

BOYS AND GIRLS

The Tale of Towels

(Agnes E. Wilson, in 'Christian Endeavor World.')

When the firm of Milburn and Colfax, dealers in dry goods and notions, wound up the business in which they had for many years served the public of the little city of Redfields, Delmar Bennett, their youngest and shrewdest clerk, saw his way clear to the little shop of his own, where he hoped to do business upon the principles which had made Milburn and Colfax's the most popular store of the little city.

Those principles were well known to every clerk who had ever found employment at Milburn and Colfax's.

'If it is bought at Milburn and Colfax's it is right,' their advertisement said. 'If it isn't right, Milburn and Colfax stand to make it right.'

They had not only said it, but they had done it. A long career of unblemished integrity, unsullied honor, had won them the undisputed trust of their patrons. No goods had ever been misrepresented; no flaw had ever been concealed; no inferior goods had ever been offered to the public. What was sold at Milburn's had always been the best of its kind.

Delmar Bennett had been under the instruction, not only of the practice, but of the precept, of his employer, during the year when the business was being closed. Mr. Milburn, knowing his plan of setting up an establishment of his own, had allowed his favorite clerk every opportunity possible to understand the business to the bottom, and had added to these opportunities many chapters recounted from his own experience.

'You mustn't think it is going to be always easy,' the old merchant said, in one of their evening talks. 'You will understand better what I mean when it comes to the test of what is before you. I know you mean to build your success on the solid rock of business honor. It is the only way. I don't mean that honesty is the best policy in the little, sordid sense of that saying. I think it is, in the long run, but what I mean is that there is something better than financial gains, and that is self-respect, and something worth more to you than reputation, and that is character. I want to say to you that I know that it is possible to live up to the highest standard of honor, although it requires constant watchfulness, both of yourself and of others.'

A moment's silence fell. Then the old merchant continued.

'It is hard because you will find that men who scorn to take a lie upon their lips will many of them not hesitate to put one into your actions, and you will be tempted to follow their example. You will discover that it is sometimes possible to retain the respect of others even while you forfeit your respect for yourself; and this course will present itself to you on occasion so advantageously that it will make you hesitate. I remember how keenly these temptations appealed to me when Milburn's was a little store on a side street, where sales were small and profits microscopic. I made a good many mistakes and a good many failures, and the memory of them makes me say to you that if you will remember, when these things

come up, that the way to real satisfaction in life is to live up to the highest standard you can set for yourself, you can safely leave the profits to take care of themselves.'

His employer's words fitting him so exactly with what his own life had always been, made a deep impression upon Delmar Bennett. And yet, when it was all over, and Milburn and Colfax's was only a memory in the town which it had served so long, when the bright new sign of Delmar Bennett was put over the spick-span shop over which he presided in person, he found himself inclined to smile a little over the earnestness of his old employer's warning.

For Delmar Bennett was not finding things hard at all. He had put in a stock limited to the lines with which he was familiar, and had taken care that everything should be thoroughly good of its kind.

He had found the public appreciative. He had always found it safe to experiment with some new lines of goods which he had sometimes not at first carried. The wholesale houses had given him favorable terms, and sometimes special privileges. The young merchant told himself that times had changed since his employer had carved out his first success. It was not hard to keep up to his standard when everybody was so encouraging.

Perhaps because he had cherished this belief during the first months of his venture he did not recognize temptation when it came. A travelling man who had shown him many favors was in his shop after the closing hour.

'I tell you, you aren't running this thing right,' the travelling man began in a tone of friendly expostulation. 'I've travelled for a little of everything in my day, and I know something about it. Take your knitting silk for instance. There isn't one woman in twenty knows the difference between the different makes. They all retail for the same price; yet you choose the make which costs you the most at wholesale.'

'I know the difference, if my customers don't. This is the smoothest and best-finished silk.'

'Maybe it is, but not many know it. Why don't you keep both kinds? Then, if they expressed no preference, sell them the kind which costs you least.'

'Then there's your velvet ribbons,' Travis went on. 'Just before you closed a woman left the store because she couldn't get the cheap ribbon here. When people want that kind of goods, you ought to be ready to sell them to them.'

'That cheap velvet ribbon doesn't give satisfaction,' Delmar defended himself. 'It hasn't any selvage, and it frizzles out in no time at all.'

'I don't doubt it. But that was the kind she wanted, and the kind she bought somewhere else. And the percent of profit is much higher on that class of goods, as you know very well.'

'Come, Travis,' Delmar said at last, as the travelling man multiplied instances, 'what do you want to sell me? Have you some seconds that you want to unload on me?'

The travelling man laughed.

'Well, not exactly. I'd like to put in a line of towels for you that only an expert could tell from those you are handling, and which would allow you three times as much profit.'

'Three times naught is naught. There isn't any profit on those towels. I've just put in my linens, and I want everybody to know that I have them.'

'Put in a line of my goods; and your customers will never know the difference, and you will have thirty percent profit besides.'

'And the wearing qualities?'

'You don't have to worry about that. Anyway, they are all right. New process, you know; looks like pure linen; wearing qualities not impaired in the process of manufacture.'

'The wearing qualities of the cotton?'

Travis laughed again.

'Let me show you my samples,' he said skilfully dodging the question.

The result was one which Delmar himself could not have foreseen. Travis went away with a 'hurry up' order for the cheaper grade of goods which he had pressed upon the young merchant.

Once out of the presence of the travelling man, Delmar found time to reflect upon the order, and his reflections did not make him comfortable. Tell himself as persistently as he might that he was meditating nothing dishonorable, he could not help feeling that he had lowered his standard. Even the words of appreciation and praise that had seemed so pleasant before, became gall and wormwood to him. And it seemed as if his customers were everyone determined to talk to him about towels!

'It's such a pleasure to Milburn and Colfax's old customers to be served in Milburn and Colfax's old way,' one lady said, as he rolled up her purchase of linen. 'We are all hoping you will enlarge your business rapidly, Mr. Bennett.'

For the first time the thought of his old employer was an unpleasant one. Had Mr. Milburn meant towels? he wondered.

'No, it is pure selfishness,' the lady replied. 'Our concern for your success isn't a bit disinterested, I assure you.'

'That is the highest compliment yet,' he made answer.

But the lady wondered at his pre-occupied air, and went away wondering whether, after all, Delmar Bennett was not over-young for the responsibilities of such a situation.

'These are all linen, aren't they, Delmar?' queried an old friend who had known him from his boyhood, an hour or two later, as she fingered the towels. 'It seems to me linen nowadays isn't what it used to be. I suppose that is a sign that I am growing old. But they have discovered so many ways of making one thing look like another that one has to be an expert not to be deceived.'

'You'll find that these will give you satisfaction, I'm sure, Mrs. Reynolds.'

He paused to think how glad he was that he could still say that. When that new line was in—well, he would not think of that. Of course, he did not mean to say that they were linen, but perhaps not many would ask.

It was only a day or two until the new goods came. He was in no haste to get