The Lancaster Intelligencer.

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FRIDAY EVENING, SEPT. 10, 1880.

The Load of Wood.

BY J. T. TROWBRIDGE.

The boys were talking about the kind of business they would choose, when Uncle Asa came into the room. As Uncle Asa had tried several kinds and been prosperous in all, they appealed to him for advice.

"What I want to know is this," said Charley, in the course of the discussion which followed: "You have bought and sold a good many things, but what has turned out to be the most profitable?"

Uncle Asa considered a moment, while a curious smile passed over his pleasant rosy face.

"Well, if I were to name any one thing which I have handled and which has in the long run proved most to my advantage—well," said the old gentleman, nodding decidedly, "I think I must say, a load of wood."

"A load of wood?" chorused the boys. They had expected he would say wool, or wheat, or hardware, or indigo; and they couldn't believe his reply was quite serious.

"But it is!" said Uncle Asa. "A load of wood, and not a large load, either; not nearly so large as it looked. It was really the beginning of my fortune, and I owe more to it than to anything else I ever dealt in.

"Tell you about it? Of course I will, if you wish it; and perhaps it will help to start you in the right direction.

"It was when I was a boy—about your age Charley; I think I was sixteen that fall. The summer work was well over; the winter school had not yet begun; and my cousin Medad and myself were considering how we should earn a little pocket-money. My father heard us talking over some boyish schemes, and said to us:

"'I can give you an idea better than that. There's the oak that blew over last spring, in the mill-pasture. You may cut it up, and have all you can make out of it.'

"'But there's work in that,' I said.

"'Yes; so there is in almost any honest job that people are willing to pay money for. But it isn't so hard as you think,' said my father. One stroke at a time; so many strokes an hour; so many hours a day. That's the way great things are accomplished. It isn't much of a tree; you'll wish there was more of it before you get through.'

"Well," Uncle Asa continued, "we undertook the job, and we did wish there was more of it. With a cross-cut saw and beetle and wedges, then with a hand saw and an axe, we reduced that tree to stove wood in a very short time; and had fun of it too. Boys have only to be interested in their work, you know, to find it pleasant.

"We saw profit in every stick, and had as much talk about what we would do with the money, as if we had been young millionaires discussing some great project.

"There's a good deal in the way you pile wood, to sell it, Medad said. 'There's Jake Meeker—he says he can take nine cords of wood and pile it over and make ten of it, easy as nothing.'

"'Yes,' I replied; 'and father says he can throw his hat through some of Jake's woodpiles—such great holes! He don't really make ten cords of it that way.'

"'Yes, he does,' Medad insisted. 'There,s holes through every wood-pile; and you measure so much for a cord, whether they're big or little.'

"'But that's cord-word,' I said. 'You can't pile stove-wood so as to make so much more of it.'

"'We'll see about that,' Medad replied, with a laugh. 'We're going to make the most of our job, ain't we?'

"'Of course,' I said; and waited with a good deal of curiosity to see how he would manage.

"He showed me in a day or two. We had an old one-horse wagon; we harnessed Dolly to it, and backed it up to our wood-pile. Then we began to lay the sticks loose in the box, so as to make them take up as much room as possible.

"But they did not fill up as fast as we had expected, for we knew that if we piled them too loosely, they would be apt to shake down together on the way to the village, and so cause our load to shrink before we sold it.

"Medad looked at the wood in the box when it was half filled, and then at that which remained on the ground, and shook his head dubiously. "'Twon't do!' he said. 'We ought to make three loads of it; but at this rate we shan't make two. I've an idea!'"

"What?" I said, wondering how he would get out of the difficulty.

"'Throw it all out again; I'll show ye!'

"I didn't like that notion; but he insisted, and the wood was all unloaded but a few sticks in the bottom of the wagon-box. With these he began to 'build' the load, as he aptly termed it. Instead of laying sticks together all one way, he placed a few on tha bottom far apart, and others crosswise on those, also very far apart, cob-house fashion. Then he called upon me for more wood.

"'But, Mede,' I objected, 'this will never do.'

"'Why won't it do?' he demanded.

"'It's cheating, isn't it?'

"'It's no more cheating than the way Jake Meeker piles his wood is cheating. Other folks do so. Only we make our pile a little more hollow than common.'

"I couldn't deny the truth of the argument. And if others made the most of their money by their skill in piling it, why shouldn't we do the same?

"Still I hesitated. A man might perhaps be accused for cheating a little, but we were preparing to cheat a good deal.

"'The principle is the same,' Medad said, when I mentioned my scruples (pretty fellows we were to talk of principles!) 'It ain't cheating exactly; but even if it is, it's what everybody does, in the way of business. Ye can't get along without it; mabby ye can in the next world, but you can't in this. Who tells the bad points in anything he wants to sell? Don't everybody cover them up, and show the good points, and make the most of 'em? Of course they do. Hand me more sticks!'

"I wasn't convinced in my heart and conscience by this plausible speech. But my cousin, who was a year older than I, had a great influence over me, and I must confess that I was a little to anxious to get rich out of that wood. So I merely said, 'Don't make the hollows too large, Mede,' and handed him more sticks.

