

STORY BY WALLACE IRWIN

The Little Booster

TWO SKYSCRAPERS AND MRS CASEY

THE LITTLE BOOSTER, ADVISED BY BETTY SPENCER, WORKS HIS REAL ESTATE DEALS BY STRANGE METHODS

ILLUSTRATION BY NORMAN ANTHONY

HAD Leonidas advertised for a lady helper to assist in defending the pass at Thermopylae against any number of invading Persians, he could not have done better than to have chosen Mrs. Mary Casey. Also, she would have been useful for holding bridges with Horatius; for it was she who, by her single-handed prowess, held a gap between two tall buildings against the strongest army of real estate speculators ever assembled in the city of San Bruno, state of California. No name in the directory was more hated by land brokers than was hers, no ground more coveted than the 100x150 foot plot on which her tiny, shabby cottage crouched stubbornly between those lofty commercial towers which, like fabled giants, had suddenly risen out of nothing to overcome her. On the right it was the new Insoluble Trust building, on the left the sky-aspiring apartment store of Nathan Rosewacker.

These buildings were the commercial pride of booming San Bruno, and that Mrs. Casey's lot was wanted as the site for a still more imposing structure was a secret so open that it was shouted daily over every other telephone in town. Yet Mrs. Casey continued to raise chickens on her priceless holdings—two dozen scrawny Plymouth Rocks whose daily egg songs vied with the click of typewriters in the offices on either side. Every little while some undiscouraged agent would enter her domain prepared to offer her as high as a quarter of a million dollars for her place; and, like the hero in the ballad, said agent would always "walk right in, and turn round, and walk right out again."

C. W. KETCHUM, from his window on the tenth floor, cast an evil eye upon the widow's roof. He knew how to clear half a million by buying that lot within thirty days, and he could have murdered the big woman for her mulishness. Like many another great sinner, he was an eager stone thrower. He hated Mrs. Casey's stubborn resistance; yet his own dog-in-the-manger attitude concerning the sale of certain property to the city park was common talk among the honest Boosters. But it was Ketchum's way. And, as he yearned for Mrs. Casey's lot with a great passion, he resolved to make life so miserable for her that she would have to move. So Brian Coru Blaney happened upon her persecutions.

Anybody would have noticed Brian crossing Central Square that morning, because he wore a suit that rivaled the blue jay in its vivid color. "Somp'n' burnin'," said Brian, sniffing the odor of hot rags. Looking across the square he saw a vast smudge of smoke rising from the street and pouring through the gut between the Insoluble and the Rosewacker buildings. A woman's voice hurriedly in the tone of outdoor suffrage oratory.

"They're smokin' Mary out again," said Policeman Jones of the park squad. Brian pulled his green velvet hat over his eyes and raced across the square in the direction of the smudge. The gap between the two vast buildings formed a natural flue which drew the smoke straight across Mrs. Casey's house.

A seedy workman, going about it with all the dignity of a high priest performing a sacred rite, stood shoveling street litter on the pyre. Another workman, smoking a pipe, stood amusingly receiving the volleying abuse that flamed from the lips of a huge Irishwoman who carried a bucket in either hand, setting one down occasionally to add a telling gesture to some lofty flight of Billingsgate.

"Who sint ye here on this devil's errand?" she demanded.

"Orders from the board o' health, lady," said the workman.

"Th' board o' pesthouses, ye mean! I know who's back o' this job—Ketchum an' Sellers, bad cess to their black souls!" Her red forefinger pointed to a gilt sign on the tenth floor of the Insoluble.

"May the mold rot their dirty money an' th' itch come to them that counts it!" she shrieked.

And, as a sort of emotional climax to her curse she seized a bucket of water and turned it over the head of the nearest workman. Taking advantage of the confusion, she made for the fire with the other bucket, and was about to empty it when the second workman jumped forward and defended the sacred flame with a shovel held bayonet fashion. Mrs. Casey gripped him by the hair, the workman rapped her knuckles with the handle of the shovel, and the crowd laughed.

Brian Boru Blaney, a bright-hued streak of wrath, shot forth from the crowd and wrenched the shovel from the man's hands. The embattled fomen stood aghast at the unexpected appearance of the Blue Knight.

