

ALICE ADAMS

by BOOTH TARKINGTON

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"W" HY, yes," she said, briskly. "You don't realize what a little bit of a thing all this is to him. It's been a long, long while since the last time you even mentioned glue to him, and he's probably forgotten everything about it."

"You're off your base; it isn't like him to forget things," Adams returned peevishly. "He may seem to forget 'em, but he don't."

"But he's not thinking about this, or you'd have heard from him before now."

Her husband shook his head. "Ah, that's just it," he said. "Why haven't I heard from him?"

"It's all your morbidness, Virgil. Look at Walter; if Mr. Lamb held this up against you, would he still let Walter stay there? Wouldn't he have discharged Walter if he felt angry with you?"

"That dang boy!" Adams said. "If he wanted to come with me now, I wouldn't hardly let him. What do you suppose makes him so bull-headed?"

"But hasn't he a right to choose for himself?" she asked. "I suppose he feels he ought to stick to what he thinks is sure pay. As soon as he sees that Mr. Lamb's not discharging him, means there's no hard feeling against you, Virgil?"

"Well, he better get a little sense in his head," Adams returned crossly. "He wanted me to pay him a \$300 bonus in advance, when anybody with a grain of common sense knows I need every penny I can lay my hands on."

"Never mind," she said. "He'll come around later and be glad of the chance."

"He'll have to beg for it then! I won't ask him again."

"Oh, Walter will come out all right; you needn't worry. And don't you see that Mr. Lamb's not discharging him, means there's no hard feeling against you, Virgil?"

"I can't make it out at all," he said, frowning. "The only thing I can think it means is that J. A. Lamb is so fair-minded—and of course he is one of the fair-mindedest men alive—I suppose that's the reason he hasn't fired Walter. He may know," Adams concluded, morosely—"he may know that's just another thing to make me feel all the meaner; keeping my boy there on a salary after I've done him an injury."

"Now, now!" she said, trying to comfort him. "You couldn't do anybody an injury to save your life, and everybody knows it."

"Well, anybody ought to know I wouldn't want to do an injury. But this world isn't built so we can do just what we want!" He paused, reflecting. "Of course there may be one explanation of why Walter's still there: J. A. may be hasn't noticed that he is there. There's so many I expect he hardly knows him by sight."

"Well, just do 'jult thinking about it," she urged him. "It only bothers you without doing any good. Don't you know that?"

"Don't I, though?" he laughed feebly. "I know it better'n anybody! How funny that is: when you know thinking about a thing only bothers you without helping anything at all, and yet you keep right on pestering yourself with it!"

"But why?" she said. "What's the use when you know you haven't done anything wrong, Virgil? You said yourself you were going to improve the process so much it would be different from the old one, and you'd really have a right to it."

Adams had persuaded himself of this when he yielded; he had found it necessary to persuade himself of it—though there was a part of him, of course, that remained unpersuaded; and this discomfiting part of him was what made his present trouble. "Yes, I know," he said. "That's true, but I can't quite seem to get away from the fact that the principle of the process is a good deal the same—well, it's more'n that; it's just about the same as the one he hired Campbell

and me to work out for him. Truth is, nobody could tell the difference, and I don't know as there is any difference except in these improvements I'm making. Of course, the improvements do give me pretty near a perfect right to it, as a person might say; and that's one of the things I thought of putting in my letter to him; but I was afraid he'd just think I was trying to make up excuses, so I left it out. I kind of worried all the time I was writing that letter, because if he thought I was just making up excuses, why, it might set him just so much more against me."

Ever since Mrs. Adams had found that she was to have her way, the depths of her eyes had been troubled by a continuous uneasiness; and, although she knew it was there, and sometimes veiled it by keeping the revealing eyes averted from her husband and children, she could not always cover it under that assumption of absent-mindedness. The uneasy look became vivid, and her voice was slightly tremulous now, as she said, "But what if he should be against you—although I don't believe he is, of course—you told me he couldn't do anything to you, Virgil."

"No," he said, slowly. "I can't see how he could do anything. It was just a secret, not a patent; the thing ain't patentable. I've tried to think what he could do—supposing he was to want to—but I can't figure out anything at all that would be any harm to me. There isn't any way in the world it could be made a question of law. Only thing he could do'd be to tell people his side of it, and set 'em against me. I been kind of waiting for that to happen, all along."

She looked somewhat relieved. "So did I expect it," she said. "I was dreading it most on Alice's account; it might have—well, young men are so easily influenced and all. But so far as the business is concerned, what if Mr. Lamb did talk? That wouldn't amount to much. It wouldn't affect the business; not to hurt. And, besides, he isn't even doing that."

