

Tom the Telephone Boy

**Or
The Mystery of a Message**

**BY
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Tom the Telephone Boy



“Mr. Cutter came in, turning on the electric light as he did so.”

TOM THE TELEPHONE BOY

CHAPTER I

A QUEER CUSTOMER

“HURRAH! Good news, mother!” cried Tom Baldwin, as he hurried into the house, throwing his hat on the rack. “Fine luck! Where are you?”

“Upstairs, sewing,” replied a woman’s voice. “My, Tom, but you are making quite a noise.”

“Can’t help it, mother! I’ve got good news! I’ve got a job!”

“Have you really, Tom? Come right up and tell us about it. I’m very glad!”

“Tell him to be sure and wipe his feet,” added another woman’s voice, from the same upstairs-room where Mrs. Baldwin was sewing. “The snow’s melting outside, and he’ll track it all over the house.”

“I guess he has already done so, Sallie,” said Tom’s mother a little ruefully. “He’s half-way upstairs now.”

“Land sakes! And that carpet only just cleaned! What terrible creatures boys are!”

“Not so very bad, Sallie,” replied Mrs. Baldwin with a smile.

Meanwhile, Tom was coming up the stairs with a rush, and when he reached the top he found his mother in the hall waiting for him. He kissed her affectionately, and then followed her into the room from which she had emerged to greet him.

The apartment was a small front one, and contained two sewing machines, and, from the cloth, patterns, needles and thread scattered about, it did not need a sign to tell that dressmaking was conducted in it.

“Hello, Aunt Sallie!” exclaimed Tom, as he prepared to sit down on a chair near the door.

“Mercy! Goodness me! Don’t sit there!” cried Miss Sarah Ramsey, Tom’s maiden aunt, who was called “Sallie” by Tom and by his mother. “Look out, Thomas!”

“Why? What’s the matter? Is there a pin or a needle in it?” asked Tom, as he paused and looked apprehensively at the chair, which contained some fluffy white material.

“Needle! Pin! Why, Thomas Jefferson Baldwin! That’s the ruching for the neck of Mrs. Anderson’s new dress, and if you had sat on that, and crushed it, I don’t know what I’d have done,” and Aunt Sallie became positively pale over the thought.

Tom knew she had been much wrought up over the threatened calamity, for she never gave him his full name—Thomas Jefferson Baldwin—unless she was very serious indeed.

“Huh!” exclaimed the boy. “I didn’t think that bunch of white stuff was anything.”

“There, Tom, I’ll take it out of the way,” said his mother. “Now you can sit down and tell us all about it.”

“Yes, and try and be quiet about it,” cautioned his aunt. “When you talk so loud you make my head ache, and my nerves are all

unstrung now with trying to get the sleeves in this waist. I never saw such styles as they wear now-a-days.”

“Have you really got work, Tom?” asked Mrs. Baldwin.

“Yes, mother, and a good job, too.”

“Where is it?”

“I hope it is in some place where you will have a chance to advance, and improve yourself,” put in Miss Ramsey quickly. “Boys need improving very much, now-a-days.”

“Then this ought to be just the place for it,” said Tom, with a laugh. “It’s in a book store, and I expect, before long, I’ll know enough, from reading the books, to become a school teacher or a professor.”

“That would be very nice,” remarked Tom’s aunt, as if he really meant what he said.

“Have you really got a place in a book store, Tom?” inquired his mother, as she threaded a sewing machine, preparatory to doing some stitching.

“Yes, in Townsend’s Book Emporium, as it’s called. It’s on Milk Street, and it’s one of the largest book stores in Boston. I saw a sign out ‘Boy Wanted,’ and I went in. I didn’t expect to get the place, for I’ve been disappointed so often of late, but I made up my mind I’d try.

“Mr. Townsend—he’s a nice elderly gentleman—asked me a lot of questions, and when I got through answering them he told me to come to work in the morning. Isn’t that good news?”

“Indeed, it is,” replied Mrs. Baldwin.

“How much will you get?” asked his aunt anxiously. “When I was a girl, boys in book stores didn’t get more than three dollars a week.”

“Times have changed since then,” declared Tom, with a laugh. “I’m to get five dollars. There’s only one bad thing about it, though.”

“What’s that?” asked Mrs. Baldwin.

“I’m only hired during the holiday rush. They want a boy to help out, and that’s what I’m to do. I’ll have to look for something else after the first of the year. Still, it’s better than nothing, and there are four weeks more of this year left.”

