

The Free Press' Short Story

A Night Clerk for the Alamansor

By DENNIS H. STOVALL

**R**ICHARD THURSTON was polishing the bottle-shaped, plate-glass mirror of the Ballyhoo when Howard Dugan thumped in from his truck, shouldering a heavy bucketful of cracked ice.

"Greetings, Mr. Richard!" lustily hailed the husky bucket toter as he opened the box behind the fountain to dump in his load.

"Same to you, Howard," Richard genially responded, keeping right on with his work. Being only seven-thirty, no customers were in the place; but he had been on duty since seven. To look at him, one would not have guessed that every morning, in scrubbing floor and polishing glass, he wore a spotless white jacket, whose lapels and cuffs were edged with gold braid. The name of the establishment was embroidered on the sleeves in fantastic red silk lettering.

Howard Dugan set his emptied pail on the floor and gave the natty-attired mirror-polisher a quizzical stare.

"I can read your mind, Howard, just like a book," Richard Thurston remarked. "You're going to give me another invitation to that Delphia Class party."

"You're a clever guesser," commented the ice man. "Of course you're going?"

As Richard shook his head he turned round and looked into the big fellow's healthily bronzed face. "I appreciate your invitation, Howard, because I know it's sincere. But I must tell you, once and for all, that I can't accept it. You know why, without my going into details—"

He swept his arm in a gesture that encompassed the whole gaudy place. "I'm a legitimized vendor of—"

"Don't say it!" Howard Dugan interrupted, raising his hand. "The Ballyhoo isn't a saloon. Neither are the Big Bed, Wolf the Lions' Den, the Last Round-up, nor the Output saloons, even if they do sell liquor. They can't be saloons, for didn't the repeals tell us in a clamorous chorus that the saloons wouldn't come back?" His ironic utterance brought a smile to young Thurston's serious features.

"But there's one important matter you should not overlook," Richard quietly replied. "I have a job here. I'm grateful for the chance to earn enough to support my mother and sister."

"Sure!" Dugan grinned understandingly. "Just as I'm glad of the chance to drive an ice truck."

"I never drink a drop of the stuff I mix and dispense in the Ballyhoo. But the boss pays me every Saturday night, and that means something."

"You don't have to tell me that, Dick. But listen—" Dugan's voice fell to a low note. "If you were offered another job, one that pays the same or higher wages—"

"Thanks, Howard," Thurston interrupted. "Such jobs don't grow on trees these days. I was bounced from my former one on an hour's notice, so I'm hanging on here and rendering the best service I can give just as I tried to do before. I can't let my loved ones starve, or even go hungry."

"Well, I'll see you again, Dick. And I may surprise you." Howard picked up his ice bucket and returned to his truck.

During the noon hour that day the truck was parked on a side street while its driver, in his working clothes, took lunch with Hugh Roscoe the young and energetic Delphia president. The two friends sat at a table in a quiet corner of an eating place not far from the Merchants' National Bank, where Hugh served as teller.

Before they were through with their soup and had begun on their salad, Roscoe guessed the other had some special business to discuss. "What's on your mind?" he wanted to know.

"I've got a top-grade prospect for our Delphia bunch. Dugan finally said 'I found him in a place out in the Island district, where I deliver ice every day. I should like to have him attend our next class party, so as to get acquainted. He's a stranger in our town, unmarried, good-looking, educated, with a mother and a young sister."

"Why can't he join our bunch or attend our next party?" Roscoe curiously asked.

"Pride and self-respect," Dugan quickly answered. "He's engaged in a work that fits neither his character nor his ability because he must earn a living for himself and his dependents. I can drive an ice truck and hold my head up. But I couldn't mix booze and sell it over a polished bar, even if it is local. Neither would this fine fellow I'm telling you of now if he had a better job."

Hugh Roscoe toyed with his salad in meditative silence. "It so happens that I know of an opening," he presently remarked. "There aren't many of them now. The one will be available for the right party within a month or six weeks. It's a particular place, requiring a young man of winning personality, who is dependable, straight, who has at least a high-school education—"

"You've described my man to a dot," Howard Dugan stated. "I'll see him again to-day, and arrange for him to meet you, or whoever the persons are who offer the job."

"You didn't let me finish," Roscoe continued, as he leaned across the table

to give his friend a close gaze. "I had you spotted for this job, Howard. You have it coming to you. It will pay higher wages than you are making now, and be more in keeping with your training and ability."

