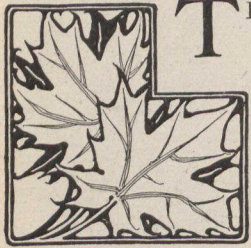


WANTED—A QUARTER!

A Clever Story of Hard Luck

By R. S. BOND



HERE it is. It's only a quarter, after all. Not likely you could get it. So, never mind wasting your time."

"All right. I don't care for a quarter anyway. I thought perhaps it was a gold piece I dropped, though."

Following these remarks, the four young men who

had been gazing through the cracks in the sidewalk, moved off down the street.

My companion turned toward me.

"Three years ago to-day," he remarked, "I'd have spent an hour fishing for that little piece of metal. Did I ever tell you of my experience in Atlantic City?"

"I don't believe you did," I replied. "But here's the house. Come up to the den and have a cigar and spin your yarn in comfort."

"Just three years ago to-day," began my companion some ten minutes later, when he was snuggled comfortably in my old-fashioned arm-chair with his feet deposited carefully on the mantel. "I had an experience in Atlantic City that I would not care to repeat. I was living down in Philadelphia that year. If you've ever lived there in summer you know just what I was suffering. But business was rushing and I was up to my neck in work."

"Every night I would stop and read the notices of the week-end excursions, and each time promise myself a holiday the following Saturday. But when Saturday came it was simply a duplication of the previous one and I would drag myself home at noon too hot and tired to think of going away."

"One Friday, however, the heat was more intense than usual. Ninety-eight degrees I think it was, but to me it felt like twice that much at least."

"About three o'clock I gave it up. Not for a hundred dollars would I have finished out the day. As I stood at the corner waiting for my car I thought of Atlantic City. The thought brought a breath of cool sea air with it, and firmly declaring that this time at least I would not be disappointed, I strolled into the depot to purchase my ticket."

"And right there my bad luck started. If I had purchased that ticket, everything would have been all right, and I would not have been telling this story now. But before my turn came to get at the window, I was grasped from the rear, whirled around, and looked into the eyes of Bill Jennings. You know Bill—or you remember. And Bill was just up from Atlantic too. Had a return half he wasn't using. Passed it over to me, and there the trouble began."

"Next morning I was up bright and early, ate a hasty breakfast, and was soon sitting contentedly in my coach watching the green fields slip by, and drinking greedily of the pure, sweet air that came dashing in my face. Ahead of me were two blissful days of cool enjoyment. In my pocket rested securely a neat little roll of greenbacks. I was happy as a lark, and laughed to myself as I thought of the thousand and one people who were even now starting to work in the building where I passed eight hours a day."

"Still chuckling to myself I detached a two-dollar bill from my roll and deposited it safely in an upper vest pocket. It has always been a habit with me to put my return fare securely away when I go on a trip of this kind. I then know that I can safely blow in my roll, and still have enough to take me home."

"Arriving at my destination I headed direct for my hotel. I always call it 'my' hotel, although before that I had only stopped at it once, and that three years ago."

"Fred Walters was there with an auto party, among whom were several girls. I was greeted rapturously, and one of the fair damsels immediately passed over to my protecting care. She was a winsome little thing, and for my short stay I flatter myself that we got on immensely. Anastasia was her name. I never liked the name until then, but it simply seemed to suit her from her patent leather ties to the peak of her jaunty little head-piece, and long before the day was over I found myself rolling Anastasia over in my mouth as a delicious morsel—I mean I rolled the name, not the original, over in my mouth."

"By nine o'clock Sunday night I found that my

finances were nearly exhausted. It would never do to acknowledge this to my companion, nor would it do to cease the extravagant attention I had been bestowing on her. The only thing was to get lost from the party, and this I speedily did, taking advantage of a jam at the corner of Georgia Avenue to slip away. I don't know what Anastasia said when she found herself deserted; whether she blamed the crowd or me, but I am inclined to believe she blamed the former, and hustled around for hours uncountable with one eye peeled for her devoted Romeo."

"As I emerged from the jam at the farthest corner from where I had left my friends, I looked at my watch and found I had still half an hour to spare before leaving for home. With an exhilarated feeling of freedom I commenced to spend my few remaining pieces of silver recklessly, and by the time it was gone, found that I had barely enough time to catch my train."

"Ticket to Philly, please," I cried jovially to the sour-looking animal behind the wicket.

"One and quarter," he responded gruffly.

"I threw down the folded bill from my vest pocket, thanking my lucky star that I had had the foresight to put it there."

"And quarter," gruffly said the ticket seller. I looked around with a start.

"Take it out of the two," I stammered, dim forebodings of some mistake filtering through my brain.

"Where's the two?" he queried. "This's one." Mechanically I held out my hand, took the one-dollar bill he passed to me, looked at it, and for the second time that night slunk off into a crowd."

"When I reached the fresh air I again examined the bill which I had tightly clenched in my hand. Sure enough it was a one. Feverishly I went through my pockets. In the corner of one my hand came in contact with a hard substance that sent a thrill of exultation through my veins. I pulled it out, but it was only a button, and disgustingly I hurled it through a window of the now departing train. Not a cent could I find. Not one mean, stingy, filthy penny. And to get home I needed a quarter—twenty-five of those selfsame mean and filthy pennies."

