

THE MAKING OF A SMALL CAPITALIST

I am not a Rockefeller or Carnegie or...

What I have done is what any average man...

My mother was the most managing woman I ever saw...

She managed her husband and each one of her children...

The first I can remember, there had been sickness and pa...

I seem to remember much washing that winter...

My mother never hesitated, however, even when I was very small...

"Now just you 'em a little in that, Jim; you can if you'll roll your sleeves up to here..."

We moved to another run-down cottage, but the yard was larger and there were four rooms...

Mother managed all of us children as we grew up...

So, that evening, in the presence of the entire family...

It was not long after that my mother remarked that I could paint my brick pavement so well...

I did so—two afternoons. The painters were amused at me...

I told my mother what I had learned about the cracks, rubbing with the grain...

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"A capitalist? What's a capitalist, Jim?" I asked in wonder...

"A capitalist, Jim," she replied slowly, "is a man whose head makes his money work for him."

Not long afterward a discussion arose among the neighborhood boys concerning what would be when we grew up...

As I look back I am trying to think how she made me like to work and freed me when I had my own work...

Soon after the announcement of my vocation she presented me with a bank. It was of iron in the shape of a house...

On the next day the future capitalist accompanied his mother to the sure-ty savings bank uptown...

My mother never paid me for work about the house or yard...

"Listen to me, Jim! Now if I was you I'd be turning the wringer and seeing how much fun it is to squeeze out the water and make the clothes peel off dry..."

"Now just you 'em a little in that, Jim; you can if you'll roll your sleeves up to here..."

My mother never hesitated, however, even when I was very small...

"Listen to me, Jim! Now if I was you I'd be turning the wringer and seeing how much fun it is to squeeze out the water and make the clothes peel off dry..."

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I don't remember the first whitewashing I ever did, but I think I must have been about ten years old...

It was after my first successful grass-cutting and brick-paving at Mrs. Truber's that she asked me one spring if I knew anybody she could get to do her whitewashing...

It did not take me long to get home and proudly tell my mother of the astonishing order. Since then I have often wondered whether she had definitely refrained from ever suggesting my looking up jobs of whitewashing to do...

I was immediately filled with the possibilities of front fences as stepping-stones to wealth in my career as a capitalist, and I told her I could certainly do that.

"Why, you can, I do believe!" she answered with feigned surprise—not meant to deceive me. Then we both laughed and I went to work.

Presently she said meditatively: "Jim, if you was to find a palling off, don't you suppose you could get another to match it somewhere, where that son of a—"

"You surely could nail on a palling if it was needed, and tack up the rest of the fence if it was shabby!"

"Just try me!" I answered cheerily. "I'll do it for you, and you'll be right hand, you could put on a new hinge or wedge an old hinge to make the gate hang right, those gates you are going to fix?"

I did not doubt the wisdom or justice of my mother's plan, and I repaired and painted forty-six front fences while she was again from two to fourteen years old, and each averaged me a family trade—60 cents profit for my savings bank.

Let me say right here, to all of you who wish to become small capitalists, that I have no regrets, and I believe people would want the split palings taken off, and new ones put on before the fence was painted—don't you?"

"I heard, and held up my head again. I think the idea of being a carpenter occurred to me when I was about twelve years old, when the shed kitchen was built to our newly acquired home and I had helped repair the front fence."

A year before, after some of the older children had been working for some time, mother made the plan of owning her home. She had been looking forward to that home for ten years. How she saved the first dollars only Omnipotence knows!

The summer after I was fourteen, mother had another small bedroom added to our house. I was working that summer at a near-by grocery. I had always worked at something in summer—mostly job work—but my managing mother had seen to it that I had been kept in school thus far, and I had finished the course in the graded schools that year.

In the middle of August, when the grocery was on that, she let me leave the house and do all I could to help the bricklayer, the carpenter—the plasterer, even; and I finally painted the complete addition to her house.

In the middle of September I started in the High school and went there two months, when my father was taken down with a long siege of inflammatory rheumatism, and he had to leave school and go to work again.

My mother, however, did not allow my saving-bank account—the account of the capitalist—to be touched. I had then \$375 in the bank, drawing interest at 3 per cent, and I was very contented.