Dugan waved his heavy hand again and grinned. "I've got a good, healthy job. I'm grateful to you, of course, for thinking of me. But—well—I haven't a widowed mother to support nor a small sister." He could have said that he and Lucy Allingham, one of the attractive young women of the Delphia's, expected to get married some happy day.

"I want to get that fine chap out of the place where he's mixing drinks," Howard declared in genuine sincerity. "It might become a habit."

Hugh understood. He knew Howard and yet he seemed never to fully measure the bigness of his heart. "You realize this is a confidential matter," he cautioned. "The man who offers the place is a prominent stockholder of our bank. Only a very few of our business men know that he is the financial backer of the new Alamansor Hotel. This will be a strictly high-class hostelry, even without a bar. The position of night clerk remains unfilled, and I have been requested to look for the right man. The one doing all this is none other than Jason Allingham—"

Dugan sat up with a jerk. "Lucy Allingham's Uncle Jason! This is a surprise! Now I know why you spotted me for the job. Well, I'm still eager to have the other fellow get it."

The men finished their lunch, received their individual meal checks and went back to their work—Hugh Roscoe to his job at the bank, and Howard Dugan to his ice truck. Not until four-thirty did the truck roll round to the Ballyhoo. The place was doing its customary brisk late afternoon business. Thurston and two helpers were kept on the run, serving convivial patrons at the bar and tables. He brought Howard a glass of ice water, and casually inquired:

"I suppose you have that big job ready for me?"

"You've guessed it, Dick!" the ice man answered. He grabbed the gold-braided sleeve and lowered his tone. "Listen, handsome, I have good news!"

"Can you give it to me now, or must I wait?"

"You can have part of it right now. I have it from a reliable source, that a place will be available within the next month or six weeks. It offers good pay and a chance to serve the best people."

Richard turned to wait on a customer. When he came back his features were beaming but his subdued words indicated a lurking doubt. "It sounds too good to be true," he declared. "Can you give me a hint as to who is doing it, and what the job is?"

"Sure I can," Howard replied, "but you are to keep the information to yourself. The job will be that of night clerk in the new Alamansor Hotel. The backer of the enterprise is Jason Allingham. You know him, or must have heard of him."

Instantly the smile of joyous anticipation faded from Thurston's face. "Jason Allingham's? Yes, I know him! If that man is backing it, Howard, you may count me out!" He wheeled abruptly, leaving Dugan gazing in dumbfounded amazement. Shortly he followed up Thurston.

"What's wrong, Dick? I don't understand, and wish you would explain."

"Of course you don't understand, and I'm not blaming you. But I can assure you there's something queer about this promised job. Jason Allingham would never give it to me. I'm too busy now to tell you why."

Further pleading would have been a waste of time. Nor did Howard Dugan wish to lose Richard's friendship by unnecessary questioning. He gulped the cooling ice water and hastily left the Ballyhoo. When he climbed in behind the steering wheel of his truck, a look of grim determination was on his countenance.

At six o'clock he drove his truck into the company garage and checked out for the day. By seven-thirty he had eaten supper, taken a shower bath, changed his clothes and driven over to Lucy Allingham's home in his own car. Howard kept few secrets from the girl he hoped to marry. In fact, he usually went to Lucy when he found himself in a jam. He told her as much as he could of this peculiar angle.

When he mentioned the Ballyhoo and Richard Thurston, the girl uttered a startled gasp. "So Dick is living here—with his mother and little Anne?"

"Now what have I done? You seem to know that handsome boy—"

"He is my cousin!" Lucy replied. "He is the nephew of Uncle Jason and his widowed sister's only son. They are very proud—and poor."

"Now I begin to understand," said the big fellow.

"I know very little about it. None of our family do," Lucy said. "The arrangement between Uncle Jason and Dick was due to an unfortunate affair of a year ago when Dick was employed as a passing clerk in the Allingham juke-mills, at Connaughtville. It appears that there was a shortage when the accounts

were audited at the end of the year. Dick maintained it was a numerical error that could be corrected. He got into a heated argument with Uncle Jason and was discharged. They have not spoken to each other since. Dick, with his mother and sister, moved from their little home near the mill. We've tried to locate them, fearing they had gone some distance away possibly into another state. And here you have found Dick so near and working in that terrible place—"

"Yes, and why is Dick working in the Ballyhoo?" Howard Dugan cut in. "You know, Lucy, without my telling you. It is because it was the only place that offered him employment. He doesn't drink; yet I almost wonder how he kept from it. He told me something of his troubles, of how he walked the streets for months, trying to find a job. Just as thousands of other clean young men have done."

