

# The Coils of Chance

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Mothers started their children off to school when Gilbert Benner passed down Cannon Street in the morning. They knew it was precisely twenty-nine minutes past eight. Clocks were set by his going and coming. On Monday evening, when he passed, with his long, quick stride, Cannon Street knew it was twenty minutes to eight, and that at eight o'clock Gilbert Benner would reach the Y.M.C.A., where he gave a free course in double-entry bookkeeping. On Tuesday evening his passing announced that it was ten minutes to eight, for Tuesday was his lodge-night, and at eight-fifteen he was due at the lodge-rooms to assume the robes and throne of High Treasurer. Wednesdays, it half-past seven, he went to services at the Old Brick Church, where he served as treasurer also. He was the sort of man who is immediately thought of for the office of treasurer (without pay).

Professionally, Gilbert Benner was cashier down at McHarg's lumber-yard, and had been all his working life. McHarg trusted him rather more than McHarg trusted himself, and each Christmas Gilbert Benner's employer presented him with a turkey. On these occasions Gilbert Benner's throat always filled a little and his eyes watered, and he mumbled sentences in which expressions like "deeply appreciate your trust" were involved. But he never ate the turkey. Somehow there was always somebody along Cannon Street who seemed faced by a turkeyless Christmas, and so he, concealing his shyness under an elaborately offhand manner, gave the turkey away and managed to convey the impression that turkeys were a mere incident in his life. One year it was old Mrs. Lock who got the turkey, the next the eight fatherless Kellys, the next Mr. and Mrs. Wasser, since Max Wasser, that year, was out of work.

They had begun to call him "Old Gil" along Cannon Street. They always said it with affection. Gilbert Benner was a neighborly sort. He lived alone in a small, neat brick house just at the top of the hill, and his housekeeping, for he had been a widower many years, was the despair of the housewives of Cannon Street.

"His kitchen," declared old Mrs. Lock, who lived next door, "is always in apple-pie order." She was in a position to know, for she frequently hobbled over there to borrow "a bit of butter" or "just a handful of tea" or "a spoonful of sugar." Gilbert Benner had a way of loaning things he knew would never be returned that made it appear that the borrower was conferring a great honor on him.

He had a way, too, of being gratefully surprised when the Wassers, from the yellow bungalow across the street, dropped in on Friday, the one night on which he had no fixed engagement, to ask him to keep an eye on the three small Wassers while the larger Wassers went to the moving pictures. The little Wassers were always delighted to see him; by experience they knew he would

have memorized the latest bed-time story about Mary Ape and Edwin Mudturtle, and that exploration of his pockets would be sure to yield lollipops or candy rabbits. He had come to be regarded as a safety-deposit box for all the secrets and troubles of the neighborhood. When Francis Xavier, oldest of the eight fatherless Kellys, in a high-spirited moment induced by his first contact with strong waters, stuck pins into Officer Curtin right on Main Street, it was to Gilbert Benner that the distressed Mrs. Kelly went, and it was Gilbert Benner who went to Judge Pratt and got Francis Xavier off with a fine of five dollars. And it was Gilbert Benner who slipped the five dollars into Mrs. Kelly's hand to pay the fine.

It was Gilbert Benner, too, who reduced Francis Xavier to a fit of tearful remorse by means of a kindly but pointed discourse on the perils of alcohol taken internally, and who got the Kelly boy to sign the pledge, and who persuaded crochety Mr. Kurtz to give Francis Xavier back his job on the grocery wagon.

"I'll keep an eye on the lad," Gilbert Benner promised. "He wont touch the stuff again."

"Well, in that case—" said Mr. Kurtz, and gave the boy his old job again. People trusted Gil Benner.

Thereafter young Kelly maintained a commendable sobriety. He was entirely sober the day Mr. Kurtz detected him in the act of diverting a case of canned peas to his own use.

"He isn't a bad boy; he's just weak," Mrs. Kelly said over and over again, sitting there in Gilbert Benner's kitchen, rumpling up her apron with hands permanently red from hot suds.

"Of course he isn't bad," Gilbert Benner agreed. "Now, run along and don't worry. I'll go down and see Mr. Kurtz and see if I can't get this thing straightened out. Perhaps I can get the lad a job down at the lumber-yard."

He did so; and when, in time, young Kelly displayed more talent for handling railroad ties than canned peas, and came to be foreman for the lumber company, not even Francis Xavier himself was happier or prouder than Gilbert Benner.....

One Friday night Gilbert Benner had to work late over his books in his little coop of an office down at the lumber-yard. There was an estimate to check over, a long and complicated figuring job that had to be finished that day, and Gilbert had sat at his old-fashioned desk figuring furiously, from the time he reached the office till well past dusk. So busy had he been that he had not had time to stop for any sort of lunch. Darkness was almost upon the town when he added up the last column of figures, checked them over twice, and gave a short sigh of relief. When he reached for his hat and coat, he noticed that he had to fumble about a bit, although they hung on the same peg on which they had daily

hung for a matter of twenty-four years. When he walked down the steps, he noticed, too, that his knees wobbled a little.