"Now, Jim," she would say, "don't you think for a minute it's because you're so smart or such an extra kind of a boy that you have had that money; anybody can do who is willing to use his hands and his brains too, and not spend all his money on himself. Don't you get any fool notions into that little head of yours, son."

The job I found easiest to get was clerk and driver at the grocery where I had been the summer before. The work was not easy, for I had to take care of the horse, get up early to feed him, and sometimes go to market before time to open up the store. In addition, I had work of taking orders, filling and delivering them; but I got \$6 a week to start on and the grocery gave me many groceries, especially perishable vegetables, at wholesale prices.

I stayed there all winter, for it was four months before my father got back to work. In the following spring one of my sisters married. In May I was getting \$8 a week and I wanted to stay on; but my mother one day remarked:

"Jim I wonder if Mr. Ohrlinger wouldn't like a helper this season—a sort of apprentice helper? I certainly would like for you to have some sort of trade to fall back on. What do you think of it?"

Mr. Ohrlinger was a prosperous, strictly honest, middle-aged carpenter, a good workman of excellent habits, whom we knew slightly. He frequently took contracts for cottages and sometimes for a pushing man, but a good, reliable workman who knew his business.

I liked to be where carpenters were at work; construction appealed to me.

"I think I would like it," I replied thoughtfully. "You wouldn't make so much money at first," she said, "but I think we can get along, now that summer is almost here, and you might make more money in the long run. Even a small contractor makes a little more than wages—don't he, Jim?"

"Sure," I replied, in my best grown-up manner. "I might be a contractor myself some day." I imagined then that I lived there alone—living on a pension and with no money for repairs; at his death it had passed to a non-resident relative of his who wished to turn it into money as soon as possible.

My mother, with her keen eyes and intelligent sympathy, was always interested in my accounts of what I had learned. I used to tell her about our foundations, bracing, studding, weather-boarding, etc., and all the little fly details of repair work—how we had applied this and ripsawed that and cut down the roof, and so on.

Fortunately much of Mr. Ohrlinger's work was in that section of the city where we took our walks, and usually I got home for dinner. When I got there he always had me lie down for a ten-minute nap before dinner, on the cool imitation leather sofa in the parlor; somehow I was always at least ten minutes late those days. I got to looking forward to that ten-minute nap, and would get up refreshed, wash my face in cold water and enjoy a good dinner. Mr. Ohrlinger managed to have something to eat and a little rest before I came to him. Then, after dinner, there was a five-minute rest and a chat over my work before I set out again.

I thrived under the outdoor exercise, grew a little taller, and was ready early, tired out, and slept like a log. Though I never got more than \$4 a week, that was one of the best summers I ever had—with good health, learning how to have new ideas, determination to build houses myself some day, and reasonable success in planning repair work.

I started in again at the High school that fall, a year behind my class, and went for several months. I studied hard and enjoyed it after not having had the chance for so long; but in the winter my father was laid up with another spell of rheumatism; and my brother, now twenty-three, who had saved some money, married. Then it was back to the grocery for Jim, at \$8 a week this time, of which \$6 were handed to me every Saturday for family expenses.

I did not attend school after that, except a night school. In the summer I was back with Mr. Ohrlinger—earned more and had learned more. I was sixteen and had grown much taller; but all that fall and the following winter I kept up my odd jobs, except whenever Mr. Ohrlinger did not need me.

I haven't given you any idea of my mother yet, if you think she was content to let me do as I pleased here or let me fall into a rut in my work; not she! It was she who suggested I take up mechanical drawing at the night school and ask the teacher for the best simple book on architecture, and she had me get three books on "How to Build Homes; Plans and Specifications for the Home Building Library. It was she who used to keep me finding out where the popular free lectures and free concerts would be given, and Sunday night classical programs of sacred music. And I am sure I must have been the first made to think of going through the fashionable residence districts of the city, whenever I had a chance, studying styles in painting and combinations of colors; and of going through every vacant newly papered house, criticizing or approving the wallpaper—then coming home and telling her all about it, which I liked best and thought best suited, and why. Oh, that mother of mine! There was never another like her in my life.

The summer I was seventeen I was working again with Mr. Ohrlinger, and in July we overhauled a cottage for a man who had bought it as a speculation. The property was very much dilapidated, but he had gotten it for \$810. After two weeks of our work, and another two weeks of painters, paperhangers and concrete-walk men, the house was an entirely different-looking proposition and sold for \$1,250—\$500 cash, balance on time. The profit to the owner after six weeks—without his doing any manual work at all—was nearly \$200.