"I groaned dismally. I had not even a tie pin or ring that I could pawn, for with my usual excitement I had left my jewellery on the dressing-table at home, this last having also been a source of great worry to me when in the company of Anastasia."

"But it was no use standing around groaning. Already a policeman had sauntered by me twice, swinging his club nonchalantly, and each time eyeing me suspiciously."

"I strolled toward the boardwalk thinking deeply. Surely a quarter wasn't such a hard thing to secure. I had read times without number in magazines, how the broken down and penniless idler had secured the price of a meal, and surely I, with my education and my personal appearance, could raise a quarter in this vast city."

"But I was handicapped. I could not bring myself to beg, I was too proud to pawn my hat or coat and go home without that portion of my attire, and I did not know how to steal successfully. By successfully I mean without being caught, and even had I known how, I doubt if I would have had the nerve."

"My only hope was 'luck.' I have never doubted that there is such a thing as luck, notwithstanding the fact that I have read treatises without number on the subject, all heartily disagreeing with me. I am still bull-headed enough to believe in that so-called myth—luck. If there is no such thing as luck, why was it that as I passed up the boardwalk with my head down and my eyes on the flooring, I saw a bright new dime at my feet? Hastily I picked it up and stored it safely in my pocket, then doubled on my tracks as if fearing that the owner would pass that way in search of it. Ten cents already! My heart throbbed at the thought. Ten from twenty-five left fifteen. What a snap! Any person could get fifteen cents in Atlantic City. Why, probably I could find it like I had found the dime if I would but try. With a lighter heart I again turned and walked hastily up the walk, my eyes now eagerly searching for a gleam of silver. Bumping into a party I looked up into the face of Anastasia. She did not see me and thankfully I

dodged into a store where I stood with palpitating heart until she and her companions had passed."

"Some clumsy fool," I heard her mutter as she fixed the sleeve that I had disarranged, and I snickered in spite of my misery. One thing sure I must exercise more care, but still I could pursue my course for a time now, as my friends had gone the other way. I thought of hastening after them, explaining my plight, or even telling them that I had been robbed, and borrowing enough from Fred to see me safely home, but the thought of Anastasia's contemptuous look should I do such a thing gave me a thrill of fear, and I gave up the idea. No, I would have to trust to luck."

"Suddenly I thought of the urchins I had seen earlier in the day scrambling for pennies and nickels in the sand heap. I myself had carelessly thrown away several times the amount I now so ardently desired, and had laughed loudly over the scrambling youngsters, each eager to secure the coveted coins. Was it possible some Lord and Lady Bountiful were even now amusing themselves in this manner? Mechanically my feet drew me to the spot. Sure enough; a dozen wriggling bodies were rolling over each other in a struggle for a coin and several persons on the walk were good-naturedly abetting the frolic by keeping the youngsters supplied with money."

"I dropped from the walk and stood near the heap. In a minute a nickel rolled nearby. I had just time to place my foot on it when the urchins hurled themselves on the sand, and pairs of hands innumerable began to dig frantically. I looked on innocently."

"Move, mister, please," piped a small negro. I knew it was up to me to obey, but how I wanted that nickel under my foot! As I moved away I kicked backwards. Fortune favoured me, for the nickel fell in the edge of the grass. I stooped to pick it up but had barely got it in my hand when the sharp-eyed piccaninny cried:

"Hoy, kids. Pike der cheap sport. He's got de nickel. Hey, mister, tro' it here. Don't be a Jew." There was no time for thought. I saw them coming and ran. I knew they would not follow far with richer fields behind, and then, ten and five were fifteen, and fifteen from twenty-five left only ten to get. When I was a block away I felt safe. I had my nickel all right and it was worth the trouble. But where was I going to get the remaining ten? I realised that I could not hope to find it, and I knew I dare not go near the sand heap again. After all, a quarter was not such an easy thing to get."

"I had my hands stuck in my pockets, and was idly walking along, when a happy thought struck me. My knife! Why couldn't I get a dime for that? Surely any enterprising newsboy would gladly give that amount on speculation. I myself had given a dollar and a half for it scarce two weeks before. If I had not been so dense I would have thought of pawning it, but the thought never entered my head."

"A hearty voice shouting 'Extra!' drew my attention. I sauntered toward the corner on which the newsy was plying his trade."

"Want to buy a knife, sonny?" I inquired, trying my best to keep a trace of hatred from my tone."

"What'cha got?" inquired the boy. I showed him the piece of cutlery. "Gee. It's a beaut, ain't it, Mister? Where'd you swipe it?"

"I didn't swipe it," I gasped. "I'm broke and have got to get a dime somewhere and want to sell the knife."

"Dat's the woist of drinking, Mister," piped the urchin. "You can't never tell when you'll lose your head and tro' away all your dough. I got a uncle what boozes, too."

"I don't drink, boy!" I roared. "I'm simply broke. Broke! Don't you understand? Theatre, hotels, girls, entertainments. Don't you savey?"

"Oh," nodded the boy, "just plain everyday broke eh? Well, I ain't got but four cents. I'll give you that for the cutter."

"Are you sure you only have four cents?" I inquired, with as stern a look as I could muster. The boy pulled his pockets inside out and produced four dirty pennies."

"Spent de rest on cigarettes," he explained smiling."

"Give me the four," I demanded. He passed over his pennies and I handed him the knife. True, some other newsy might gladly give ten for it, but not for anything would I go through another ordeal