

Jim Goodwin's Real Asset

A Story Containing Much Experience of Human Nature

By WILLIAM HUGO PABKE

JIM GOODWIN was wholly unprepared; he had had no presentiment whatever. He had entered the office that morning in his usual cheery manner. With a bright "good-morning" here and there, throwing a nod and a laughing word to the pretty stenographer, he reached his desk. On it lay the letter, singularly conspicuous on the background of dark wood. He regarded it curiously for a moment, then picked it up. Even then, no tremor of anticipation warned him of the turning-point. He opened it and read the few type-written lines.

That was long ago, ages ago—all of ten minutes. He had read it over and over again—the neatly-embossed heading, the date, the formal address, the body, the signature. He grasped it in both hands and shook it. The paper gave out a reassuring crackle; it was indubitably real.

Mr. Randall came in from the street and walked slowly through the long room toward his private office. His head, with its wealth of white hair, was held proudly erect; the eager, interested look in his eyes gave an almost youthful expression to his ruddy face. Stopping beside Jim's desk, he dropped his slender, gloved hand on the young man's shoulder in an affectionate gesture.

"James," he said, "this is the morning for our little monthly conference. Bring your book."

Jim rose mechanically, slipped the letter into his pocket, picked up a memorandum of shipments from the desk, and followed Mr. Randall into his office. It was a dignified room, stripped of all unessentials. What articles of furniture it contained, however, were exceedingly good. In spite of its approach to austerity, it was cheerful; the man who had worked in it, dreamed in it for a generation, had imparted some of his own combined dignity and cheer to its atmosphere.

"A capital month—March," said Mr. Randall, seating himself at the old-fashioned desk. "It is gratifying to see the—ah—the house hold its own—nay, more—to increase its prestige from month to month." He spoke in the eager, interested manner that had been habitual with him for a lifetime; it was an index of his boundless energy.

"March was a good month, sir," said Jim, vaguely, his glance roaming out of window.

The expression on his good-looking, boyish face was one of utter bewilderment. Unconsciously, his hand passed through his thick, dark hair, leaving it in a most unseemly, tousled state. The familiar room seemed far away. He was hardly aware that he had spoken. A wonder crept into his mind if he should ever again see this room that had played so important a part in his life hitherto. He pulled himself together suddenly, a quick realization of change gripping him. Drawing the letter from his pocket, he opened it with a brisk movement.

"Mr. Randall," he said, throwing back his head, "I should like to speak to you about a personal matter. Something quite wonderful has happened to me. It—it was unexpected—incredible!"

"Certainly, James, certainly," Mr. Randall smiled his quick, fine smile. "Perhaps my advice—"

"It's not that, sir," interrupted the boy. "This will explain better than I could. Will you read it?"

Mr. Randall adjusted his pince-nez, and read the letter over swiftly. He settled down in his great leather-covered chair, his clean-shaven chin resting between forefinger and thumb. Again, he perused the page, slowly this time.

"Forty thousand dollars," he mused. "Quite a considerable sum of money—in wise hands; otherwise—" He broke off and flashed a look at Jim, whose mounting excitement was beginning to show in flushed cheeks and shining eyes.

"It's a fortune!" The boy leaned forward eagerly. "Why, Mr. Randall, until this morning—half an hour ago—I thought I would always have to work for a living!"

"And now?" There was a yearning, wistful look in the older man's eyes. "And now?" he repeated, urgently.

A PUZZLED expression crossed the boy's face. The question seemed superfluous. Everything had suddenly become crystal clear to him.

"Why?"—he reached for the letter and waved it with a slightly dramatic gesture—"this is the answer!"

Mr. Randall shook his head slowly, sadly, as though a disappointment had just come to him. "That's no answer," he disclaimed.

The interview was becoming irksome to Jim. He chafed under a sense of disappointment caused by the lack of enthusiasm accorded his surprise. How

could any one hear such tidings and remain calm? A glorious sense of freedom possessed him; he wanted others to respond to his mood of elation. He longed to rush into the outer office and tell his news to his fellows. They would be impressed! After that, he wanted to quit.

"You haven't congratulated me yet, Mr. Randall," he said, a hint of reproach in his tone. "I thought we were—friends."

The wistful look grew in Mr. Randall's eyes. "I had hoped we might remain so, James," he said, slowly.

