

Sunday Reading.

A NEGLECTED DUTY.

"I'm going to make out my application for promotion to the Junction this morning," remarked Ray Standard, emphatically. "I don't believe the railroad ever would promote one if he didn't ask for it."

"Probably not, Ray," answered Arthur, his brother, and senior by two years. "But on the other hand you might lose your position if you seem dissatisfied. I've been promoted twice, and I never once asked for an advance."

"That is the difference between your store, where the officers are all gentlemen, and the J. T. & W. Railroad, where you don't know who is in authority. Those who pay me my wages never come down to collect the monthly bills. If I could get up at the Junction in the main office I might get a chance to work up. But down here at this small station I'm not noticed, and nobody knows whether I do my work well or not."

"Do you believe that?" Arthur asked. Don't you think they know up at headquarters what agents do their duty thoroughly? I don't know, but I'll bet they have a record of you, and every other employee on the road."

"Well, my record is clean," Ray replied. "My reports have all been correct, and I have never made a mistake of a serious nature in my office."

"Then I should say that such a record will tell in your favor in time."

"In time? Yes, when I'm an old man. I've been here four years—ever since I left school—and I'm no nearer promotion than at the first."

Arthur shook his head. At the fork in the road they separated, and Arthur's last words to his brother were:

"Don't do anything hasty, Ray. Remember, we must support mother, and if you lose your position things will go hard this winter."

"Oh, they won't drop me," Ray answered, a little proudly. "They know that I'm valuable to them, and they won't get another agent here to do their work so well."

The two brothers worked about a mile apart—Arthur in a large factory below Jamesport, and Ray in the railroad station just outside of the village.

Four years before Mr. Stannard had died, leaving his wife and two children practically penniless. Both of them were at school at the time, preparing for college; but with praiseworthy zeal they gave up their cherished plans without a murmur, and secured employment to support their mother.

Arthur was doing well in the woolen factory, where he was liked and trusted, and Ray had always performed his duties satisfactorily as agent for the railroad at Jamesport. He was quick at figures and a good telegraph operator.

But as the months and years passed his ambition to secure a position in the main office at the Junction grew upon him, but seemed to be doomed to disappointment. His position was made more irritating because his brother had twice in the same time been promoted in the factory.

He felt particularly gloomy and dissatisfied this morning, as he left Arthur, and trudged on toward the railroad. He entered the small station, and proceeded slowly to perform the routine duties of his office.

Then, when the morning express had passed and the way bills had been made out, he sat down before his desk and began to write out his application for promotion.

"It's the only way I'll ever get advanced," he muttered to himself, as if to strengthen any wavering of his decision. I've waited four years for some recognition of my service from the company, and at this rate it will never come. I believe every one who succeeds in railroading has to push his way forward."

Satisfied with this argument, he proceeded to frame his thoughts, and to put them upon paper. He found, when he came to enumerate his good points, that he had done nothing extraordinary—only administered the affairs of his office intelligently, and without any serious mistakes.

Ray had fair gifts as a writer, and his petition was well worded. When finished he read it over to see if it sounded just right. He was right in the midst of it when his telegraph instrument began to click. He listened to its sounds, and read: "Hold the west-bound express at Jamesport until further orders. Track is torn up between Jamesport and the Junction. E. T. T."

Ray took a mental note of the message and glanced at his watch.

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"She won't be here inside of half an hour," he said.

Then once more he started to read his petition. After making a few corrections he laid it down on his desk with a satisfied smile.

"There, if that doesn't do the work I'm mistaken," he muttered in an undertone. "I don't think even Arthur could find fault with it."

It was only natural that the idea of securing promotion should stimulate the boy's imagination, and that he began to plan for the future. Tipped back in his comfortable chair he thought of the time when he might become superintendent of the division, and probably in time general passenger agent, and even president of the road. Then, with a big salary and a private car, he could be his own master and support his mother in the style she deserved.

A wave of compassion for other boys and poor station agents swept over him. He would make an innovation in the management of the road. He would visit every station at certain times and personally inspect the record of the agents. Then, where good services warranted it, he would make promotions, and not keep deserving employes in one place for a long time.

It was pleasant to think of the gratitude the men would feel toward him, and in his dreams he posed as a benefactor to the deserving poor on the road with considerable grace and condescension. It was an added satisfaction to know that he had worked up from the lowest position to the highest, and that he was familiar with all the discouragements and disappointments of the various employes.

In the midst of his dreams he heard the shriek of an engine, but it seemed more like the echo of a dream than a reality. It took some moments for Ray to bring himself back to practical thoughts.

Suddenly he dropped his feet from their perch on the desk with a bang, and jumped from his chair with the startled exclamation:

"The express is coming!"

It was indeed the whistle of the approaching express that had sounded so far away in his dreams, and now he could hear the roar and rumble of the train as it bore down upon him at the rate of fifty miles an hour.

In an instant the telegraphic order to hold the express at Jamesport flashed across Ray's mind. That order had not yet been countermanded, and the express was down upon him without any signals set to stop her.

The boy turned deathly pale as he sprang to his feet and rushed for the door. Just as he reached the platform of the station the express gave utterance to another shrill whistle and flashed by the small depot like a hurricane. In the strong suction of wind that followed in the wake of the flying train Ray lost his hat, but unmindful of that, he stood as if petrified by the awful catastrophe which his negligence had caused.

The express was rushing on to its doom, carrying with it probably several hundred people. Ray was helpless to avert the terrible calamity. The track was torn up

between the two stations, and it would do no good to telegraph on to the Junction. The harm was already done, and no earthly power could save the train.