"'I'll look out for that,' he said. 'Now you'll see.'

"After about half the load had been built hollow, he put our crookedest and meanest sticks over it, and then covered the whole with nice wood closely packed filling the wagon, so that, to all appearances, we had a fine compact load.

"My father came out and looked at it, as we drove out through the yard, and praised us for our industry. 'Well, well, boys,' said he, 'you've got a handsome load of wood, I must say. I'd buy it of you, but I suppose it will be just as well for you to take it to town and see what you can get for it.'

"'I think it will be better,' said Mede, with a sly wink at me. 'What is such a load as that worth?'

"'Stove-wood like that—white oak—solid load right through,' said my father, running his eye over the wagon-box, 'ought to bring at least two dollars.'

"'We're going to get three for it,' said my cousin.

"'That's too much,' said my father. 'Never, boys, try to get more for a thing than it is really worth.'

"I knew that he always acted upon this principle himself; and I felt some pangs of conscience as I thought of the empty spaces hidden in that load.

"But I'll tell you what you may do,' he said. 'Drive to Deacon Finch's store, and get him to look at your load. He knows better than I do what wood like that is worth in the village, and if he says three dollars is about right for it, why,' my father added, with a shrewd twinkle, 'get it if you can!'

"He knew very well that Deacon Finch wouldn't say any such thing. And as we drove out into the road my cousin laughingly said that the deacon was the last man he would ask to examine that load.

"But as we were driving into the village, we met Deacon Finch in his chaise; and the temptation to play a sharp game on him was too much for my cousin. For my own part, I was feeling pretty sick of the idea of selling the load in its present shape to anybody; and I strongly objected to the proposed attempt on so sagacious a man as the deacon.

"'It happens just right, don't you see?" Medad insisted. 'He won't get out of his chaise; and it's a splendid looking load, as you look down on it. If he buys it he will tell us to drive it to his house, and of course he won't go to see us unload it.'

"So he drove up on the roadside and stopped the deacon as he was passing. 'Mr. Finch,' he said, 'would you like to buy a load of first-rate white oak wood? Just loo'k at it if you please.'

"'I've wood enough,'' said the deacon. 'But it's a nice looking load you've got; and I guess you won't have any trouble in disposing of it.'

"'What is such a load as that worth delivered in town?' asked Medad. 'We cut it ourselves.'

"'How much is there?'

"'I don't know; haven't measured it; just call it a load,'' said Medan.

"'Good as that all the way through?' quiried the deacon.

"'About the same,' said Medad.

"'Well, from a dollar-seventy-five to two-and-a quarter; somewhere along there,' replied the deacon.

"'Will you give us two-and-a-quarter?' Medad was quick to inquire.

"'I told you I had wood enough. But I like to encourage boys; I'll look at your load.' And to the terror of one of us, very sure, Deacon Finch slowly and deliberately got out of his chaise.

"I don't suppose anything in our looks caused him to suspect our honesty; for my cousin did the talking, and I must say I could not but envy the cool and candid manner with which he carried on his part in the interview.

"'You are Mr. Prank's boys, ain't you?' said the deacon, going to the hind end of the wagon.

"'I am Mr. Prank's son,' Medad replied promptly. 'This is my cousin.'

"'Good wood; well split; pretty smart boys!" said the deacon, tumbling over a few sticks on top. 'Guess I'll take it.'

"'Shall we deliver it at your house?' Medad asked, almost too eagerly.

"'Wait a minute! What's here?' cried the deacon, thrusting down his hand and pulling up one of the hidden crooks. 'Is there much like that?' and he began to dig down straight into one of our choice hollows.

"'See here, if you please!' said Medad alarmed, 'you needn't take the wood if you don't like it, but don't spoil our load!'

"'Spoil your load!' echoed the deacon, with indignant scorn, thrusting in his arm up to his shoulder. 'You wouldn't be afraid of my spoiling an honest load; but what sort of a load is this? Its a perfect cheat, and you are a couple of rascals!'

"'You needn't take it if you don't want it!' Medad repeated, more angry than ashamed, I am sorry to say. 'We just put it in that way to make a handsome load of it; but we don't expect anybody to pay for it until they've seen it thrown off.'

"The deacon did not, evidently, put much faith in this falsehood; for he reprimanded us again sharply as he climbed back into his chaise.

"'I guess he was about right, Mede,' I said, as we watched him drive away. 'We are a couple of rascals!'

"'Pshaw! who cares? It's what everybody does,' said Mede, blusteringly; 'what he does himself, every time he sells goods out of his store. It takes a rogue to catch a rogue. We'll look out next time.'

"He laughed scornfully when I begged him to drive home and reload the wood in honest fashion. But he was shy of making the sale where the deacon would be likely to hear of it.

"'We'll go over to the East Village,' he said. 'It'll be dusk when we get there; nobody will know us; and by that time nobody can look into our load.'

"This plan was carried out in spite of my too feeble objections. I drove the horse, while Medad went from door to door in the East Village, offering the wood 'dog cheap,' he said, because it was so near night and we wanted to sell out and go home.'

