jesus' Revenge."

The state of Fred's mind made him read the words again and again. And after he left the store he couldn't get them out of his mind. They seemed to be riveted there.

Did Jesus seek revenge? If so, with whom? These and other questions upset his thoughts. So much so that he felt he would like to hear what the preacher had to say about it. He used to attend the services in the school at one time till the feverish desire to get ahead of his rival had disinclined his



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mind for the kind of thing one got there. Sunday morning came and with a resolve to hear what the young preacher had to say upon his subject: "Jesus' Revenge." So the afternoon found him, with many others, in the school listening to the sermon.

First of all the preacher briefly touched upon the work Jesus did to help suffering and sinful humanity. Then he showed how one young man sought in every possible way to prevent and ruin that work, pouring contempt upon Jesus and upon the cause for which he had given his all. After this dwelling upon the young man's opposition and persecution of Jesus in a way that stirred Fred's anger, he reached the climax where the young man was going down to Damascus, breathing out threatening hate of and injury to Jesus

and his cause. He did not need the preacher to tell them that Jesus' revenge had blessed both him and Paul; both the injured and the injurer.

With telling effect, as if he sensed what was in Fred's heart, the young preacher quoted words that burned: "The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath: it is twice blessed, it blesseth him that gives and him that takes."

"Tis mightiest in the mightiest. Fred was out of the school and away before any could speak to him. Swiftly changing emotions surged within him as he drove home, caused now by the effect of the revenge of which he had

just heard, now by the effect which his revenge sought; now by the passion within him that declared that there was no satisfaction for a red-blooded fellow such as he in an attitude such as his towards an enemy, now by the call of that higher self that declared that there was no true satisfaction in any other attitude.

He passed the fields of Tom Summers' farm as he drove along. He beheld their desolation; a desolation that would shock any farmer who loved his work; fields untouched that spring by plough or seeder, standing as they had done for weeks. At that moment Tom Summers came to the door. His hair was shaggy and on his face was the growth of many days' beard. Catching sight of Fred, he gazed at him sullenly.

Then he hastily closed the door. Fred didn't sleep well that night. The events of the day had been too much for his peace of mind; the words of the young preacher; the thoughts that had come to him; the look of that farm; the changed appearance of his former rival. For hours he lay awake, his mind a turmoil, and when sleep came it brought fitful dreams.

Two days later, Tom Summers was aroused early in the morning by the sound of men's voices outside his house. Wondering what was happening, he climbed out of bed and looked through the window. Half a dozen teams were in the yard and more were coming. Some hauling ploughs were already on their way to the fields. Seeders and tractors

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