

A Bachelor in the Making

by Charles Jackson, 1903-1968

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It was so... adult. Knowing everything... everybody...

When, at fourteen, Don began to work at the Arcadia Grocery, a whole new wonderful world opened up to him; and not the least of its delights was the sense of worldliness he rapidly acquired, a sophistication beyond his years, with its attendant pleasurable notion that he had already seen enough of life to disillusion him with a certain well-known institution.

He came to work as soon as school was out at three-thirty, and worked until the store closed at six; but on Saturday it was all day, from seven-thirty in the morning till ten-thirty at night. He loved it. He liked his two employers very much, the partners Mr. Heffelfinger and Mr. Kunkel; they were awfully good to him, and treated him as an equal.

He loved, too, the importance of being behind a counter to so many people he had known all his life, and who had, till now, regarded him as a kid. And he loved all the gossip; the secret lives of friend and stranger alike were openly discussed in his presence as though he wasn't fourteen at all, and he soon learned to join in the general, ribald amusement that seemed to be universal in the grown-up world and occupy the greater part of their conversation.

It was quite different from the veiled allusions he often overheard at home, when his mother uttered half a sentence and then cut herself off with a sigh and a headshake over the carryings-on of one of their neighbors; or when his father laughed outright over some tidbit he had brought home but which he only fully disclosed to Don's mother when he himself was out of hearing.

At the Arcadia Grocery gossip was not only openly rife but there was something even better: if you kept your eyes and ears open, actual evidences were all around you of the choice scandals from which that gossip sprang. Like Mrs. Corbin, for instance, and the telephone.

Mrs. Corbin was an attractive, neat woman, married to Joe Corbin who repaired watches at Platt the Jeweler's. She had a pleasant open smile, impersonal eyes, and wonderful eyebrows, plucked and pencilled, that rose in twin symmetrical arcs almost to the brim of her close-fitting felt hat, giving her a provocative, surprised look.

Every afternoon about four, Mrs. Corbin came into the store and bought her two pounds of sugar; it was during the war with the Kaiser, and the sale of sugar was strictly kept to two pounds per day per customer. Then she would linger at the counter for a while, chatting amiably as if she had all the time in the world; but it was clear to Don's fast-maturing perceptions that Mrs. Corbin had other things on her mind besides the small talk; that her thoughts were elsewhere.

Don had got so used to measuring out the regulation two pounds of sugar that he could do it accurately, almost every time, without weighing it. He took the aluminum scoop, dug into the big sugar barrel that swung from below the counter on a squeaking arm-like arrangement, held the scoop high in the air, and let the sugar fall beautifully into the paper sack, which he had already whipped open with a professional flip of his left hand; then he plunked the bag onto the scales, watched the needle wag to and for for a second, and there it was: two pounds even. He folded the flap doubly over the top, wound the white string twice around the sack, and breaking the string with a smart quick yank, he handed the sugar over to Mrs. Corbin. And then she would say, every darned afternoon—the arched eyebrow's rippling higher and the cool impersonal eyes gazing directly into his: „Oh, I just remembered! May I use the phone a minute, please?“

„Why certainly,“ Don would say, never batting an eye, „just help yourself, Mrs. Corbin.“ Then, because he knew what was coming and, as became a man of the world, must be discreet, he turned back to the sugar barrel and tossed off a few more two-pound bags, in readiness for the next customers who asked for them.

Mrs. Corbin stepped to the wall telephone with the goose neck a few feet away, picked up the phone book that hung from a cord beside it, and opening the directory to somewhere in the middle, she would peer intently at the long list of names there and run an inquiring finger slowly down the page.

„Mrs. ... Mrs. ... Mrs. ... Mrs. ...“ she would murmur, just loud enough for him to hear, and then give Central the number in lowered tones that could not be heard at all.

Don smiled to himself. He knew what the number was—424, Mersey's saloon; and Mrs. Corbin was calling up Mr. Mersey to find out when he was to be free and where she was to pick him up this time, before they drove out to the pines after supper to park for awhile after dark. He knew this because Mr.

