Steelman's Pupil

Henry Lawson

Steelman was a hard case, but some said that Smith was harder. Steelman was big and good-looking, and good-natured in his way; he was a spicier, pure and simple, but did things in humorous style. Smith was small and weedy, of the sneak variety; he had a whining tone and a cringing manner. He seemed to be always so afraid you were going to hit him that he would make you *want* to hit him on that account alone.

Steelman "had" you in a fashion that would make your friends laugh. Smith would "have" you in a way which made you feel mad at the bare recollection of having been taken in by so contemptible a little sneak.

They battled round together in the North Island of Maoriland for a couple of years.

One day Steelman said to Smith:

"Look here, Smithy, you don't know you're born yet. I'm going to take you in hand and teach you."

And he did. If Smith wouldn't do as Steelman told him, or wasn't successful in cadging, or mugged any game they had in hand, Steelman would threaten to stoush him; and, if the warning proved ineffectual after the second or third time, he *would* stoush him.

One day, on the track, they came to a place where an old Scottish couple kept a general store and shanty. They camped alongside the road, and Smith was just starting up to the house to beg supplies when Steelman cried:

"Here!—hold on. Now where do you think you're going to?"

"Why, I'm going to try and chew the old party's lug, of course. We'll be out of tucker in a couple of days," said Smith.

Steelman sat down on a stump in a hopeless, discouraged sort of way.

"It's no use," he said, regarding Smith with mingled reproach and disgust. "It's no use. I might as well give it best. I can see that it's only waste of time trying to learn you anything. Will I ever be able to knock some gumption into your thick skull? After all the time and trouble and pains I've took with your education, you hain't got any more sense than to go and mug a business like that! When will you learn sense? Hey? After all, I——Smith, you're a born mug!"

He always called Smith a “mug” when he was particularly wild at him, for it hurt Smith more than anything else.

“There’s only two classes in the world, spielers and mugs—and you’re a mug, Smith.”

“What have I done, anyway?” asked Smith helplessly. “That’s all I want to know.”

Steelman wearily rested his brow on his hand.

“That will do, Smith,” he said listlessly; “don’t say another word, old man; it’ll only make my head worse; don’t talk. You might, at the very least, have a little consideration for my feelings—even if you haven’t for your own interests.” He paused and regarded Smith sadly. “Well, I’ll give you another show. I’ll stage the business for you.”

He made Smith doff his coat and get into his worst pair of trousers—and they were bad enough; they were hopelessly “gone” beyond the extreme limit of bush decency. He made Smith put on a rag of a felt hat and a pair of “’lastic-sides” which had fallen off a tramp and lain baking and rotting by turns on a rubbish heap; they had to be tied on Smith with bits of rag and string. He drew dark shadows round Smith’s eyes, and burning spots on his cheek-bones with some greasepaints he used when they travelled as “The Great Steelman and Smith Combination Star Dramatic Co.” He damped Smith’s hair to make it dark and lank, and his face more corpse-like by comparison—in short, he made him up to look like a man who had long passed the very last stage of consumption, and had been artificially kept alive in the interests of science.

“Now you’re ready,” said Steelman to Smith. “You left you whare the day before yesterday and started to walk to the hospital at Palmerston. An old mate picked you up dying on the road, brought you round, and carried you on his back most of the way here. You firmly believe that Providence had something to do with the sending of that old mate along at that time and place above all others. Your mate also was hard up; he was going to a job—the first show for work he’d had in nine months—but he gave it up to see you through; he’d give up his life rather than desert a mate in trouble. You only want a couple of shillings or a bit of tucker to help you on to Palmerston. You know you’ve got to die, and you only want to live long enough to get word to your poor old mother, and die on a bed.

