

Conscience Money

Harry Jobling Finds That Honesty is Still the Best Policy

By A. G. GREENWOOD

Everybody who knows Stacey Park, London's newest suburb, knows the little general shop which old Jobling built out in front of the ancient and unshakable Manor House.

Young Harry Jobling lived there now, alone, except for Mrs. Briggs, who kept house for him. But things weren't going well. Multiple shops had sprung up, and competition had become fierce.

If you went into Jobling's, a girl with light brown, bobbed hair and dark brown, bright eyes served you. Daisy King was Harry's only assistant.

It was on a Friday—the thirteenth of the month, too!—when Daisy, who had been even quieter than usual all the morning, lingered before she went off to lunch, and then said nervously to Harry:

"I'm sorry, Mr. Jobling; I've got to give notice."

She went on to explain that her father was joining his brother in partnership on a farm in Canada. The whole family were leaving England for good. Her uncle would find jobs for Peter and Dick, her brothers.

When she had gone to her lunch, Harry stared at her usual seat in the dark corner behind the counter and the perfumery showcase. She was leaving England. Never had he imagined such a disaster. Never had he realized the truth with such blinding clarity. Did she know? No, never had he hinted by deed, word or glance. How could he speak of love to a girl when he had nothing—less than nothing—to offer?

It was then that he suddenly thought how splendid it would be if he too, could go. Was it impossible? Her father, he learnt, had sold his business and his house, and was putting capital into his brother's farm—paying his feeing. Swiftly calculating, Harry believed he could meet his liabilities and have a few hundreds over—providing he could find a real purchaser for the freehold of the old house.

That same evening Mrs. Briggs, the housekeeper, called Harry into the kitchen. Since the dry weather had set in, she explained, the crack between window and fireplace had been widening. Something ought to be done, said she.

Harry investigated. In the passage above the crack, hidden by a cupboard, gaped widely. On the first floor, in one of the disused rooms, he could put his fingers into it. On the second floor, in yet another empty room, rats' runs had driven in and rotted the floorboards.

A structure of old standing, made more apparent by the draught, said a friend—a clerk in a London surveyor's office—who came down that weekend at Harry's request and investigated. With a very long face he made his report. "The old house is doomed, old boy," he finished, "and turning wood cost a mint of money."

"Nobody would buy, I suppose?" said Harry.

"Only for the site value, I'm afraid, old man. The house itself is worth less than it would cost to pull it down and clear the site."

In bed that night, with a high wind silling the old house with strange noises, Harry, calculating, realized that his capital, too, was a minus quantity. Without the price he had set against the house, he was no longer solvent. Day-dreaming of Alberta and Daisy was folly. He wouldn't think of her. Tomorrow he wouldn't even look at her.

"But he did look—constantly. The presence of a rat in the basement, where stock was stored, changed his plans. The rat caused Daisy's wailing cry, which cut Harry boiling downstairs. She had kept up on a state.

"Darling, what's happened?" The words were instinctive. Not till he noted her expression did he realize what he had said. The rat, by running again across the floor, came to Harry's rescue. He snatched up a bundle of firewood and let fly at it. The bundle glanced off a barrel and brought a pyramid of paint pots to the floor.

Simultaneously Daisy jumped down. Her foot landed on a rolling tin. She fell, scrambled up as Harry darted forward, then drew a loud breath of paint and stood balanced on one leg.

"You're hurt? It was all my clumsy fault! I—I say, I am a clumsy idiot! Is it your ankle?"

She nodded and blinked. Two tears glittered on her cheeks. She put her foot to the ground and went very white. Harry's arm shot round her.

"Sprained? Oh, I say, I am so frightfully sorry! Don't walk on it. Let me—"

He lifted her as though she was made of glass. He carried her, staring steadfastly ahead, upstairs and into his little parlor.

"Mrs. Briggs!" he shouted.

The old woman came bustling. He hovered, gazing at Daisy, saying: "A doctor? You think I'd better get a doctor? Sure it's all right! Hadn't I better telephone?"

An hour later, he shut up the shop and took Daisy home in a taxi. To and from it he carried her. He was reluctant to let her go.

That night he laid the matter before Daisy. He told her all that depended on it. If he kept silent and let the sale go through, he could clear off his liabilities and land in Canada with several hundred dollars at least.

"In Canada, Harry?"

"Yes, I mean to follow you out. I'll get a job somewhere within riding distance. I'll see you sometimes—somehow."

And then he told her of the crack in her mother's sitting-room. Left alone with Daisy, while Mrs. King was upstairs fetching bandages, he leant over the sofa.

"I'm so—frantically—frightfully sorry," he said. "I'd rather harbor a million rats than hurt one hair of your head."

She lay there, looking up at him. "What—what was it you said when you first came in?" she asked.

He felt his cheeks burn. Then he noticed that her pale lips were quivering.

"Are—are you in frightful pain?" he asked.

"No. I'm trying not to laugh."

"At me?" she said simply.

She nodded.

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"Well," said Harry, his heart ticking, "more or less."

It ended with Harry taking Mr. Miers over the house. It wasn't till they stood in the garden—a fine, long garden, now mostly jungle, lay behind the old house—that Harry felt he had been a little unscrupulous in standing in front of the crack on every floor they visited.

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