Heffelfinger had told him, with a hearty laugh, that that's what was going on; and now, after so many afternoons of „Mrs. ... Mrs. ... Mrs. ... Mrs. ...“ he could see it for himself. He was entranced. He would love to have told his father and mother, but of course they would only have said he was taking a great deal for granted, smarty, a very great deal indeed, and had a dirty mind besides. Instead, he told three or four of his friends in High School, and together they laughed and laughed.

Within a few weeks after he had started at the Arcadia Grocery, Mr. Heffelfinger suddenly changed Don's dinner hour on Saturday noon. At first, he had gone home to dinner at eleven-thirty when Mr. Kunkel did, returning at twelve-thirty to relieve Mr. Heffelfinger and Jake, the other assistant. Now, for a reason that wasn't at once clear to Don, Mr. Heffelfinger asked him to switch places with Jake, and Jake went home for dinner at the same time as Mr. Kunkel. This left Mr. Heffelfinger and Don alone together during the noon hour, a time of day when hardly anybody ever came into the store at all. But one of these few was Miss Bye, who invariably arrived a few minutes after Jake and Mr. Kunkel had gone home.

Miss Bye was a very short, very fat woman of maybe fifty, with hair dyed a lifeless jet-black like a wig, and puffy cheeks coated with talcum powder so thick that she looked as if she had just recovered from having her face stuck in the flour barrel in the back room. She wore a single large pearl on each car lobe, and her pudgy hands glittered with rings. In her shiny silk dress of a changeable coppery color, she swelled outward in front like a pouter pigeon and in back like a lawn roller, and she had been stuffed so tightly into her iridescent dress that she looked like a gorgeous pincushion.

„Ahhh, Miss Bye,“ Mr. Heffelfinger would say, surprised; and after the barest word or two about the weather, he would draw his order pad from the pocket of his cotton apron-gown and remove the indelible pencil from behind his ear.

„And what will it be today, Miss Bye?“

It was always a nice piece of salt pork, not too fat and not too lean, or a quart of molasses, or some sour pickles or new potatoes—something, at any rate, that would take them down to the cellar.

Mr. Heffelfinger was very fat himself, and fiftyish, too; but he was a nice man, a really kind man, and Don was fond of him. He had silver-gray hair and small, merry, blue eyes, and until Don got onto the situation between him and Miss Bye, he had always thought of Mr. Heffelfinger as a kind of ideal father, except that his own father, so stern but so good, was better.

But he was not in the least shocked or even dismayed. With his newfound sophistication he shrugged and smiled to himself, and thought: *Well, that's the way of the world, there's marriage for you all right all right...*

And wisely, as Mr. Heffelfinger expected him to do, he pretended to notice nothing. The presence of Jake, it seemed, had proved inconvenient.

But all the same, there was occasionally an awkward moment, a moment that Don retailed hilariously at school on Monday morning. When, as sometimes happened, a customer came in during the noon hour and innocently asked for a piece of salt pork or a pint of pickles, all the resources of Don's ripening experience had to be brought into play. As he approached the stairs that led down to the cellar, he began to whistle *Over There* or *Keep the Home Fires Burning* or something else that he could whistle equally loud; and as he reached the bottom step he would even burst into song.

A second or two later he came upon Mr. Heffelfinger and Miss Bye, standing, a careful couple of feet apart, beside the molasses barrel or the potato bin—under the harsh glare of the single electric bulb Mr. Heffelfinger's round face was purple as an eggplant, his forehead streamed with sweat, and Miss Bye's lustrous billowing bosom pantingly rose and fell.

Mr. Heffelfinger bent forward slightly from the waist, all attention and business, the order pad held in his raised palm with the indelible pencil poised above it, while he murmured: „And perhaps, Miss Bye, I might also suggest some Bermuda onions? We have some beauties, just in the other day...

Don walked by acutely self-conscious, his eyes straight ahead; but on the way back upstairs he was already grinning, and he thought gleefully to himself: *Boy! won't Ernie and Eddie and Harry love this!...*

So life at the Arcadia Grocery went on, wonderful as ever. Besides giving him the chance of being in on the exciting events of the adult world, it had other delights, of course. Don loved to amaze a customer with his lightning calculation of the cost of 6 1/2 pounds of bananas, for instance, at 8 1/2 cents a pound, a customer, that is, who didn't know that this total was simultaneously registered, along with the weight, on the reverse side of the horizontal cylinder above the scales.

