

An Ugly Duckling

Written Specially for The Western Home Monthly.



THE Brinton-Hoards dwelt in the finest residence in Argentown, and were accorded a proper degree of deference by people who merely lived in houses. Chronologically, as well as in point of worldly possessions, Judge Brinton-Hoard was one of the "first citizens" of Argentown; but it was Jack's mother who maintained the family dignity, and who insisted upon the un-Western adherence to the hyphenated name.

As for Jack, he had long since been labeled a disappointment. His father's desire was to see him grow up to be an honored member of the legal profession; but as Jack's school record continued to show a fair average in mathematics and dismal failures in rhetoric and composition, the judge lost heart, and had serious thoughts of sending his son East to some one of the scholastic gentlemen who advertise to make Admirable Crichtons out of the most unpromising material.

And if the son was a knotty problem to his father, he was certainly a sore trial to his mother. Mrs. Brinton-Hoard's ideal Jack was well-mannered, graceful, and handsome; whereas the real Jack was uncouth, awkward, and homely. His feet were always getting tangled in the rugs; and at the dinner-table—especially the company dinner-table—he had a way of making himself unconsciously conspicuous that was little less than painful.

Aunt Lascelles, who lived in New York, had never seen her nephew, but her comment on his photograph was unmercifully just. "For pity's sake!" she had said, "he's homely enough to stop a clock!" and she might have added that he was ingenious enough to start it again, for it was in the matter of stopped clocks and other interrupted mechanisms that Jack came out bright and strong. Latin and Greek were both Greek to him; but the internal economy of a steam-engine was as apparent as the sun at noon-day. Two steps into the maze of irregular verbs bewildered him hopelessly; but he would figure out the most abstruse problem in mechanics for mere pastime.

It was Jack's mechanical leanings and their unavoidable accompaniments, that capped the climax of his mother's despair.

"Where do you suppose I saw Jack, this afternoon?" she said, one day when the judge had come home a little earlier than usual.

"I don't know—in Peter Mantz's blacksmith shop?"

"That is just where he was; pounding away with a great hammer on a piece of red-hot iron!"

"Grimy as usual, I suppose?"

"Grimy?—he was a perfect sight! You could hardly tell what color he was for the soot and smut!"

"I think he divides his time pretty evenly between Mantz's and the machine shop," said the judge.

"Yes, and he gets oil on his clothes, and iron-filings rubbed into his hands, and I don't know what all. Worse than that, he's getting to talk just like the people he associates with."

Mrs. Brinton-Hoard rose and went to the window, and the judge resumed his book. Presently a gentle tapping began to make itself felt in the decorous silence of the library. The judge noticed it first.

"What is that noise?" he asked.

"I don't know," was the reply; and Mrs. Brinton-Hoard rang the bell and repeated the question to the servant.

"Sure, mum, it's Master Jack. The stuffing did be blowing out o' the wather pipe to the range, an' he's cut the wather off the while he fixes it."

"Dear-dear! what next, I wonder? Noddy go down and send him up here."

A few minutes later the door opened

to admit what Jack's mother justly called a "sight." A stocky boy, shapeless in the upturned overalls of the gardener, his face grotesque with random smudges of red lead and soot, stumbled across the threshold.

"You're a pretty looking object to present yourself in your father's library, aren't you?" chided his mother.

The soot and red lead turned Jack's smile into a hideous grin. "Didn't have time to wash up," he explained.

The judge put down his book. "What in the world are you trying to do, Jack?"

"Fixing the water-back in the range; it leaks."

"But that is Cowley's work; you are not a plumber."

"I know, but I thought I could fix it, and I can. Besides, Cowley's gone away."

The judge took off his reading-glasses and put on the pince-nez, with which he overawed contemptuous attorneys and unrepentant criminals. "John," he said, gravely, "go and make yourself presentable and then come back here."

Jack hesitated. "Shan't I finish the job, first?" he asked.

"No; do as I tell you."

"All right," said Jack, but he stopped in the doorway to add, "Kate can't make a fire till that pipe's coupled up."

That put a different phase on the matter; no fire meant no supper, and the judge compromised with necessity. "H—m—m; are you sure you can re-adjust the pipe?"

"Why, of course; I took it apart."

"Very well; put it together again and then come to me."

Jack went his way comforted, and when he re-entered the library half an hour later, he was rather glad to find his father alone. He loved his mother in an undemonstrative way, but he stood a little in awe of her.

"Did you succeed?" asked the judge, shutting the paper-knife into his book to keep the place.

"Oh, yes, it wasn't much of a job."

