

The First Assistant Cashier

By Kenneth Carlyle Beatson, in L. A. Times

JONES' daughter cupped her chin in the palm of her hand and turned her clear gray eyes full upon her father.

"Please tell me just what it will mean if I refuse him," she said.

Jones wanted to lie to her. He wanted to assure her that it would mean no more if she refused to marry Quigley than if she should refuse to marry any one else. But he found that with those clear eyes upon him he somehow could not do so. A lie exposed to those eyes would perish as certainly and as quickly as filth exposed to the sun.

"I'm afraid," he told her, "it will mean that by this time next week the Beardstown National Bank will have a new first assistant cashier."

Then he slowly wet his lips. Those lips seemed utterly bloodless. His entire face seemed bloodless, for that matter; and one somehow suspected that his whole body was, too. A friend had once laughingly remarked that his blood had all been absorbed by the firm for which he had worked the last 35 years. That friend never guessed how near he had come to the truth.

A light flamed up in the girl's eyes. Jones saw it and forestalled what he knew she was about to say.

"No, Gertie, I don't mean that," he said. Quigley wouldn't have me let out because you refused to marry him. He isn't that kind. I'm sure he would want you to come to him absolutely of your own accord or not at all."

"Then—what do you mean?"

Jones raised a shaky right hand to his chin. That hand did not shake merely because of any momentary excitement. It had started shaking 15 years before, and it had grown more and more shaky every year since.

"Gertie," he said quietly, "I am 66 years old. Now, the first assistant in a bank is required to do a great deal of work. He is required to do all of his own work, part of the work of those below him and most of the work of those above him. To do all this and to do it well is a task that is difficult of performance for even a young man. For a man of my age it is absolutely impossible of performance. So, you see—"

"But surely, father, they won't forget that you've slaved for the bank half of your life; that you've—"

"My dear," Jones smiled, "there is not much sentiment in any business. There cannot be. And there is probably less sentiment in the banking business than in any other. When a first assistant remains a first assistant until he is no longer able to do all the work that is given him, he is practically always replaced by a younger man. This is not right, possibly, but it is inevitable, and no one is to be censured for it. The life—or the health, at least—of the bank requires that it be done."

"Have you any reason for thinking that they intend to let you out just now?"

"Yes. Sanders, who is under me, is a son-in-law of Lakers, the president of the board of directors. It has come to me that Sanders has been telling about that he expects to be at my desk by the middle of next week. This means, of course, that Lakers will try to have me let out at the next meeting of the board—and the next meeting is tomorrow morning."

A frown settled on Gertie's face.

"I know what's bothering you," said Jones. "You're wondering where Quigley comes in. I'll tell you. No one is ever let out without the vote of the board being unanimous—no one above the position of clerk, that is. Now, Lakers is president of the board and a man of much influence, and few of the directors would care to hold out against him. Quigley is one that might. He would be certain to do so if he knew that I was to be his father-in-law. Do you see?"

Nobody but Jones himself could ever realize what it was costing him to talk like this to Gertie. But he could not help it. When a little child, Gertie had turned those clear gray eyes upon him and asked him the truth about Santa Claus, and he had told it to her, and never since had he been able to tell her anything but the truth. He felt now that as long as the facts had to

come out it was best to get them out as quickly as possible.

For several moments Gertie silently studied the carpet; then she sullenly looked up with a bright smile.

"I see, father," she said; "and I'll marry Mr. Quigley, of course. That's a little enough thing to do for a father who's done so much for me."

"You'll marry him if you love him, and not otherwise," he said decisively. "I haven't told you this to influence you. I've told it to you because I've never been able to lie to you. If I thought you had married a man for my sake whom you did not love, I could not live." And the manner in which he said this last would have convinced any jury in the world that he was telling the truth.

Just then, the maid came into the room, a tray in her hand. Gertie took up the card on the tray and glanced at it.

