

**In Which a Small Manufacturer and a Powerful Trust
Lock Horns in a Conflict Which Results in a Cleverly
Earned Victory for One of Them**



O, SIR!" said old Mr. Gregory. "Not a dollar—not a red cent, sir!"

Then he lowered his head, bull fashion, and glared over his glasses at Higham, seated beside the desk. It was preposterous—preposterous! Nephew or no nephew, he had no right to come begging for a loan—a fellow situated as he was. In the distant day of Mr. Gregory's youth, a young man had started business on \$100 or \$200, or possibly even \$500; and grubbed for twenty years, and thanked God for the chance. But this thing of a boy—a mere young one of 28—owning a manufacturing plant! Of course he was in a middle—and served him right, sir!

"Even \$1000 would carry me over, you know," Higham advanced, rather wearily.

"It won't be my thousand, sir—let me assure you of that! I'll drop no money into that bottomless pit of yours! You had to make your venture—now get out of it in the best fashion you can!"

"But it isn't a venture," Higham asserted, with some heat. "We've been running for five years or more already, and paid a profit every year. Don't you understand that if Benning hadn't turned tail and left the concern and taken his money with him I shouldn't be in this hole?"

"It appears to me, James, that your partner, Benning, exhibited a far greater degree of horse sense than yourself."

"Possibly."

"Yes, sir, he did!" Mr. Gregory pursued. "Benning's well out of it. You're not. You've got your soap factory and your big stock and so on—and the trust people have got you! Right by the nape of the neck, sir! And they'll shake you well. Yet on top of that, sir, you come here and ask me for \$1000—"

"I retract that," said Higham, stiffly, arising. "I don't want it."

"Err! Sour grapes, sir! And now we're flying into a passion, eh?" rasped old Mr. Gregory.

"I think I'll go before I say anything that may need an apology later. Good-day."

"I say, James—James—tut, tut! Let him go!" snapped the old gentleman, as the door closed with somewhat impolite vigor.



"Does this mean, Mr. Higham, that you refuse?"

Well, hope from that quarter had departed, Higham reflected, as he left the building and bent his footsteps toward his unfortunate soap factory. Where else could he look for ready money? Higham abandoned it as a hopeless speculation and scowled at the pavement.

It was tough! Yes, it was just the limit of bad luck! If Benning hadn't deserted! But Benning had—at the very first sign of pressure from the trust—and his wretched \$200 had gone with him.

Higham frowned as he recalled their last discussion, its civil beginning and its violent ending. He remembered with disgust how they had passed from business arguments to highly invidious personalities, and from that almost to blows; until at the last they dissolved their partnership, amid the hot haze of wordy battle staked,

and separated as enemies.

Benning was a thoroughly low-down, mean sort, too—Higham was well aware of that. If he saw a way to injure Higham, there was no doubt whatever that he would use it to the utmost and derive a quantity of petty satisfaction from the act. There were certain epithets which Higham had applied to Benning at that last memorable interview that the latter gentleman would be long in forgiving.

Indeed, from recent happenings, it seemed palpable that Benning had disclosed to Gorman Brothers—otherwise the trust—certain inside details of Higham's business, from the sole desire to injure his quondam partner. Two or three matters could be explained upon no other ground. Higham clinched his fists as he hurried along and yearned for an opportunity to plant them upon Benning's person.

He was ready enough for a fair fight in business; but the trust worked on different lines.

At the beginning, just after Benning's defection, they had sent a representative to Higham, with an offer of \$5000 for his Star Soap Works, lock, stock and barrel.

Five thousand dollars for the whole business! Higham had turned down the proposition in a pithy little speech which promptly ended negotiations with the trust.

Then the trust had gone to cutting prices—and good heavens! how they had slashed at them! White soap or brown soap, laundry soap or toilet soap, they seemed fairly determined to sell it for less than Higham could buy the raw materials.

People who had ordered steadily all the five years that they had been making soap dropped off their books by the score. They were buying of the trust—and why not? They could get the same thing—or almost the same thing—for little more than half the old prices.

