

The Autocrat of the Swivel Chair

The Right Hand and the Left Hand of Mr. Peter R. Rutherford

By ELLA MIDDLETON TYBOUT

THE chair itself had an opulent and consequential air. It was far more obtrusive than the large mahogany desk that occupied the centre of the room and before which it was placed. Indeed, it seemed that the desk was merely an adjunct of the chair, so thoroughly had the latter become imbued with the personality of the man who sat in it every day.

Other chairs there were, of course. Some soft and luxurious, for favoured visitors; others, for unwelcome supplicants, tightly upholstered in red leather and presenting slippery surfaces that made the bodies of the occupants appear as ill at ease as their minds. There was also another, humbly retreating behind the desk in a manner befitting a paid dependent. This was the stenographer's chair, and it seemed to shrink from its large and prosperous neighbour in much the same manner the stenographer herself shrank from the man who owned them all.

For he did own them, body and soul, and they knew and resented it accordingly.

The Autocrat was aware he employed a certain number of clerks; he used them until they were worn-out, then replaced them by others. They, in turn, knew they were cogs in the wheels of a great corporation and necessary for its proper manipulation, but the knowledge brought them no personal benefit.

The junior bookkeeper used to sit upon his high stool and calculate how well he could live if he had one-eighth of one per cent. of the annual profits of the corporation, until, after a while, he decided to become a part of the corporation itself. It was an easy transition from junior bookkeeper to junior partner, and he made it at one fell swoop.

Or he would imagine himself rushing between the Autocrat and a would-be assassin and modestly disclaiming the ensuing reward. He went so far sometimes as to fill in cheques for large sums payable to himself and signed by Peter R. Rutherford, until the latter gentleman himself would have hesitated to deny the signature.

"My boy"—he could even hear the tremor of the Autocrat's voice—"you have saved my life. Allow me to offer you this slight token of my gratitude."

Meanwhile, his books refused to balance, and gradually each day he lived a little more in excess of his salary.

"Hang it all," he would protest, "a man must live like a gentleman; what can you expect on fifteen dollars per?"

And fifteen dollars it remained, for advancement was earned only by assiduous application, and, though the junior bookkeeper's manners were impeccable, application was not his strong point.

The stenographer liked him. He would open the door or pick up a paper for her with as much alacrity as though they were in a parlour, and, being a woman as well as the motive power of a machine, those things helped to soften existence.

One day, after filling in a cheque for a small amount, he cashed it, instead of tearing it apart as usual. It was all ridiculously easy and helped to tide over an emergency. When the next emergency arose, moreover, the cheque he cashed was much larger.

"For," he argued, "one might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, and, anyhow, he'll never know the difference."

But the Autocrat had formed the habit of comparing returned cheques with the stubs in his book. Consequently, one morning, the junior bookkeeper's stool was empty, and his ill-kept ledger closed.

"But," remarked the clerk just above

him, when the first flurry of excitement had subsided, "how did Arnold know just when to make himself scarce? Who warned him not to show up here to-day? That's what I want to know."

His eyes questioned the stenographer, but she shook her head.

"I didn't know about it," she said; "the letter to the bank was only written this morning."

"Otherwise, you would have told him, eh, Miss Emory?"

"Yes," she returned, "I'd have given him a chance. He was always nice to me."

She placed a sheet of paper in her machine, and struck the keys mechanically.

"I'm glad he got away—very, very glad," she said. "But he has ruined his life, of course—nothing can alter that. Why did he do it, Mr. Carter?"

Mr. Carter, who always saved a third of his earnings, smiled the smile of conscious rectitude.

"Dabbling in stocks, theatres, suppers and—things you don't understand, Miss Emory. Oh, he's ruined his life, all right! Old Peter R. won't rest easy till the law grips him good and hard. And serve him right, too; a man should live within his income."

Thus spoke Mr. Carter, whose books always balanced to a cent, and whose income was not subject to emergency calls.

Meanwhile, the Autocrat looked over his morning's mail, a task he never trusted to his secretary. Before him lay the usual pile of terse, typewritten communications, and in his hand he held a sheet of paper closely covered with the fine, delicate handwriting belonging to the old school. Perhaps, he found the shaded, sloping capitals and long S's of the old-fashioned chirography hard to decipher, for he scowled as he read, and swore audibly as he returned it to its envelope and put it in his pocket.

Late that afternoon he drew it forth and dictated a reply:

My dear Madam:

Referring to your letter of the 8th instant in regard to your son, Richard Arnold, lately employed by me.

I regret to inform you that I am unable to comply with your request not to institute legal proceedings in the matter of the forged cheques. In my opinion, to condone a felony is to put a premium upon dishonesty and encourage vice. The young man deliberately chose to commit the crime and must endure the penalty.

I beg to assure you that further appeal in the premises will be useless. The law must take its course.

I am, my dear Madam,

Yours very truly,

Peter R. Rutherford.

The Autocrat swung his swivel-chair around, and faced his desk.

"That's all, Miss Emory. There's no hurry; it can wait till to-morrow."