"Look here, neroo," said he, his Celtic eyes showing gun-metal blue as he held the spade like a baseball bat a convenient distance from the workman's nose, "I guess this burlesque show's gone about an act too far. Chuck the douse on Little Vesuvius, Mrs. Casey!"

"God bless ye for a man!" sobbed the fat woman, as the water struck the smudge with a great hiss.

"There's a rare gentleman alive—saints be praised for th' miracle!"

The big woman advanced on Brian with arms outstretched. His blushes vying with his curly hair, he escaped through the mob and hurried away to the offices of Ketchum & Sellers.

C. W. KETCHUM, the Big Booster, was still at his window on the tenth floor when the Little Booster came in.

"What were you mixing up in that for?" asked the Big Booster savagely, pointing to the blakened scrap heap in front of the cottage below.

"A couple o' hired gunmen were tryin' to smoke the old lady out of her home, and I did the Doug Fairbanks act," said Brian.

"Those gunmen were hired by me," snapped C. W. Ketchum. "Keep your



hands off. They're my gunmen—see?—not yours.

"Gee!" almost whispered Brian Boru. "And you call yourself a Booster! A fella like you's enough to drive the tourists back to Los Angeles."

"Get out of my office!" bellowed Ketchum.

"In a minute," said the Little Booster, shifting the cigar to the other side of his mouth, but making no other move.

"I suppose you got lots of time, now you're out of a job," Ketchum said.

"I ain't out of a job."

"What darn fool are you workin' for now?"

"Mrs. Casey," replied Brian, calmly. "She don't know I'm working for her, but I am."

"I hope you'll begin by teaching her some public spirit. For the selfish whim of a female mule, she's bibbling the progress of the whole town. It's a hold-up."

"She ain't got a corner on the hold-up business," Brian suddenly stood and leaned over Ketchum. "Now look here, old kiddo, I happen to know that you're tryin' to hold up the park commission for \$50,000 on six lots that ain't worth three."

"Because the city wants the strip for their gateway on Ocean boulevard, you think you can stick 'em like a porous plaster. You're spottin' a public park by your graft—but I ain't goin' to let you do that. Before the week's up I'll make you give that property to the city for what it's worth."

AS MRS. CASEY had never given any sane excuse for resisting the offers of plutocrats and sticking to her miserable hut, Brian set forth to find an explanation; and he took the most direct course by applying to Mrs. Casey herself. It was not without misgivings that he swung the little picket gate between the two skyscrapers and approached the dwarfish house.

"Who are ye?" suddenly inquired a harsh contralto from the screen door.

"A friend," said Brian, halting dead in his tracks.

"Ar-r-r ye a real-estater?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then that for yer friendship!" The screen door suddenly popped open, and a mop, hurled javelin fashion, whizzed less than six inches from his right ear. A flying teakettle smote him in the elbow, and Brian halted the advance long enough to nurse his wounds and consider the advisability of carrying the door by assault, when hostilities suddenly ceased.

and Mrs. Casey her great arms akimbo at her broad waist, stood before him.

"Ye wud be comin' atther—" she began. Then her expression suddenly cleared. "Head o' Saint Dinnis!" she cried. "If I ain't been tryin' to kill the only gentleman in San Bruno!"

"Mrs. Casey," Brian began, standing within easy lodging distance of a tree-trunk, yet removing his hat with considerable grace, "I value your appreciation! He picked up the mop and handed it to her.

you childhood!" Brian seized six and smacked ecstatically.

"It's manny's th' day since I've had a man to ate me cookies," mourned Mrs. Casey, sitting ponderously in a kitchen chair and covering her red hands with her apron. "Lonesome I am—the persecuted ay spalpeen, wid niver chick nor child."

She raised both hands to the towering skyscrapers on either side.

"Here I set in me withered home between thim devil's crags like a sick clam in the Giant's Causeway. Wirra th' day!"

She began to weep loudly into her checked calico apron. Brian rose and laid a sympathetic hand on her shapeless shoulder.