Higham had cut and cut, too, and manufactured in huge quantities in the effort to cheapen his soap; and, after all, he could only put to himself that painful question—*cut bono?*

For the Star Soap Works was crazily overstocked with soap, and the Star Soap Works' bank account had dwindled almost to a negative quantity, and the Star Soap Works' business would not have consumed—and in fact did not consume—the time and attention of one clerk for one hour daily!

It was a combination, of trust, overproduction and Benning; and so far as was apparent to Higham, the three quantities together were about to write "nims" to the biography of the Star Soap Works. It was a poor sort of goal, after five solid years of hustling.

Higham let himself into the soap works through a rear door, at which he arrived shortly. It was silent and lonely, for no wonted hum of machinery greeted his ear.

away from the spectacle and made for the office.

He favored Rudolph, his general utility young man, with a lifeless good-morning, and passed to the private office. Rudolph was upon the verge of being out of a job; probably he understood that, but he might as well have official notification.

Higham twisted around to call the boy and impart the dire information, when that individual entered the office with a stack of letters.

"Eh? What?" said Higham, staring in amazement at the collection.

"And they all came in the first mail," replied Rudolph, who had recovered from his own astonishment at the phenomenon.

"But we haven't had more than two letters a day, lately! Brown & Brown—Cogswell Company—Jenkinson Brothers—" muttered Higham, running over the names on the envelope corners. They were all old customers of the Star, long since captured by the trust. What had happened?

"All right, Rudolph. I'll attend to them."

He opened the envelope with shaking fingers and scanned the letter. Then his eyes opened wide and he whistled in sheer amazement, for the communication read:

"Gentlemen: Kindly ship us at your earliest convenience two gross cakes XXX laundry soap, and oblige, yours very truly,
BROWN & BROWN."

"What under the sun—" Higham began. "Are they coming back to me, after all? Has the trust gone out of business?"

The letter was short and sweet—but it was an order! Actually, an order for two gross of soap, and from an old customer at that!

The next epistle turned out to be even more startling. It hailed from Jenkinson Brothers; and the sister Jenkinson herself not two months ago, had given Higham to understand that their business relations were over until the Star Soap Works could hammer down its prices to the trust level. Now they wanted twelve cases of "Mayfair," Higham's beloved white toilet soap! And Cogswell duplicated it, and went better with an order for brown soap! And Richards came next with a request for a bill of goods that would have elated Higham in the firm's most palmy days!

There were letters from druggists and wholesale grocers, from department stores and jobbers; and they all wished to buy that commodity of which Higham was so heartily sick—*soap!*

"Good Lord!" he ejaculated, when he had opened half the letters. Is it a dispensation of Providence!

Unhappily for that pleasant illusion, a clue to the mystery came with the next letter:

"Gentlemen: We beg to file our order for twenty-four cases of 'Mayfair' for immediate delivery, at prices quoted in the current Grocers and Druggists' Journal. Yours truly,
"SANFORD & SMITH."

"Prices quoted in the current Journal," Higham repeated. "I haven't been quoting prices in the Journal! Prices quoted—"

He reached to the table, where lay the week's copy of the trade paper. Certainly, he had been quoting no prices, there or elsewhere. Quoting prices had seemed an imbecile waste of time and money, lately. He had not even felt sufficient interest in the paper to remove its wrapper. What other people were doing in the line was no earthly concern of his.

But now he opened the sheet with alacrity and turned the crisp pages.

At first neither his name nor that of the Star Soap Works appeared. He had almost reached the last page when the thing stood out before him in glaring black type, among the advertisements:

"THE STAR SOAP WORKS OFFER."

And there followed an outrageous list of quotations on his grades of soap—a list compiled by one intimately familiar with his stock; a list which named prices by some cents lower than the trust's most desperate cut!

"That's Benning's work!" said Higham, leaning back with an angry scowl!

There seemed to be no question. An outsider could never have listed his stock so accurately, could never have devised so unerringly such utterly ruinous prices! Benning, long known to the Journal people as a member of the firm, had inserted the advertisement, and its purpose was clear.

Higham had now two alternatives. Either he must publicly repudiate the quotations, and thus admit that his attempt at competition with the trust was dead and done for, and that people might as well buy elsewhere if they were looking for bargain prices; or he must take the pile of orders and fill them—and get out of business.

