He Still Has His First Half-Dollar

My First Encounter with The World's Rough Side

By BURTON E. STEVENSON

AFTER SUPPER that evening (for so we called the evening meal in those days) I went out to swing on the front gate for a while. It was early spring of 1880 in Chillicothe, and I was eight years old. And while I was swinging there, a boy I knew came past and stopped to talk. He told me he was on his way up town to get some newspapers to sell. He told me he could buy ten copies of a paper called the *Leader* for thirty cents, sell them for five cents apiece, and make twenty cents.

Of course, there was sharp competition from other boys, but sometimes he could sell as many as thirty or forty, for he had built up a list of regular customers. Saturday was always a good day, since it was then that the farmers and their wives drove in from the surrounding country, the men to talk about the weather and the crops, and the women to sell their chickens and eggs and butter and vegetables, and to do their shopping. For Chillicothe was then a quiet, elm-shaded, agricultural town and a wonderful place to live.

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The *Leader* was a weekly paper published every Friday evening, owned and edited by George H. Tyler, quite a famous newspaperman in his day, who, ten years later, gave me my first job as a reporter. In fact, for more than fifty years, my wife and I have been living in the remarkable house he built on the edge of a hill looking down over the town of Chillicothe, across the Scioto valley to the river and Mount Logan.

Golden Days

I had never before earned any money except by doing chores around the house to accumulate penny by penny the twenty-five cents I needed to buy the monthly copy of *Golden Days,* of which I was a devoted reader, and this seemed to me a splendid opportunity to branch out into pastures new. So I went back into the house, explained the venture to my mother, and she staked me to the thirty cents needed to start in business.

The newspapers were sold to newsboys at the Horney & Chapman bookstore on West Second street, on the exact spot it still is. I knew very well where it was, for it was there I purchased my copy of *Golden Days* every month, looking longingly at the shelves upon shelves of books, for in those days a bookstore was a bookstore, with sets of Dickens, Thackeray,

Scott, and several sets of Shakespeare always in stock, as well as practically all of what we now call the classics, but which were then everyday reading for many people.

Well, I hastened thither and got my ten copies of the *Leader,* and started out to sell them. I soon had sold nine and had forty-five cents in my pocket—the largest sum I had ever been master of. I remember perfectly just what happened —you might say it was etched deeply on my memory! I was standing in front of what was then Mosher's grocery on South Paint street, and the windows were lighted because dusk was falling. I had my single paper under my arm, and one hand in my trousers' pocket, holding my precious earnings, when a man came along and took my last paper, giving me a half-dollar and taking my forty-five cents, which I counted out to him. If I had not happened to have that forty-five cents, I'd have had to go into the grocery to get that half-dollar changed. Perhaps the man asked to make sure I had the change —I don't remember.

Another Ten Papers

It was still early enough to do more selling, besides I wanted to get an early start Saturday morning, so I ran back to the bookstore, asked for another ten papers, and proudly handed over my half-dollar. The clerk took one look at it and handed it back.

"It's a counterfeit," he said.

I shall never forget the shiver that ran down my back. Indeed, I still shiver a little at the remembrance of that instant —my first taste of the world's cruelty. I remember just how the man looked—a tall, slender, well-dressed, youngish fellow, clean-shaven, rather good-looking,— but how despicable!

I still have that half-dollar, so tarnished now that it would not deceive even an eight-year-old boy, and I often wonder what happened to the man who gave it to me.