"His idea of 'dog cheap' was two dollars, although he tried hard to get three. At last we found a woman who confessed that she was out of wood, and must get some soon, but said she was too poor to buy cord-wood, and then hire a man to cut it.

"Medad convinced her that it would be much better for her to buy ours already cut.

"'But I haven't got three dollars in the world!' she said. 'I am really poor, dreffle poor! If you'll throw off half your load into my shed, I'll give you a dollar and a half.

"'Can't do that, nowhow,' said Mede; 'for nobody then will want to buy the other half. I should think not!' he said to me aside, with a comical grimace.

"'Will you trust me for the other dollar and a half?' she asked. 'I am Mrs. Ober—Widow Ober; everybody knows me.'

"'That didn't suit my cousin's views, either.

"'Tell ye what!' he said. 'Give me two-and-a-quarter now, and you shall have the load; it's too little, but we've got to get home.'

"Two dollars and twenty cents was all she had, and Mede consented to take that. The poor woman paid down the money with a sigh, and we threw the wood into her shed.

"She offered to hold a lantern for us, but we were glad enough to dispense with that luxury. I don't know when she discovered what a small pile the wood made, which looked so large in our wagon; certainly not until after we were gone, for she came to the door as we backed around, and said she was very much obliged to us, and bid us good-night.

"'That's the way to do it,' said my cousin, on the way home. 'We'll sell the other two loads just at dusk.'

"I didn't say much. I was feeling sick. And when he gave me my share of the 'plunder,' as he called it,—and plunder indeed it was,—it was with a strange sense of loathing that I put it into my pocket. After all my anticipations of pleasure in receiving money fairly earned, that was the miserable result. Instead of sweet satisfaction, nothing but remorse and disgust!

"I found that my cousin did not feel just right about the transaction, either. 'If we had shaved the sharp old deacon,' he said, ''twould have been a good joke, though it was almost too hard on the widder.'

"He was, somehow, different from me. He hardened his heart against all compunctions, which I could not do. I didn't like to talk about our success, as my father called it, after we got home; and went to bed that night miserable enough.

"I did not see Medad again until the next afternoon, when he came over to talk about taking another load of wood to town.

"'If we take any more, I said, 'it must be honestly loaded, or I'll have nothing to do with it. It was an awfully mean thing we did yesterday.'

"He laughed foolishly, and said he guessed I was right about it. 'I'm sick of the business, anyway,' he said. 'Let your father take the rest, and give us what he thinks it's worth.'

"So ended our wood speculation," Uncle Asa added. "I've quite forgotten what father gave us; indeed, that was a matter of no consequence, compared with what I made out of the load we sold the widow."

"But I don't see that you made much out of that!" said Charley.

"Ah, but I did, though! I made something better than the most brilliant fortune ever achieved. I'll tell you how.

"I had it in me, as you see, to be a little—or, perhaps you will say, a good deal—dishonest. And if I had begun in a different way, I might have gone on cheating more and more all my life, until I should have quite forgotten there was such a thing as conscience. But luckily I overdid the thing at the start.

"I can never describe the shame and misery I felt in consequence of that trick we played off on poor Mrs. Ober. The very sight of split wood sickened me long afterwards. I got no comfort out of my share of the money she paid us; I hadn't the heart to spend it, and it was a source of bitter recollections to me while I kept it.

"Then you may be sure that it was anything but a relief to hear—as I did the following spring—that the poor woman was actually in want. I was at the town meeting when I accidentally heard the matter spoken of. 'Why can't she get along?' one man asked another. 'She works hard.'

"'Yes,' said the other; 'and she's saving, in her way. But she don't know how to make a trade, and anybody can cheat her. You would think it must be somebody pretty mean that would take advantage of a poor widow with six children; but there are just such wretches in the world, I am sorry to say.'

"I didn't care to hear any more. I went straight home, took out of the till of my chest the dollar and ten cents I had kept there all this time, folded the money in a letter, on which I wrote, 'From a friend,' and addressed it to Mrs. Ober, and mailed it that very night.

"After that part of the load was taken off my conscience. But I could find strength and peace of mind only in a resolution which I had already formed, and which was fairly burned into my soul by what I had overheard at the town meeting.

"The resolution was, never in all my life to resort to dishonesty of any kind, no matter what the seeming necessity, or the temptation.

"It is a resolution I have never broken. It hasn't kept me poor, either. I am not very rich, and yet I believe I am better off to-day than I should be if I had been dishonest. I have always enjoyed a reputation for fair-dealing; and the result has been that my worldly prosperity has been solid to the core.

"But, boys, that is nothing compared with satisfaction of always feeling that my gains were fairly earned, and that I had helped others while helping myself. A few thousand, more or less, are of no importance. But, O my boys, peace or mind is all-important."

"And Medad Prank—what ever became of him?" Charley inquired.

"I can't say that Medad took the lesson so seriously to heart as I did. He has always had the reputation of being a little tricky. Life has been a scramble with him—a scramble for riches. And it was thought at one time that he had a large fortune. But it burst like a bubble in 'seventy-three, and he has been scrambling in the old way ever since.

"I was the only one who really made anything out of that LOAD OF WOOD."

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