“A Retrieved Reformation” by O. Henry

A guard came to the prison shoe-shop, where Jimmy Valentine was

assiduously stitching uppers, and escorted him to the front office.

There the warden handed Jimmy his pardon, which had been signed that

morning by the governor. Jimmy took it in a tired kind of way. He had

served nearly ten months of a four year sentence. He had expected to

stay only about three months, at the longest. When a man with as many

friends on the outside as Jimmy Valentine had is received in the

"stir" it is hardly worth while to cut his hair.

"Now, Valentine," said the warden, "you'll go out in the morning.

Brace up, and make a man of yourself. You're not a bad fellow at

heart. Stop cracking safes, and live straight."

"Me?" said Jimmy, in surprise. "Why, I never cracked a safe in my

life."

"Oh, no," laughed the warden. "Of course not. Let's see, now. How was

it you happened to get sent up on that Springfield job? Was it because

you wouldn't prove an alibi for fear of compromising somebody in

extremely high-toned society? Or was it simply a case of a mean old

jury that had it in for you? It's always one or the other with you

innocent victims."

"Me?" said Jimmy, still blankly virtuous. "Why, warden, I never was in

Springfield in my life!"

"Take him back, Cronin!" said the warden, "and fix him up with

outgoing clothes. Unlock him at seven in the morning, and let him come

to the bull-pen. Better think over my advice, Valentine."

At a quarter past seven on the next morning Jimmy stood in the

warden's outer office. He had on a suit of the villainously fitting,

ready-made clothes and a pair of the stiff, squeaky shoes that the

state furnishes to its discharged compulsory guests.

The clerk handed him a railroad ticket and the five-dollar bill with

which the law expected him to rehabilitate himself into good

citizenship and prosperity. The warden gave him a cigar, and shook

hands. Valentine, 9762, was chronicled on the books, "Pardoned by

Governor," and Mr. James Valentine walked out into the sunshine.

Disregarding the song of the birds, the waving green trees, and the

smell of the flowers, Jimmy headed straight for a restaurant. There he

tasted the first sweet joys of liberty in the shape of a broiled

chicken and a bottle of white wine--followed by a cigar a grade better

than the one the warden had given him. From there he proceeded

leisurely to the depot. He tossed a quarter into the hat of a blind

man sitting by the door, and boarded his train. Three hours set him

down in a little town near the state line. He went to the cafe of one

Mike Dolan and shook hands with Mike, who was alone behind the bar.

"Sorry we couldn't make it sooner, Jimmy, me boy," said Mike. "But we

had that protest from Springfield to buck against, and the governor

nearly balked. Feeling all right?"

"Fine," said Jimmy. "Got my key?"

He got his key and went upstairs, unlocking the door of a room at the

rear. Everything was just as he had left it. There on the floor was

still Ben Price's collar-button that had been torn from that eminent

detective's shirt-band when they had overpowered Jimmy to arrest him.

Pulling out from the wall a folding-bed, Jimmy slid back a panel in

the wall and dragged out a dust-covered suit-case. He opened this and

gazed fondly at the finest set of burglar's tools in the East. It was

a complete set, made of specially tempered steel, the latest designs

in drills, punches, braces and bits, jimmies, clamps, and augers, with

two or three novelties, invented by Jimmy himself, in which he took

pride. Over nine hundred dollars they had cost him to have made at

----, a place where they make such things for the profession.

In half an hour Jimmy went down stairs and through the cafe. He was

now dressed in tasteful and well-fitting clothes, and carried his

dusted and cleaned suit-case in his hand.

"Got anything on?" asked Mike Dolan, genially.

"Me?" said Jimmy, in a puzzled tone. "I don't understand. I'm

representing the New York Amalgamated Short Snap Biscuit Cracker and

Frazzled Wheat Company."

This statement delighted Mike to such an extent that Jimmy had to take

a seltzer-and-milk on the spot. He never touched "hard" drinks.

A week after the release of Valentine, 9762, there was a neat job of

safe-burglary done in Richmond, Indiana, with no clue to the author. A

scant eight hundred dollars was all that was secured. Two weeks after

that a patented, improved, burglar-proof safe in Logansport was opened

like a cheese to the tune of fifteen hundred dollars, currency;

securities and silver untouched. That began to interest the rogue-

catchers. Then an old-fashioned bank-safe in Jefferson City became

active and threw out of its crater an eruption of bank-notes amounting

to five thousand dollars. The losses were now high enough to bring the

matter up into Ben Price's class of work. By comparing notes, a

remarkable similarity in the methods of the burglaries was noticed.

Ben Price investigated the scenes of the robberies, and was heard to

remark:

"That's Dandy Jim Valentine's autograph. He's resumed business. Look

at that combination knob--jerked out as easy as pulling up a radish in

wet weather. He's got the only clamps that can do it. And look how

clean those tumblers were punched out! Jimmy never has to drill but

one hole. Yes, I guess I want Mr. Valentine. He'll do his bit next

time without any short-time or clemency foolishness."