“Shouldn’t have gone without my lunch,” he muttered. “Feel sort of faint and dizzy. Wonder if my heart is acting right. Doc Lyons did say I ought to be careful. Oh, well, I’ll stop in at Charlie O’Dell’s candy store and get a milk-shake with an egg in it, and that’ll do me till I get home.”

The first part of his route from the lumber-yard to his home lay through a business part of the city, deserted at night. He cut through Washington Street, which led to the railroad station, the depot, the townspeople called it. It was down this thoroughfare that travelers hurried, bound to catch the eight-fourteen express. Such a traveler was hurrying along now. In the distance, by the light of a street-lamp, Gil Benner could see a plump figure and a plump suitcase, heading his way. But who or what the stranger was, Gilbert Benner never knew, for a sudden fit of giddiness struck Benner. He weaved about on the sidewalk; his legs gave way, and he sank down in a faint.

The hurrying traveler came panting up to him, and bent over him.

“Fainted,” was the traveler’s verdict. He was a young doctor traveling for a medical supply house. “These pale, thin fellows do. Doggone it, I did want to catch that eight-fourteen. I simply must make Clinton City tonight.”

He swiftly examined the prostrate man.

“He’ll come out of it, all right,” said the traveler. Glancing around for help, he saw, far down the street, the blue bulk of a policeman strolling unconcernedly along, his eyes contemplating the heavens.

“He’ll find the poor chap, sure,” said the traveler. “I’ll do what I can, and run.”

The traveler’s hand went round to his hip pocket and drew out a flat silver flask. Into the mouth of Gilbert Benner he trickled some pungent brandy. Then he snatched up his suitcase, hustled around the corner, dashed into the depot, and caught the eight-fourteen express by an eyelash.

Officer Gregg was so new on his job that the original creases were still in his uniform, and his brass buttons glowed with their pristine brightness. He had been patrolling along, lamenting that his beat was so quiet, so uneventful. Now, if only there’d be a murder, or a good fight, or— He stopped short. His wish seemed to have come true. He bent over the still unconscious Benner, and then, remembering Lesson 17, in the police book of etiquette, he critically sniffed Benner’s breath. The result made him brighten.

“Ah,” exclaimed Officer Gregg. “Soused. This is a case for the wagon.”

He wished his girl might have been there to see the nonchalance with which he stepped to the signal box, called headquarters, and for the first time in his official career, summoned the police patrol.

On the jolting way to the station, Gilbert Benner recovered sufficient consciousness to ask, somewhat thickly:

“What’s this? Where am I?”

“Now, then,” said Officer Gregg, sternly, “don’t you go trying to pull any rough stuff.”

Gilbert Benner was still so weak that he had to be carried into the police station. The desk sergeant surveyed him with blasé, iceberg eyes.

“Put ’im in the cooler, Joe.”

“But—but—” began to protest Gilbert Benner, whose faculties were slowly returning.

“Tell it to the judge in the morning,” said the desk sergeant coldly.

The judge had a headache that morning, due to what he had been doing the night before, and he listened to Gilbert Benner’s story with the bored air of a man listening to an after-dinner speaker tell a poor anecdote for the fourth time.

“First offender, eh?” the judge queried.

“I’m not an offender at all, Your Honor,” said Gilbert Benner, who was trembling.

“Well, don’t do it again,” said the judge, “or if you do, stay in your house. Discharged.”

Gilbert Benner went back to his office. The news would have reached there before him; he knew that. They didn’t say anything when he came in, late for the first time in a dozen years, but the bookkeeper looked at the stenographer, and Gilbert Benner saw the look. He was thinking of that look when he wrote a six for a nine in making out one of his company’s checks. The vigilant Mr. McHarg was quick to note the error and pounce upon it. He called Benner to him.

“Here, here, Gil. This wont do. Watch your step,” said Mr. McHarg, and his voice was sharp; he had never spoken like that to Gilbert Benner before.

McHarg did not refer to Gilbert Benner's experience—not in so many words, anyhow; but he didn't need to; Gil Benner could read his eyes.

That night as he was walking home, Boles sidled up to Gilbert Benner. Gilbert had always avoided Boles, who was foreman in the planing-room, and was fat and untidy and had a swollen nose like mottled soap

"Say, Gil," said Boles, "let's stop in at the Dutchman's."

"No, thanks."

"He's got," said Boles, "some prime rye. Just came in. Reg'lar stuff."

"Not interested," said Gil Benner.

Boles rubbed a raspy chin with a calloused thumb and screwed up his face in a wink.

"Of course," said Mr. Boles, "there's some that don't like rye. But you can get some wicked Scotch there."

"I don't drink," said Gilbert Benner.

