

The Blue Duck



by Donald A. Kahn

I.

YOUNG Jimmy Jones shot into the private office of the president of the Consolidated Corn Flake Company. In his haste he neglected to close the door after himself, and on his way to the hat-rack in the corner he knocked over the waste-paper basket.

He jerked off his coat, hung the garment on a peg, and rolled up his sleeves. He wore a belt—no suspenders and no waistcoat. On the left side of his pink silk shirt one fraternity emblem and a collection of college society pins radiated light like a sunburst.

Having thus stripped himself for battle, Jimmy Jones turned and addressed himself to the president of the manufacturing establishment, Mr. Frederick M. Bains.

Mr. Bains had engaged Jimmy by wire the previous evening in response to an urgent telegraphic appeal from Jimmy's father. Just what young Jimmy Jones would be capable of doing to further the interests of the company was rather vague, but Mr. Bains was an old-time friend of Mr. Jones, senior, and could not very well get out of taking on his son.

Jimmy turned and addressed the president.

"You say it," suggested the young man, "and I do it! You are the grasping captain of industry and I am the horny-handed son of toil. Just like in 'The Gumdrop Maker's Revenge.' I am James Jones, junior. Speak up, me lord! What can I do for you?"

"Shut the door," directed Mr. Bains, "and then pick up the waste-basket you kicked over."

Jimmy gave the door a push. Mr. Bains noted with considerable relief that the ground glass was still in one piece after the rattling percussion.

Jimmy stooped, grunted, and set the paper basket right side up. Then once again he presented himself to the cornflake manufacturer.

"No sooner said than done." Jimmy observed.

Mr. Bains sighed.

"What time do you come to work?" he asked.

Jimmy looked at his watch.

"Quarter of ten," he replied. "What time do you?"

"At eight," stated Mr. Bains.

Jimmy nodded approvingly. "You ought to," he said. "You're president of the company."

"What's that got to do with it?" asked Mr. Bains in surprise.

"Ask me something easy," answered Jimmy. "The business needs your expert attention. It couldn't run along without you. But us cheap help—"

He shrugged his shoulders as a finish to the sentence.

Again Mr. Bains sighed.

"If you're going to be on the payroll," he decreed, "you've got to do something. What can you do? You just came from college, didn't you? What did you learn there?"

Jimmy thought it over for a moment, trying hard to recall just what he had learned at the university. Presently he spoke up.

"French," he said, "football, philosophy, poker, calculus, calisthenics, 'Private Life of the Romans,' and pinochle." Then he added: "I learned a lot of college yells, too."

"What good will any of that do you in the corn-flake business?" asked Mr. Bains.

"I didn't go to college to learn the corn-flake business," said Jimmy. "I went to get an education."

"Education isn't what it used to be," moaned Mr. Bains. "When I went to school I learned—"

"Corn-flakes?" asked Jimmy.

"Say," protested Mr. Bains, "do you think all I've got to do is fool round gabbing with you? I've got work on hand—letters to write. Go on out in the works and look round. If you can find anything to do that you want to do, do it. I've got to write my letters."

"That's fair enough," acknowledged Jimmy Jones. "If you get stuck on how to spell any long words yell for me. I'm a bird at that—won a book at a bee one time. I can spell Schenectady with my eyes shut. I'll come back at noon and go to lunch with you."

He made an exit, remembering miraculously to close the door after him.

II.

GOING down the hall, he met a young lady coming up. She was a singularly pretty young lady—Jimmy decided so in the twinkling of an eye.

"Looking for some one?" he asked, removing his cap.

She stopped. She couldn't very well avoid stopping. His sturdy athletic form blocked the passageway.

"Why, yes. I'm looking for Mr. Bains," she explained.

"I'm sorry," said Jimmy, shaking his head solemnly. "He's awfully busy. He's writing some letters. He hasn't got time to fool round gabbing. Er, wouldn't I do just as well?"

"Maybe," replied the girl, "I want ten dollars. I'm not particular who gives it to me."

She smiled a trifle.

"He's not so busy as I thought he was," decided Jimmy. "Come on; I'll take you in. What name shall I say?"

"I'm Miss Bains—Bobette." She smiled a trifle more.

"Why, my name isn't Bobette, Miss Bains," he denied.

"Mine is," remarked the girl. "Bobette Bains."

"Tickled to death!" declared Jimmy. "My name's Jones—James Jones, junior."

They had readied the private-office door. The young man kicked it open.

"Miss Bobette Bains!" he announced in stentorian tones.

The corn-flake king wheeled in his chair.