Ben Price knew Jimmy's habits. He had learned them while working on

the Springfield case. Long jumps, quick get-aways, no confederates,

and a taste for good society--these ways had helped Mr. Valentine to

become noted as a successful dodger of retribution. It was given out

that Ben Price had taken up the trail of the elusive cracksman, and

other people with burglar-proof safes felt more at ease.

One afternoon Jimmy Valentine and his suit-case climbed out of the

mail-hack in Elmore, a little town five miles off the railroad down in

the black-jack country of Arkansas. Jimmy, looking like an athletic

young senior just home from college, went down the board side-walk

toward the hotel.

A young lady crossed the street, passed him at the corner and entered

a door over which was the sign, "The Elmore Bank." Jimmy Valentine

looked into her eyes, forgot what he was, and became another man. She

lowered her eyes and coloured slightly. Young men of Jimmy's style and

looks were scarce in Elmore.

Jimmy collared a boy that was loafing on the steps of the bank as if

he were one of the stockholders, and began to ask him questions about

the town, feeding him dimes at intervals. By and by the young lady

came out, looking royally unconscious of the young man with the suit-

case, and went her way.

"Isn' that young lady Polly Simpson?" asked Jimmy, with specious

guile.

"Naw," said the boy. "She's Annabel Adams. Her pa owns this bank.

Why'd you come to Elmore for? Is that a gold watch-chain? I'm going to

get a bulldog. Got any more dimes?"

Jimmy went to the Planters' Hotel, registered as Ralph D. Spencer, and

engaged a room. He leaned on the desk and declared his platform to the

clerk. He said he had come to Elmore to look for a location to go into

business. How was the shoe business, now, in the town? He had thought

of the shoe business. Was there an opening?

The clerk was impressed by the clothes and manner of Jimmy. He,

himself, was something of a pattern of fashion to the thinly gilded

youth of Elmore, but he now perceived his shortcomings. While trying

to figure out Jimmy's manner of tying his four-in-hand he cordially

gave information.

Yes, there ought to be a good opening in the shoe line. There wasn't

an exclusive shoe-store in the place. The dry-goods and general stores

handled them. Business in all lines was fairly good. Hoped Mr. Spencer

would decide to locate in Elmore. He would find it a pleasant town to

live in, and the people very sociable.

Mr. Spencer thought he would stop over in the town a few days and look

over the situation. No, the clerk needn't call the boy. He would carry

up his suit-case, himself; it was rather heavy.

Mr. Ralph Spencer, the phoenix that arose from Jimmy Valentine's ashes

--ashes left by the flame of a sudden and alterative attack of love--

remained in Elmore, and prospered. He opened a shoe-store and secured

a good run of trade.

Socially he was also a success, and made many friends. And he

accomplished the wish of his heart. He met Miss Annabel Adams, and

became more and more captivated by her charms.

At the end of a year the situation of Mr. Ralph Spencer was this: he

had won the respect of the community, his shoe-store was flourishing,

and he and Annabel were engaged to be married in two weeks. Mr. Adams,

the typical, plodding, country banker, approved of Spencer. Annabel's

pride in him almost equalled her affection. He was as much at home in

the family of Mr. Adams and that of Annabel's married sister as if he

were already a member.

One day Jimmy sat down in his room and wrote this letter, which he

mailed to the safe address of one of his old friends in St. Louis:

Dear Old Pal:

I want you to be at Sullivan's place, in Little Rock, next

Wednesday night, at nine o'clock. I want you to wind up some

little matters for me. And, also, I want to make you a present of

my kit of tools. I know you'll be glad to get them--you couldn't

duplicate the lot for a thousand dollars. Say, Billy, I've quit

the old business--a year ago. I've got a nice store. I'm making an

honest living, and I'm going to marry the finest girl on earth two

weeks from now. It's the only life, Billy--the straight one. I

wouldn't touch a dollar of another man's money now for a million.

After I get married I'm going to sell out and go West, where there

won't be so much danger of having old scores brought up against

me. I tell you, Billy, she's an angel. She believes in me; and I

wouldn't do another crooked thing for the whole world. Be sure to be

at Sully's, for I must see you. I'll bring along the tools with me.

Your old friend,

Jimmy.

On the Monday night after Jimmy wrote this letter, Ben Price jogged

unobtrusively into Elmore in a livery buggy. He lounged about town in

his quiet way until he found out what he wanted to know. From the

drug-store across the street from Spencer's shoe-store he got a good

look at Ralph D. Spencer.

"Going to marry the banker's daughter are you, Jimmy?" said Ben to

himself, softly. "Well, I don't know!"

