



*** "PAPER, MISTER?" ***

BY A. STEWART CLARKE.

“PAPER, mister? Have a paper, sir?” It was a bitter, cold night in December. People hurried along the sidewalks with the collars of their great coats upturned against the biting wind and their hands thrust deep in pockets. Now and again a cab rattled disconsolately over the mud-frozen streets, waking echoes in the lonely nooks and corners where darkness gathered blacker as the lights of the town went out.

Overhead the stars looked coldly down upon the bare brown earth and twinkled a message of coming snow—the chill of which was in the air.

“Here y’are for yer extra. Paper, sir?” “No, I told you. Here you, get out of the way,” exclaimed a stylishly dressed young man, glaring at the newsboy as the latter attempted to pass in front of him to accost a prospective customer. There had been a crowded house at the Academy, but the audience was fast thinning and as the stylish one handed his companion into a waiting carriage, he noted that they were about the last among those who had occupied the dress circle parquet to leave the theatre.

“I hope that brat didn’t spoil your gown, Ka,” he remarked a few minutes later as the carriage moved away.

“No, I think not—the little wretch was positively filthy tho’. I don’t see what the police are about. He shouldn’t be allowed to annoy people that way.”

To the speaker the incident had been merely a petty annoyance to be forgotten the next moment. Newsboys and boot-blacks she supposed were necessary evils, associated in her mind with ill-smelling haunts of vice and squalor. For the inhabitants of such places she had no compassion. In these days in the great Dominion no deserving man or woman need go hungry. Twas all their own fault, she’d been told that repeatedly. Her glance had taken in the dirty face and the ragged clothes, but the pinch of

hunger on the manly features of the urchin and the haunting look of despair in the brown eyes had escaped her notice. Tears had welled up in those same brown eyes and had been wiped away time and again by dirty hands as the evening had passed and his papers remained unsold. Supperless and with chattering teeth he had waited the outcoming of the crowd from the theatre. He would be able to sell out then, but the crowd had come and gone and there was still a big bundle under his arm.

As he fumbled over the copies remaining in a vain endeavor to make his receipts larger, he could not repress a sob as he realized the truth. “Hi bub, you there! Give us a paper. Look sharp now; my mate wants one, too.”

The papers were forthcoming instantly and a fifty cent piece was slipped into his hand. “Never mind the change lad,” exclaimed his benefactor. “Cut along home, time you was there;” and, almost before he could realize his good fortune the sailor and his mate had passed out the door.

For an instant or two he stood irresolute, the next he was across the street running as fast as his numbed legs could carry him. In and out among alleys and by-ways he ran until forced to stop for breath. Presently he reached a dingy looking structure facing the end of a narrow court where he stopped suddenly, gazing at the lights which were flashing from its windows. Lights and people, what did it mean? The neighbors—a sudden fear gripped his heart and he uttered a cry of despair as he sprang up the rickety stairs.

One there had been that day before him, a visitor whom all must meet, whom none may deny. No more would a mother’s welcome greet him on his return from his day’s work. Her voice was stilled for ever, her hands at rest at last. No word of love, no parting kiss was possible now. Death had robbed him while he had been battling for his daily bread. Hunger and cold, privation and want he could have faced for her dear sake, but now there remained nothing but a world of desolation.

A mile away under a very different roof, a woman was examining her gown under the flame of a resplendent chandelier.

“Do you know, dear,” she observed at length, “I can’t see that, that little wretch soiled my dress at all.”

Twenty-five years have passed away since that black December night when the newsboy’s mother died. Some changes have taken place in the old town of Halifax, but about the Academy of Music everything seems to be much the same, save that the strident hum of the electric cars is now to be heard as they scurry over the frosty rails with clamoring gong, bumping and thumping over the uneven road bed with noise enough to wake the dead.

Another audience is thronging from the theatre, scattering hither and thither in all directions as they emerge from the building. Two men who are in advance of the crowd are engaged in a lively discussion when one of them stops and examines an object near the curbstone.

Heavens, Jack, he exclaims after a moment’s scrutiny, its a man. He’ll freeze to death a night like this. The man addressed as Jack came forward and between them they lift the unconscious figure into a sitting position. The rays from an arc light some distance off fall upon the group and soon a crowd collects. “Just a common drunk—the police know him. It’s wonder he didn’t freeze.” These and a score of other remarks come from the crowd as the police take care of the drunk and once more the sidewalk is deserted.

What made you start so Jack when you saw young Lufers’ face said the man who had discovered the sleeping figure as the two walked on.

“I,” replied his companion, “Did I start?”

“Well rather, did you know the Lufers when you lived here. They carried pretty high sail then. Lived beyond their means—most extravagant couple. When the boy came he followed the example set him, and went to the dogs before he was twenty-one. Father died here recently, left absolutely nothing. Boy came back from the States last year and has been kicking about most of the time since in the condition in which you saw him tonight. Mother is now trying to run a boarding house, but he leads her a terrible life. Pity, too, I remember her as such a pretty girl.”

While his friend had been talking, “Jack’s” thoughts had been busy with the past. Once more he can feel the gnawing of hunger and the pinch of frost, he can see the kindly face of the sailor that gave him the fifty cents that bitter night, in that very lobby over there. The face of the drunken sot he has just seen carried away by the police peers to him from the doorway and he can see a vision of loveliness disappearing in the open door of a carriage! Everything that occurred that eventful night is fixed forever upon his memory. It does not seem so long ago; yet it is a long step from a penniless newsboy to the management of a big American daily and ten thousand a year.