There was no doubt as to that last. When he had disposed of his soap at the Journal quotations and pocketed the entailed losses, he could never go on and fight the combine. And yet—

The proprietor of the Star walked to the window and stared abstractedly at the huge brick building two blocks away.

By chance, he and the trust were near neighbors. That immense red structure represented the machine that was grinding him to bits.

He wondered whether the trust was chuckling over his predicament—certainly they knew that he had never published those quotations. In all probability, they were waiting for him to refute them. Then they would sail in and put the Star Soap Works hors du combat for all time.

What should he do? Do? Benning's spite, expressed in the advertisement, seemed to have settled that question. He could write all the people who had ordered and tell them that the advertisement was a fraud—and shut up shop. Or he could sell out at a heartbreaking loss—and shut up shop.

Either way, the Star Soap Works had reached the end of its rope. Still—

Higham returned to his desk, opened the balance of the letters and figured for a time on the back of an envelope. There were orders sufficient to clear out a good quarter of his stock.

All right—he'd fill them! He would abide by the terms of Benning's advertisement and sell out his soap at the ruinous figures, to the very last cake! He'd die fighting—or with the appearance of fighting, at least. And when the stuff was all paid for, there would be a little cash for him to take out, and the machinery was worth something—although not much—at second hand.

It was better than sacrificing his stock later, and the loss no greater. For two or three days, or perhaps a week, the Star Soap Works should do a rushing business; even the trust couldn't cut under the murderous prices in the Journal. And if the Star Soap Works must go up in smoke, at least a little blaze of glory should precede the fumes.

With considerable amazement Rudolph received the memorandum of orders to be sent out that day. With even greater surprise the truckman shortly heard that young man's voice over the telephone, for he had harbored the impression of late that Higham was dead.

He sent a pair of double trucks, and they backed up before the Star Soap Works. Men began to pass out cases, until dozens and literally hundreds of them stood on the little shipping platform. Then they were loaded on to the trucks and carted away to their various destinations.

A couple of blocks down the street a man on one of the upper floors of the trust factory happened to note the activity, and remarked upon it to another man. The second man unhooked the telephone on his desk and transmitted the information to the general offices, downstairs.

An impression took shape in the trust offices that Higham had inherited money or gone insane; for the advertisement was evidently genuine, and the Star Soap Works was shipping stocks in quantities.

By night, a quarter of the storehouse had been cleaned out. Next morning, a fresh assortment of orders greeted Higham. He classified them, made out another memorandum and handed it over to Rudolph.

That day the truckmen appeared before 10; and they

returned with empty wagons at 4 in the afternoon, to load up once more.

Late in the day, Higham was seated in his offices, wearing a smile that might have passed for serene satisfaction, but which actually denoted the calm of resignation, when a little, black-whiskered man entered.

Higham observed his entrance with secret wonder. The man was the agent of the trust!

So they had noted his spurt of business! But—surely they must realize the shallowness of the demonstration.

Still, it appeared to have caused the trust some concern. After a few preliminaries, it developed that the emissary was there for the sole purpose—the astounding purpose—of offering Higham \$10,000 for the Star Soap Works!