The next morning Jimmy took breakfast at the Adamses. He was going to

Little Rock that day to order his wedding-suit and buy something nice

for Annabel. That would be the first time he had left town since he

came to Elmore. It had been more than a year now since those last

professional "jobs," and he thought he could safely venture out.

After breakfast quite a family party went downtown together--Mr.

Adams, Annabel, Jimmy, and Annabel's married sister with her two

little girls, aged five and nine. They came by the hotel where Jimmy

still boarded, and he ran up to his room and brought along his suit-

case. Then they went on to the bank. There stood Jimmy's horse and

buggy and Dolph Gibson, who was going to drive him over to the

railroad station.

All went inside the high, carved oak railings into the banking-room--

Jimmy included, for Mr. Adams's future son-in-law was welcome

anywhere. The clerks were pleased to be greeted by the good-looking,

agreeable young man who was going to marry Miss Annabel. Jimmy set his

suit-case down. Annabel, whose heart was bubbling with happiness and

lively youth, put on Jimmy's hat, and picked up the suit-case.

"Wouldn't I make a nice drummer?" said Annabel. "My! Ralph, how heavy

it is? Feels like it was full of gold bricks."

"Lot of nickel-plated shoe-horns in there," said Jimmy, coolly, "that

I'm going to return. Thought I'd save express charges by taking them

up. I'm getting awfully economical."

The Elmore Bank had just put in a new safe and vault. Mr. Adams was

very proud of it, and insisted on an inspection by every one. The

vault was a small one, but it had a new, patented door. It fastened

with three solid steel bolts thrown simultaneously with a single

handle, and had a time-lock. Mr. Adams beamingly explained its

workings to Mr. Spencer, who showed a courteous but not too

intelligent interest. The two children, May and Agatha, were delighted

by the shining metal and funny clock and knobs.

While they were thus engaged Ben Price sauntered in and leaned on his

elbow, looking casually inside between the railings. He told the

teller that he didn't want anything; he was just waiting for a man he

knew.

Suddenly there was a scream or two from the women, and a commotion.

Unperceived by the elders, May, the nine-year-old girl, in a spirit of

play, had shut Agatha in the vault. She had then shot the bolts and

turned the knob of the combination as she had seen Mr. Adams do.

The old banker sprang to the handle and tugged at it for a moment.

"The door can't be opened," he groaned. "The clock hasn't been wound

nor the combination set."

Agatha's mother screamed again, hysterically.

"Hush!" said Mr. Adams, raising his trembling hand. "All be quite for

a moment. Agatha!" he called as loudly as he could. "Listen to me."

During the following silence they could just hear the faint sound of

the child wildly shrieking in the dark vault in a panic of terror.

"My precious darling!" wailed the mother. "She will die of fright!

Open the door! Oh, break it open! Can't you men do something?"

"There isn't a man nearer than Little Rock who can open that door,"

said Mr. Adams, in a shaky voice. "My God! Spencer, what shall we do?

That child--she can't stand it long in there. There isn't enough air,

and, besides, she'll go into convulsions from fright."

Agatha's mother, frantic now, beat the door of the vault with her

hands. Somebody wildly suggested dynamite. Annabel turned to Jimmy,

her large eyes full of anguish, but not yet despairing. To a woman

nothing seems quite impossible to the powers of the man she worships.

"Can't you do something, Ralph--/try/, won't you?"

He looked at her with a queer, soft smile on his lips and in his keen

eyes.

"Annabel," he said, "give me that rose you are wearing, will you?"

Hardly believing that she heard him aright, she unpinned the bud from

the bosom of her dress, and placed it in his hand. Jimmy stuffed it

into his vest-pocket, threw off his coat and pulled up his shirt-

sleeves. With that act Ralph D. Spencer passed away and Jimmy

Valentine took his place.

"Get away from the door, all of you," he commanded, shortly.

He set his suit-case on the table, and opened it out flat. From that

time on he seemed to be unconscious of the presence of any one else.

He laid out the shining, queer implements swiftly and orderly,

whistling softly to himself as he always did when at work. In a deep

silence and immovable, the others watched him as if under a spell.

In a minute Jimmy's pet drill was biting smoothly into the steel door.

In ten minutes--breaking his own burglarious record--he threw back the

bolts and opened the door.

Agatha, almost collapsed, but safe, was gathered into her mother's

arms.

Jimmy Valentine put on his coat, and walked outside the railings

towards the front door. As he went he thought he heard a far-away

voice that he once knew call "Ralph!" But he never hesitated.

At the door a big man stood somewhat in his way.

"Hello, Ben!" said Jimmy, still with his strange smile. "Got around at

last, have you? Well, let's go. I don't know that it makes much

difference, now."

And then Ben Price acted rather strangely.

"Guess you're mistaken, Mr. Spencer," he said. "Don't believe I

recognize you. Your buggy's waiting for you, ain't it?"