



A Retrieved Reformation

JIN THE PRISON SHOE-SHOP, JIMMY VALENTINE was busily at work making shoes. A prison officer came into the shop, and led Jimmy to the prison office. There Jimmy was given an important paper. It said that he was free.

Jimmy took the paper without showing much pleasure or interest. He had been sent to prison to stay for four years. He had been there for ten months. But he had expected to stay only three months. Jimmy Valentine had many friends outside the prison. A man with so many friends does not expect to stay in prison long.

“Valentine,” said the chief prison officer, “you’ll go out tomorrow morning. This is your chance. Make a man of yourself. You’re not a bad

fellow at heart. Stop breaking safes open, and live a better life.”

“Me?” said Jimmy in surprise. “I never broke open a safe in my life.”

“Oh, no,” the chief prison officer laughed. “Never. Let’s see. How did you happen to get sent to prison for opening that safe in Springfield? Was it because you didn’t want to tell where you really were? Perhaps because you were with some lady, and you didn’t want to tell her name? Or was it because the judge didn’t like you? You men always have a reason like that. You never go to prison because you broke open a safe.”

“Me?” Jimmy said. His face still showed surprise. “I was never in Springfield in my life.”

“Take him away,” said the chief prison officer. “Get him the clothes he needs for going outside. Bring him here again at seven in the morning. And think about what I said, Valentine.”

At a quarter past seven on the next morning, Jimmy stood again in the office. He had on some new clothes that did not fit him, and a pair of new shoes that hurt his feet. These are the usual clothes given to a prisoner when he leaves the prison.

Next they gave him money to pay for his trip on a train to the city near the prison. They gave him five dollars more. The five dollars were supposed to help him become a better man.

Then the chief prison officer put out his hand for a handshake. That was the end of Valentine, Prisoner 9762. Mr. James Valentine walked out into the sunshine.

He did not listen to the song of the birds or look at the green trees or smell the flowers. He went straight to a restaurant. There he tasted the first sweet joys of being free. He had a good dinner. After that he went to the train station. He gave some money to a blind man who sat there, asking for money, and then he got on the train.

Three hours later he got off the train in a small town. Here he went to the restaurant of Mike Dolan.

Mike Dolan was alone there. After shaking hands he said, “I’m sorry we couldn’t do it sooner, Jimmy my boy. But there was that safe in Springfield, too. It wasn’t easy. Feeling all right?”

“Fine,” said Jimmy. “Is my room waiting for me?”

He went up and opened the door of a room at the back of the house. Everything was as he had left it. It was here they had found Jimmy, when they took him to prison. There on the floor was a small piece of cloth. It had been torn from the coat of the cop, as Jimmy was fighting to escape.

There was a bed against the wall. Jimmy pulled the bed toward the middle of the room. The wall behind it looked like any wall, but now Jimmy found and opened a small door in it. From this opening he pulled out a dust-covered bag.

He opened this and looked lovingly at the tools for breaking open a safe. No finer tools could be found any place. They were complete; everything needed was here. They had been made of a special material, in the necessary sizes and shapes. Jimmy had planned them himself, and he was very proud of them.

It had cost him over nine hundred dollars to have these tools made at a place where they make such things for men who work at the job of safe-breaking.

In half an hour Jimmy went downstairs and through the restaurant. He was now dressed in good clothes that fitted him well. He carried his dusted and cleaned bag.

“Do you have anything planned?” asked Mike Dolan.

“Me?” asked Jimmy as if surprised. “I don’t understand. I work for the New York Famous Bread and Cake Makers Company. And I sell the best bread and cake in the country.”

Mike enjoyed these words so much that Jimmy had to take a drink with him. Jimmy had some milk. He never drank anything stronger.

A week after Valentine, 9762, left the prison, a safe was broken open in Richmond, Indiana. No one knew who did it. Eight hundred dollars were taken.

