

The Kid

Virginia Cunning

We used to make a lot of fun of the Kid when he first come to the mill, 'cause he was so green, bein' fresh off the farm. But you couldn't help likin' him when he was tryin' so hard to keep up with the rest of us older fellows. We all knew he didn't have no business in a steel mill.

I'd been workin' in the mill all my life and I could see plain as day that the Kid wasn't strong enough. Oh, he was big enough, tall and big boned, but he didn't have much flesh on him: sort of made you think of a bean plant that had sprouted too fast. Come to find out, he wasn't more than seventeen; he'd lied about his age.

The boss must have known the Kid wasn't old enough and that he couldn't stand the gaff. But labor was scarce then on account of the war and we was runnin' three shifts a day. So the boss took him on.

The Kid made out all the time that the work wasn't too hard. Said he'd always worked just as hard on the farm. I guess that was true, all right, 'cause his old man had T. B. and the Kid and his brother had done all the farmin' until they come out to Pueblo on account of the climate when the old fellow got real bad. But that was different. Bein' outdoors on a farm and workin' hard ain't like workin' in a steel mill, and I noticed that the Kid was gettin' kind of pasty lookin'.

Well, even if we did sort of tease the Kid, we was all pretty nice to him and tried to show him the ropes. All except John Hamby. He was a big fellow; weighed about two hundred and thirty. Hamby was a mean one, always pickin' a fight.

That wasn't all he did either. We found out later that he'd been sellin'

the jobs to the "Hunkies"—they're the Poles and Slavs who work in the mills. Well, Hamby didn't have no more control over the jobs than I did, but he made the dumb "Hunkies" think so, and every week they'd pay him so they wouldn't get fired.

Hamby was a bad egg all the way through, and I knew he was layin' for the Kid. He didn't have any reason; it was just his natural meanness. He kept doin' little nasty things like borrowin' the Kid's tools without askin', or workin' so much faster than the Kid, bein' new, couldn't keep up with him. I thought maybe the boss mechanic would notice and say something to Hamby, but if he did, he never opened his mouth about it.

I could see Hamby was just tryin' to start a fight and I says to him one day, "John, why don't you lay off the Kid."

But he just snarls and says, "If you know what's good for you, you'll mind your own business."

So I warned the Kid. I says, "Kid, Hamby's layin' for you. I'd be mighty careful if I was you, and I wouldn't let him get under my skin. It wouldn't be smart business to tangle with that guy, I'm tellin' you." Hamby kept on tryin' to pick a fight but the Kid was smart and he didn't have no luck.

One day, though, Hamby was cleanin' the sewers under the rollers. Ever been in a steel mill? Well, the rolls are cooled by water and the scales drop off the steel into the sewers as the steel goes through the rolls. John was cleanin' the sewer. There's a hole about twenty feet deep under the rolls. The Kid had been workin' on a valve, and he'd set his torch on a roll. When he came back for it, it was gone. He

asked a "Hunky" workin' there if he had seen it.

The "Hunky" says "Yes. I seen it. Boss Takem." So the Kid went over to where Hamby was workin' on the sewer hole.

"John," he asks, "have you seen my torch? I set one down on the roll and the 'Hunky' said you got it."

John turned real quick and said, "I didn't get your damned torch," and he hit the Kid in the chest. The Kid wasn't hurt much, but he was standin' with his heels against an empty rack, and when Hamby hit him so unexpected, it knocked him over into the rack. For a minute the Kid just set there in the rack, lookin' kind of silly, and then he reached around and pulled a hammer out of his pocket. First thing you know, he climbed out of the rack and he hit Hamby in the head with that hammer.

Hamby went down in a heap, backwards and hangin' over the rolls, and his head rolled over on one side. But he was a tough guy, I'll say that, and in a minute he sort of grunted and got up and started after the Kid again. Of course, the Kid hit him again with the hammer. Well, Hamby kept coming back for more, and every time the Kid slugged him with that hammer. He was a sight, bloody as a stuck hog, blood spurtin' out of his head everywhere the Kid had hit him. Finally, after about five times, the Kid knocked him out and some of the men got him and took him to the hospital.

After it was all over, the Kid didn't say nothin' at all. He just sat on the rolls with the hammer still in his hands and he got all white like he was scared to death. I guess maybe he thought he'd killed Hamby. As it turned out, Hamby was laid up for a couple of weeks, but he was one of those guys who's just too mean to die.

After a bit the boss mechanic come in. He was a Frenchman. The boys had told him about the fight, I guess, because he set down on one of the rolls and nodded his head for the Kid to come on over. The Kid went, sort of dazed like, and the boss motioned for him to set down beside him. The Kid thought for sure then that he was gonna be fired, cause he knew there wasn't supposed to be no fightin' in the mill.

"You had a fight?" the boss asks.

The Kid answered straight out, but kind of hopelessly, "Yes, I had a fight."

"Well," says the boss in his soft voice, soft as a woman's and with that funny French accent of his, "you didn't use a big enough hammer. The next time, when he come back, if he bother you, you no use a hammer. You pick up a rail—and you kill him!"

But the doggondest thing had happened—the Kid had fainted clean away!

LOVE

"I'm seventeen, I'm old enough
To know love never dies,"
Said Paul to Margaret as she heard
His words with widened eyes.

He kissed her. Stars came tumbling
down
And tingled in his head.
And Paul went home and couldn't
think
Of anything he'd said.

He dreamed that they were king and
queen—
Two glittering crowns—
She wore blue satin—

* * * * *

And Margaret went up to her room
And did her Latin.

—Mary Catherine Funkhouser