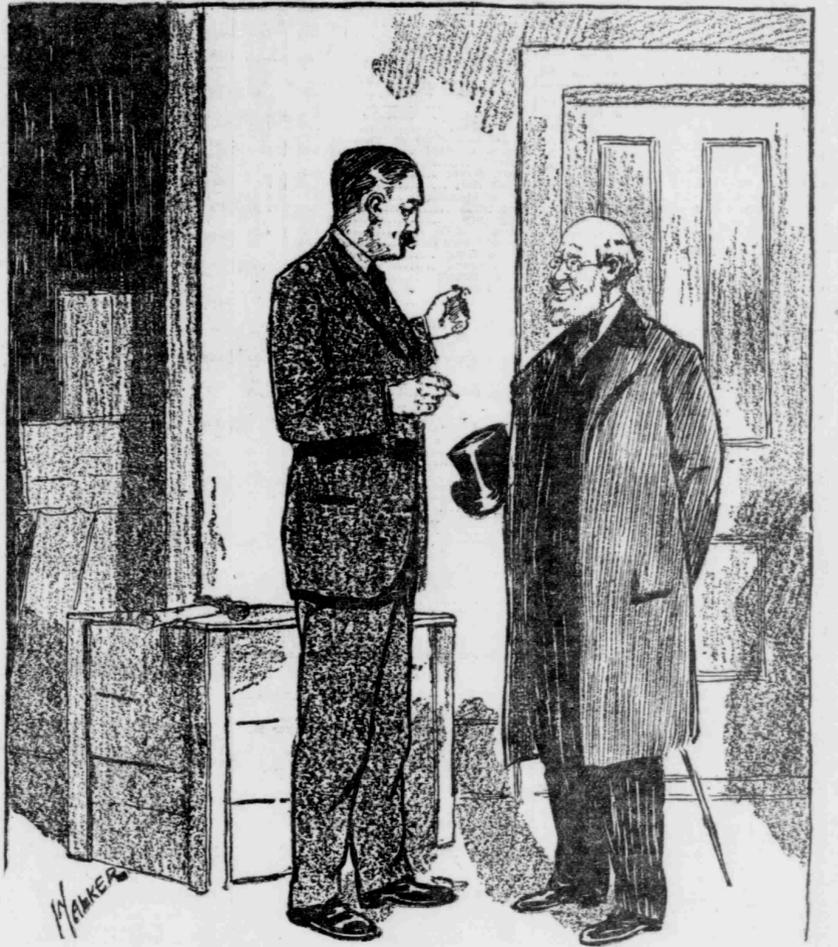
Higham managed to mask the emotions that struggled within him; and the ambiguous smile being as con-

breaking business; and as a consequence of the Journal advertisement the trust's orders had fallen off astonishingly during the week.

It was really a serious situation—an unexpectedly threatening situation. They came to that conclusion in the trust offices. Their salesmen couldn't bring in orders—every one was buying from Higham. And Higham was selling at prices below their own cost of manufacture, and seemed quite likely to keep on doing it. At the pace he was setting, running the Star Soap Works out of business would be a proposition simply tremendous in its actual money losses.

Something must be done and done speedily if the trust was ever to recapture the local trade.

In the end, the people in the executive offices entrusted to the black-whiskered man a bundle of documents, and sent him forth to tackle Higham once more—and have



"Humph!" said old Mr. Gregory. "That sounds like you."

venient as any other expression, he allowed it to remain upon his features.

Ten thousand dollars, eh? Would he accept? Will a duck swim? The place was worth more than that—\$2500 or \$3000 more—but what infinite luck to escape so well!

Higham had almost spoken the words that would have closed the deal, when another idea flashed over him. The trust had been impelled to this action by the amount of shipping he had lately been doing. No other cause could account for it.

Higham drummed an absent-minded tune upon his teeth with his lead pencil. There were possibilities in the situation that had not hitherto appeared to him.

Presently he turned to the trust man with a bland smile.

"Honestly, now," he said, in the most friendly manner possible, "don't you take me for rather an easy mark?"

"Does that mean, Mr. Higham, that you refuse?"

"Assuredly," replied Higham, drawing a cigar from his pocket with the air of a multi-millionaire captain of industry. "Most assuredly."

The trust agent departed in a mental haze. Higham arose and went into the storehouse. It was fast emptying. Tomorrow, or the next day, would show the whole floor bare.

"What an ass I am!" said Higham. "Why didn't I take it and be satisfied?"

But he was committed now. He returned to the office and drew forth the Star Soap Works bank book. A balance of exactly \$272 remained. It was enough. Higham seated himself and wrote a letter; and as he sealed it a pathetic element of doubt entered into his smile.

Now, there are two ways of looking at what followed. First, Higham's way.

On the following morning the familiar quota of orders was awaiting him. He jotted down the items and returned to the storehouse. One by one he checked off the list; and when he had done he perceived that not more than eighty-three full cases of soap would be there that evening. The stock was exhausted!

On the morning after that he found quite as many orders for soap; but this time he bunched them with a rubber band and laid them away for future attention.

From the street, one could observe operations in the second way—as the trust saw them. Cases of soap were coming out thick and fast, and Rudolph and Rudolph's brother, who had been called in to help, went rapidly over them with the marking brush. The truckmen scurried around and piled boxes of soap on their trucks and drove away, and returned later for more boxes of soap. At night—although this did not appear from the street—the storehouse was empty.

