

A Practical Joke



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A PRACTICAL JOKE

A Story

By HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH

Towering seven stories into the air the Imperial Building rose from the almost deserted street and stood lowering and silent against the darkness of the night. It was close to eleven o'clock, and this section of the city, given over almost entirely to business, presented a strange contrast to its daylight self. Here and there a lighted window told of some unlucky worker toiling to make up arrears, or to discover and correct some elusive error. But for the most part the jagged line of tall buildings might have been frowning cliffs, remote from human habitation.

On the fifth floor of the Imperial Building two young men scowled over their ledgers, the two lighted windows, like luminous eyes staring from the blank face of the building. As the clock struck eleven, one of them threw down his pencil and turned to his companion.

"Did you hear that, Harry? I'm not going to stay here any longer if I never find that error. As it is, we won't be worth half-price tomorrow."

The other, so absorbed in his work that he had failed to notice the striking of the clock, looked up blankly, as if but half-comprehending his companion's words. Then as their meaning filtered into his preoccupied brain, he nodded.

"You're right, Hugh. It's time to shut up shop for tonight. You don't gain anything by working till you're unfitted for anything next day."

Hugh carried his books to the vault and stood stretching himself, while his more methodical companion put his desk in order. He had been at work almost continuously since eight o'clock that morning, and the realization that his drudgery was over for the time produced a curious reaction. Whistling a lively air he executed a jig, bringing down his heels with resounding thumps, which caused Harry to look at him with a smile.

"What a fellow you are," he said, as he piled up his books preparatory to putting them away. "No amount of hard work ever sobers you. I should think that you'd be too tired for that sort of thing. I am."

Hugh did not answer. A madcap idea had taken possession of him, and as his friend made his way to the vault, carrying the big ledgers, Hugh followed close behind. No sooner had Harry passed the heavy door with his burden than it slammed shut with a suggestive click. "Good night," called a mocking voice.

"Oh, bother. Hugh!" the prisoner replied sulkily. He turned with some difficulty, for the space in which he was confined was too narrow to admit of

much movement. "Let me out," he called. "It's too late for this kind of nonsense."

On the other side of the closed door Hugh grinned. He had a reputation to sustain as a practical joker, and he did not mean to lose it by giving in too easily. From the time when, as a little lad at home, he had put salt in the sugar-bowl at breakfast and enjoyed the wry faces the family made over the coffee, he had practised amusing himself at the expense of other people. Sometimes his victims laughed good-naturedly. Sometimes they lost their tempers and heaped abuses on him. Whereupon Hugh generally had something cutting to say about people who couldn't take a joke. He walked across the room to wash his hands, whistling as he went, and smiling to himself at the thought of Harry fuming behind the heavy door. Meanwhile the victim of Hugh's sense of humor compressed his lips and waited. He was well aware that protests and appeals on his part would only lengthen his term of imprisonment.

Presently he again heard footsteps. His tame acceptance of the situation had rendered the sport unexciting. "Want to get out?" said a teasing voice outside.

"Whenever you're good and ready," Harry replied with mock submissiveness.

"Don't be too humble, young fellow, or I may go off and leave you locked up for the night." But a clicking of the lock belied the threat. A minute passed, another; the tired prisoner frowned and wondered. Then a voice spoke, a voice so changed that for an instant he thought it that of a stranger.

"Harry!"

"Well, Hugh?"

"The combination won't work."

At first, against the evidence of the gasping terror of the tone, Harry believed this only a further development of Hugh's joke. "It won't do, my boy," he replied. "I'm too old a bird to be caught with that chaff. Hurry up and let me out."

"Harry, I'm not joking. I've been trying over and over to work this combination, and I can't. Something's wrong." His voice rose shrill and terrified. It was impossible to doubt his sincerity.

Strangely enough it was Harry who took it upon himself to be reassuring. "Brace up, old fellow," he called soothingly. "You're tired and nervous and that's all the trouble. Don't lose your head and the combination will be all right."

A minute passed, seemingly ten to the waiting prisoner. He reached up and turned on the electric light. The illumination flooding his cell helped to

steady his nerves, and he needed it. For outside a voice, breaking into a sob, called despairingly, "It's no use! I can't open it."

"Better get the janitor." Harry suggested, and he heard Hugh leap across the room in a frenzy of haste. All was still. The thought came to him that the narrow vault, with its heavy door and terra-cotta walls, was not unlike a tomb. He put this reflection aside resolutely, and began to steady his nerves with the multiplication table. "Thirteen times fifteen is—is. Thank God, here they come."

The rasping voice of Hooker, the janitor, brought him such relief that he almost felt himself free again. Hugh had lost his head, that was what was the matter. Hooker would have him out in a minute. He waited while the big drops of perspiration ran down his face and dripped from his finger-tips. Why were they so long about it? What ailed Hooker? Presently he heard the rasping voice give a sharp order.

