

The Free Press Short Story

THE FOLLOW-UP DEPARTMENT

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The time was two minutes to five o'clock. Closing time would come in the same number of minutes in the office of Colebrook & Company. Typewriters rasped. The envelope sealer clicked rapidly. The switchboard operator connected her cords at express speed. Clerks cleared their desks. Two girls sat back, watching the clock, ready to fit on the instant.

Young Kent Oggood, at the manager's desk of the Follow-up Department, cleared up his unfinished business by the simple expedient of slipping letters and papers into his top right-hand drawer. Looking up, caught Tip Owen grinning at the act. Kent smiled back. He had a pleasant manner; everyone liked him.

"Oh, Kent!" called Jessie Wilmer, in the easy manner of the office head, "I'll have that new follow-up letter on our sales record cards ready in ten minutes. I was delayed in getting certain information. Will you wait for it?"

"Not I," chuckled Kent. "Put it in this top side drawer. I'll be here early in the morning to glance over it, so as not to hold up the multigraphing."

"But," said Jessie, uneasily, "Mr. Colebrook wished it to-night."

"He's out isn't he and most likely won't be back," laughed Kent. "Let me do the morning. It will be on his desk in the morning."

"All right," Jessie answered, slowly. She laughed, as well but, not comfortably. She was new to her work and anxious to make good.

On the stroke of five Kent started for the cloakroom. A tall, well-set-up young man with sandy hair, he stood out among the office group for a distinct air of clean living, physical and mental. At the office rail he came face to face with Alice Harmer, Mr. Colebrook's secretary, and a most efficient and loyal one. As Kent smiled down at this brown-haired, slender girl, his eyes were more than just friendly.

Alice's own smile, in response, was swift and lovely, but it instantly faded. "Is that follow-up letter on the sales records ready, Kent?" Mr. Colebrook wished it to-night."

"But he isn't here to see it," replied Kent. "It's in my desk."

"Let me have it," said Alice. "He may come in."

"I must glance over it first," said Kent. "I'll get in early and have it on his desk before he arrives to-morrow morning."

Alice appeared distressed. She started to speak, caught her breath and moved away, returning into her own office.

Kent stared after her in blank amazement. "What's upsetting her these days?" he muttered. "Giving me those pained looks! Certainly there's nothing in that form letter to get excited about. I'll have to worm the trouble out of her." He hesitated, half inclined to follow her half inclined to return to his desk and go over the letter. Shrugging his shoulders, he said, "No, let it go. It will all be the same a year from now."

Still the matter recurred to his mind several times that evening. He would have to check himself up a bit. Colebrook had been getting angry of late over slight delays. Still he decided he was not going to work overtime as Alice was continually doing. Colebrook drove her too hard, and she was willing to work Kent got quite wrought up thinking of the injustice to her.

Alice and Kent had long been neighbors and comrades. They had attended high school together. Later they had come together again in the making of office record forms. Alice had started as switch-board operator, but Colebrook had noted her ability and had groomed her for the position she now held.

Kent had entered as a file clerk. In the enthusiasm of making good in a first position he had made certain clear-cut suggestions relative to the company's own office records. That had caught the superior's attention. Kent had been given an opportunity after another until he found himself in charge of the Follow-up Department.

At first Kent had put himself into everything in the department. He had a freshness and vigor of style that gave real quality to the material his department turned out. As the business and the department grew, he had withdrawn somewhat from actual copy writing and had devoted himself more busily to general oversight. He had eased up a bit. Alice had been the first to call his attention to that. Kent insisted he gave the full time the business hours demanded, and certainly a fair return in effort for the reduced salaries depression years had forced upon them.

"So it's salary that counts and not loyalty and service to the company?" Alice had asked in a hurt tone.

"I give good measure, never fear!" Kent had laughed.

Gradually a little tension had developed. Salaries had started up again, but Kent had continued the even tenor of his way. Presently Mr. Colebrook began to take him to task over slight delays.

"Oh well!" Kent finally showed the

AT MEMORIAL SERVICE



William Churchill wore a grave countenance as he arrived at Westminster Abbey to attend memorial services for the late Lord Stanley, Dominions Secretary, who died recently, shortly after returning from a visit to Canada.

material at a reduced salary. Kindly turn your records over to Mr. Andrews and give him an understanding of current matters in your charge.

Very truly yours,  
J. A. Colebrook.

Kent looked up, his eyes hot. "You know the substance of this letter?" he demanded.

"Mr. Colebrook requested me to read it," said young Andrews.

Kent felt shaken to the very foundation of his being. This was his first business setback. Furious anger sustained him. His voice cracked as he said "I'll spend the day going over things with you; then of course I step out."

"Why of course?" questioned Andrews. "Glad to have you stay."

"After this outrageous treatment? Why that cantankerous old man never gives a fellow a show. I—"

"Let's not discuss that," smiled Andrews. "You see he's my boss."

"Very well," snapped Kent. "Come over to my desk."

Seating the newcomer at his desk, Kent took a chair beside him, conscious of curious glances and whispered comments among his force. Flushing somewhat, he pulled open that top case drawer and shoved out its contents. One by one he took the papers explained them, and helped Andrews classify them in the order of their relative importance. In the process he uncovered a

missing letter he had searched for in vain, also one on another matter that should have been attended to days before. His embarrassment grew as he had to confess to delays and stop the conference to get matters caught up.

Coming back from lunch that noon, Kent came face to face with Alice. "I suppose," he blurted out, "you know what was coming to me."

"Yes," she acknowledged. "I am so sorry."

