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THE PUSH CART NEIGHBORHOOD

By Arthur H. Folwell.

THE sun, a great, good-natured, red-faced sun, having thrown aside his coverlet of night, was briskly rising. Obvious to all, the season being spring, the hour was early morning, and a delicious freshness filled the air about. First in the sun's path was the fourth or top floor, and darting through the window glass, he caused the Smythe family, or those of its members whose beds had an early exposure, to blink in their sleep. Next he dazzled the shadeless panes of the third or vacant floor, where a white To Let sign made a tempting and conspicuous target. The moments flying, the second or Perkins floor responded to his livening touch and finally, descending to the bottom floor of all, he flashed from window to mirror and from mirror to wall and from wall to ceiling in the snug apartment of Willoughby Rudyard, and would have tried his merriest without question to arouse the Willoughby Rudyards had not the Willoughby Rudyards, both Mr. and Mrs., been up betimes and expecting him.

"Come along!" cried Rudyard masculine, seizing a grip and a folded umbrella. "If we start now, we can miss a car and still take it easy. We're off!"

"If it only stays clear," said Rudyard feminine, passing through the door to the vestibule. "How is the wind, can you tell?"

"Nor'west by nor', half east, as near as I can judge," was the reassuring answer. "But as nautical knowledge was never my strong suit, I of course don't guarantee—"

Now it will be difficult, we imagine, to convince even the most pliant of persons that the mere sight of a line of moving pushcarts, a few yards away, was sufficient to deprive Mr. Willoughby Rudyard of all his knack of speech, but such notwithstanding was the case. A temporary loss, however, nothing more. Mr. Rudyard on recovery gave instant vent to the following exclamation:

"Well, by—thunder!"

Again, as one might promptly claim, there was little or naught in a quintette of pushcarts, each with its swarthy chauffeur, to cause a remark so suggestive of surprise. It is only through the supplementary fact that p-u-s-h-c-a-r-t, in the Rudyard flat, spelled mystery that the matter's real significance is apt to be suspected.

"Where do the Italians come from?" time and again Mrs. Rudyard had asked, as evenings she glanced from her parlor window.

"That's a lot less important than what they come for," Mr. Rudyard an equal number of times had replied. "There is a regular fete of St. Rocco of them, lacking only the candles, around here every night."

All neighborhoods, be they rural or urban, have characteristics which distinguish them from other neighborhoods, sections or localities. In some it is the bracing air. In others, the high ground. In others still, the view, the nearness to car lines or the noted affability of the resi-

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dents. And there are numerous other characteristics, desirable and otherwise, but morally certain were the Willoughby Rudyards that in no "nice" neighborhoods save theirs was the pushcart, the common or garden pushcart and the Italian (unattached) possessed of no pushcart, the chief, the most constant, the most obvious characteristics.

When, one night in winter, on hearing a particularly persistent and high-keyed whistle, Mrs. Rudyard had parted her curtains and seen for the first time a pushcart of peanuts by the opposite curb, she neither displayed nor felt unusual interest. Nor would any one. But as winter departed and spring arrived, the peanut pushcart with its whistle was observed to have chums, companions, affinities, and her interest grew. There appeared nightly an apple pushcart, a gentlemen's furnishings pushcart, a ladies' neckwear pushcart with a wealth of rich furs, and lastly, a pushcart laden to the gunwales with shrines, images and gorgeously tinted saints; these, plus the peanut pushcart, making five in all before the Rudyard door, and yet from observation and experience, the Rudyards had come to know that there was a pushcart up the block, a pushcart down it, another across the street in the shadow of some trees and two perhaps around the nearest corner every night.

Into a trolley climbed the Willoughby Rudyards, a trolley which would take them, the powerhouse willing, to the 6.05 annex boat, and when that trolley was well past the corner and the clang of its gong was for other and for more distant corners, a solitary figure, the figure of a stocky man with gleaming black hair and a checked blouse, came out of the basement entrance of the Rudyard home and hurriedly scanned the street. It was quite deserted. Next, with more deliberation, he scanned the front windows of the two upper floors, the vacant flat not counting, and they, it appeared, were quite the same. Thereupon the man with the gleaming black hair and the checked blouse returned immediately to the door from whence he came out, speaking into the depths beyond, called guardedly but authoritatively:

"Alla right now. Alla sneak."

At this, strange to relate, a number of heavy-soled gentlemen, some with picks, some with shovels, and all with marvelously colored shirts, went forth in single file from the basement floor, and up the basement steps, and down the waking street the way of the creaking pushcarts.

"That—what'a they call it?—a close, a nearby shave," said the man in the checked blouse, grinning to himself.

The man in the checked blouse was Tony, the janitor.

It was late, very late indeed, for a nice neighborhood. Midnight had struck and in no great while it would be 1 o'clock. In the Rudyard apartment there were unmistakable signs of a journey just ended; a top coat thrown over a parlor chair; a dust-streaked derby hat; an umbrella folded not nearly so neatly as it once had been, and a half unpacked valise.

"Oh, nonsense, there's nothing afire," Willoughby Rudyard was saying. "Something is coming in the window, likely. That's what you notice, I guess."

"I don't," retorted Mrs. Rudyard. "It isn't from the outside at all. I can smell it here in our hall, and hereby the spare room; yes, and here by the dumb-waiter, and—Oh-h-h, gr-r-acious!"

She had opened the dumb-waiter and with a little scream of alarm jumped back.

There were no rolling billows of dense smoke; no vicious crackling of flame, but out of the dark of the cellar, now receding, now furiously advancing, there swept up the shaft a tempestuous sound wave of—

"Snores!" gasped Willoughby Rudyard. "Snores and stale tobacco!"

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