"Bob, why under the sun did you bring him back in?" he implored. "I just got rid of him."

"Bring whom?" asked Bobette.

"What can I do for you, dear?" asked the

father, ignoring the question, addressing his daughter and reaching for his check-book.

"Ten," replied Bobette.

"Here's twenty-five," said Mr. Bains "Take it—and take young Jones. Take him out to lunch; then take him to the matinee; then take him out and drown him. Keep him till the shops close down. I can't be worried to death. I've got work to do."

"Didn't I tell you he was busy?" asked Jimmy.

"Get out!" yelled Bains.

"Come on, Mr. Jones," invited Bobette. "I've got my car out here."

"Wait till I get my coat," said Jimmy.

III.

THE girl climbed up into the driver's seat and young Jimmy Jones slipped the crank-handle out of its leather socket.

Once he spun the crank: twice, three times, a fourth time, a fifth, a sixth, seventh, and an eighth. Then he halted, straightened up, and looked through the wind-shield, inquiry plain in his eyes.

"'S matter?" asked Bobette, dabbing her nose with a powder-puff from her vanity-box.

Jimmy circumambulated the left front wheel and inspected the control-board of the machine. He nodded knowingly.

"I love to turn that crank," he observed. "Especially on a hot day. It reminds me of those pleasant weeks I spent working in a weenieworst factory. The engine doesn't like to start unless the switch is turned to battery."

"My blunder, Mr. Jones," she apologized.

He resumed his labor—and the motor started after the first half-turn of the crank. The car leaped ahead as if it were late for dinner. It knocked Jimmy down and straddled his body.

Bobette applied the emergency brake and the scion of the house of Jones crawled out

from under the machine. His cheek was smudged and his nose had a scratch, but in other respects he looked little the worse for wear.

"My blunder again, Mr. Jones," admitted Bobette. "I sometimes forget to put the lever in 'neutral,' I guess."

"I guess you forgot that time," he commented.

"I'm going to be exceptionally nice to you to make up for this," she promised.

He grinned and took the seat at her side.

"Let her out, old kid," he suggested.

She plunged down the accelerator-button.

'Twas plain to see they were two of a kind.

"Where'll we go?" she asked.

"Home, James," he replied. "We lunch at home?"

She nodded.

"I want to meet your mother," Jimmy said, "Nothing like getting acquainted with the family. Your mother is decidedly good-looking, I should judge," he observed.

"She is," admitted Bobette. "Mother's a peach. How did you know?"

"Well," said he, "you don't resemble your father."

Either that one was too deep for her or she purposely ignored it.

"Your dad's a good head," continued Jimmy. "We're going to get along fine!"

"Do you think so?"

"I can get along with anybody," declared Jimmy. "The trouble is some people can't get along with me."

"Did you—did you quarrel with your father?" asked Bobette. "Was that the reason you left Detroit so suddenly to come to Battle Creek?"

"It wasn't exactly a quarrel," qualified Jimmy. "Dad just thought he'd have less anxiety if I were out of town. His nerves were getting bad."

“So he sent you to father,” concluded Bobette.

“Nice way for him to treat a friend, wasn’t it?” demanded Jimmy.

“Father doesn’t mind,” said she.

“I wasn’t thinking of your father,” said Jimmy.

So suddenly did she turn up a drive-way that Jimmy jammed his head against the top iron-support.

“Ouch!” said he “Is this home?”

She nodded and stopped next the stoop.

They went into the spacious drawing-room and Bobette introduced the boy to her mother. Jimmy’s deduction proved out: Mrs. Bains was very beautiful.

“Mother,” said the girl, “this is Mr. Jones.”

“James John Jones, Jr.,” supplied Jimmy. “Very pleased to meet you, Mrs. Bains. I’ve come to lunch.”

“Yes,” corroborated Bobette. “He’s come to lunch. Then I’m to take him to the matinee.”

“And then she’s to take me out and drown me,” added Jimmy. “She’s got her orders straight from headquarters.”

Mrs. Bains and Bobette seated themselves and, on invitation, Mr. Jones seated himself.

All three were silent for a moment. Then the elder hostess turned to their luncheon guest. She must say something to fill in the ten minutes till meal-time.

“Mr. Jones,” she asked, “what year did you graduate from college? Ann Arbor, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, Michigan,” he answered. “Why, I didn’t graduate, Mrs. Bains. I decorated the campus only three and one-quarter years.”

“Why did you quit?” asked Bobette. “Didn’t you like it, Mr. Jones?”

“I didn’t want to quit,” Jimmy explained. “The dean and I had an argument. Then I resigned.”