"Looks like it," he growled. "Why didn't you tip me off in time?"

"What I learn in the office is confidential," she reminded him, "however much I may wish to speak. I do hope you'll stay, Kent."

"Stay?" he growled. "And just to be kicked out later?"

"Think it over, Kent," she urged, and turned hurriedly away.

A disastrous afternoon followed the troubled morning. Finally, all material and records had been gone over. Only the difficult task of introducing Andrews to the department force remained.

As Kent finally prepared to leave, Andrews said, "Thank you for the day. I want you here. Don't make your decision to-night. Sleep on it."

Kent spent hours with his problem that night, nevertheless. He composed several stinging letters of resignation, only to tear up each one in turn. He was troubled, too, about another position. They were not easy to get in this particular field where his training lay. Leaving under such conditions would make explanations doubly hard. Finally he decided he would have to stay where he was until he could uncover a position elsewhere.

Mr. Andrews smiled pleasantly, though distinctly, when he was informed. "Glad!" he said, briefly. "Now will you take this material on our condensed ledger system and frame a four-page folder on it? Put a lot of pep into it. I'm looking for something good."

Kent took his new desk, but for a time kept an eye on Andrews. That young man was handling all incoming material without making his advice. A greenhorn is likely to stub his toes on something important if he acts without advice," chuckled Kent.

Later that day Andrews made Kent uncomfortable. He called his force together and laid down the rule that a current material must be acted on the day received unless he himself gave permission to hold it over to the next day. Desks must be cleared, no matter how late one had to stay. Kent had to stay that first day.

Odd days followed. Andrews handled his work with seldom a request for advice or information. The man was just keen in criticism and quick to approve or award praise. As Kent got back to work he received many good words for his product, and those pleased him surprisingly. The new head was winning all the force. He so tuned up the department that it had a reflex for good on the entire office. "Kent found himself acknowledging to himself how far he had been.

Still Andrews failed to make that blunder Kent was expecting. "Some day it will come," he told himself. To his surprise he felt no happiness in the thought. He was finding more and more pleasure in his work; also he was

uncovering a pride in his company for developing such excellent products. Andrews was beginning to use him in special ways, too. Now and then he was left in charge in Andrews' absence. Another time he was asked to take Jessie in hand and give her the special instruction necessary to make her a valuable assistant. Jessie was grateful for that. Why, he wondered, had he not helped her when he was head of the department?

Wholly unexpectedly, Andrews made his blunder. Colebrook was still away, helping his sales force in important cases. He used Andrews, at times, in the same way. The latter had left on such a trip when Kent, glancing over his itinerary, discovered that he had evidently forgotten an important presentation at the Jamison Company, Chicago. Andrews had planned to be in another city on that date.

Some one must act. Kent telegraphed Andrews but got no reply; then he felt forced to telegraph Colebrook. Still no reply came in distress. For a large order might be involved, he called over long distance along the route of both men, trying in vain to trace them.

"To save our company, I've got to go—without authority," Kent growled to Alice, who refused to advise.

Andrews left all the Jamison samples here. I phoned that company and they are expecting us to-morrow. And I'll have to go by air to make connections. "Good luck!" said Alice; her smile was very lovely.

Shortly Kent was en route by air. He tried to concentrate on his sales presentation for he was not used to such work.

Hours later he became conscious of an uneven note in the motor rear. Presently he realized the airplane was descending, and into a thick mist. Something had gone wrong. He fought to control an almost overwhelming fear of a crash. The crash did not come, only a sickening, awfully jolt. Somehow the pilot had managed a successful forced landing in the fog. Relief, however, was followed by anxiety. He had planned to arrive in time for a night's rest. Now he was stranded somewhere in the country. Without waiting for the pilot to make arrangements, he loaded a near-by farm, secured transportation to a railway and caught a slow night local, arriving at his destination two hours before the hearing.

Wearily, almost haggard, Kent presented himself at the Jamison Company office, hoping against hope to see Andrews. No Andrews appeared, so Kent went in to face Jamison and his alert corps of assistants. For a time he hesitated and wandered somewhat, then he forced himself to concentrate on his subject. Presently he discovered that it had gripped him. Words and arguments came to him as he needed them. On finishing his presentation, he

found himself facing a brisk fire of keen, incisive questions. All his skill was needed to answer them. At last the shake-thunder and say, "Well done, young man. Very clear, indeed! We're representatives of other companies to hear, so we can't announce our decision."

"Thank you, sir," announced Kent, with that friendly smile, "for your most cordial hearing." As he left the room, two men followed him out. One tapped him on the shoulder. He swung about, to face Colebrook and Andrews.

"Come to lunch and tell the whole story," laughed Colebrook, as Kent stood speechless. A little later Kent was giving an account of his actions and explaining why he felt obliged to come on.

"We got your telegrams," laughed Colebrook. "Son, you made a fine presentation. Parker and I enjoyed it, though we had to keep under cover."

"Parker?" gasped Kent.

"John Andrews Parker," chuckled

Colebrook. "My San Francisco office manager. I brought him on to tone up the Follow-up Department. Think you can run it now?"

"Watch me, sir!" gasped Kent.

"Heavily, while this test was hard for you," went on the president, "I suspect it was harder for Miss Harmer. She wanted so to help you and I wouldn't let her. But, Kent, Parker and I have to get elsewhere. That Jamison order is in the bag. I know by the way he spoke to you. I want you back on your job. Take the night transport plane back."

The airplane should land Kent home in eight hours, but he could not wait for that. He hurried out and called Alice by long distance.

THAT'S DIFFERENT

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