Ray staggered into the office. Every particle of blood had left his face. He felt weak and helpless. Burying his face in his hands he gave vent to sobs that shook his frame. Before him was his petition for promotion. The sight of it brought a revulsion of feelings, and he took it up and tore it into shreds.

"If it hadn't been for that I would have attended to my duty," he muttered.

Then the cold perspiration broke out upon his forehead as he again realized the horror of the situation. He was a murderer a hundred times over; in all probability the train was already wrecked, and scores of mangled, bleeding corpses were crying to heaven against the perfidy of the man who had so suddenly launched them to their destruction.

"Oh, God, help me," the boy cried in his utter helplessness.

Under the strain it seemed as if he would lose his mind, and he rose from his seat and paced back and forth in the narrow office.

"I must do something," he said, finally. "I'll face it all and telegraph to the Junction for a wrecking train. I shall not try to excuse myself."

He seated himself at his desk again and seized the knob of the telegraph machine, but before he could call up the operator at the Junction a message for him came ticking over the wires;

"Release the express. Track all clear. E. T. T."

For an instant the boy could not comprehend the full import and meaning of this message to him. Then, as it dawned upon him, the revulsion of feeling was too much for his strength. He dropped back into his chair, and for an instant it seemed as if he lost consciousness.

When he recovered himself he walked unsteadily toward the door and opened it to take a full breath of fresh air. The world never seemed so beautiful to him as that moment. Every familiar object of the landscape impressed him as being dear and attractive. He was in love with his native village, and his small, insignificant office appeared in a new light. When he turned around and realized it all, he said aloud:

"Thank God it is not true; it is not true. That night Arthur asked Ray if he had forwarded his petition for promotion to headquarters.

"No," the boy replied, "I have thought it all over, and I feel content where I am. I won't make any request for a promotion."

Arthur looked queerly at his brother and wondered at the cause of his sudden change of opinion, but Ray did not divulge his secret until long after. One day there came word from the chief at the junction requesting Ray to appear for examination for promotion.

That night, when he was assured of his new place, he related to Arthur the terrible accident that his neglect had nearly caused to the express.

"I was so thankful when I found that it was not true," he concluded, "that I had no further desire for promotion. It made me satisfied with my position, and warned me that I could do more good in attending to my duty than in worrying for something higher. It was an experience and lesson, Arthur, that I can never forget."

And the boy shuddered at the mere recollection of his terrible mistake—a mistake which none but himself knew about, but which might have ruined him for life and precipitated two hundred lives into eternity!"

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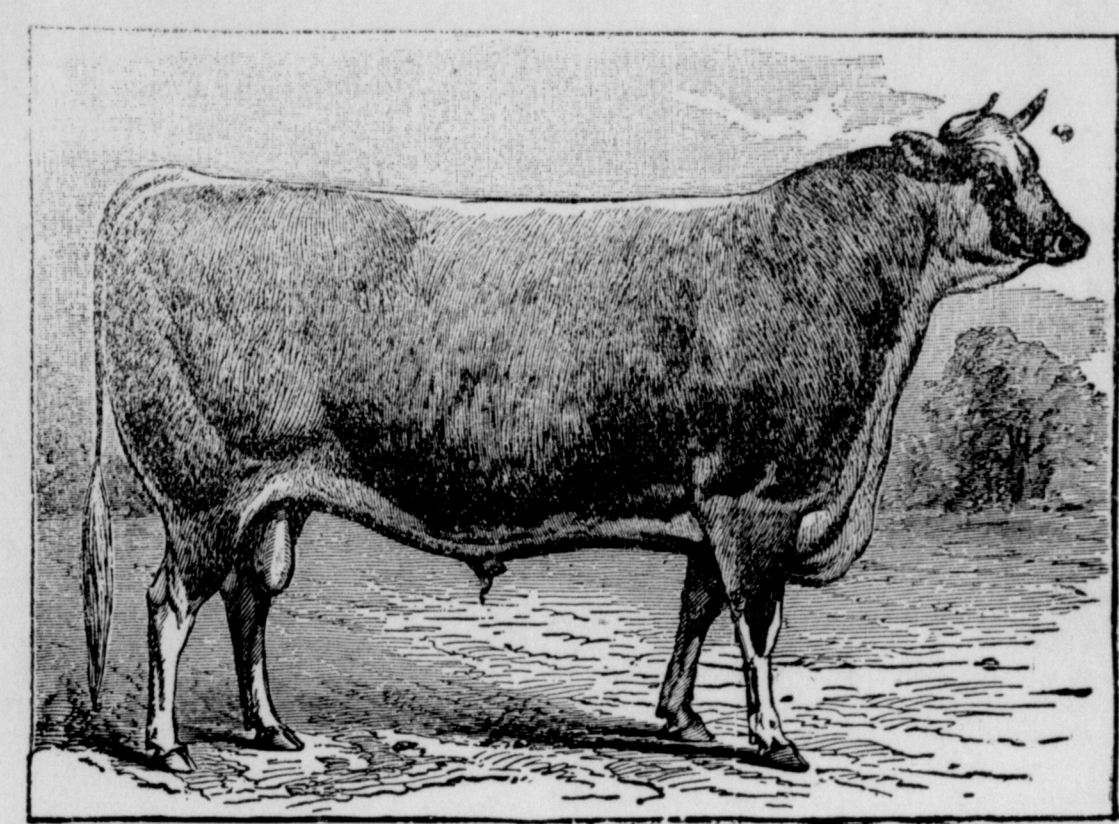
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