

The Free Press' Short Story

THE ROAD TO CAMPTON

ERNEST L. THURSTON

Jessica Wilcox eyed the young man beside her with tantalizing glances. Her brown eyes sparkled, color flushed her cheeks, her charming mouth was quirked with mischief. She had been making teasing remarks.

Joe Barbour admired the girl; yet the sharp bars of speech had brought embarrassed color flooding up into the roots of his light brown hair. "Be yourself, Jess!" he forced himself to say, laughing. "Don't get me flustered in the midst of this traffic."

"Get out of this jam, Joe. Your machine can go like a swallow. Swoop down the hill by these cars. Let's go places, old sport."

Joe eyed on-coming cars and the machines ahead of him. "Sorry, Jess, but we're doing all the law allows now."

"You're so careful, you act as if you didn't dare," spluttered Jessica.

Joe stirred uncomfortably. He choked back the impulse to snap out, as he said, quietly, "I think I'd like to—sorry, Jess. But it isn't safe. And being a member of the town's Law and Order Society, I need to be especially careful."

He glared and roared back in his seat as, wholly unsuspectedly, his powerful roadster leaped forward. Instinctively he acted. He swerved out to avoid crashing the car ahead, and with a clang of clipping fenders, shot by a car from the opposite direction. Nothing was left to do, then, but get by the whole line of cars. He had to do it fast because other cars were approaching. He lifted his foot from the accelerator, but the car started when he stepped down grade at sixty miles an hour. Behind them a whistle whirled. Joe whitened; Jessica laughed delightedly.

"Run away from him, Joe," she cried. "You can make it."

Joe flashed a glance at her that almost made her regret a certain act. Finding the accelerator still down to the floor as if stuck, he threw out the clutch and began braking to a stop. As he did so, his eyes caught the gas lever on his steering wheel. It was far forward. No wonder the car had leaped ahead!

"Now how did that happen?" he muttered, as he showed it back and then swung to the road side. Behind them the putt-putt of a motorcycle sounded, increasingly loud, and presently a gray-clad trooper ranged alongside.

"What's the big idea?" he snarled. "Want to pile a dozen cars in a wreck? Fork over your license."

"I can't understand how this happened, officer," returned Joe, courteously, though miserably. "I never drive with the lever, but somehow it got shoved forward. I thought the accelerator was stuck. I sped on to avoid an accident."

"You speeders are always making up a new one," chuckled the officer, grimly.

"But, officer," exclaimed Jessica, bringing her delightful smile into play, "he really is an exceptionally careful driver."

He nearly ditched a car back there, young lady," growled the trooper. Suddenly he looked up, a little contemptuously, from the license he was reading. "Are you the secretary of that law and order society in Campton? Got speech one thing and practice another, eh? I'll show you up." He scribbled in a form and passed it over. "Follow me to the justice of the peace in the next village."

He shot ahead, and Joe followed, downcast and miserable. Jessica eyed him considerably, mischief still in the dark eyes and in the corners of her mouth, but a little frown of perplexity in the middle of her forehead.

Ten minutes later they sat in a little roadside office. Before them was a grizzled, lantern-jawed old man with cold blue eyes, who eyed Joe sarcastically as the trooper gave testimony, including the young man's position.

"Are you a law and order chap, as the trooper says?" snapped the justice.

"Yes," acknowledged Joe.

"And then you engage in this sort of business?" said the man, sourly. "Like lots of reformers—surface obedience, but underneath get by with what they can."

"But, Mr. Justice," exclaimed Jessica, "he wasn't to blame."

"Ten dollars and costs if you're guilty, total," snapped the man.

Joe went white, then he flushed with anger. Jessica stared at him with a certain hopefulness that faded as the young man took out his billfold and counted out the fine. The justice endorsed the offence on the license card and returned it with sarcastic words.

"Why didn't you fight?" demanded Jessica, as she and Joe left.

"What was the use? They wouldn't take my word. I could get no witnesses to help for the thing did look bad. I'm sorry—in more ways than one; besides, now I'll have to resign my secretaryship of the Law and Order Society."

"Why in the world?" demanded Jessica.

"Our society stands for careful driving. It wouldn't look right for me to represent it officially when I have this record against me."

"Your explanation ought to satisfy them," insisted Jessica.

"It didn't satisfy justice or trooper."

"It would be a silly act," insisted

Joe. "Everyone fractures driving laws. Of course, if I'd realized what would come—" She stopped in dismay.

"What do you mean?" demanded Joe, swinging around.