"It's Tommy Travis," she said, looking up—and Jones saw a little path of red come into the cheek that was turned toward him. "Tell him we'll be right in, Mary."

A moment later they went into the parlor to greet the visitor. Travis was tall, tanned, and 22; a college athlete by his looks, but actually a book-keeper. He came of a very aristocratic, very highly respected, very poor family. Eugenically, he was an ideal son-in-law for anyone; financially, he was not.

Jones did not stay long in the parlor, but quickly took himself off to his club. He did not stay long at the club, for he found cards, companions and billiards all equally depressing. Leaving the club, he walked slowly up the street, not knowing or caring where he was going. And presently he found himself in front of the Beardstown National Bank.

He stood there on the sidewalk a moment, gazing at the heavy plate-glass windows. An automobile whirled around the corner, and its headlight fell full upon the window just before him, lighting up plainly the interior of the bank. Jones caught a glimpse of his own desk; and then, giving way to an odd fancy, he walked around to the rear entrance and rapped sharply three times. After a moment the night watchman opened the door. He let Jones in without question; it was not unusual for Jones to come back to his office at night. Few first assistants can do all the work they are required to do in their regular working hours.

Straight to his desk went Jones. There, still guided merely by fancy, he got up on his high stool and sat looking out through his window, just as he did when a line of people stood there.

He remembered the first time he had seen the inside of the bank. Then he had stood in that line of people, waiting to have his first salary check cashed. What a wonderful thing that bit of paper had seemed! In imagination he pictured his life from that day on. Now he was standing tremblingly before Major Black, then president of the bank, asking for a position. Now he was working as a clerk—working furiously that he might gain notice and advancement. Now he was again standing before Major Black, blushing at the other's words of commendation and hearing that he was to be made an assistant teller. Now he was on the bank steps, facing a surging, sullen mob of men and women, pleading with them, begging them not to bring ruin on themselves and the bank by demanding their deposits. At first it was like trying to beat down a fortress with pebbles, and his words brought forth only sneers and cat-calls. Gradually, though, the sneers disappeared and the cat-calls grew less frequent. His enthusiasm swelled. He talked on furiously and desperately. Presently a few began to turn shamefacedly away, and the rest, sheep-like, began to follow. Now Major Black was sobbing out his thankfulness; telling him that he had saved the bank, and that the bank would know how to reward him. Now he was sitting at the first assistant cashier's window for the first time. How bright the world had seemed that morning! There had not been a sign of a cloud in the sky. He was to be

married in a week to the most wonderful girl in the world, and the cashier's desk, with its salary of \$5000 a year, had seemed but a step away. Just a step away—yet 25 years were to bring it not one inch closer! It might have been different in Major Black had lived. But one morning the Major's heart had gone back on him and he had died without having time to even make a will. And directly thereafter things began to break badly for Jones.

Black's death had left room for a step up all along the line. What actually happened was that everybody stepped up except Jones, the second assistant being pushed over his head to the cashier's desk. Again Jones lived over the disappointment he had felt then.

One day, some three months later, a messenger boy had come into the bank with word that he was wanted at home at once. When he had arrived there Dr. Anson had opened the door for him. He remembered how grave the expression on the physician's face had been.

"You'd better come right upstairs," the other had said. "She's been asking for you."

Upstairs he had found his wife lying in bed, a pink little object beside her. She had smiled weakly at him, closed her eyes, and sighed deeply; and then Dr. Anson had laid a hand across his shoulders.

"She's gone, Jones," he had said simply.

The next time someone had been shoved over Jones' head he hadn't cared so much. It hadn't seemed to matter, somehow. For a long time nothing had seemed to matter very much. When he had finally begun to take a new interest in life, he had realized that an advancement was out of the question. A fixture he was and a fixture he would stay. When the others moved, it was taken for granted and as a matter of course that he should stand still.