"Call up the police department and be quick about it. There isn't any time to waste." And for a moment Harry lost his self-control and beat upon the door till his hands were bruised, swept away by a tidal wave of fear.

The police lieutenant who, accompanied by a couple of patrolmen, hastily answered the unusual summons, saw a white-faced youth crouching on the door in front of the closed vault. His eyes were staring, his hair wet with perspiration. The lieutenant looked at him hard, though he addressed Hooker.

"How big is this vault?"

"It's a small one." Hooker indicated its dimensions in pantomime, his face very grave.

"How long has the man been in there?"

Hooker caught Hugh by the shoulder and shook him. "Don't you hear? They want to know how long he's been locked up there."

"Since eleven." Hugh heard the odd, strained voice which sounded so unlike his own, give the answer. He saw the lieutenant glance at the clock. "There's no time for fooling," the latter muttered. "It's a case for the fire department."

Hugh hid his face in his hands. He sat crouching and silent while Hooker still struggled with the combination, and the others talked in low tones. Strangely enough, his thoughts were wandering from the tragedy of the present to the other practical jokes he had played in his time. He saw the face of old Mrs Wegg, whose dog he had captured and shaved, and sent home painted in black and white stripes like a zebra. He had laughed a thousand times over the look of consternation with which the old lady had regarded her transformed pet, but now the horror and the anguish of it wrung his heart. He remembered the children he had teased till they cried or flew

into fits of passion, according to their dispositions. Their little faces wet with tears, or defaced with scowls were before him in the long procession of those who had suffered that he might be amused. And last of all, this friend, locked in to die perhaps, a martyr to his perverted sense of humor. He flung himself against the door with a cry. "Harry, O Harry!"

"Yes Hugh." The voice that answered was faint. By a tremendous effort Hugh's victim had regained his self-control. He realized that his frantic beating against the walls of the cell only helped to exhaust the scant supply of air, as well as his own strength and was futile to aid his escape. He stood with his nails pressed into his bleeding palms and the thumping of his heart sounded clearly in the stillness. It seemed to him that his imprisonment had lasted for hours. He fancied that the morning had come and pictured the outer world flooded with sunshine. Would he ever see it again, that welcome sunshine, and fill his lungs with the invigorating air? Already his breathing was becoming labored. There were pains in his head and chest, whose meaning he understood only too well.

Dreamily he heard the tramping of feet. Loud voices gave directions he did not understand. Then a ringing blow struck the side of his prison, and with the sound hope thrilled through him. Some instinct quicker than reason told him that at last help was come.

As a matter of fact, the tools of the firemen, planned for emergencies quite as desperate as this, were not long in making an opening in the walls of the vault. When the aperture was a few inches square a voice spoke through, "You've got a light there?"

"Yes."

"If we hand you tools can you unscrew the combination?"

The rush of fresh air had revived him: the sight of the aperture telling of the effective help steadied his nerves. "Yes. I can do it," he said bravely.

A moment later a screwdriver was passed to him and Harry's eyes never fell on anything more beautiful than the commonplace tool and the hard, brown hand which proffered it. He set to work with a courage that made him feel quite like another person from the youth who a few minutes before had tried to hold his whirling thoughts in check and prepare himself for an inevitable fate.

He walked out of his prison just as the clock struck twelve. He reeled and would have fallen if Hooker had not caught him. "Sit down and rest," said that worthy man, his harsh voice softened almost to tenderness. "You've earned it after what you've been through."

Harry dropped into the chair some one pushed toward him. He tried to say that he would be all right in a moment, but in the completeness of his relaxation his voice failed him. He lay back white and limp, his hair wet

with perspiration falling on his pallid forehead, his lips colorless. Then he felt himself clasped in two strong arms. "O Harry," a voice sobbed, "forgive me."

Harry opened his eyes. If there had been any bitterness in his heart during that dreadful hour, it vanished at the sight of his friend's tear-stained face. "It's all right, old boy," he said, though still faintly. "It was only a joke."

Hugh broke into uncontrollable sobbing. Hooker blew his nose. The police lieutenant regarded the little group darkly.

"It is all right, young fellow," he said severely, "but it had a pretty close call to being all wrong. And if I were you, I'd steer clear of such jokes in the future." It was good advice, unquestionably, but if Hugh had heard it at eleven o'clock he would have laughed at it. Coming after that dreadful hour, its dragging minutes weighted with suspense and apprehension, he did not need the officer's counsel to induce him to forswear such practical jokes forever.—Young People.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

This story was originally published as a newspaper or magazine short story. This copy taken from *Christian Observer* (1840-1910); Oct 6, 1909; 97, 40; *American Periodicals* pg. 16

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

A cover has been created for this story.

[The end of *A Practical Joke* by Harriet Lummis Smith]