"Honest, it's too bad," he said. "But you're playin' an awful long shot Mrs. Casey—a million to one against you. But it means a fortune to you tomorrow if you move. Why don't you beat it to pastures new?"

"Me?" Mrs. Casey bounced to her feet, a mountain of indignant fire. "Niver will I move—not till their feet rot away wid waitin'. D'ye think I'd sell out an' give him, the dirty Scandinavian Swade, th' half o' me profit?"

"Who's the Scandinavian Swade?" asked Brian, leaping to the crucial question.

"Ye're a gentleman, though in a bad business," answered Mrs. Casey. Be that token, I'll tell ye what no man knows. Seventeen years ago I was married be th' priest to wan Martin Casey, and come to live in this house. Martin was a good man except whin drunk, which was most o' the time. Five years we lived widout child, whin wan day Martin, who was drivin' a sprinclin' cart—more shame to th' wather!—fell from th' seat an' expired in his alcohol."

"IN THIM days this house stood in th' midst o' fields. I owned no more than th' lot I live on, wid th' little shack out back, now used as a hincop. Wan day along comes a fella name av Oscar Hansen, a white faced divil av a handsome Swade, thim worrukin' as motorman on th' San Pedro trolley. Th' shack where me hins now roost, I sold him for th' price of wan hundred dollars—great wealth to me in thim days. Th' deed fer th' whole lot was still in me name, but we made a contract be th' lawyer that we was to share th' profit half an' half if we iver sold it. Thim what did that divil Oscar do but come a-courtin' av me, wid his china-blue eyes an' white heart. Crazy fool that I was for lovin' him—they're wonderful ladies' min, thim Swades. So we was pledged to be married be th' priest."

"Me an' Oscar was to wed on a Thursday. Hinny Eagan av th' Gripman's union to stand for th' groom. It was on Wednesday mornin' whin along comes Hinny Eagan wid a face longer n' me father's chimney. 'Mrs. Casey,' he says, says he, 'prepare for th' wor-r-rst. I am that, says I; I'm preparin' to git married.' 'Naw, ye ain't,' says Eagan. 'Explain yer-silf,' I says, says I. At whic wor-r-ruds Hinny Eagan stands twistin' th' rusty brass buttons av his coat. 'Mrs. Casey,' says he, 'if it's th' truth ye must know, Oscar Hansen ran off last night wid a gilt-roofed blucuit-shooter from th' Trolley's End restaurant; an' they was married be th' justice. I hurried th' lie in his face, an' followed it wid a pan o' hot mush. But it was th' God's truth he told me."

"So Oscar flew his kites with the blonde?" asked Brian.

"Where he wint God knows, and how long he'll sthity th' divil cares," she mut-

tered. "But wan thing I know: White coward that he is, he'll niver dare show his mushroom face to me door to claim th' half av his property from th' Widdy Casey."

"So that's why you won't sell! You're holdin' on to spite Oscar."

THE coaxing out of Mrs. Casey, during the few days following, was a process involving much roundabout diplomacy, which Brian finally accomplished by laying siege to her better nature. Although she had known few children in the flesh, her love for childhood as an idea amounted to a monomania. So Brian called frequently, bearing gifts catering to her sawing weakness. Once it was an ostentatious gilt-framed chromo labeled "Tiny Toddlers." Brian patiently scanned the daily papers for bright sayings of children with which to interlard his conversation.

Mrs. Casey's garrulity, corked up for years, gushed forth in a flood of complaints and confidences. At last, when she lamented her sleepless nights and fits of depression, Brian saw his chance, and said:

"What you need's fresh air."

"Fresh air don't cure a sick heart," she moaned.

"California air'll cure anything from corns to hernia," he replied, with optimism. "Come, take a jog in my auto."

"I ain't got no clothes," she objected.

"Wear a tablecloth and be comfortable," he suggested. "I'll be around in an hour with a runabout built for two."

"A beau at my age!" exclaimed Mrs. Casey.

Prompt to the minute, Brian drove his hired car up to the gate. Mrs. Casey had attired herself in an alpaca dress of other, slimmer days. The sleeves clung snugly, a sage-tight to her fat arms, and a complicated series of ruffles climbed her circular skirt like a winding staircase around the Tower of Babel.