“I wish it was a permanent place,” remarked Tom’s mother. “But, of course, as you say, it’s better than nothing. Perhaps if you do well, they may keep you permanently.”

“I hope they do, mother. But have you any work that you want me to take home?”

“Not yet, Tom. Mrs. Anderson’s dress isn’t quite finished. There is more work on it than I thought there would be, and it is going to take me a day longer.”

“That means you won’t make so much money then,” said Tom, soberly.

“Yes, that is so. If I had it finished I could sew on that skirt for Mrs. Thompson, and she is prompt pay.”

“I can’t sew as fast as I once could,” remarked Tom’s aunt. “I’m afraid I’m not much help to you, Jeanette.”

“Indeed, you are!” exclaimed Mrs. Baldwin, kindly. “I don’t know what I’d do without you—and Tom.”

“If you haven’t anything for me to do then,” went on the lad, “I think I’ll get something to eat. I didn’t have any dinner.”

“Oh, Tom! Didn’t you?”

“No; I saved the money for car fare, as I didn’t know how far I’d have to go before I struck a job. Then, when I got this one in the book store, I thought I might as well come home and get a bite as to go to a restaurant, so I’ve got the quarter left.”

“But, Tom, you must take care of your health,” said his mother. “Going without your dinner, to save money, is poor economy. You can’t afford to get sick, with two women to look after,” and she smiled fondly at her son.

“Oh, I guess it didn’t hurt me, mother. But I certainly am hungry now. Is there any jam left?”

“Yes; you’ll find it in the pantry.”

Tom went downstairs, and was soon rattling away at the dishes in the cupboard.

“Look at that!” exclaimed his aunt, as she pointed to a patch of snow and mud left by Tom’s shoes in the middle of the sewing room. “Isn’t that awful! Oh, boys are such terrible creatures!”

“I’m glad I have one,” declared Mrs. Baldwin fondly, as she wiped up the mud with an old rag. “There are worse things than muddy shoes, Sallie.”

Miss Ramsey sighed, but said nothing. Meanwhile, the “terrible boy” was satisfying a very healthy appetite, thinking, between bites, of his good luck in finding work.

For he needed employment very much. Tom Baldwin’s father had died about three years before this story opens, leaving his wife and son a small house, in Boston, but no money. Of course, Mrs. Baldwin could have sold the house, and lived for a time on what she got for it, but she preferred to keep it. She had been a good seamstress in her younger days, and she determined to try to earn her living by dressmaking.

But she soon found that dressmaking, as she had seen it conducted when she was a girl in the country, and the way it is done now-a-days, was quite different. She could barely get enough to do to make a living for herself and Tom, who was too young to go to work, and who attended a public school.

Finding she had not the skill necessary to compete with the department stores and with modern dressmakers, Mrs. Baldwin sent for her maiden sister to come and help her. Miss Ramsey was a better sewer than Mrs. Baldwin, but her health was poor, and between them, the two women could barely make both ends meet.

Much against her will Mrs. Baldwin had to take Tom from school and put him to work. He got a position in an office, where he earned three dollars a week. This helped a little, and

as he proved efficient he was advanced until in about two years he was earning eight dollars.

Times seemed better then, for, having no house rent to pay, Mrs. Baldwin got along fairly well on Tom's money, and what she and her sister could earn. But the dressmaking business grew worse, instead of better, and the two women had to depend more and more on Tom.

Then came a dark day when the firm that Tom worked for failed, and he and many others lost their places. From then on the little family of three had a hard struggle. Had it not been for the sewing the women did, and which just managed to keep them, the house would have had to be sold.

Work was hard to get in Boston, that year, and it seemed with the approach of winter, that times were worse than ever. Tom tramped the streets day after day, looking for a situation, but in vain, although occasionally he managed to get odd jobs to do.

Then came the unexpected, when he saw the sign in front of the book store, applied, and was taken. No wonder Tom felt happy as he rushed home with the good news.

The boy was at Townsend's Book Emporium early the next morning. There were several other clerks employed, and Tom was told by the proprietor, Elmer Townsend, that his duties would be to run on all sorts of errands, to sweep out the store, dust the books, and, in a rush, wait on customers.

"I want you to make yourself as familiar as possible with the books," said Mr. Townsend. "Here is a catalogue, and I have marked on it just what part of the store each book is in. The

price of each book is written on the upper right-hand corner of the first fly-leaf, but as it is in letters, instead of figures, you will have to learn what the letters mean."