The clerks had gone when Miss Emory returned to the outer room, and as she paused at her own desk she glanced toward the corner once occupied by the junior bookkeeper. Was it imagination that caused her to see a figure in a well-known grey coat upon the high stool? She rubbed her eyes and went closer; it was Arnold himself. His arms were crossed upon the desk and his head was bowed on them in a characteristically picturesque abandon of misery.

Miss Emory glanced fearfully at the room she had just quitted, as she advanced and touched his shoulder.

"Mr. Arnold!" she spoke in a whisper—"is this prudent?"

The boy raised his head in response. Youth had deserted him during the night,

and he looked at her out of hollow, despairing eyes.

"Hush!" she said, and immediately supplemented the warning by a question:

"What are you doing here?"

"I don't know." He spoke dully and without intelligence.

"You don't know?"

"I think I came for something in my desk, and"—he paused uncertainly—"and—well, to see you. It was awfully good in you to send that telegram; I don't know how to thank you."

"I sent no telegram."

He drew a crumpled bit of yellow paper from his pocket and stared at it incredulously.

"Then, who—"

"I don't know"—Miss Emory's voice was rather breathless—"but you mustn't stay here. Mr. Rutherford is in his office."

"My mother wrote to him," Arnold spoke with an effort; "she thinks, perhaps, he won't prosecute if we promise to make good."

"Oh, but he will. He has just written to her—a cruel letter. You must go at once."

The gleam of hope that had sprung to his eyes died away as he got off the stool.

"I'm going."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

The girl came a step closer.

"I'm sorry I didn't send the telegram," she said. "I would have liked to be the one to help you, Mr. Arnold."

A movement in the inner room caused her to pause.

"Oh, go—go!" she exclaimed. "I'll stay here and stop him with some question if he comes out. But be quick."

He disappeared through the door leading to the street, and Miss Emory noticed the droop of his shoulders and heaviness of his step. She looked toward the inner room, and thought of the man in the swivel-chair who held the boy's destiny in the hollow of his hand. A man, hard, implacable, and relentless in his demand for the pound of flesh. His stenographer knew him well.

"A few paltry dollars," she murmured; "what are they to him?"

Then suddenly the girl rebelled against the irony of Fate, and her heart was filled with the bitter helplessness that sometimes overwhelms those who toil.

"Oh," she cried aloud, "it isn't fair—it isn't fair that he should have so much and we so little."

The Autocrat stepped forth from his motor at the door of his club, and told the chauffeur not to wait. He watched the machine disappear around the corner, then hailed a passing hansom and gave an address.

The winter's day was closing in and the street lamps gleamed through the early dusk as the cab rattled over cobblestones and turned many corners. Little by little he left the haunts of the wealthy and penetrated into the region where prosperity has perhaps begun to dawn, but life is still strenuous. Another

turn or two and he reached a waste of genteel poverty where the very cleanliness of front steps and windows seemed to protest mutely against the price of soap.

Before the six-story apartment in the centre of the block the cab stopped. The last apartment on the top floor consisted of three rooms; a kitchen, a bedroom, and an indefinite room where a couch against the wall suggested the idea that at night its shabby cover was removed and it stood confessed a bed.

On the wall, strangely incongruous, hung portraits of a richly-dressed man and woman, who seemed contemptuous of their surroundings, even as the woman by the window was oblivious to them. She was prematurely aged and careworn, but had once been of the Dresden china type, and recalled rose leaves and lavender, in spite of the fact that, like everything the room contained, she was worn and faded. Her delicate, blue-veined hands were folded in her lap, and she gazed with unseeing eyes out into the forest of chimneys stretching into the horizon. She was so absorbed, indeed, that a knock was twice repeated before she heard it, and her eyes were filled with fear when she responded.

The Autocrat entered uninvited, and closed the door.

"Your bell is out of order," he remarked, rather as though it were a personal affront.

She did not reply, but stood tense and upright, waiting until he should disclose his errand.

"It is Peter Rutherford," he said.

"I thought so," she replied, "but I was not sure. Won't you sit down?"

He complied, with caution, for he was a large man and the chair creaked a warning. She lapsed into silence, and again he took the initiative.

"I got your letter."

"And you came instead of writing? That was very kind."

"I have written also; you will get the letter to-morrow afternoon."

"And it says?"

"That I can do nothing. The law must take its course."

Her face went a shade paler, and there was an involuntary flutter of her hand to her breast, but her voice did not tremble as she spoke.

"Then I will detain you no longer. I am sorry to have troubled you."

He knew himself dismissed, but continued his calm survey of the room and its contents. His eyes travelled from floor to ceiling, and from wall to wall, appreciating the sordid details and aware of each pitiful makeshift.

"So it is you," he said at last—"you—Sallie Dangerfield."

"Mrs. Arnold," she corrected; "only my friends need remember Sallie Dangerfield."

"You have many friends, of course?"

"I had at one time; they grow fewer every day."

The Autocrat moved uneasily and the chair instantly announced his indiscretion. He glanced toward the bedroom, and also into the little kitchen, whose door stood hospitably open.

"Where is he?"

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