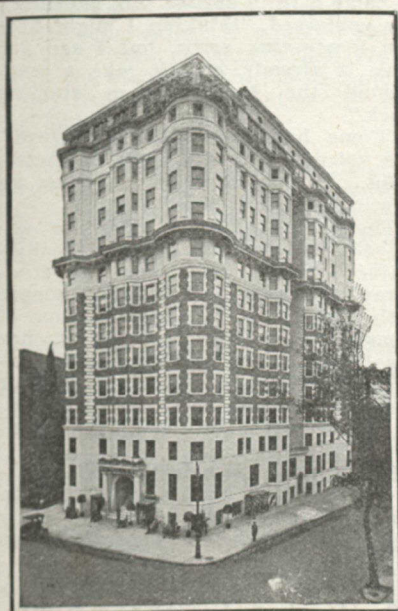


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A TRIAL BALANCE

BY L. C. WEBBER

[T was nearing midnight. One green-shaded electric light cast its ghostly glimmer over some pine packing boxes, and a brilliant glare directly on the glossy blue-white paper of a loose-leaf ledger.

Pencil dots and tiny oblique strokes beside the neat, black ink figures gave silent evidence of the month's work, having been twice checked over, after posting, in the vain effort of locating an error of 6 cents. A week had passed since the close of the financial year for the firm of Hopper, Heimer & Co. Auditors were expected in the morning, and as is the case upon such an occasion, the bookkeeper was having worse luck than usual with his balance.

Sore-eyed through loss of sleep, tired and utterly discouraged, John Wurbeck threw down his pencil, stretched his two white-sleeved arms high above his bald head, yawned audibly, and grunted a very emphatic word of four letters, ending in a silent N.

He consulted a gun-metal watch. "I can't possibly make that midnight car, it will be 1 o'clock before the Owl car leaves the corner. I'll stay, so as to get an early start in the morning."

He moved three packing cases close together, found some old coats, belonging to the salesman and shipping clerks, hanging above the cellar stairway. Four of these he spread on the boxes, folded one for a pillow and kept two to throw over him.

Stretched at full length on his back, his eyes closed and hands clasped beneath his head he went over some of his work mentally.

The totals of two long columns on a sheet of ruled paper were before him as plainly as if he were looking at them in broad daylight with his glasses on. The recapitulation of footings from his balance book, when summed up, had amounted to 1,475,986.29 on the debit side, and for the credit 1,475,986.23. No entry he could find on his books would change that 9 into a 3 or 3 into a 9.

"Yes," he ruminated, "there can be no doubt about the additions, for the machine is in perfect order. The amounts also agree with the footings of the balance book. Miss Crawford was particularly careful in checking them back with me, and to make doubly sure she afterward called the amounts while I checked. The cash balance to a cent, and the credit in the bank pass-book tallied exactly with the overdraft when allowance was made for the cheques outstanding."

A review of the quarter of a century he had spent in the employ of Hopper, Heimer & Co. swept across his brain.

In the early days he had occasionally taken a vacation, leaving a billing clerk to do the work necessary to the daily routine of business, and upon his return made up for the loss of time by considerable night work. Substitutes, taking no personal interest in the books, were frequently careless and impudent, and as the bookkeeper grew older he became imbued with the idea that one day a young shaver would wrest his position from him. His employers recognized that faithful, persevering, apprehensive nature by taking every advantage of it, and for the last ten years he had plodded along without recreation, regularly depositing in a savings bank a pittance toward the dreaded day when his brain would no longer be master of his pen.

"The best years of my life have been one long, dull, monotonous grind," he thought bitterly. "Miss Crawford was right when she remarked to-day that the terrors of advanced age without an income kept men from the enjoyment of a few short days in a lifetime of labour, from spending a trifling sum in the gratification of legitimate desires out of the thousands earned by drudgery."

Miss Crawford was the calm-eyed, gray-haired stenographer who, six months previous, had taken the posi-

tion made vacant by a young and pretty typist. At first the men, John included, resented the daily companionship of a woman of 40 whose serious, hazel eyes and sallow complexion indicated that struggles and disappointments had been her portion in life. By degrees, however, through her cheerful, capable assistance she not only won their respect, but admiration. That morning the idea occurred to Wurbeck that he would take a vacation, leaving her in charge of his books, and when he conveyed his intention to her, she said, in her quiet way: "A complete relaxation of both mind and body is necessary once in a while to give workers power to act and think quickly, besides prolonging their earning ability."

"What did she mean to infer by that?" he wondered.

The mental picture of Kate Crawford acting as a sedative, he fell asleep only to waken with a start as the clock was striking 6.

The room was as dark as when he had closed his eyes, so he turned on a light and looked at his watch, which also registered 6.

He opened the door to let in a breath of fresh air, and the town clock weirdly tolled six times.

A brute of a dog on the corner gave six short, sharp barks, then stopped. Everything seemed possessed to bring back to his mind that 6-cent error.

He hurried to a restaurant where six drummers seated at an electric-lighted lunch counter were having an early breakfast, and saw, as in a daze, their six cups of coffee, plates, knives, forks. Everything went in cycles of six, apparently.

Wurbeck's faded blue eyes were riveted on a white-capped chef in the window frying griddle cakes, who had one filled plate beside him and was preparing a second order, when a waiter respectfully broke in on the accountant's reverie.

"Your order, sir?"

"Six griddle cakes!" he exclaimed without removing his gaze from the pancakes.

"And coffee?"

"Six cups!"

However, the diplomatic waiter, accustomed to absent-minded patrons, laid before him only one cup of steaming, strong coffee, which brought Wurbeck's temperature back to its normal condition and invested him with interest in the casual remark of one travelling salesman to his companion.

"Matrimony," said the salesman, "is a well-balanced life. It is the only life. Withdraw. I have never regretted the venture I made five years ago, and I'm sure you won't. The joy of having some one await your homecoming, and feeling you are first in the interest of one woman, makes up for the toil and anxiety of any man's business career."

Before the fifth cake had disappeared from Wurbeck's plate he had made a resolution that, if the error on his books was found before 8 o'clock that morning, which seemed an impossibility, he would demand an increase in salary by 10, and in the evening call upon the stenographer for the purpose of asking her to become his wife.

"Miss Crawford," he reasoned, "is practically alone in the world, and so am I. And now I come to think of her in the light of a prospective wife, I feel confident she is not indifferent to me. I have never known what it is to be in love, but have often thought I would like a little home, presided over by a neat, cheerful wife, who could be content with reasonable comforts. Miss Crawford has had enough business life to satisfy her that the place for woman is her home. We shall use my savings," he calculated with increasing enthusiasm, "to purchase and furnish a modest bungalow, and before settling down we'll take a honeymoon trip, if for nothing else than to get me out of the rut."

He walked to the office and scanned the leaves of the ledger critically.

His eye rested upon an open charge



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