Prescription

By G. M. SASSAMAN

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IT HAD been a strangely busy night at the little corner drug store, and Rex Katon, prescription clerk, was out of sorts. Here it was past ten o'clock and he had arranged a date for nine. With an angry twist he screwed the cap on a bottle and slapped a skull and cross bones label upon it before wrapping it in blue paper.

The negro scrub-woman sloshed past him with her bucket and mop.

He placed the bottle of poison upon the counter beside another blue-clad package. The bewhiskered little scientist who ordered the poison would probably call for it in a few minutes. The other bottle was for a thin-faced little boy whose mother was suffering from stomach cramps.

Katon went into the washroom at the rear of the prescription department. He could clean up a bit while the scrub-woman was busy out there. As he washed his hands he felt a little sorry for having been irritable with the thin-faced little tyke. The kid had almost shown tears when he had said, "Chase yourself around the block while I get this ready." Oh well, he'd give the kid an ice cream cone when he returned for the medicine.

When Katon re-entered the prescription room the woman was almost finished with the floor. She had already wiped off the counter, leaving wet finger-prints upon the clean wrapping paper covering the two bottles.

For the thousandth time Katon made up his mind to complain to the boss when the latter came in to relieve him. That charwoman was altogether too sloppy. Then he grinned to himself as he saw the thin-faced boy opening the street door hesitantly.

"Come in, son," he called, snatching up one of the packages and going forward to the soda counter. Leaning over the counter he handed the boy the bottle. The latter gave him a bill and he returned to him some small change.

The boy turned to leave.

"Wait a minute," said the clerk. Taking up a cone he filled it with a heaping mound of ice cream. The boy's eyes opened wide with pleasure. He took the cone and then looked uncertainly at the change in his other hand.

"Never mind about paying for it," said the clerk kindly. "That's for having to wait."

It was almost fifteen minutes later when the bewhiskered little scientist came in for his order. He had the appearance of one who lived an exact and well-ordered existence.

It didn't surprise Katon when the little man frowned at the wet finger-prints upon the wrapping paper. Nor did it surprise him when the man proceeded to unwrap the bottle and drop the blue paper upon the floor.

He glanced at the clerk and was starting back toward the prescription room when he heard the little man begin to splutter in indignation.

He turned to see the scientist holding the bottle out toward him. The little man's whiskers were fairly bristling with anger.

"This isn't what I ordered, young man," he blazed. "I ordered a special poison preparation, not a bottle of stomach medicine."

As Katon took in the full significance of the words he swayed dizzily, grasping a show-case for support. He felt the blood drain from his face and an awful emptiness take possession of his stomach. His legs seemed, for a fraction of a minute, to have turned to putty.

A ghastly mistake! How had it happened? Oh yes, he remembered now. He had placed the poison on the right-hand side. The scrub-woman must have changed the position of the bottles. He had given the boy a deadly poison instead of medicine. And he didn't even know the youngster's name or address!

Like one in a drunken stupor he leaned against the show-case. He never heard the bewhiskered little man flounce angrily out of the store.

Was it hours that he stood there? Dimly he heard the clock on the wall tick out the seconds. An old lady came into the store and asked querulously for some iodine. He didn't hear her.

When the clerk didn't move at her bidding, the old woman sent a sharp glance in his direction. His drawn, white face and staring eyes frightened her. She made for the door, looking apprehensively over her shoulder as she went out.

Katon pulled himself together at the heavy touch of a hand upon his shoulder. He looked up to see a fat policeman standing before him. The thin-faced little boy, with tears still welling in his eyes, stood beside the officer.

The policeman was talking. His words registered themselves upon Katon's muddled consciousness in scattered, informative fragments. Strangely enough, the officer's tone was not that of angered condemnation. It was almost pleading.

"Kid . . . crying . . . dropped bottle . . . smashed . . . fill another . . ." he was saying.

The truth dawned upon Katon with the slow beauty of a pleasant dream unfolding. He drew himself erect and smiled into the boy's tear-stained face.

"Sure," he breathed, and in the little word he put all the fervency of a benediction. "Sure. I'll fill out another for you."

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