Two weeks after that, a safe in Logansport was opened. It was a new kind of safe; it had been made, they said, so strong that no one could break it open. But someone did, and took fifteen hundred dollars.

Then a safe in Jefferson City was opened. Five thousand dollars were taken. This loss was a big one. Ben Price was a cop who worked

on such important matters, and now he began to work on this.

He went to Richmond, Indiana, and to Logansport, to see how the safe-breaking had been done in those places. He was heard to say: "I can see that Jim Valentine has been here. He is in business again. Look at the way he opened this one. Everything easy, everything clean. He is the only man who has the tools to do it. And he is the only man who knows how to use tools like this. Yes, I want Mr. Valentine. Next time he goes to prison, he's going to stay there until his time is finished."

Ben Price knew how Jimmy worked. Jimmy would go from one city to another far away. He always worked alone. He always left quickly when he was finished. He enjoyed being with nice people. For all these reasons, it was not easy to catch Mr. Valentine.

People with safes full of money were glad to hear that Ben Price was at work trying to catch Mr. Valentine.

One afternoon Jimmy Valentine and his bag arrived in a small town named Elmore. Jimmy, looking as young as a college boy, walked down the street toward the hotel.

A young lady walked across the street, passed him at the corner, and entered a door. Over the door was the sign, "The Elmore Bank." Jimmy Valentine looked into her eyes, forgetting at once what he was. He became another man. She looked away, and brighter color came into her face. Young men like Jimmy did not appear often in Elmore.

Jimmy saw a boy near the bank door, and began to ask questions about the town. After a time the young lady came out and went on her way. She seemed not to see Jimmy as she passed him.

"Isn't that young lady Polly Simpson?" asked Jimmy.

"No," said the boy. "She's Annabel Adams. Her father owns this bank."

Jimmy went to the hotel, where he said his name was Ralph D. Spencer. He got a room there. He told the hotel man he had come to Elmore to go into business. How was the shoe business? Was there already a good shoe-shop?

The man thought that Jimmy's clothes and manners were fine.

He was happy to talk to him.

Yes, Elmore needed a good shoe-shop. There was no shop that sold just shoes. Shoes were sold in the big shops that sold everything. All business in Elmore was good. He hoped Mr. Spencer would decide to stay in Elmore. It was a pleasant town to live in and the people were friendly.

Mr. Spencer said he would stay in the town a few days and learn something about it. No, he said, he himself would carry his bag up to his room. He didn't want a boy to take it. It was very heavy.

Mr. Ralph Spencer remained in Elmore. He started a shoe-shop. Business was good.

Also he made many friends. And he was successful with the wish of his heart. He met Annabel Adams. He liked her better every day.

At the end of a year everyone in Elmore liked Mr. Ralph Spencer. His shoe-shop was doing very good business. And he and Annabel were going to be married in two weeks. Mr. Adams, the small-town banker, liked Spencer. Annabel was very proud of him. He seemed already to belong to the Adams family.

One day Jimmy sat down in his room to write this letter, which he sent to one of his old friends:

Dear Old Friend:

I want you to meet me at Sullivan's place next week, on the evening of the 10th. I want to give you my tools. I know you'll be glad to have them. You couldn't buy them for a thousand dollars. I finished with the old business—a year ago. I have a nice shop. I'm living a better life, and I'm going to marry the best girl on earth two weeks from now. It's the only life—I wouldn't ever again touch another man's money. After I marry, I'm going to go further west, where I'll never see anyone who knew me in my old life. I tell you, she's a wonderful girl. She trusts me.

Your old friend, Jimmy.

On the Monday night after Jimmy sent this letter, Ben Price

arrived quietly in Elmore. He moved slowly about the town in his quiet way, and he learned all that he wanted to know. Standing inside a shop, he watched Ralph D. Spencer walk by.

“You’re going to marry the banker’s daughter, are you, Jimmy?” said Ben to himself. “I don’t feel sure about that!”

