

The Exceeding Wickedness of Ezra.

BY FORREST CRISSEY.

Ezra's eyes bulged with ingenuous greed as he watched the shower of red cinnamon drops that pattered into the scoop of the sugar scales of the counter of the grocery. Fifteen cents' worth! And all of one kind, and at one time! What delicious prodigality!

His heart bounded with pride as the old storekeeper pushed up his brass-rimmed spectacles in astonishment until they spanned his wrinkled forehead, and inquired:

"What's that, bub? Fifteen cents' worth? Does yer pa know you're goin' t' spend that much fer candy?"

But the glow of vanity that flushed the youngster's tense face faded before Uncle John clapped the tin cover over the big mouth of the candy jar and replaced it on the shelf.

"I guess that red-headed city cousin must be up from Cincinnati t' spend the summer, eh? Didn't think any boys that blonged round here had got s' free with money 's all that! They say his pa's rich enough to buy out th' town an' throw it in th' creek."

Instantly the swelling importance with which Ezra had entered the store—hoping that some of the village boys would be present to witness his prodigal expenditure—subsided. His passing glory had been rudely given to another. Bitterness and resentment gripped hard at his throat, and the flush of shame chased the glow of pride in his burning cheeks. Meekly he laid the dime and the five-cent piece upon the counter and took up the bag of cinnamon and walked slowly out. For the first time the mingled odors of prunes, smoked herring, muscovado sugar—the grocery-store smell—failed to chain and tantalize his sniffing nostrils. He was in rebellion against the established order of things. His heart was heavy with self-pity, embittered with the gall of its first taste of worldly pessimism. For a moment he loitered on the platform before the store and pushed his toe into the pitch which sizzled up from a knot in the pine plank on which he stood. He had been cheated of a distinction in the eyes of the village boys, suspected of spending money not his own, and twitted of being a fetch-and-carry for his city cousin. And that by the keeper of the candy jars!

A new emotion stirred his blood as he plodded past the solemn peaked church—a fierce vindictive passion of resentment. He knew it was a wicked feeling—but he didn't care! He was glad of it! What if he did hate the red-headed city cousin, who brushed his hair so smooth, put on clean clothes every morning and could play the piano? Ezra leaned over the low, whittled railing that spanned the mill-race, and thought how he would like to throw the lordly Howard Richard Taylor down where the "pumpkin seeds" and "shiners" were flashing their gleaming sides in the deep water.

Swiftly the burden of his wrongs and injuries gathered volume as he scuffed along the cindered path in front of the blacksmith shop, where a sizzling wagon tire sent up a cloud of steam from the tub in which it was dipped and turned. He did not pause to scamper into the mill and scoop from the brimming hopper a handful of plump wheat. A world of injustice pressed too heavy upon him. He could even see the city cousin, who was waiting for his return in the shade of the swing trees, doling out, with studied exactness, a stingy pinch of the cinnamon—listening to hear the humble "thank you" that was expected to follow upon his benefactions! Why had this city boy dimes to spend where he himself had only coppers? Why should he trot on the errands of this officious interloper who took the best bed, the biggest apples, the ripest blackberries and the lion's share of "bumble-bee" honey from the nest which he had not the courage to break up at the risk of stings and swollen cheeks? But the crowning contempt which Ezra held against this opulent city cousin was that of shameless terror at the sight of a water snake and a retreat into bed because of a stone bruise. Even his goodness became hateful in the meditations of Ezra. The lofty superiority with which he had refused to smoke the dried lily stems gathered from the South Pond, the treachery with which the hiding-place of yellow-covered dime novels had been betrayed, and the boastful tales of the family carriage, of visits to the Zoo, and of having stopped at a hotel where board was five dollars a day—all these were reviewed in the rancorous count which the bearer of the cinnamon drops cast up against the waiting cousin.