Lucy Allingham smiled, and her blue eyes glowed sympathetically. She liked her good-looking cousin, and she could not resist Howard Dugan's earnest plea. Her heart warmed even more when Howard confidentially revealed the proposal to have Richard Thurston placed as night clerk in the new Alamansor.

"I'll do my best," promised Lucy. "Uncle Jason is obstinate, and headstrong. But I have learned through Mother that he regrets his quarrel with Dick. I will have a talk with him in the morning."

"And I'll hold another session with Dick at the same time," agreed Howard. "The ice man got an unexpected jolt to his determined resolution when he entered the Ballyhoo at seven-thirty the following day. Richard Thurston was not in the place.

"Richard is at the hospital," the white-coated substitute briefly announced.

"Dick at the hospital! What's happened? Is he sick—or hurt?"

"It's his sister that's badly hurt," the other explained. "She was struck by an automobile."

Howard Dugan hurriedly emptied his ice bucket. His big heart started pounding excitedly. "Which hospital is it?" he asked.

"Georgia Street. You know the address?"

At the first convenient telephone Howard stopped the lumbering truck long enough to go into a telephone booth and call up Lucy Allingham.

"Listen, Lucy," he almost sobbed. "Dick's little sister was run over last night by an automobile. She's at the Georgia Street Hospital. Dick is with her. I'm on my way there now. Go ahead and talk to Uncle Jason. Tell him of the accident. Maybe he has a heart—"

He hung up, without waiting for a word from the girl and bolted from the booth. More than an hour passed before he could reach the hospital.

Richard Thurston sat by a white-sheeted cot tending over a bandaged and swathed little figure that lay on the bed. On the opposite side knelt a white-haired woman, Richard's mother. Her trembling fingers tenderly caressed the little girl's golden hair. She rose and smiled when Howard approached.

The big fellow laid a shaking hand on Richard's shoulder. He tried to speak but only a mumbled phrase or two came from his contracted throat.

"Old man, I'm awfully sorry to hear about this—"

He could say no more. He gripped the other's hand, holding it a while in a strong, sympathetic clasp.

Just then the little girl opened her eyes. "I thought at first—you were, Uncle Jason," she said in a childish voice. "Richard caught his breath sharply. His mother straightened suddenly, and started in the direction of the door. Two other callers were admitted, who quietly approached the cot. Howard Dugan felt his pounding heart skip a beat when he recognized one of them as Jason Allingham. The other was Lucy! She led her uncle straight toward the bed.

"Dick—Dick—I'm so sorry!" he said brokenly. "Please forgive me—and tell me—how is little Anne? I heard about the accident only a short time ago. Lucy told me—and we hurried here at once. Is she badly hurt?"

"I'm all right, Uncle Jason! I'm better!" a cheery voice came from the cot. "I'd so glad you've come! It has been a long while—"

"Yes—it has been a long while, Anne!" agreed Uncle Jason alternately bending lower to touch his hand to her cheek. "You are going to get well and strong—and we'll have some more wonderful times together—with big brother Dick—and Mother—"