During an idle moment he loved to stand in the front window looking through the spray of the tiny fountain that squealed faintly like a distant peanut wagon and kept the lettuce and spinach fresh, and wave to friends who went by on Main Street. Every time he passed the cold meat counter he gave the handle of the slicer a spin and helped himself to a fresh slice of boiled ham or dried beef. When a customer asked if the cheese was strong today, he cut off a small piece with the tremendous cleaver-like knife, sampled it himself, then pronounced the verdict with authority.

And he early loved the long, democratic Saturday evenings when the store filled up with farmers and their families, loud with greetings and news as if they hadn't laid eyes on one another for months, chattering away in their Holland-Dutch accents and generously accepting him as one of themselves.

Meanwhile Mrs. Corbin continued to run her finger down the open page of the telephone book in the afternoon and murmur aloud, „Mrs. ... Mrs. ... Mrs. ... Mrs. ...“

Mr. Heffelfinger and Miss Bye continued to go down cellar on Saturday noon and inspect the salt pork together; Mrs. Hanks continued to climb the stairs to Dr. Wallace's office above the store on Saturday nights after office hours were long since over and Mr. Hadley continued not too surreptitiously to pay Mrs. Denton's exorbitant grocery bills and the good-looking Mrs. Burton Slade, emerging from the store, continued to be picked up at the curb with not at all surprising frequency by Mr. Cunningham or his well-paid chauffeur Art Holmes, who, by the greatest good fortune for the package-laden Mrs. Slade, just happened to be passing by at that very moment; items, all, to be relished and hooted over with Harry and Eddie and Ernie...

One afternoon, Mr. Heffelfinger came from the phone and said: „Don, will you run over to Mrs. Oliver's with this vanilla like a good boy? She's making a sponge cake for supper and needs it right away.“

„Sure thing. Be back in a jiffy“—for the Olivers lived less than a block away. He stuck the bottle of vanilla in his apron pocket and went out; and it was fun

going along the street in his long work-gown with The Arcadia Grocery stencilled on both the front and back.

„Come in, Donnie boy,“ Mrs. Oliver sang out nasally from the kitchen as he came up the back steps.

Mrs. Oliver was a florid-faced woman of about forty with a dumpy figure, from eating too much candy, it was said, and she talked through her nose with a whine that grated on the ear; but she was a good soul, the kind that people spoke of as „harmless“ and „well-meaning“, and Don had always thought her quite nice.

„Come on into the den a minute, why don't you?“ she said. „I want to show you my new books. You like books, I know.“

„Thank you, Mrs. Oliver, I'd like to.“

They entered the den and she waved her hand toward a series of bookshelves along one wall.

„I had it all done over by that man at Sibley, Lindsey & Curr,“ she said.

„Very nice.“

„I knew you'd be impressed,“ she said.

But he was not looking at the bookshelves. His eye was caught by a pendant hanging from her plump neck, with a large yellow stone that might have been a topaz. He peered at it, and then said: „Gee, that looks like a nice stone, Mrs. Oliver. Pretty, too.“

„This old lavalier? You like it?“ She bent her head to look at the pendant, and the double chins spread upward toward her cheeks. Then she smiled and said: „Tell you a little secret, Donnie. Just between you and I. You know who gave me that lavalier? Your father.“

Don felt the hot red flush rise upward from his neck to his very ears, but Mrs. Oliver didn't notice.

„And look,“ she went on, reaching toward the table for a candy box inlaid with different-colored woods in such a way as to depict the Statue of Liberty, with a tugboat in the foreground.

„He gave me this, too; isn't it cunning? Couple of years ago your father was mighty sweet on me, for a while.“

„I've got to go now, Mrs. Oliver,“ he said. „I got to get back...“

And as he walked in through the front door of the Arcadia Grocery he saw Mr. Heffelfinger, whose face could get so purple in the cool cellar, bending toward Mrs. Newman with order pad and pencil in hand. *You old fool*, Don said under his breath, bitterly: *You miserable, hypocritical, sweaty, purple old fool...*