Tom thought it was a queer plan to mark the selling-price in letters instead of figures, but he was soon enlightened.

"That is done so customers will not know the prices of books," said his employer. "I take a word of ten letters, and each letter represents a figure from 1 to 0. Then, by combining the letters I can make any figure I want. Do you understand?"

Tom said that he did, and he had soon mastered the little problem so that he could, after a little study, tell the selling-price of any book, by looking at the small letters on the first page.

The book store was quite a large one. Tom had never seen so many volumes in one room before, except in a library, and he began to think he had come to just the right place, for he was fond of reading and study, and he made up his mind he would have a good time perusing his favorite volumes.

But if our hero had an idea that clerks in book stores spend their time pleasantly in looking at pictures and reading stories, he was soon disappointed.

He found himself ordered here and there by the other clerks. He had to bring books from the front of the store to the back, and from the back to the front. He had to get out bundles of wrapping-paper, and balls of twine. He had to dust off long rows of volumes, and when a clerk was trying to wait on two customers at once, Tom had to tie up books to be sent to

various addresses given by the purchasers. The lad hoped he would be sent out to do some delivering, but he learned that the volumes went by a local express company, with which Mr. Townsend had a yearly contract.

Tom was in the back part of the store, arranging some pamphlets that had been scattered about, when he saw an elderly gentleman walk slowly along the aisle formed by the book tables, and pausing before some historic volumes, take one from the row on the shelves.

“Ha! Um! Here it is!” exclaimed the old gentleman, as he peered through his spectacles at the printed page. “I knew I was right. It isn’t there! Here, boy!” he called suddenly, glancing over the tops of his glasses at Tom. “Just you hold this book open a minute, right there, and keep your finger on this line,” and he held the volume out to the lad. Wonderingly, Tom complied.

The queer customer ran his finger along the row of books, took out another, leafed it over rapidly, and uttered an exclamation. Then, placing this book down on a table, and holding it open with one hand, he reached for a third volume, which he extended to Tom.

“Open that at page twenty-one,” he said.

“I can’t,” replied the boy, “unless I let go of this other book.”

“That’s so, I forgot. Well, give me the first book. I can keep two places at once.”

Tom passed it over, and the old gentleman now had two books open before him.

“Have you got page twenty-one?” he asked Tom, as he bent close over the opened books.

“Yes, sir.”

“Is there anything on it about the ancient Hickhites having used belladonna in fevers?”

“No,” answered Tom slowly, as he read down the page. “This seems to be an account of how to make a fruit cake.”

“A fruit cake! What do you mean?”

“This is a cook book, sir,” replied Tom.

“A cook book! Goodness me! I must have picked up the wrong memoranda when I hurried from the house.”

He rapidly searched through his pockets, and produced a crumpled piece of paper.

“That’s what I did,” he announced. “I picked up a memoranda made out by my sister-in-law. It’s about buying a new cook book she saw advertised. My memoranda was on the use of belladonna among the ancient Hickhites. I differed from a certain historian, and I wanted to look it up. I have taken her memoranda, and left mine. Well, well, I must be losing my memory. I’m sorry I bothered you.”

“It was no bother at all,” said Tom politely.

“I’m glad of it. I hate to bother any one. Now let me see. There was another book I wanted to get. What was it about? I thought I would remember it. I know I had it on my mind when I was looking at the first volume of the new edition of Motley’s Dutch

Republic—um—er—well, I can't think. I'll have to go back home and get my list."

He took the cook book from Tom, and placing it, with the two other volumes, under his arm, started to walk out of the store. At once there flashed through Tom's mind the idea that this was a slick swindler, who had adopted this method of stealing books.

"Wait a minute!" he called. "Shan't I wrap those books up for you?"

He thought this would be a polite way of calling the attention of Mr. Townsend or some clerk to the actions of the queer customer.

"What books?" asked the old gentleman innocently.

"Those under your arm."

"Have I some books under my arm? Why, goodness gracious, so I have! I'm glad you called my attention to them, young man, or I might have walked off with them. My, my! but I am getting to have a poor memory! To think of carrying off books without paying for them!"

"It's a good thing I caught him in time, or Mr. Townsend might have blamed me," thought Tom.

Just then Mr. Townsend came to the rear of the store. He caught sight of the old gentleman.

“Why, Dr. Spidderkins! How do you do?” he exclaimed. “I am real glad to see you? What can I show you to-day? I didn’t know you were here, or I would have attended to you personally.”

“I guess I made a mistake,” said Tom to himself.

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