"I ain't in style," she announced, timidly, straightening her tiny plush hat, which perked up at the corners in the manner of a Chinese pagoda.

"Cheer up! You will be next year!" he, guardian reassured her.

So they were off with a honk. Mrs. Casey in a palsy of nervousness, and Brian never looking up as they drove down the main street of San Bruno.

Their passing constituted a serious flurry in the real estate market. Clerks in the windows of various offices exclaimed: "Mrs. Casey!" in dread unison. C. Pitman Pike, standing under the gold sign bearing his name, dropped his cigar and forgot to pick it up. And in the office of the Sunland Improvement company, C. B. Brinkhaus, president, rushed to the telephone and shrieked to his junior partner: "Blaney's running off with Mrs. Casey. For gosh sake!" Then he dropped the receiver, dumb with the thought that the precious widow had already disappeared in a cloud of dust wearing toward the declining sun.

To avoid publicity, Brian purposely took his course through bumpy and illusive by-paths.

"Th' inside av me is churned antirely," moaned Mrs. Casey, holding on.

"It gives you that wealthy feeling," replied her escort at the wheel.

"There do be some pleasures in poverty," she philosophized.

But as they swung into the smooth State road she expanded into smiles, her face assuming the hypnotized expression peculiar to the chronic motorist. The ocean breeze stirred old desires in her heart. She pointed out a broken wharf where her husband had taken her to fish

in their courting days. A flock of pelicans swung across the mists in imitation of a Hokasai print.

"I well remember th' time me husband shot wan o' thim bur-r-rds an'—"

"Something's wrong with the engine," said Brian, grimly. The car was noticeably slowing down. A few hundred yards ahead appeared the desolate, box-like shanties of Ocean Terrace. They were approaching an untidy, ragged tent which good, like the outcast of beggars, a respectful distance from the settlement. The car stopped dead.

"What's th' matter av it?" asked Mrs. Casey.

"Differentials tangled in the hub," said Brian, vaguely, gazing into the hood.

TWO towheads peeped curiously out from a flap in the tent beside the road. A baby's cry could be heard from behind the canvas.

"Th' little dinnis!" cried Mrs. Casey, raptuously. "Come here, childer, an' talk to yer Aunt Mary!"

A barefooted boy of about ten approached the car and turned a pair of scared eyes upon the big woman.

"Ma's awful sick," he said, pointing to the tent. Brian jumped suddenly, and knocked his head against the flap of the hood.

"Sick!" said Mrs. Casey, getting down ponderously.

"She's got a little baby, an' she was took with a spell when she got up to do the washin', an' pa's dead."

"I'll run and hustle a doc," exclaimed Brian, cranking up the supposedly helpless car and starting away in a miraculous jiffy. The boy took Mrs. Casey's big red hand and led her into the tent.

A thin woman lay moaning on a confused pile of bedclothes in a corner. A very small girl was attempting to lift a red-faced bundle of squalls, while the boy stooped to tuck a blanket around his mother.

"Doctor!" said the woman faintly, as Mrs. Casey leaned over her.

"There's wan on th' way, dearie," the widow reassured her, as she raised the woman's head on the pillow and arranged her faded yellow hair.

When Brian returned with a doctor from the village, he beheld a strange sight—Mrs. Casey heating water on a stove in the yard, while with her good right forearm she supported a sleeping child against her broad, sterile bosom.

"This places makes the fresh air smell kind o' close," said Brian, indicating the rubbish that surrounded the tent. "A widow with three kids—down and out—ain't it fierce!"

"Mrs. groceries in the cupboard," Mrs. Casey informed him. "But what do the cherubs know about cookin'?"

Brian handed two dollars to the boy. "Rush the milk can to th' grocer's," he said, "and brace Heine Schmalz for a dozen lamb chops."

The doctor, with the usual offended air of needy country doctors on charity cases, emerged from the tent.

"I'll be th' nurse," Mrs. Casey volunteered.

"You're on!" said Brian.

"I'll have a word with you about the case," remarked the doctor, beckoning Mrs. Casey into the tent.