Mr. Boles made a sniggering noise.

"Oh, no!" he said. "Oh, no!"

Gilbert Benner washed up his dinner dishes and put them away. But he saved out a piece of cake, for he was expecting Mrs. Kelly to drop in that night to talk over the career of one of the Kellys,—Monica—who was doing well with the telephone company but of late had felt an urge to go to a big city and become a chorus girl. Mrs. Kelly had said she would come; she always came to him with her problems; but she did not come.

When he bowed to old Mrs. Lock as she was scrubbing her four-by-four front porch next morning, she returned his bow, politely. But she did not hurry down to the gate to gossip with him, as on other mornings, she who loved gossip more than anything in the world. Having bowed, she kept scrubbing away at her bit of porch.

She was about due to come in and borrow some tea, too. He kept the kind she especially liked—gunpowder—although he didn't like it much himself. But she did not come to borrow

—“Only just a drawing, Gil Benner, just a drawing. Oh, not that much. That’s too much—well, if you insist!”

He wanted very much to take her some tea that evening; but he remembered that she had not smiled when she bowed to him in the morning.

He had agreed to go over Friday evening to mind the little Wassers while the big Wassers went to the Bijou Dream. He knew that their favorite of all the picture stars was at the local theater that week, so he went over early. The little Wassers ran up to him with squeals of delight, but the big Wassers showed less animation in their greeting.

“The wife and I have decided to stay home tonight,” said Mr. Wasser, not looking at Gilbert Benner, but at a picture of a box of pansies in a thick gilt frame that hung in the parlor.

“Oh,” said Gilbert Benner, “I see.” And he went out with the candy rabbits still in his pocket.

The time had come, down at the Old Brick Church, to elect lay officers for the coming year, and of course Gilbert Benner would be made treasurer for the tenth consecutive time. He always made a speech when the Reverend Mr. Leeming said: “I hope we can prevail upon our good friend Benner to accept the office for another year.” Gilbert’s speech did not vary, but went: “I deem it not only a duty, but an honor and a privilege to serve.” Actually the job was a nuisance, for the ladies were often slow with their pledges for the missionary fund, and the church dinners and sociables had a way of getting their finances extremely tangled. But Gil Benner did the work gladly, proudly.

This year, at the meeting, the Reverend Mr. Leeming was extra affable in a nervous way, beaming from behind his glasses and shaking hands with everybody twice. When the nominations for treasurer were in order, Mr. Leeming, mopping his brow, began:

“Ah, well—it seems to—and I think our—ah—good friend Benner will agree—that we have been imposing on his—ah—good nature too long—and that it might be a good idea if we—ah—let some one else bear the burden—”

“I nominate Mr. Finch,” said a voice.

Confused, almost stunned, Gilbert Benner heard “Seconded.” “Any other nominations? Then, I declare the nominations closed, and Mr. Elmore C. Finch is elected treasurer for the ensuing year.”

Gilbert Benner did not wait for the end of the meeting, as he had always done, but he went home up the hill in Cannon Street. It seemed to him that his neighbors came to their windows, slyly, to watch him pass. He went up to his room, and lay on his bed, but sleep was far from him. He could hear Mrs. Lock's high voice, as she gossiped with Mrs. Wasser over the front gate. Scraps of sentences came to him. "Of course. Guess he's been doing it for years..... On the sly. You can't tell me—these men that act so good—I know they do good things in public to square themselves with God for doing bad things nobody knows about..... Yes, aint it the truth? No, I never even suspected, did you? .... You can't tell me—it aint human for a body to go round looking for chances to do something for other folks—sort of forcing things on you, like—it just Yes, I guess you could sort of excuse it in a fellow like Tim Kelly, who never pretended to be any better than he was and got roaring drunk every Saturday regular, but these good men—"

"Well,"—lying there, Gil Benner recognized the voice of Mrs. Wasser,—“Max says secret drinkers is always kind to children. But you can just bet I aint going to trust Junior and Irma and little Sid to him again; no sir! You never can tell when a man like that will fly off into delirious trimmings—you can't—”

"That's just what Mrs. Kelly says," remarked the voice of Mrs. Lock, "and she oughta know, since her Tim fell down a well while havin' 'em. And she says that her boy Francis and Mr. McHarg—down at the yard—was saying the same thing—they may have to get rid of him, Francis says. Drinking leads to stealing, you know.... I guess you're right, all right, Mrs. Lock. When a man acts good, you can be sure that he's up to some sort of deviltry—”

The next evening Gilbert Benner got slowly up from his desk, took off his shiny alpaca coat and put on his blue serge coat, and started for home. His steps lagged; they were no longer brisk.

Boles came sidling up to him.

"Say, Gil," said Mr. Boles, "let's drop in at the Dutchman's. Case of Scotch just in from Canada. Make a dove bite an eagle, it would. What say?"

"All right," said Gilbert Benner.