

.. The BEGINNERS ..

A Novel by Henry Kitchell Webster

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SYNOPSIS

Acting in good faith to aid a neighbor, Ruth Ingraham, in a business way, Edward Patterson, cashier of the Chicago agency of a life insurance company, is wrongly suspected by his wife, Julia, of infidelity. Her accusation unites him for business, and he takes a short vacation. On his return he is deeply wounded by his daughter, Edith, telling him his personal belongings are in the "spare room," having been removed from the room which had been his and his wife's bedroom. Patterson accepts the situation as proof of his wife's belief in his guilt. Edith, seventeen years old, is worried over the estrangement of her parents. Her mother only partly succeeds in her efforts to comfort her. The son, Edward, Junior, is at college. A business matter brings an "inventor," James Mariner, into Patterson's life. Mariner needs \$6,000, with which to push his invention, an automobile choke, and Patterson, after a brief investigation, decides to go in with him, supplying the money and taking a part in the management. Without informing his family, he resigns from the insurance company, devoting his whole time to the pushing of the invention. An old friend, Albert Willard, is frankly skeptical of the value of the choke. Patterson tells his wife of the change he has made. She accepts the situation. Edith is made aware of the change in the family fortunes by her mother telling her she has decided to part with the cook, she and Edith to do the housework. At Christmas Edith's school, a private one, puts on a play, in which the girl has a part. Her brother Edward comes from college for the holidays. With him is Roger Morgan, whom Edith had known as a child. Her mother asks Edith to leave her present school and finish her studies at the public high school. It will mean a saving of several hundred dollars, and Edith agrees. A talk with Roger Morgan heartens her. Edward tells her he is going to pay his own way through the university, and she decides to leave school and fit herself to become her father's stenographer. He is hurt, but her determination is evident.

CHAPTER V

The Coward

They compromised with Edith. It was agreed, after an evening's argument and a morning's investigation by Julia, that the child might go to her nice little business college for a trial month. By the end of that time, if she still wanted to, she could go to work for her father at the office.

It was he who insisted upon the delay. His wife, to his astonishment, after she had heard what Edith had to say about it, was in favor of letting her take the plunge at once. She was frankly enthusiastic over the plan.

He had never been able to make out whether Julia believed in the auto choke or not. She had never said she thought their own car ran better with it, than before. She blew cold when he blew hot. She never took so dark a view of the future as when he came home buoyant over a good order or a gorgeous prospect. Yet when the prospect faded or the man who had sent in the big order turned out not to have the money to pay for it, when he found himself drifting on the rocks of despair, she just took hold of him and pulled him through.

Often he recalled Bert Willard's saying that she was a good sport. It had surprised him at the time and it surprised him still. It was true—true up to the hilt, in a way. It was true if you considered what she did. But if a good sport was an adventurer, who took hazards and defeats as a part—even an enhancement—of a game, then Julia was as little a sport as anyone he knew. Less than he himself.

But whatever the source of her courage might be, the steadfastness of it sometimes made him gasp. And it was not, he believed, all a bluff, either. From some source or other she was finding happiness. She hadn't been so cheerful in months. He wondered rather bleakly whether this might be due to the cessation of their marital relations. Was that part of their life something she had always hated, and was it now her sustaining belief that she had escaped from it—permanently?

She confessed herself puzzled about the change in Edith. She'd known more of the girl's real feelings, of course, than he had. Anyhow, she was delighted with the change of heart. "It's really on her account more than yours," Julia amazingly told him, "that I want her trained to earn her living. I don't want her ever to have to wake up to the fact that she's helpless, at the mercy of some one else—any one else, not even the best husband in the world."

She said it with such intensity that he asked, before he stopped to think, "Did you ever feel like that?"

"I don't, now," she said, and he was glad she went on talking about Edith without giving him a chance to ask any more questions.

"You must make it a real job for her, Ned," she told him earnestly.

"Pay her real wages, whatever she's worth, and always pay them, just as you pay the others. And if she turns out not to be good enough, discharge her. Don't try to make her feel that she's just one of the family, 'helping out.' Don't try to pretend, to anybody, that she's doing it for fun."

He said, "Of course not," in a rather aggrieved tone, but he admitted to himself that this was exactly what he had been meaning to try to pretend. She had made him wince by putting her finger on a sore spot. He had never realized before that he was a snob, but now the fact confronted him.