And now he was to be let out. This was the end, then. After 35 years of slavery, he was to be—

A clock struck off the hour of ten. Jones started and climbed down from his stool. He realized, all at once, that the place was very cold. He tried to speak a cheerful word to the watchman as he went out, but somehow what he said did not sound cheerful.

Reaching home, Jones went straight to his room. He had been there but a few minutes when he heard the door open. Glancing up, he saw Gertie coming towards him. Her cheeks were unnaturally flushed and her eyes were unnaturally bright. She sat down on the arm of his chair and put her arm around him, and then suddenly she buried her face in his vest front.

"P—father," she sobbed, "I—I c—couldn't. He—he asked me to—marry him, and I c—couldn't refuse h—him. He only gets s—seventy-five dollars a month, b—but I—I l—love him."

"Why, what in the world!" exclaimed Jones, raising her face.

"Oh, I—I know I'm ungrateful and—and s—selfish, b—but when T—Tommy asked me I c—couldn't say no. I—I j—just c—couldn't. I—"

Suddenly Jones saw light. He saw what she had done and why she was crying about it, and he saw, too, what his course must be. He forced a smile to his face.

"Well, Gertie, what are you crying about?" he asked. "You're not sorry you accepted him already, are you?"

Gertie brightened a little behind her tears.

"But—but Mr. Quigley won't—"

"Oh, bother Quigley!" Jones exclaimed lightly—he made it come lightly. "I wouldn't think of allowing you to marry him unless you loved him, and you know it. Anyway, what if I am let out of the Beardstown National? I can get—" He paused a moment and swallowed. He had meant to say that he could get plenty of other positions, but those clear gray eyes would not let him. "There's other banks in town," he finished. "I guess there's no danger of me starving to death. I was unstrung when I walked to you this evening, and things seemed worse than they were. Now, brighten up, my dear, and tell me more about Tommy."

An hour later Gertie, reassured and happy, left the room. As the door closed after her, Jones relaxed in his chair and sighed deeply. Just then he felt a very, very old man.

When Quigley called early the next

morning to take Gertie auto riding, he received her answer to the question he had asked her two days before.

At 11 the next morning, a boy brought Jones word that the president of the board wanted to see him. Jones had been expecting that. He calmly put everything in perfect order, hung up a "Please call at next window" sign, got down from his stool, took a last look at his desk and window, sighed slightly, and then went to Lakers' office.

Lakers glanced up as he entered. "Sit down, Jones," he said.

Jones sat down. Lakers thoughtfully rubbed his chin for a moment.

"Jones," he said, "do you realize that you are getting to be a pretty old man?"

Jones nodded. He couldn't trust himself to speak just then.

"Yes, you must be somewhere around 65," the other went on. "A man that old can't do the work a first assistant cashier must do, Jones. It's a physical impossibility. The first assistant is the pack-mule of a bank, and everybody takes a turn at riding on him. I've thought for a long time that we ought to have a younger man as our pack-mule, and I brought the matter up before the other directors at the meeting this morning. They all agreed with me, and we decided to make young Sanders first assistant."

Lakers paused and coughed. Jones glanced at the window at his right and saw that a shadow had fallen across it. Evidently a cloud had passed before the sun. The words of a song he had known as a child came back to him, "Somewhere behind the clouds the sun is shining." He smiled grimly to himself and wondered if somewhere behind the clouds his sun could be shining.

"Yes, Jones," Lakers went on, "we decided that you'd been our pack-mule long enough. A man who has served his firm as long and as faithfully as you have deserves a better reward than that. Now, Winston hasn't been well for a long time, and his physicians fear that his lungs are affected. He's bought a place out in Arizona, and he is going out there next week. We decided at the meeting that no one was better fitted or more entitled to fill his place than you. So I take pleasure in informing you, Jones, that from tomorrow on your position will be that of head cashier."

When Jones looked again at that window he saw that the cloud had gone by and that the sunlight was streaming in brightly.

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