“What was it about?” Bobette demanded.

“You mustn’t be personal, dear,” said her mother. “Perhaps Mr. Jones doesn’t care to discuss it.”

“I don’t mind at all,” volunteered Jimmy obligingly. “We had an argument, the Dean and I. He thought I ought to quit; I thought I ought not to. We couldn’t come to a satisfactory agreement and I got huffy and resigned.”

“Did the dean think you couldn’t learn anything more at his university, Mr. Jones?” asked Bobette.

“He didn’t put it in just those words,” Jimmy replied. “You see, he was kind of prejudiced against me. The first year I was there I painted a sophomore with molasses and then rolled him in leaves. The dean didn’t like that.”

“Did the sophomore?” asked Bobette.

“He didn’t say. The next year I made a mistake. I mistook a young assistant instructor in economics for a medic’ freshman and clipped half his hair. The dean found out about my mistake and that made him peeved, too.

“Then the third year, I got acquainted with an engineering special that roomed at the dean’s. One night while the dean was at a faculty meeting, he and I were smearing shoe-blackening on all the black door-knobs in the house. The dean came home and caught us at it. Then we had the argument.”

“What kind of shoe-blackening did you use?” asked Bobette.

“It was Diamond Star brand—ten cents a box,” said Jimmy. “Any kind will do, though.”

“I’m going to try it some time,” she observed.

“Bobette!” protested Mrs. Bains.

“I never have any fun,” the daughter asserted. “I’m mighty glad Mr. Jones has moved to Battle Creek. I know he knows a lot of nice games like that. You’re going to teach them all to me, aren’t you, Mr. Jones?”

He promised.

“Luncheon is served, madam,” announced a maid.

IV.

AFTER lunch the two returned to the car. Jimmy stepped in, took the lever out of third, put it in the neutral position, retarded the spark, and switched to the battery. Then he cranked up without accident.

“Which show would you like to see, Mr. Jones?” asked Bobette. “I’ve seen this week’s vaudeville, and the stock company’s playing ‘East Lynne’—and once I saw that. So you might as well choose. Which?”

“I’m not going to punish you with either,” he declared gallantly. “Supposing we go out in the country and look for violets,” he suggested. “Would you like that?”

“I’d love it!”

She shot the motor down a street running out of town.

With feebly disguised admiration he watched her drive.

A rather tall, somewhat slender but physically competent girl sat alertly erect in the driver’s seat. Two sun-stained hands, small but capable, grasped tightly the rosewood steering wheel. From beneath a white duck hat stray strands of nut-brown hair flirted with eyes of the same color. Sensitive red lips curved upward slightly at the corners.

It’s mean, sometimes, I know, to tell a girl’s age; but when they’re eighteen they don’t greatly mind, I dare say. Bobette was.

She threw the gasoline throttle up, and they plunged down grade, the car making fifty an hour easily. Sighting an approaching curve in the road she threw out the clutch.

Fifty feet round the curve a low and very narrow bridge spanned the small river. She had forgotten its existence.

The car spun round the curve.

A farm-wagon was holding the bridge as a

Mr. Horatius had held one of old.

Jimmy Jones gasped.

The girl did the next best thing; she put on both brakes and steered for the water.

The car bumped down the rocky bank and then launched off like a miniature liner. Water flooded the engine—metal cracked. The car emitted a long, low moan and stopped stock-still.

The boy and girl, sitting side by side on the seat, were up to their waists in the water.

“Well,” observed Jimmy, “you took me home to lunch; you offered to take me to the matinee; and you at least tried to drown me. You followed orders, and I’m much obliged to you for your kind thought of these pleasures in my connection.”

“I d-d-didn’t try to drown you, M-mister Jones,” Bobette protested. “R-r-really I didn’t, M-mister Jones. I—I l-l-like you v-very much. M-m-mister J-Jones.”

She looked up at him. He saw tears gathering in her big, brown and white eyes. He didn’t want her to cry—no man ever wants any girl to cry—any man, any time, would much rather she’d stab him with a hat-pin.

He didn’t want her to cry. He wondered what he’d better do. He wondered whether he ought to put his arm around her. He knew he’d like to do it; he thought he ought to. He did not.

“I w-want you to b-believe that I w-w-wouldn’t try to d-drown you, M-mister J-Jones,” she repeated. “I w-wouldn’t for the w-w-w-world!”

And then she did begin to cry. She began very softly to cry, but she began.

Jimmy stopped speculating on ethics. He put an arm around her.