That gave me a thrill—I talked and talked about it, and dreamed of it all night; and finally I exclaimed: "Ma, why can't I do that myself?"

"You can, Jim," she answered with quiet assurance and a confident look through her glasses. I don't see how—though hearing me talk all those weeks of the house being repaired for a speculation—she ever refrained from any suggestion that I should not do it. I had thought it out and determined myself that I could and would try my hand at the game!

It was then the first of September and I had \$115 in the savings bank. After I had taken the initiative we talked much of how to get a bargain in a house, and agreed that I ought to look out for one badly cheap—but one suitable for my money. I was beginning to feel like a sure-ty capitalist; the assurance, the self-reliance (I had earned it all and yet it was not all I had earned), the sense of achievement, and the sense of independence. My mother saw to it, however, that I did not get too conceited.

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I found my first investment or speculation in the spring of 1908. It was a straight three-room cottage, about fifteen years old, with brick foundation, but leaky shingle roof; weather-boarding rotten in some places, cracked in others; badly in need of paint; many window-light sashes, walls covered with dirty, faded paper, cracked in places; pavements and yard weed-grown and deserted-looking. It had been for years the home of an old man who had lived there alone—living on a pension and with no money for repairs; at his death it had passed to a non-resident relative of his who wished to turn it into money as soon as possible.

I talked it over earnestly with my mother and she went with me to look at it when I asked her what she thought about my buying it. She was greatly interested, as she always was in anything that I was interested in; and as we looked it over, inside and out, she said:

"Now, Jim, you know something about houses; tell me what you think of it—what's for it and what's against it?"

Then I told her—in its favor: It was on a pretty good block, with many German neighbors who owned their own homes, and kept their yards and their little yards looking well; rented houses were in demand there; it was near some factories, yet six or eight blocks away from them; the streets and alleys roundabout were all made. The lot was large for a cottage lot and a foot higher than the street; the foundation was good and raised the house another foot; the three rooms were unusually large; the house still held its shape and seemed to have been originally pretty well built; there was a leaky, dirty old cistern in the yard, but also city water within the front gate; lighting and cooking gases were in the street in front, and the cooking gas would be put in by the company free of charge.

On the other hand—against it: It needed thorough repairing, inside and out—a new roof to begin with. "But I can put that on myself, you know, ma," I said eagerly, and she nodded assent as I smiled encouragingly. There was a small porch on a little porch here, new front and side steps; new cellar steps; new front fence; side fences needed repairing; plastering inside needed patching, and walls needed new paper, no water or gas in the front door was old and cracked and weather-beaten; coalshed was in bad shape and the pavements needed some attention.

"Most of this work I can do myself," I explained; "and you know the house stands so that I can build on two little rooms across the back here, a kitchen with a narrow window facing the street, and a dining room beside it, with a glass door opening on a little porch here, facing the street. Don't you see?"

Ma saw and nodded approvingly. I had \$719.00, however, all told; and at eighteen I was not old enough to make a deed to the property if I wished to travel before I would reach twenty-one.

"There must be some way to arrange it," my mother said, and we talked it over and investigated. It was finally decided that my single sister, twenty-two years old, from the title in her name, and the title company would lend \$300.00 on it—the amount desired—at 6 per cent, for one year. In this way the seller got his money. I had the property paid for with the exception of the \$300.00, and the title had been examined, etc., I still had nearly \$250.00 for repairs, if I needed that much.

At last I was a capitalist—a property owner! I thrilled at the thought and my mother's saying: "I'm so glad for you, Jim; I'm proud of my capitalist!" Then she added, "Now do good honest work fixing this up, just as if you expected to live in it yourself the rest of your days."

I got Mr. Ohrlinger and paid him to look over the whole place carefully, figure out exactly what was needed in carpenter work and make out the bill of lumber for it. He had helped me in the select before, and went with him to the lumber yard to pick out in person the lumber and shingles, and to see that I got exactly what I ordered.

GROOMING THE HOUSE FOR A BUYER. Then I started in on it. The days did not seem half long enough, I enjoyed the work so much and did it so carefully. My mother came down every once in a while to see, although it was half a mile from our house.