Jessica giggled; her expression was mischievous. "Hold your horses, Joe! It was all a joke. While I held your attention, I reached under the wheel and shoved up that gas lever."

"Why, may I ask?" Joe clearly failed to believe his ears.

"For a joke. To make your beetle yourself; to let yourself go, for once."

"And you took a chance of causing an accident, possibly loss of life, for such a silly impulse?" Joe's temper flamed. "And you'd wreck my record, my usefulness, for your idea of fun? I'm ashamed—disgusted—" With a desperate effort he regained self-control. His lips clamped tight.

"I've done it!" Jessica favored him with that vivid, tantalizing smile that usually brought an answering smile to his lips. "I vowed I'd make you lose your temper, sometime, you image of the town's Law and Order Society."

Joe stared straight into her eyes; a keen, considering, measuring glance; then, again, he looked ahead, unseeing nothing. He had come from the city two years before to become assistant teller in the local bank. Oddly enough, some thought, he wished to develop his life work in a small town.

He had been prompt in forming a church connection, friendly in meeting people, courteous always. He could be firm without losing his temper. To Jessica, whose temper took to itself with an slight provocation, this had seemed a fault. She felt he lacked fire and force to blow up; yet more than once she had seen an iron will clamp down his self-control.

Joe had been prompt to join the Law and Order Society, a group of thoughtful citizens who were interested in clearing up certain unsatisfactory local conditions, and in promoting the village welfare. He had proven a quiet but forceful speaker and an active member. At the last election he had become the society's secretary, and its routine spokesman.

When he let Jessica out at her home, Joe extended his hand but his manner was distant and his voice a little cool as he said, "I'm sorry I blew up, Jess. You see—" he glanced down the street—"I once lost my temper with disastrous results. Since then I've fought for the control you shattered. I'll begin over."

Jessica was left a prey to mixed feelings. She laughed, recalling his surprise, thrilled to his instant skillful meeting of the situation, flushed in anger at the harsh treatment he had suffered, and worried—for fear their real friendship had suffered.

As the days passed it really appeared to have done so. Joe no longer dropped around in the old way to pick her up for a ride.

Two, Joe resigned his secretaryship. The members asked him, and many opposed his action, but Will Barlow, the president, agreed that Joe would be less valuable as a society representative in hearings before the council and state commissions. To Jessica's furious anger, his resignation was accepted. She had wished to clear him, but Joe had put his foot down, arguing that a misunderstanding would still persist.

This was the status of affairs when the matter of the location of State Highway Number Seventeen became active. The wonderful five-truck road, sweeping the entire length of the state, was to pass through Campton. That meant business and prosperity. The business people were for it, so was the Law and Order Society.

When the tentative line was laid out, however, it was discovered that the highway would sweep around a curve into the village Main Street, passing through the middle of Fletcher's Woods, a glorious stand of old oak timber on the outskirts of town. Certain profit-seeking landowners outside the village limits had managed to influence this location.

The objections were two. A little settlement lay beyond the curve. Speeding drivers considering themselves in open country would strike the village without warning almost at a point where the large township school was located. That meant danger to children especially. In the second place, Fletcher's Woods would be wrecked.

The Law and Order Society debated the matter hotly and heatedly. Business interests opposed a protest over the location. Protesting might lead to relocation to pass outside the village. Save business at any cost. Joe, on the other hand, favored protesting. He continued outspoken about the matter, although the bank president warned him meaningfully that his attitude was likely to hurt the bank's business.

Finally, by a close vote, the society directed its officers to appear before the State Highway Commission in protest. The officers sat with Joe and worked up their arguments.

"Don't simply knock," he urged. "Offer a substitute and back it up."

On the day appointed for the hearing Joe took the trip to the state capital,

ed. Jessica stared at him, fascinated, on which appeared no record of his offense.

"And Joe," cried Jessica, as they left together, "you won on the highway matter."

"How can you imagine that?" "You know your facts. And you showed your control that the matter meant more to you than any hurt feelings."

"Still, I don't see—"

"Gosh! Dad knows DuBois and gave me a pointer. In hearings, as soon as he's convinced, he checks his memorandum in a certain way. I saw him check that item."

"Come on, Jess," cried Joe in the old friendly way, as he swept her into his roadster. "Let's go places."

UNHAPPY FR

Woop to the tale of Willie Fr. Who met a girl whose name was K. He courted her at a fearful rate. And begged her soon to become his M. "I would if I could," jovily K. "I pity your lonely, unhappy M. But alas, alas, you've come too late. I'm married already. The mother of a."

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