He had been trying to find a way to save his face. He flinched from the thought of Edith's going in on the train with him every morning under the eyes of his more prosperous acquaintances whose daughters didn't have to go to work. He had had in the back of his mind, even while Julia talked, the whimsical explanation he would make to Mariner when he told him who the new stenographer was going to be.

He'd always said that snobbery was a specialized form of cowardice. He wasn't a coward—was he?

Mariner looked a bit blank when Edward told him of Edith's plan and his own tentative agreement to it, but he offered no overt objections. She'd find it a pretty dull way of spending her days, he thought, but of course she wouldn't have to stay if she found it so.

"I don't believe she'll find it dull," Edward said. "It will take her a week or so to get the hang of it, and it may prove too much for her, but if it does I'll let her go and get some one else. It's to be a plain businesslike arrangement. We'll pay her a fair salary—and see that she earns it. It's her own idea, from the first, but it will be a material help to me if it works."

Mariner said, "Oh, that's all right, of course," and apparently forgot all about it. He was in a queer sort of mood, these days, anyhow. It was hard to be sure you had his attention, for anything.

Upon Edward, Edith's presence was profoundly disturbing. It gave the day a different color and texture from any that had gone before. It made the office a different place.

That sort of electrical tingle which her presence put in the air couldn't be a permanent thing, could it? How long would it last? Why, it would last, Edward found himself deciding, exactly as long as he could play up to it. On the day she saw him slack, despondent, frightened, ready to quit, the spell would be broken.

There had been nothing aggressively virtuous about her manner. She'd just been natural. Once, indeed, she'd mildly shocked him by uttering a perfectly audible "d—n" over some mistake in her typing, and once when she'd bent over his desk to see some correction he was pointing out to her, she'd forgotten she wasn't at home and rumpled his hair.

No, she was all right. She'd keep it up as long as he did; as long as he remained the person she wanted him to be. She wouldn't be critical; she'd take him for granted as long as she could. What she couldn't do was be sorry for him, encourage him, pull him up when she saw he was down. She could pull him up wonderfully as long as she didn't know it was necessary.

That was what it came to, then. He must never give himself away.

They got into the doldrums. The impetus that their business had got from the automobile show in January had spent itself. Nobody now took any interest in his car. The accessory game was hibernating. There'd be nothing much doing until spring, or at least until a few fine days gave a hint that it was coming. A real advertising campaign was the only thing that could possibly wake them up, right now. This was the burden of the salesmen's complaints.

Edward did his best—and it was a better best than he would have been capable of a month ago—to inspire them and keep them up to their work. He admitted it was a handicap that they weren't better supported by advertising, but a real campaign was out of the question. The financial resources of the business didn't run to it.

Edward had an out-of-town customer on his hands one day and took him to lunch. When he got back to the office, about three o'clock, he found the city salesman dictating a letter to Edith.

The glimpse he got of the man through the glass door, before he opened it, offended him. The fellow

was leaning over her closer than necessary, and his good-looking-enough face wore a fatuous smile. He looked around with a perceptible start as his employer opened the door, straightened up, and said with a completely changed manner, "That's all. Yours very truly."

He seemed suddenly, too, in a great hurry to get out on his rounds. He had a lot of people to see, he told Edward, between now and six o'clock.

Almost against his will and aware that his voice didn't sound as casual as he meant it to, Edward asked, "Is that a business letter, Edith?"

The girl laughed. "I should say not!" She turned around to him with nothing in her face but a grin of perfectly spontaneous amusement. "It's the silliest stuff you ever saw. It's a letter to a girl. He is sort of a washout, isn't he dad?"

Edward sighed. "I'm inclined to think he is," he said. The sigh was half rueful, half relieved. He was glad Edith felt that way about him, but this feeling he kept to himself.

"You wouldn't be broken-hearted, then, if I let him go?" he asked.

"Broken . . ." She whipped around upon him and saw by his grin that he was teasing her. "He isn't really any



The Fellow Was Leaning Over Her Closer Than Necessary and His Good-Looking-Enough Face Wore a Fatuous Smile.

good, is he?" she asked. "Oh, dear, I wish you could get somebody that was so good. Or I wish . . ."

She didn't go on to complete the alternative, and presently he asked her what it was. He didn't much want to, somehow. But the silence forced the question from him.