The candy! He had reached the maples in front of the village school when his thoughts returned to the starting point of his troubles. How easy it would be to drop the bulging paper bag upon the hard-packed gravel of the path. And what if it did break? He could eat those which spilled out. They would be his share! Some of them would be his, anyway, when he reached home. Why not let chance settle his portion of them in-

stead of having them counted out on the kitchen table by "Howard Richard Taylor—Big headed, Red-headed, Jail-er!" One instant he hesitated. Then he opened the bag, sniffed its spicy odors—and it fell from his guilty hands to the ground. A pang of conscience shot him through as he scraped up the heap of red, sticky disks that poured from the split in the side of the bag. Slowly, one by one, he picked the remaining ones from the gravel path and wiped his stained and grimy hands upon the side of his manish "pants."

Yes—he would tell them that he dropped the bag. And it would be true, too! Right in front of the second maple, between that and "third base"—they could go back and see for themselves if they didn't believe him. There were three of the cinnamon still left in the path. They would know he had told the truth when they saw those! How small the bag looked now as he crumpled it in both his hands. If only so many hadn't spilled out—but anyway he had made it up that those were to be his share, and he never went back on what he had made up with himself.

Wretchedly, with sullen, dogged loiterings he made his way homeward. Every chippy-bird that chirped from the dusty roadbed, every chipmunk that raced his striped, saucy self along the top rail, accused him.

At the home bars he halted in a panic of terror. He could face the cousin—but the quiet, searching eyes of his mother! Almost he decided to flee to the West Woods. He would become a hermit and live in the old sugar camp! But, before he could put his flaring resolution into action, the city cousin, from the shade of the swing trees, called out:

"Ezra, did you remember the candy?"

Pale, big-eyed, with hangdog countenance Ezra pushed silently past his questioner into the kitchen, placed the bag on the table and slunk down upon the door-step.

"What is the matter, Ezra?" came the quiet, anxious question as his mother looked at his white cheeks. There was no escape from that voice, those eyes!

"I dropped it," he blurted; "in front of the schoolhouse—by the maple—the second one, close by third base. I scraped up some—you can look for yourself—he can if he wants to!"

"Come into the bedroom!" commanded the quiet voice.

"Fifteen cents' worth!" sneered Howard Richard Taylor, holding up the crumpled bag. "Dropped it! You look it!"

Ezra turned his head about as he was led forward into the iquisitorial bedroom, and screwed his face into a grimace.

When he emerged he was led in front of the waiting accuser. His breast shook and heaved, and tears traced their muddy courses down his dust-worn cheeks.

"Ezra has been exceedingly wicked, Howard," said the maternal voice. "He has told a lie. He dropped the bag on purpose so he could take the candy. He is very sorry, and begs your forgiveness!"

Howard Richard Taylor drew a long breath—a deliberate, judicial inspiration. He was about to dispense pardon.

"Yes, auntie, I forgive him. I'm sorry he's getting wild, but I shall try to exert a good influence over him."

"Now, go out to the swing, Ezra," said the mother of the penitent, "and meditate on what I told you in the bedroom. Remember, you are not to get out, or play or talk or whistle—not until I call supper."

He was scuffing his calloused feet upon the bare-worn ground beneath the swing, letting "old cat die," guessing what time it was, and remembering the story of Ananias which his mother had read to him—wondering if she would tell his Sunday-school teacher, or if Howard Richard Taylor would tattle to the boys—when he heard the voice of the city cousin sweetly asking:

"Auntie, would you mind letting Ezra sit in the bedroom or on the grass? Don't you think he would think better and be more penitent there than in the swing?"

"No," was the quick answer; "he will stay where I told him."