"Very good. Now, Jack, I want to reason with you a little. These ingenuities of yours are all well enough in their way; and if you were going to be a plumber, or a gas-fitter, I should encourage them. But you know we have very different views for you; you are to go to college, you are to study law, and, by and by, when the burden grows too heavy for my shoulders, you will step in and help me carry it. Isn't that all true, Jack?"

Jack hung his head. "I know that's what you want me to do."

"Very well; then you must make the most of your opportunities and not waste your time and thought on these other things. If you persist, you know the alternative; don't make it necessary, Jack."

Jack both knew and dreaded the alternative. It was bad enough to have one's shortcomings paraded at home, where the jeers were at least friendly; but to go away and be clumsy and awkward and tongue-tied among strangers—the bare thought of it was harrowing.

"I don't want to go away, and I don't mean to be obstinate," he replied, urged into unwonted speech by the exigencies of the case. "I try, and try hard, to learn the things you want me to, but it just seems as if I can't. And about the tinkering—I'd rather fix things than eat, and I can't help that either."

The judge took up his book and opened it at the paper-knife. "You must help it, my son; you know your mother's wishes and mine. See that you bring me a better report from Professor Rhodes at the end of the month."

The month had three weeks to live at the time of this conversation, and for twenty-one days Jack tried stren-

ously to raise his standing in school. The effort increased his average in mathematics, but the other studies suffered by comparison, and the judge shook his head over the report and spent the Friday evening examining the prospectuses of several special schools for dull boys.

Nevertheless, Jack might have obtained a stay of proceedings if it had not been for the compound locomotive. For three weeks he had managed to steer clear of Mantz's, the machine shop, and the railway yard; but on Saturday he heard about the new engine, hesitated, went to the bridge across the tracks to view it from afar—and fell.

The new compound was an experiment on the Argentown line and the builders had sent a skilled workman to demonstrate its advantages. Unlike his kind, the man seemed to have a special fondness for interrogative boys; and he answered Jack's eager questions with gratifying minuteness of detail. More than that, when the engine was ordered out on its trial trip, he invited Jack to go along, and Jack went.

The trip was a long one, and he barely won home in time for supper, exultant, tired, conscience-stricken, and smelling of oil and burnt varnish. His father said nothing until after supper, and then the sentence of banishment was pronounced; on the following Thursday Jack was to start for Dr. Harshey's school in Pennsylvania, where the tutelage was warranted to succeed and the discipline to control and correct.

Pending the execution of the sentence, Jack went about with his head down and his hands in his pockets, finding no comfort in anything. On the Wednesday morning there was a small diversion. The window in his room overlooked the railway yard, and while he was dressing he saw a group of men gathered around a derailed engine. Half an hour later he was on the ground; it was the big compound, off the track in such a way as to effectually block the yard.

"How did she get off?" he asked one of the shopmen.

"Open switch; Larkins tried to throw it ahead of her and she was too quick for him."

"Why don't they put her on again?"

"They will, if you'll tell 'em how. She weighs sixty tons, and we can't touch her with any tackle we've got. The boss has wired for the wreck-train, but it can't get back before night."

Long after the men had gone to work and the idlers had left the yard, the shopman's words, "They will, if you'll tell 'em how," rang in Jack's ears as he walked around and around the big engine, trying to make up his mind what he should do if he were the master-mechanic. It was a very respectable problem, and it quite over-matched all of his previous antagonists in the mechanical field; but he felt that if he could only figure it out, he could go away in the morning with fewer regrets.

By noon he had satisfied himself that the thing could be done without the help of the wrecking-train. He had solved the problem in theory, using the adjacent wall of the round-house for a blackboard; and he was finishing the conclusive diagram when Mr. Meacham, the master-mechanic, came by on his way to dinner.

"Hello, Jack; what's all this?" he asked.

Jack went dumb when he saw who it was, and stammered out something about trying to figure the engine out of its trouble.

"Figure it back on the iron?—well, you've made diagrams enough, if they'll do any good. Show me what you mean."

"Don't know as I can; Professor Rhodes says I never can explain anything, after I've done it. It seems to me just like this—" and he began to unravel the tangle of figures and diagrams.

The master-mechanic followed him, carelessly at first, and then with increasing interest. When Jack came to the end, he said:

"You've gone all around Robin Hood's barn to prove two or three very simple things; but at the same time, those very simple things hadn't occurred to any of the rest of us. I don't know but the thing can be done; anyway, we'll try it, after dinner. Are you going up home?"

The master-mechanic lived just beyond the Brinton-Hoards, and on the way up town he learned more about Jack's peculiar bent than the boy had ever before told anyone.

At the judge's gate, Mr. Meacham paused to say, "Jack, my boy, you

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