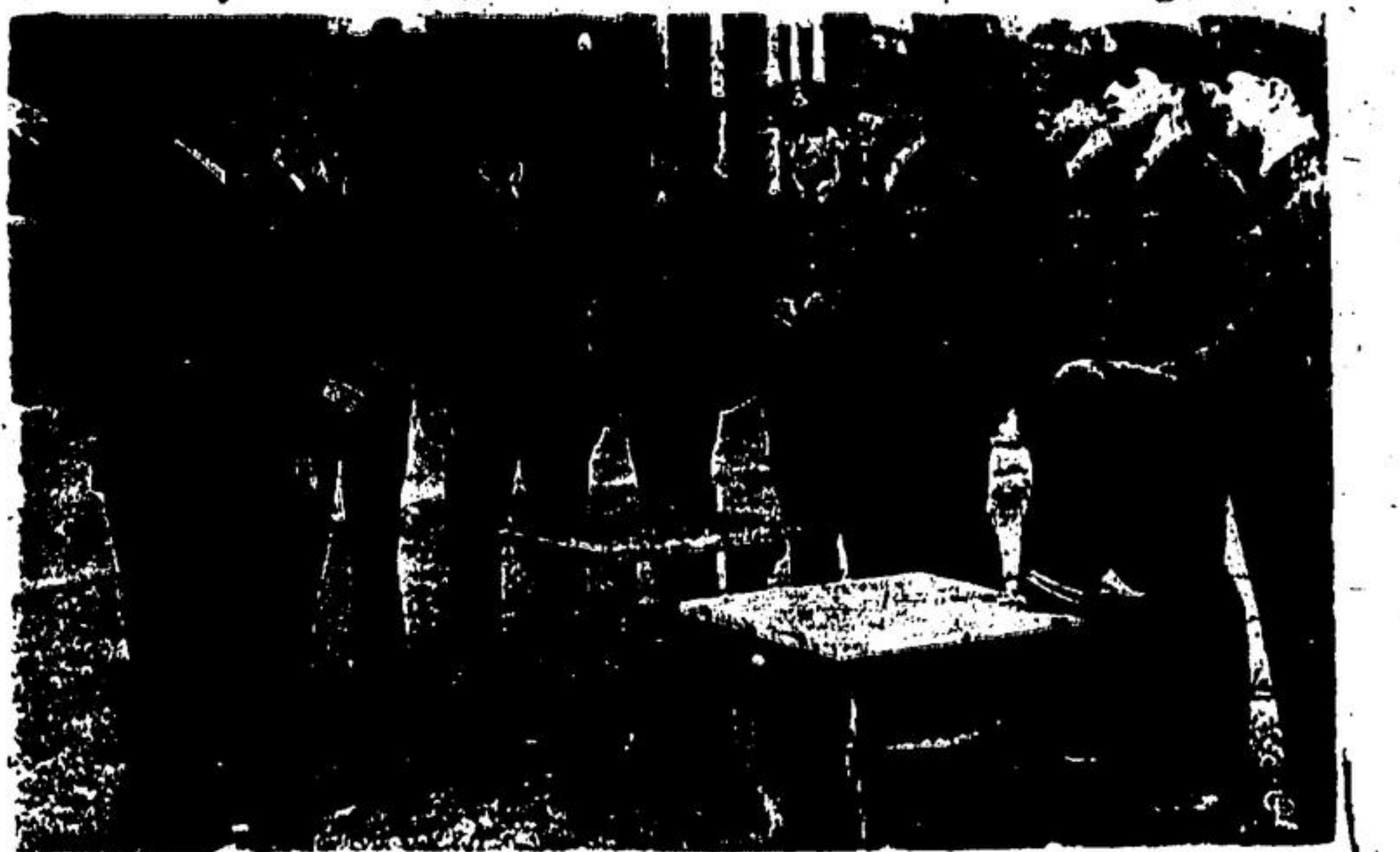
Lucy Allingham's trembling fingers clasped Howard's arm. The two exchanged understanding glances and slipped from the ward.

Two days later, when Howard Dugan and Hugh Roscoe got together on their spuntime lunch, Richard Thurston and Uncle Jason sat with them. The financier insisted on paying for the meal. Also, he produced the contract that made his nephew night clerk of the new Alamansor.

Richard, joyously elated, looked into Howard Dugan's grinning face and remarked: "What will you give me for a white, gold-braided coat, with Ballyhoo embroidered on the sleeves?"

"If you'll take the Ballyhoo off I may be able to use it," Howard Dugan promptly answered. "I'll need a wedding coat. Lucy and I are going to be married next month! The ice company has made me district manager!"

Royal Canadian Air Force Officers Train in England



The first draft of short service commission officers to arrive in England to complete their flying training with the Royal Air Force, nine pilot officers, trained in the R.A.F. at Trenton, Ontario, are shown receiving helpful hints from an R.A.F. officer at the Uxbridge, Middlesex, training depot.

At the Signing of the Anglo-Italian Pact



While Foreign Minister Count Ciano, of Italy, stands by right, Lord Perth, British Ambassador to Italy, is shown signing the pact that is expected to end the disagreements between the two nations. Recognition of the conquest of Ethiopia by Great Britain and the withdrawal of Italian "volunteers" from Spain were two of the terms of the pact.



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