“Remember, they’re Scotch up at that house. You understand the Scotch barrack pretty well by now—if you don’t it ain’t my fault. You were born in Aberdeen, but came out too young to remember much about the town. Your father’s dead. You ran away to sea and came out in the *Bobbie Burns* to Sydney. Your poor old mother’s in Aberdeen now—Bruce or Wallace Wynd will do. Your mother might be dead now—poor old soul!—any way, you’ll never see her again. You wish you’d never run away from home. You wish you’d been a better son to

your poor old mother; you wish you'd written to her and answered her last letter. You only want to live long enough to write home and ask for forgiveness and a blessing before you die. If you had a drop of spirits of some sort to brace you up you might get along the road better. (Put this delicately.) Get the whine out of your voice and breathe with a wheeze—like this; get up the nearest approach to a death-rattle that you can. Move as if you were badly hurt in your wind—like this. (If you don't do it better'n that, I'll stoush you.) Make your face a bit longer and keep your lips dry—don't lick them, you damned fool!—*breathe* on them; make 'em dry as chips. That's the only decent pair of breeks you've got, and the only shoon. You're a Presbyterian—not a U.P., the Auld Kirk. Your mate would have come up to the house only—well, you'll have to use the stuffing in your head a bit; you can't expect me to do all the brain work. Remember it's consumption you've got—galloping consumption; you know all the symptoms—pain on top of your right lung, bad cough, and night sweats. Something tells you that you won't see the new year—it's a week off Christmas now. And if you come back without anything, I'll blessed soon put you out of your misery."

Smith came back with about four pounds of shortbread and as much various tucker as they could conveniently carry; a pretty good suit of cast-off tweeds; a new pair of 'lastic-sides from the store stock; two bottles of patent medicine and a black bottle half-full of home-made consumption-cure; also a letter to a hospital-committee man, and three shillings to help him on his way to Palmerston. He also got about half a mile of sympathy, religious consolation, and medical advice which he didn't remember.

"*Now*," he said, triumphantly, "am I a mug or not?"

Steelman kindly ignored the question. "I *did* have a better opinion of the Scotch," he said, contemptuously.

Steelman got on at an hotel as billiard-marker and decoy, and in six months he managed that pub. Smith, who'd been away on his own account, turned up in the town one day clean broke, and in a deplorable state. He heard of Steelman's luck, and thought he was "all right," so went to his old friend.

Cold type—or any other kind of type —couldn't do justice to Steelman's disgust. To think that this was the reward of all the time and trouble he'd spent on Smith's education! However, when he cooled down, he said:

"Smith, you're a young man yet, and it's never too late to mend. There is still time for reformation. I can't help you now; it would only demoralize you altogether. To think, after

the way I trained you, you can't battle round any better'n this! I always thought you were an irreclaimable mug, but I expected better things of you towards the end. I thought I'd make *something* of you. It's enough to dishearten any man and disgust him with the world. Why! you ought to be a rich man now with the chances and training you had! To think—but I won't talk of that; it has made me ill. I suppose I'll have to give you something, if it's only to get rid of the sight of you. Here's a quid, and I'm a mug for giving it to you. It'll do you more harm than good; and it ain't a friendly thing nor the right thing for me—who always had your welfare at heart—to give it to you under the circumstances. Now, get away out of my sight, and don't come near me till you've reformed. If you do, I'll have to stoush you out of regard for my own health and feelings."

But Steelman came down in the world again and picked up Smith on the road, and they battled round together for another year or so; and at last they were in Wellington—Steelman "flush" and stopping at an hotel, and Smith stumped, as usual, and staying with a friend. One night they were drinking together at the hotel, at the expense of some mugs whom Steelman was "educating." It was raining hard. When Smith was going home, he said:

"Look here, Steely, old man. Listen to the rain! I'll get wringing wet going home. You might as well lend me your overcoat to-night. You won't want it, and I won't hurt it."

And, Steelman's heart being warmed by his successes, he lent the overcoat.

Smith went and pawned it, got glorious on the proceeds, and took the pawn-ticket to Steelman next day.

Smith had reformed.