Ezra could hear his father dipping the wash-basin in the rain-barrel at the back of the woodshed—the sign of approaching supper—when Howard Richard seated himself at the foot of the swing tree and solemnly remarked:

"I think liars and thieves are awful sinners. The Bible says so. My mother would be heart-broken if she had a son that did such things. I guess she'd be so humiliated that she'd want to give up her church and social connections. I forgive you, Ezra—but this ought to be a dreadful lesson to you. It should make you very humble—"

The swing darted backward and its occupant fell upon the orator with a swiftness that sent a bluejay squawking in alarm from the tip of the neighboring balsam. Dust, wails and sturdy strokes marked the progress of the combat. The penitent had risen in revolt. In the doorway of the kitchen stood the tall form of Ezra's father, a peculiar light in his eye. His arm formed a bar against which the excited mother struggled in vain, calling: "Ezra! Oh, Ezra!"

When the dust cleared away the triumphant penitent was seen sitting astride the prostrate orator, and he was heard to inquire:

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"Nough? Goin't lemme 'lone an' qu't yer blowin' 'bout Cincinnati 'n' things?"

"Yes, Cousin Ezra," came the smothered reply.

"Then git up an' dust!"

"You can use my shot-gun all day to-morrow," humbly volunteered the vanquished Howard Richard Taylor.

MR. BOK ON THE AMERICAN FATHER.

He Thinks the Average Man of Family Gives too Little Time to His Children.

Is it right to the child that he sees and knows so little of his father? Is all this commercial strife worth the price of a child being almost a stranger to his own father? Men are sometimes surprised that their children go instinctively to their mothers, and so little to them. But aside from the natural instinct which draws every child to his mother, why should the fact cause any wonder? A child attaches himself to those who give him the most attention, to the one who joins him in his play. And if, as so many fathers do, a man places business first in his life all during the week, and buries himself in those modern curses, the Sunday newspapers, on the day when he is at home, what can he expect from his child? It is a case of the child not seeing the father during the week, and the father not seeing the child on Sunday. A man must be the wage earner and the family supporter. That is the duty laid out for him. But when that is accomplished is it worth his while to push on into the commercial maze at the expense of the sweetening that should come into the life of every man? In short, what profiteth it a man suppose he gain the whole world—and not know his own child?—Edward Bok, in the April Ladies' Home Journal.

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Address as above, enclosing a stamp. No attention will be given to those writing out of idle curiosity, therefore state that you really need a cure.

The Drift of Modern English.

A Washington resident, who is so proud of her home that she sometimes sins against the rubric of fashionable form by remaining in town the year round, was recently assailed by an ultra-conventional friend in ultra-modern language.

"I knew that you usually wintered here," she said, "but I was astonished to hear that you had summered here."

"I have not only wintered here and summered here," answered the recklessly unfashionable one, "but I will astonish you still further"—and the threat was borne out—"when I tell you that I always fall here, and I have sometimes sprung here."—Lippincott's Magazine for April.

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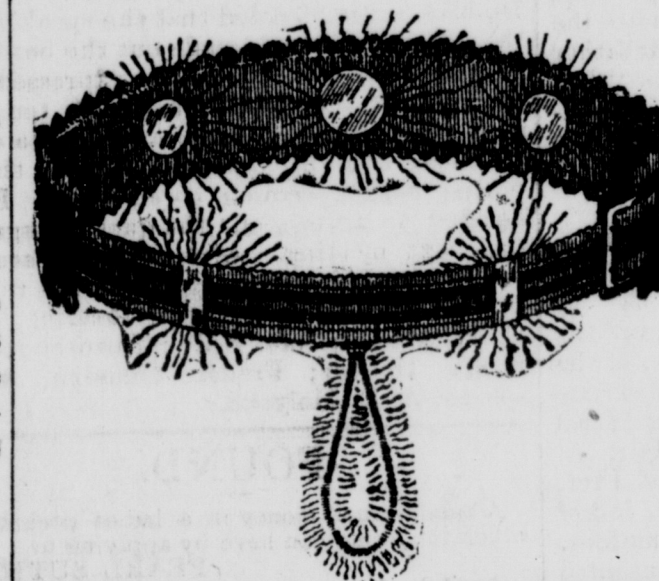
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