"No; anyhow not yet, it seems." And Adams sighed again, wistfully. "But I would give a good deal to know what he thinks!"

Before his surrender he had always supposed that if he did such an unthinkable thing as to seize upon the glue process for himself, what he would feel must be an overpowering shame. But shame is the rarest thing in the world; what he felt was this unremitted curiosity about his old employer's thoughts. It was an obsession, yet he did not want to hear what Lamb "thought" from Lamb himself, for Adams had a second obsession, and this was his dread of meeting the old man face to face. Such an encounter could happen only by chance and unexpectedly; since Adams would have avoided any deliberate meeting, so long as his legs had strength to carry him, even if Lamb came to the house to see him. But people do meet unexpectedly; and when Adams had to be downtown he kept away from the "wholesale district." One day he did see Lamb, as the latter went by in his car, impassive, going home to lunch; and Adams, in his crowd at a corner, knew that the old man had not seen him. Nevertheless, in a street car, on the way back to his sheds, an hour later, he was still subject to little shivering seizures of horror.

He worked unceasingly, seeming to keep at it even in his sleep, for he always woke in the midst of a planning and estimating that must have been going on in his mind before consciousness of himself returned. Moreover, the work, thus urged, went rapidly, in spite of the high wages he had to pay his laborers for their short hours. "It eats money," he complained, and, in fact, by the time his vats and boilers were in place it had eaten almost all he could supply; but in addition to his equipment he now owned a stock of "raw material," raw indeed; and when operations should be a little further along he was confident his banker would be willing to "carry" him.

Six weeks from the day he had obtained his lease he began his making. The terrible smells came out of the sheds and went writhing like snakes all through that quarter of the town. A smiling man, strolling and breathing the air with satisfaction, would turn a corner and smile no more, but hurry. However, colored people had almost all the dwellings of this old section to themselves; and although even they were troubled, there was recompense for them. Being philosophic about what appeared to them as in the order of nature, they sought neither escape nor redress, and soon learned to bear what the wind brought them. They even made use of it to enrich those figures of speech with which the native impulses of colored people decorate their communications; they flavored metaphor, simile, and invective with it; and thus may be said to have enjoyed it. But the man who produced it took a hot bath as soon as he reached his home the evening of that first day when his manufacturing began. Then he put on fresh clothes; but after dinner he seemed to be haunted, and asked his wife if she "noticed anything."

She laughed and inquired what he meant.

"Seems to me as if that glue-works smell hadn't quit hanging to me," he explained. "Don't you notice it?"

"No! What an idea!"

He laughed, too, but uneasily; and told her he was sure "the dang glue smell" was somehow sticking to him. Later, he went outdoors and walked up and down the small yard in the dusk; but now and then he stood still, with his head lifted, and sniffed the air suspiciously. "Can you smell it?" he called to Alice, who sat upon the veranda, prettily dressed and waiting in a reverie.

"Smell what, papa?"

"That dang glue works."

"She did the same thing her mother had done," laughed, and said, "No! How foolish! Why, papa, it's over two miles from here!"

"You don't get it at all?" he insisted.

"The idea! The air is lovely tonight, papa."

The air did not seem lovely to him, for he was positive that he detected the taint. He wondered how far it carried, and if J. A. Lamb would smell

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with more than the smell," his foreman remarked one morning.

"How's that?" Adams inquired.

"That great big, enormous ole dead butterine factory across the street from our lot," the man said. "Nothin' like settin' an example to bring real estate to life. That place is full o' carpenter's startin' in to make a regular buildin' of it again. Guess you ought to have the credit of it, be-

cause you was the first man in ten years to see any possibilities in this neighborhood."

Adams was pleased, and, going out to see for himself, heard a great hammering and sawing from within the building; while carpenters were just merging gingerly upon the dangerous roof. He walked out over the dried mud of his deep lot, crossed the street, and spoke genially to a work-

man who was removing the broken glass of a window on the ground floor.

"Here! What's all this howdy-do over here?"

"Goin' to fix her all up, I guess," the workman said. "Big job it is, too."

"Sh! think it would be."

"Yes, sir; a pretty big job—a pretty big job. Got men at it on all four

floors and on the roof. They're doin' it right."

"Who's doing it?"

"Lord! I don't know. Some o' these here big manufacturing corporations, I guess."

"Is it going to be?"

"They tell me," the workman answered—"they tell me she's goin' to be a butterine factory again. Anyways, I hope she won't be anything

to smell like that glue works you got over there—not while I'm workin' around her, anyways!"

"That smell's all right," Adams said. "You soon get used to it."

"You do?" The man appeared incredulous. "Listen! I was over in France; it's a good thing them Dutchmen never thought of it; we'd of had to quit!"

(To Be Continued.)