Jim looked up puzzled.

"I mean that friendship invariably implies a community of interest. From your remark a moment ago, I infer that you wish to sever your connection with the—ah—the house?"

Mr. Randall always spoke of "the house" as a high, fine thing—and with reason. Randall & Co. stood for the ambition, the high thinking and the right doing of years. Unconsciously, he deemed it almost sacrilege for any one to be untrue to its standards. There was an unmistakable hurt in his tone as he repeated:

"You wish to leave us?"

The boy nodded excitedly. He thought of his



"May I have my job back?"

he said, a nuance of patronage in his tone.

A smile of frank amusement lighted the older man's eyes. It died quickly, however, as he extended his hand.

"Good-bye, James," he said, cordially. "If you need me at any time, you will find me here."

IN the outer office, as Jim had foreseen, his news was received far differently. Of course, there was a little envy—that was just as it should be to give the proper flavour. The envy, however, was submerged in the flood tide of whole-hearted rejoicings, sincere congratulations, and snap-shot advice that flowed over the new-made capitalist.

"Put every cent of it in bonds!" urged the chief clerk, who invested his little all in gilt edges only.

"Buy a farm!" incited the book-keeper, the old man of the office, who, by that advice, disclosed his own ambition.

"Get your clothes made by Neumann!" insisted young Hartley, the sartorial expert.

The pretty stenographer came last. She had no advice to offer, no congratulations to express in words. While Jim held her hand a trifle longer than was absolutely necessary, two big tears splashed down on his knuckles; they were Annie Boyd's contribution to the general rejoicing.

Those two big tears formed the last impression that Jim carried with him in his transition from the work-a-day world of labour to the glorious freedom of the idle rich.

There is absolutely nothing of interest in a commonplace, unoriginal course of action. Jim Goodwin, unfortunately, was hopelessly mediocre in the methods that he adopted to aid him in killing time and in forgetting the tug at his heart-strings whenever the thought of Randall & Co. entered his mind. His sins of omission, as well as his positive acts, were hackneyed to the point of vacuity. He eschewed all the advice that had been gratuitously bestowed on him, most of which, incidentally, had been rather good. He invested in no gilt-edged securities, neither did he buy a farm. In fact, he even forgot to have his clothes made by Neumann; he was too busy just dissipating.

Sometimes, waking from feverish sleep, he seemed to see before him the face of his former employer. The eyes were always a bit wistful—and pitying. He would even hear a clucking sound, which augmented the vividness of the impression. He understood the commiseration in the fine eyes now—and the clucking tongue. Cursing himself weakly, he pulled the covers over his head to get away from it all.

As the weeks dragged by, the call of Randall & Co., instead of losing its urgency, became ever stronger. Hectic days and riotous nights were unavailing against the subtle influence of the clean, big man working and dreaming in the bare, high-ceiled room down in the heart of the city.

On a headachy, nerve-racking morning, when life was a thing unendurable, there came to him a resolve. Subconsciously, it germinated; he was wholly unaware of it until it had crystallized into action. He spent the rest of the morning steaming out in a Turkish bath, the afternoon sleeping in an adjacent bed, and that night finishing out his eighteen-hour nap in his own room.

THE next day, pale but clear-eyed, he entered the familiar office. He walked hurriedly through the outer room, speaking to no one, glancing neither to right nor left. There was no suspicion of haughtiness in his manner; it was merely pre-occupied. The cheery greetings called from behind the desks fell on deaf ears. The tremulous, welcoming smile of the pretty stenographer, even, was unheeded. Jim was in deadly earnest.

Arriving at the door of Mr. Randall's room, he paused. His eyes dropped to his shiny, patent-leather shoes; his glance rested in unconscious approbation on the well-defined creases that so perfectly divided his light grey-green trouser-legs. He relied on his sartorial splendour to give him courage. The ornate suit and shrieking tie, however, failed him in his hour of direst need; he had felt more confidence when arrayed in the shabby office-coat that he had discarded with his job. Some agonized moments he stood there irresolute. Then, gritting his teeth and straightening his shoulders, he knocked.

Mr. Randall was sitting at the old-fashioned desk, going through a pile of mail in his quick, energetic way. He looked up without speaking at Jim's entrance. (Continued on page 19.)