"I wish you'd go out and sell the thing yourself," she said, "just to show them up."

He tried to laugh that off as a simple absurdity, but he found he couldn't let it go at that. "I doubt if I could show them up, in the first place," he said. "You see I've never sold anything in my life. There's a special technique about it that I've never learned. And then, of course, I have to be here, really; especially now that Mr. Mariner has practically abandoned us." He essayed a smile. "There has to be somebody on the bridge, you know."

"Well, I'd be here," she reminded him. "I mean, I usually know what to tell people now when they telephone. And I've sold three chokes this week to people who were driving by and stopped to see what it was like. Oh, of course," she concluded, after a pause, "I know you really are too busy. I was only—wishing. I know that anybody who was any good could sell those things."

The afternoon mail came in just then, like a godsend, and gave them something to do. But that talk of theirs wasn't forgotten. He didn't believe, at least, that she had forgotten it. As for himself, it kept gnawing away in his mind like a persistent mouse, audible whenever the silence gave him a chance to hear it.

He couldn't be expected, could he, to rush out whenever he found a free moment and peddle their article about the neighborhood? "Can't I interest you in the Mariner Auto Choke?" Of course it was preposterous.

All the same, he grew acutely self-conscious about the periods of unwellcome leisure which kept cropping up during his business days, and he resorted, sometimes, to rather far-fetched occupations to fill them up.

Did Edith suspect the hollowness of

his pretenses? If she were to see through him, what would she think? How would she account for his unwillingness to turn salesman, now and then, when he had a chance? Would she decide that he was lazy—or afraid?

Of course he believed in the auto choke. He believed it was a valuable adjunct to a car. He believed that it actually was better, more to be relied upon, cheaper—in the long run—than any of the other devices in the market which pretended to do more or less the same thing. He believed heartily enough in all this to hire glib young men to go about telling people it was true and trying to persuade them to buy chokes on their representation that it was. The only fault he had to find with these young men was that they didn't do it well enough. That pretty well disposed of his moral superiority, didn't it?

Oh, he was making a mountain of a molehill! He'd been arguing with himself about it until he was getting morbid. The thing to do would be to put one of the chokes into his pocket some day, walk into the nearest garage he came to and sell them a dozen.

That would settle the question whether there was anything the matter with him or not; take the sting out of Edith's "I know that anybody who was any good could sell those things." Of course, she'd been talking about the salesmen when she said that, not about him. Anyhow, he'd do it, when he had time, and restore his sense of proportion—leave his mind free for dealing with matters that were really important.

Naturally he'd find it unpleasant, a man of his years and position, to start out peddling, to try to get the attention of a man who was busy—or pretending to be—about something else and didn't want to listen to him; to assume a manner of hollow goodfellowship . . . "Say, friend, I've got something here . . ."

It made him sick to think about it. Call it fear, if you liked. He'd do it though, some time. He was going to have to do it.

He did discharge the city salesman and none of the applicants who answered his want-ad in the paper was conceivably satisfactory. The out-of-town salesman, too, was temporarily laid off. Mariner was more nearly nonexistent than ever. He and Edith had the office to themselves.

There came a particularly bad day; no orders at all in the first mail; an obviously disingenuous letter from a customer who owed them quite a lot of money, offering a perfectly unbankable ninety-day note instead of the check Edward had counted upon—another bad debt; a dun that he simply hadn't the heart to answer; a tax notice; and a long chatty letter from a bond house announcing an attractive offering of municipal tax-exempt securities; that was all. Nothing to do.

Out-of-doors, the day was ironically fine; the sky, a pitiless cold blue; the winter's sun, in great, broad, golden splashes, making a mockery of his despair. He shut his book and put down his pen. Edith at that moment had gone into the shop for a consultation with Charlie Franklin. He got up and put on his hat and overcoat. With hands that trembled, he picked up a sample choke and slipped it, along with a pad of order blanks, into his pocket.

"I've got to go out for a while," he told Edith, when she came back into the office. "I may not be back before lunch."

Well, he'd got out, anyway, he reflected, as he closed the door behind him. He was safe so far. Edith hadn't remarked anything queer about his voice.

