

BOYS AND GIRLS

Joe and the Foreman

(Milford W. Foshay, in 'Good Cheer'.)

'Your account's out just one loaf, young fellow,' the foreman of the bakery, Mr. Jacques, said to the boy who stood before him.

Joe Marston tried to think of any sale for which he failed to make collection. His business was to deliver bread a day old throughout a district in which poor people lived who preferred the stale loaves because they were a cent apiece cheaper than the fresh ones. Mr. Jacques was a gruff man, and apparently without the kindly disposed heart that is sometimes thought to be hidden under a rough exterior. At any rate, he held the drivers of the bread waggons to a very strict account.

'Oh, I know now, sir,' Joe suddenly exclaimed, as recollection came to him. 'Old Mrs. Machon hadn't had anything to eat since yesterday, and I let her have a loaf until to-morrow.'

'Then why didn't you pay for it yourself? We're not running a charity ball. If she pays you back, all right; but you'll have to fork over now.'

Joe handed out the four cents, looking as if he had committed a crime. When the foreman went away (he was a large stockholder in the company) some of the working girls expressed their opinion of him in vigorous terms.

'The mean old thing! I don't believe he's got any heart,' said one. 'You did right, Joe. I guess the Gem Baking Company can stand four cents! Here, Joe, you're not going to lose it,' and Joe was offered the money.

'No, I won't take it, 'cause I ought to pay for the loaf myself. I see it now, but I thought I was doing right. The bread wasn't mine to give away, and I won't do it again unless I'm willing to pay for it.'

Although he saw where he had done wrong, the sympathy of the girls was very grateful to him and restored his confidence. He was so poor himself that he had a hard enough time to make ends meet, yet he felt glad that he gave the loaf to the destitute old woman; or, rather, trusted her with it, for he was to be paid on the following day. But he now saw that he had no right to trust other people's property, and that he ought to have paid for it without being told to by the foreman.

After his delivery on the next day, Joe again handed in his report.

'Correct, this time. Didn't find any poor old starving body, eh?' the foreman asked, jeeringly.

Joe did not make any reply, but went to his work; while the girls turned up their noses at the back of the foreman.

The place where they were working was on the fourth floor, and a large quantity of flour in sacks had been piled there recently to be used while the basement was undergoing some repairs. Suddenly there was a creaking, groaning sound heard, and the floor began to sink. Those nearest the windows, which were open, ran toward them; but only three reached them before the building collapsed, the walls bent inward, and machinery, flour, men and women went crashing through to the basement.

In a moment screams of agony came up from those below who were being crushed in the wreckage. Joe had caught hold of a window sill, and had no difficulty in drawing himself to a seat on the ledge; but the wall itself was tottering, and he was in great danger.

The cry came from some one near him, and Joe looked inward. Two girls who had expressed their sympathy with him when he was reprimanded by the foreman were hanging to the sill. To let go meant to fall to the basement, and almost certain death; yet they could not hold on longer than a few minutes. Joe felt his nerves tingle at the thought.

He turned to the outside. The fire escape was about six feet beneath him, and although twisted by the bulging of the wall, it ran up to the window where the girls were hanging. He dropped to it, and then made his way to the upper window as rapidly as possible. Bracing his feet against the iron railing and his shoulder against the side of the window, he grasped the arm of one of the girls and pulled with all his might, telling her to help herself at the same time with her other hand. She did so and was soon leaning through the window, from where she made short work of getting out on the fire escape.

Then Joe tried to help the other girl in the same way. But she had been holding on for a few second longer than her companion, so that when Joe took her by the arm she let go of the window with the other hand also. This threw her entire weight on him, and he was drawn inward in spite of his utmost endeavor.

It was a terrible moment. With every muscle strained until his eyes seemed to start out of his head, and the sharp corner of the casement cutting his shoulder, he felt himself being overcome. As he thought of the terrible death for both of them if he was drawn over the ledge, or for her if he let go his hold on her arm, he gasped,

'Catch the sill with your other hand, quick!'

She understood and tried to do so, but her effort in reaching up pulled him so far inward that the movement greatly increased their peril, and caused her fingers to fall short of the sill by an inch or two.

'I can't!' she screamed in a frenzy of fear, her fingers scratching the paint in their wild grasping to secure a hold.

Just then both felt an upward and outward motion to their bodies. The girl first rescued heard her companion's wild scream, and at once seized the hand of the arm which Joe held, pulling outward with all her might. This assistance came not a moment too soon, and with it Joe was enabled to drag the girl safely to the ledge.

They were obliged to rest a moment, and then began to make their way down the escape. No time was to be lost, for coals from the furnace had started a fire, and as gas pipes had been twisted off, the blaze would spread rapidly. On reaching the third floor a portion of the walls which had fallen across the escape was encountered, and they could go no further. Already the smoke and heat were in their faces.

'Girls,' Joe said, 'there's nothing to do

but jump, so come on,' and he started to assist them over the railing of the escape, and in this way to let them down as far as possible before they dropped.

But at this moment the firemen arrived in the alley, and although it was choked up with the fallen bricks, they planted ladders and started up for Joe and the girls. One at a time the latter were carried below.

'Follow me down,' the fireman said to Joe, as he received the second girl over the railing, 'and be quick about it. The fire is coming!'

Joe turned to look at the approaching flames, and on bringing his eye back it took in the mass of ruins beneath him.

'Go to the second floor!' he suddenly shouted to the firemen, and he disappeared inward over the broken wall.

What had led him to take such a perilous step? Lying head downward over a beam, he saw Mr. Jacques and determined to rescue him. Sliding along a steel girder which inclined that way, Joe jumped to the place where the foreman lay, with his clothing caught on a spike. He was unconscious but still breathing. Had it not been for that spike, he would have been buried under the ruins at the first crash. But other parts of the wall were occasionally falling in, the fire was advancing, and he must be removed at once or left to his fate.

The beam, fortunately, was leaning outward toward the point where the wall had fallen away from it, and the inner end was hanging on a wire which was attached to it. When Joe leaped to the beam, all he had to do was to shove the shoulders of the unfortunate man on to the timber, in order to make it safe to release his clothing; otherwise he would fall, since he was too heavy for Joe to hold.

To get Mr. Jacques' shoulders on the beam was no easy task, however, for Joe's strength had been nearly used up already; but it was accomplished, after which Joe took out his pocket knife to cut the clothing away from the spike. It is not likely that he could have guided the body down the incline, and all his labor would have been lost; but the firemen came to his assistance, having hurried to the second floor to see what had become of him. With their aid Mr. Jacques was taken out safely and sent away in an ambulance, while Joe, too weak to be of any further service, went home.

The fourth day from the collapse of the Gem Baking Company's building, Joe received a message to visit Mr. Jacques in the hospital. When he was shown to the cot on which the injured foreman lay, he found him as gruff as ever.

'Well, you've not had a chance to give away any bread to hungry people for a few days, eh?' was the greeting he met with.

Joe was so confused that he could answer only,

'N-no, sir.'

'Should think not,' Mr. Jacques grunted. 'Get hurt any?'

'No, sir.'

'Well, I did. A broken head and a shoulder out of joint. Those girls up on the fourth floor seem to like you well, eh?'

'I-I don't know,' Joe stammered.

'I do. Been here and told me about how