Next day, Rudolph exclaimed when Higham left the mail unopened, and a few words passed between them. Rudolph grinned, and the day's business began.

The trucks appeared as usual. So did the cases. One by one, they were carried out of the storehouse and marked and loaded upon the wagons. One by one the wagons drove away with their loads.

From the chimney of the Star Soap Works volumes of soft coal smoke belched forth, and the rattle of machinery was audible in the street.

In the trust factory, the black-whiskered man ascended to the top floor on the freight elevator, viewed the situation and scratched his head. It appeared that Higham was manufacturing at high pressure and shipping soap at a rate that was nothing less than astounding. But how the dickens was he doing it? Who had put up the money?

One way followed another, until a week had passed; and with the regularity of time itself, the daily programme was repeated at the Star Soap Works. The chimney smoked furiously, the trucks backed up, the boxes of soap were loaded on. More boxes emerged from the storehouse and were piled on the platform, where Rudolph and his brother marked them, under Higham's pious supervision.

The Star Soap Works was doing close to a record-

the thing over with on the spot!

The owner of the Star Soap Works was frankly reluctant to consider any proposition. He said so, and smiled with smug self-satisfaction as he said it.

They could see how he had stirred up some little business for himself—they could see just what he was doing. He wasn't anxious to sell out, for spot cash or any other consideration.

But he of the black whiskers was persistent and persuasive. He purred and reasoned, and argued and analyzed and cajoled. He played up the cogent point—and then that. He dilated upon the terms "spot cash." He told Higham—almost to a dollar—what the Star Soap Works was worth, and then laughed deprecatingly as he mentioned their price.

Very slowly, very gradually, very grudgingly, Higham allowed himself to come over to the trust man's views.

Rudolph was at last dispatched for the notary across the street. And when that person had performed his solemn office, the Star Soap Works belonged to the trust! The deal was closed, and the black-whiskered man departed. He had been obliged to go the limit, but he was satisfied. The trust's last and formidable antagonist had been "absorbed." Even the swirling clouds of black smoke above the Star Soap Works belonged to them now.

Alone in his office, Higham's lips expanded into a smile; they broadened into a grin; then they parted and Higham's robust laugh set the place a-ringing. He flourished a bit of paper and roared and roared again.

When he had quite finished, he perceived that old Mr. Gregory had entered and was regarding him with an inquiring smile.

"I dropped in, James," said his uncle, "to inquire out of pure curiosity what the devil you're doing!"

"At the moment, I'm laughing."

"So I perceive. But what has happened? I'm hearing about it everywhere. They say that you are suddenly doing a tremendous business—sending out hundreds of boxes of soap a day! Where the deuce did you get the money, sir?"

"I didn't get any money," said Higham. "Here's all I have on earth."

He handed over the slip.

"God bless my soul! Twenty-five thousand dollars!"

"Exactly. The Star Soap Works has sold out to the soulless corporation."

"Good gracious! How—how—how—"

"I'll tell you, uncle," said Higham. "Benning inserted a notice in the Grocers and Druggists' Journal, in my name, advertising prices on my soap for which no mortal could sell it and survive. Of course, orders rained in. I determined to sell out the stock and quit. Then the trust man came along and offered to buy me out for \$10,000—and, well, I turned it down."

"Humph!" said old Mr. Gregory. "That sounds like you."

"You see, I caught on to the fact that the trust had been rather jaded by the amount of shipping I'd been doing for a few days. Well, I told McCarthy, the engineer, to start the fires and the machinery—just to give us a little more businesslike air. Also, I decided to do some more shipping, so I went ahead and sent out a couple of hundred cases every day. The trust watched it from their windows, I suppose—and a few minutes ago they bought me out for twenty-five thousand dollars!"

"Yes, yes," said old Mr. Gregory. "That's all very well. Most amazing, I must say—the whole affair! But where the dickens did you get all your soap, sir? You couldn't possibly have manufactured it. Why, you must have shipped something over 1000 boxes!"

"I did—1200 and something," Higham replied. "You know Jones, our truckman?"

"Well?"

"Most of them are piled up in his stable!"

"What?"

"That's where the trust put too much faith in what they saw. The last 300 cases that went out of here were nothing but empty boxes!"