"Twenty-seven acres of ripe tin cans and the happiest tribe o' flies I ever met!" Brian mused, as he hunted up an old shovel and began digging a trench to bury the litter in the yard.

THE doctor administered an opiate to the mother and left her sleeping. Two visitors, assisted by the small boy, performed the labors of Hercules in making the place habitable. Brian held the baby in various attitudes, while Mrs. Casey washed clothes and the boy turned the wringer. Then Mrs. Casey would snatch the baby from imminent death and set Brian to sweeping, repairing holes in the tent and spicing the clothes-line.

"If I was rich, what a home I could give these childer an' thier ma!" She pressed the baby savagely against her shoulder.

"You'd be richer 'n Hetty if you sold your lots," Brian hinted.

"Yes. An' if I cut off me feet I could walk on me hands," she sniffed.

"Mrs. Casey, do you know why you're here?" Brian replied.

"Yer car-r-r busted down and—"

"It busted accidentally on purpose," he confessed. "I've got you on this job because it's your last call to the kindergarten. Do you want to help these kids or don't you?"

"Mary Mother knows how I want to!" Mrs. Casey wanted you to have 'em, Mrs. Casey. But you're a blind and stubborn woman—now don't blow up till I finish my spiel. To spite the memory of Oscar Hansen you're making yourself and everyone else miserable. If you did the right thing by these purpas, you could send that boy to college—either Yale or business; you could buy those two babies silk petticoats, give the mother a home with all the refinements from Paris to pianola. But no! You prefer to raise hens."

"What can I do?" she asked, humbly, lifting the sleeping girl.

Brian promptly unfolded a typewritten paper before her eyes.

"This is an option on your property, sale price \$250,000. Sign here, please. Tonight I can offer it to any one of twenty dealers."

"Will they take it?"

"Will a cat steal fish?" Brian shook out a fountain pen.

"For me babies!" whispered Mrs. Casey, as she knelt under the candle light and affixed her scraggly signature.

She was silent like the southern stars as, still carrying the sleeping child, she followed Brian out to the car. He took his place at the wheel.

"Be th' way, what's th' name o' that sick woman in there?" she asked in a low tone.

"She's the widow of Oscar Hansen," said Brian, distinctly.

"God's will!" whispered Mrs. Casey as she turned away. The little girl, half waking, threw her arms around the big woman's neck.

LIGHTS glimmered from bedroom windows in a prosperous residence district of San Bruno as Brian stopped his car in front of a white stucco villa and rang at the oaken door.

"Who's there?" The voice of C. W. Ketchum grated from above.

"B. B. Blaney's my name and every B in it stands for Business," the voice below bubbled.

"Can't your business wait till tomorrow?"

"Sure. It can wait till Alton Parker's elected. You're the one that's got to get a move on!" Brian started to stroll away.

"Hey!" I'll be down!"

The Big Booster himself opened the door. He wore pink pongee pajamas.

"What's the fool proposition now?" He rubbed his eyes.

"A ten-day option on Mrs. Casey's property at two hundred and fifty thou'," announced Brian in a small, shrill voice. "What! Ketchum's hands cluttered imaginary value. 'Sell it to me!'"

"It's got strings on it, ol' man. You know what I told you the other day—I'd smoke you out of your property before you smoked the widow out o' hers. Well, here comes the tar-boller!"

"What do you mean?"

"I'll sell you this option dirt cheap, provided you're a good boy and do what I say. I want you to sit down and write a letter to the park board, offering that park strip for \$6000."

"It's an outrage!" said Ketchum.

"Sure it is. The strip's only worth three."

Ketchum went to a desk and wrote the letter to the board.

"I'll take it with me," said Brian, reaching for the letter. "The board meets tomorrow at ten. I'll get Robbins to rush it through, and when the bill of sale is in my hands, I got my commission—\$5000."

"You might trust me a little," said the Big Booster.

"I might," agreed the Little Booster, putting the letter safely away.

And next day, after the deal was closed for all parties, Ketchum handed Brian his commission, and laughed in rare good humor.

"You might have asked five times that amount."

"I know," rippled the optimist, "but I got my money's worth."

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