The next morning Jimmy was at the Adams home. He was going to a nearby city that day to buy new clothes for the **wedding**. He was also going to buy a gift for Annabel. It would be his first trip out of Elmore. It was more than a year now since he had done any safe-breaking.

Most of the Adams family went to the bank together that morning. There were Mr. Adams, Annabel, Jimmy, and Annabel’s married sister with her two little girls, aged five and nine. They passed Jimmy’s hotel, and Jimmy ran up to his room and brought along his bag. Then they went to the bank.

All went inside—Jimmy, too, for he was one of the family. Everyone in the bank was glad to see the good-looking, nice young man who was going to marry Annabel. Jimmy put down his bag.

Annabel, laughing, put Jimmy’s hat on her head and picked up the bag. “How do I look?” she asked. “Ralph, how heavy this bag is! It feels full of gold.”

“It’s full of some things I don’t need in my shop,” Jimmy said. “I’m taking them to the city, to the place where they came from. That saves me the cost of sending them. I’m going to be a married man. I must learn to save money.”

The Elmore bank had a new safe. Mr. Adams was very proud of it, and he wanted everyone to see it. It was as large as a small room, and it had a very special door. The door was controlled by a clock. Using the clock, the banker planned the time when the door should open. At other times no one, not even the banker himself, could open it. He explained about it to Mr. Spencer. Mr. Spencer seemed interested but he did not seem to understand very easily. The two children, May and Agatha, enjoyed seeing the shining heavy door, with all its special parts.

While they were busy like this, Ben Price entered the bank and looked around. He told a young man who worked there that he had

not come on business; he was waiting for a man.

Suddenly there was a cry from the women. They had not been watching the children. May, the nine-year-old girl, had playfully but firmly closed the door of the safe. And Agatha was inside.

The old banker tried to open the door. He pulled at it for a moment. "The door can't be opened," he cried. "And the clock—I hadn't started it yet."

Agatha's mother cried out again.

"Quiet!" said Mr. Adams, raising a shaking hand. "All be quiet for a moment. Agatha!" he called as loudly as he could. "Listen to me." They could hear, but not clearly, the sound of the child's voice. In the darkness inside the safe, she was wild with fear.

"My baby!" her mother cried. "She will die of fear! Open the door! Break it open! Can't you men do something?"

"There isn't a man nearer than the city who can open that door," said Mr. Adams, in a shaking voice. "My God! Spencer, what shall we do? That child—she can't live long in there. There isn't enough air. And the fear will kill her."

Agatha's mother, wild too now, beat on the door with her hands. Annabel turned to Jimmy, her large eyes full of pain, but with some hope, too. A woman thinks that the man she loves can somehow do anything.

"Can't you do something, Ralph? Try, won't you?"

He looked at her with a strange soft smile on his lips and in his eyes.

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

She could not believe that she had really heard him. But she put the flower in his hand. Jimmy took it and put it where he could not lose it. Then he pulled off his coat. With that act, Ralph D. Spencer passed away and Jimmy Valentine took his place.

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

He put his bag on the table, and opened it flat. From that time on, he seemed not to know that anyone else was near. Quickly he laid

the shining strange tools on the table. The others watched as if they had lost the power to move.

In a minute Jimmy was at work on the door. In ten minutes—faster than he had ever done it before—he had the door open.

Agatha was taken into her mother's arms.

Jimmy Valentine put on his coat, picked up the flower and walked toward the front door. As he went he thought he heard a voice call, "Ralph!" He did not stop.

At the door a big man stood in his way.

"Hello, Ben!" said Jimmy, still with his strange smile. "You're here at last, are you? Let's go. I don't care, now."

And then Ben Price acted rather strangely.

"I guess you're wrong about this, Mr. Spencer," he said. "I don't believe I know you, do I?"

And Ben Price turned and walked slowly down the street.