He walked away without direction, with no conscious objective. His hands were in his overcoat pockets and his fingers became conscious of the thing they were gripping—that d—d auto choke! He'd left the office with the idea of making a sale, and with some unrecorded vow that he wouldn't come back until he had made a sale.

He was passing a big public garage now, and he paused before the show window. They had all sorts of accessories in there. Why didn't he make his beginning here? Why didn't he go inside and find the boss? And say "Can I interest you . . ."

He turned and walked hastily, almost furtively, away, as if his design might have been legible through the window to the boss—the design, and the terror, too, that set him on his way once more, in flight again. He'd have to do it some time, though. He couldn't go back and face Edith until,

at least, he'd tried. He would try at the next garage he came to. After all, they couldn't do anything to him. They couldn't even, with rudeness and ridicule, make him feel any worse than he felt right now.

All the same, he went by two more before he tried one. At last he opened a door and went inside. He took his auto choke out of his pocket and started in on the first man he saw.

"Can I interest you . . ." He didn't know what he was saying, but it must have sounded coherent since the man listened calmly enough; but after a while he yawned and said, "You'll have to talk to the boss. I ain't got nothing to do with it."

"Is the boss out?" Edward asked. He thought for an instant he was going to get a reprieve, but the man said, "No, here he comes now." So he had to begin all over again.

The fog lifted momentarily while he talked and he heard himself saying things . . .

A customer had come in and the boss was getting uneasy. "Oh, it's all right, I guess," he said at last, "but there are so many of those things. No, I don't believe I'm interested. Nothing doing just now, anyway."

He was out on the street once more. He had known it would come out like that. What the boss had said was perfectly true; there were uncounted things to make cars run better, or more conveniently, being offered every day.

Well, he'd tried, anyhow, and the experience hadn't been so bad. By comparison with the way he'd felt when he went into that place, he was almost elated. He might as well go on and try other places. He tried another and another and another. He lost count at last; didn't know how many he had tried. The thing was so obviously useless, he was surprised to find, in the main, so much good-humored tolerance. They let him talk. They even seemed to listen, sometimes for one minute, sometimes for as many as five.

The steady repetition of failure was wearing him down. The mood of desperation that had driven him from the office was once more engulfing him, with fatigue, crude bodily fatigue, on top of it. He couldn't go back to the office now. He was marked legibly with failure, branded with it.

A queer reminiscence came over him of the other office; the handsomely furnished, comfortable office in the insurance company; of himself sitting in the easy chair, dictating to a smart, neat stenographer. The queer, almost unbelievable oddity about it was that he didn't wish himself back there. Not even now. For the man who had sat in that easy chair, comfortably salaried, secure, exercising an authority that was unquestioned as far as it went, seemed to him not to have been a man at all—a symbol; a stuffed shirt.

He turned into the office of another public garage and asked—it had become a mechanical question—for the boss. "He's busy now," his informant said with a jerk of the thumb. "You'll have to wait a minute."

Edward drew near and waited.

It was another salesman who was talking to the boss, trying to sell him a newfangled trouble light. Edward listened absently at first, but after a minute or two he noticed something. The salesman wasn't saying a word about the merits of his device. He was talking discounts, quoting jobbers' prices. There was a clean profit of two dollars and twenty-five cents in every individual light the boss could sell. That was more than a dollar better than he could hope for under ordinary conditions. He'd better let him leave a half a dozen on consignment while he was finding out what the demand amounted to. The salesman would come back in a few days and sell him a real order.

Edward didn't try to make a sale in that place. He remembered, now, that his salesmen had always grumbled about discounts. He'd followed Mariner's lead in stiffly maintaining the price. He'd learned something more. Why should any of these little dealers care how much gasoline his device would save? They sold gasoline. They'd sell anything there was a handsome profit in, unless it were so hopeless a fraud that it kept coming back on their hands.

He tried the new approach and found that half the time, perhaps, it worked. He accumulated a little list of dealers to whom he was to send, next day, half a dozen of his chokes on consignment.

He was dog tired by now, but somehow he couldn't stop. Something—he didn't know what it was—drove him on.

At last, he visited a man who did not mean to hear a word of his story. He was a swarthy man, of sixty, perhaps, with a thick neck and a bullying voice.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Ancient Lake Dwelling

The remains of one of the lake dwellings of the Gaelic period, fortified against invaders, was discovered on the bed of a Scottish loch which has partly dried up.