

"We Go Together"

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Must a boy be ashamed of his father just because the man lacks an education? Olsen thought so, and it put an ache in his heart



"Paul," he said, "I think I'll not go. My head is hurting

A Short Story

THE woman in 3B had got her kitchen sink stopped up again. Mr. Olsen was sure that if she'd had to pay a plumber to fix it every time, she'd be more careful. This way it was so easy; she just buzzed the superintendent's bell, and up came Mr. Olsen. "My goodness, Mr. Olsen," she always said, "you can do anything."

In spite of himself, this pleased him—though he knew she was only flattering him so he wouldn't notice the smallness of her tip. He took pride in his ability to fix things.

There wasn't much that went wrong in any of the apartments, from stuck windows to short circuits, that couldn't be taken care of by Mr. Olsen, the superintendent.

"Well, you certainly did that in no time at all," the woman in 3B said. She dropped a small coin into his palm. "You're a wonder."

Mr. Olsen closed the rear door of 3B softly and rang for the service elevator. While he waited, he looked at the coin, shrugged, and slipped it into the pocket of his dark work trousers. He filled his pipe, and found a book of matches in one of the pockets of his faded brown sweater. But he wouldn't light the

pipe until he was in his own apartment. Mr. Olsen was a stickler for rules.

The old man on the rear elevator saluted with mock servility, and Mr. Olsen gave him a gentle little poke in the ribs. "Hello, Pop," he said, in his gentle, softly accented voice.

The old man chuckled. "Your boy's home," he said. "Just saw him come in."

"Yah?" Mr. Olsen smiled, his long, large-boned face breaking into dozens of deep lines. He was a man whose age it was difficult to judge, but when he smiled it was almost impossible, for the smile brought out all those lines, and at the same time lit his blue eyes with a youthful merriment.

HE GOT out of the elevator and walked with brisk, powerful strides toward his neat courtyard apartment. In the kitchen, a boy was pouring himself a glass of milk. As soon as he turned to smile at Mr. Olsen it was evident that they were father and son—yet in a dozen ways they were strikingly different. The boy was considerably darker, and in spite of his youth, more smoothly put together. He was only twelve, but he moved with easy grace and stood straight, sure and sturdy.

"Hello, Dad," he said, in the same soft voice as his father, but with a crisp, clear enunciation. "I just came home for a minute. The gang's waiting for me to play."

Dad, thought Mr. Olsen. As often as he heard it, the word always gave him the same embarrassed pleasure. It had such a fine American dignity, though it still seemed a little strange. He'd always called his own father *papa*, and the boy said *papa* too, until a few years ago. After Ilse died and they moved here and Mr. Olsen got this job in the apartment house, it was changed. All the boys called their fathers *dad* here.

"You did good on the history test?" Mr. Olsen asked.

"I think so. I only know of one answer I'm sure I got wrong."

"Not the Mr. Lincoln's speech?"

"Golly, no." The boy laughed. "I sure couldn't forget that one."

Mr. Olsen laughed too. "Sure not. This one I know myself, we say him so many time: 'Fourscore seven year ago . . .'"

"Okay, okay, that's enough." The boy groaned elaborately and made exaggerated fending-off motions with his hands. "If I have to hear it once more, I'll go nuts!"

"Yah? You go nuts too quick. Say again that hard part, that part I like."

"Aw gee, Dad, the kids are waiting."

"Well, you say for me."

"Conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

"Yah." Mr. Olsen lit his pipe and drew rapidly, gustily. "This is nice thing to remember, Paul. Many things are nice to remember even without tests." He looked at the boy, who waited with the rigid quiet of a stretched spring, and smiled. "Well, okay, you go now."

Paul sprinted into the hall, came back with

his baseball glove. "Here goes to try that inside curve, Dad. Wish me luck."

"That's the one we practice Sunday? Yah, I wish you luck."

The boy streaked out—in a minute was back. "You haven't forgotten tonight, Dad?"

"Tonight?"

"Gosh—you know. The father-and-son dinner at the Scout house. I told you."

"Oh, sure, sure, now I know. The dinner."

"It's okay, then?"

"Yah, sure. Is okay."

The door banged again. Mr. Olsen stood looking at it, wondering whether he'd really forgotten about the dinner, or just pushed it back in his mind where he wouldn't have to think about it. You could do that, he knew, because he'd done it all the time since Ilse died. He didn't think grief was a good companion for a young boy, and so he'd kept his so deep that he himself scarcely knew it was there. Even when he and Paul cleaned the little apartment together and cooked their simple meals, he kept away the thought that their home was incomplete, that they'd be happier with a wife, a mother, and that she'd do a better job of all this.

"We're pretty good cooks, huh?" he'd say to Paul. "We two men together."

And they had made out all right, considering. He'd done what he could to keep the boy from missing a mother, giving up his job in the machine shop and coming here where he could be home when the boy came in from school. Being a superintendent wasn't much, but they had a nice apartment in a good neighborhood, and he could be with Paul the way his mother would have been, watching over him.

ONLY now there was this Scout thing, this father-and-son night. Mr. Olsen knew the boys who'd be there. Four of them lived right here in the house, and all the others came from near-by. They were always dropping in to use Mr. Olsen's workbench in the cellar, and he'd had a hand or a word of advice in almost all the model planes made by the troop. "Gosh, you sure are handy, Mr. Olsen," they'd say, and he'd feel the same glow of pride as when the lady in 3B told him he could do almost anything.

Mr. Olsen, the handyman who was good at unstopping sinks, going to dinner with the fathers of those boys! With Mr. Pratt, who owned this building and a dozen others; with Mr. Lowell, who ran a department store and was distantly related, Paul said, to a famous American poet; with the two doctors, Dr. Curran—who took care of people when they were sick—and Dr. Fairchild, who taught at the university and had nothing to do with sick people but was called doctor just the same. . .

Someone buzzed his phone, and Mr. Olsen answered it. "Yah? Yah, Mrs., I be right up."

IT TOOK him a long time to replace the broken sash cord in 6C, because he couldn't keep his mind on what he was doing. . . If he could be sick tonight and not go, maybe that would be better for Paul. Maybe it would be better for him to have no father at all among all those big, important men, than to have a father whose best suit was tight and frayed and whose learning did not go much beyond what he picked up when he heard Paul's lessons; who could not even speak English properly. . .

He hadn't thought much about it before, but now he wished he could have made something of himself so that Paul would never have to be ashamed of him. If he could have studied; if he could have learned the kind of work that the father of a boy like Paul should do—big, important work. . . How fine to

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