I got the new shingle roof on and put in place after piece of new weather-boarding; put in a new front door with a large plain glass in it, and put an attractive double window in front, thus changing and materially improving the appearance of the front of the house—the front effect counts for so much in selling.

I dug the foundation for the two extra rooms, and acted as helper to an experienced bricklayer that I got for a day to water-brought back and brick and with cement mixed with the mortar I had a splendid foundation at slight cost. I got Mr. Ohrlinger for two days to help me get the framework up for the additions, and when I had finished I hired a plasterer to finish the inside. So doing most of the work myself, but getting outside help when I needed it, the place began to get in shape without unreasonable cost.

While I had the house torn up I found I could get the illuminating gas put in cheaply, and did so, in order to set the place to better advantage; had the cooking gas put in the new kitchen, the water brought back, and a sink and drainboard placed by a window in that light, cozy little room. I partitioned off corner closets in the two bedrooms, and had small closets in the new dining room and kitchen also. The housekeepers always like them; got a cheap but neat attractive gas fixture; had the plastering patched where needed; had the woodwork grained, but varnished it myself, scrubbed the floors until they looked as if they had been polished, then stained and varnished the borders

for three feet to give the hardwood effect. The wall paper I selected with great care, and it was as attractive as I could make it for the money; the front room had a rather fine paper. I put a brick floor in the cellar and cemented the floor; then whitewashed the walls until it was nice enough for any housekeeper. I put in a new front fence, and painted that and the house carefully.

You should have heard the discussions my mother and I had about the house—what colors were most used then and what would look best; whether the cornice should contrast or go in with the body of the house; whether the trimmings should be dark or light; whether the window sash would look best in olive green or dark red; whether the corner strips should go with the body of the house or with the cornice, and what should be the color of the foundation. We had ideas—definite ideas—and some taste by the time we got ready to paint that cottage. When I had finished, mother said it looked about as well as a professional work—she and she never praised anybody else. I got the neighbors on each side to stand part of the expense of the necessary lumber, and repaired thoroughly each side fence all the way back, and had the coalshed got in first-class shape; then whitewashed all that with white coats in my best old style. All the grass and weeds I got out from the brick walks, down on my knees, with an old knife; patched and partly relaid the sidewalk where needed; and after I had graded "up" and cleaned and sodded the yard, I scrubbed those walks and painted them; then they would have deserved Mrs. Truber's most satisfied smile.

When I had finished it was entirely different looking place—so fresh and clean and sound throughout, so attractive, such a healthy-looking place to live in, such a homey-looking place! It would have rented for \$150 a month, but I wished to sell and cash in on my earnings and capital. I was at work on it about seven weeks, and ten days before I finished I put up a "For Sale" sign after the place had been painted.

I asked \$1450.00 for the place, and might have gotten it by waiting and giving considerable time on the interest payments. I had many nibbles and offers, ranging from \$1100.00 to \$1400.00—the latter being \$200.00 cash and the rest in monthly installments of \$18.00 each. I turned those offers down, but when, about two weeks after I had finished, I had an offer of \$1,350, \$700 being cash, I took it; for that meant all cash to me, the buyer raising the balance by loan from the title company, which it readily made.

Of course I consulted my mother before closing the trade, and she advised it. "Yes, Jim; a quick sale is a doubly good sale, and lets the other fellow have a chance to make something out of it. You know the old saying: 'No sale is a good sale unless it's good for both parties.' You treat people fair and square and give 'em the worth of their money; make 'em respect you and treat 'em so's they won't be afraid to do business with you."

By the first of July I had sold, paid off that borrowed \$300 and had \$1,050 cash capital; and I had nearly three years to travel before I would reach twenty-one.

"Jim, that's fine! I'm proud of you!" ma said. "But don't you stop. Go on with your patchwork for other people, but keep looking out for another place to buy."

ANOTHER QUICK SALE. I found another in less than three weeks. It was not a place that would bring me such a large profit, but I felt I could not lose on it—a four-room cottage, the kitchen very small, eight by ten; with metal roof and brick foundation; giving, in need of paint and repairs, but fairly sound in essentials. I bought it for \$950 cash, taking the title, as before, in my sister's name. It had only a small yard and the vacant tenants had been paying only \$9.00 a month for the place; but I felt that was because they

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