“Of course you wouldn’t, Bob dear,” said Mr. Jones. “I know you wouldn’t. And I know you like me very much. You like me almost a hundredth as much as I like you. And you’re going to prove it to me right now!”

"H-h-how?" asked Bobette—she stopped crying.

"Like this," said Jimmy.

He put his lips very close to hers. She proved it to his complete satisfaction.

"Hey! be you killed?" asked a burly voice from the bridge.

They might have been dead for all the farmer knew.

Jimmy leaned out of the car and peered up.

"Yes, both of us!" he called back. "Going to town?"

The farmer nodded

"You've got two passengers," yelled Jimmy. "Wait a minute."

Bobette followed his directions. She put two water-soaked arms tightly round Jimmy's neck. Then that young man, happier than he'd been since the day he daubed blacking on the dean's door-knobs, carried her safely to shore.

V.

WEEEKS passed as weeks will—three of them did.

Young Jimmy Jones shot into the private office of the president of the Consolidated Corn-Flake Company. In his haste he neglected to close the door after himself, and on his way to the hat-rack in the corner he kicked over the waste-paper basket.

He hung his coat on a peg and rolled up his sleeves. On the left side of his blue pongee shirt one fraternity emblem and thirteen college society pins radiated light like a sunburst.

Jimmy Jones turned and addressed himself to the president of the concern, Mr. Frederick M. Bains.

"What can I do for you this morning?" asked Jimmy politely enough.

"If you will, James," suggested Mr. Bains, "I wish you'd kindly shut the door and set up the waste-paper-basket."

Jimmy obediently closed the door and righted the basket.

"No sooner said than done," he commented.

Mr. Bains sighed. It was a habit with him nowadays. He addressed Jimmy:

"What time do you come to work?"

Jimmy consulted his watch. "Eight forty-five," he replied.

"Listen, James," said Mr. Bains. "You're always out late at night going to entertainments and things with Bobette. I'm afraid you're not getting sleep enough. I'm real worried about it, James.

"Don't feel impelled to get here before eleven o'clock. You can do enough during the afternoons. I have to work mornings; I have letters to answer."

"I can get here by ten easy," replied Jimmy, deeply touched by his employer's kind consideration.

Mr. Bains sighed.

"How am I getting along?" asked Jimmy. "I've been trying hard lately. Do you think I'm learning the business? When I came three weeks ago I couldn't tell a corn-flake from a snow-flake, nor maple syrup from soothing. Do you think I'm making progress, Mr. Bains?"

Mr. Bains thought it over.

"Don't you suppose, James," he ventured, "that you would make just as rapid progress if you had your desk out in the general offices somewhere?"

"But then who'll help you with your spelling, when you come to long words?" asked Jimmy.

"I'll get a dictionary," explained Mr. Bains.

"That wouldn't do," declared Jimmy. "You haven't got time to hunt through a book. You're the head of the Consolidated Corn-Flake Company. Your time's valuable. You're a busy man!"

"I have got letters to answer," admitted Mr. Bains ruefully.

"I got a letter from my father this morning," observed Jimmy. "He wants me to come and see if I can't learn his street railway business. He's getting too lonesome, he says. He wants me to marry and settle down in Detroit."

"Why don't you?" asked Mr. Bains hopefully.

"You might not like it," suggested Jimmy.

"Of course I should hate to see you go, James," said Mr. Bains. "My business needs the services of capable young men. But I shouldn't want to stand in the way of your opportunity."

"You don't get me," objected Jimmy. "Maybe you've noticed Bobette wearing a strange pin. Have you?"

"A little blue goose?" asked Mr. Bains.

"Duck, not goose," corrected Jimmy. "That's my pin—it's the pin of the U. of M. Blue Duck Secret Society. When they pinned that little blue duck on me I had to take solemn oath never to part with it except to give it to the girl I ask to marry me.

"And she, accepting it, I am bound by ritual to fulfill my engagement to her in spite of heaven and earth. In other words, I am never free to take back the little blue duck."

"Don't tell me all that nonsense!" protested Mr. Bains. "I like to hear you talk, James—I've enjoyed all the funny stories you've told me mornings. But I've got my work to do; I've got my letters to write. I'm busy!"

"It isn't nonsense," objected Jimmy. "It's the honest truth. When they initiated me I had to write the promise in my own blood with a

sword."

"I can't help it!" declared Mr. Bains, glancing down longingly at his correspondence.

"Neither can I!" said Jimmy. "So I'll just plug along working for you, telling you how to spell hard words and things, and maybe after a while you'll like me well enough to let your daughter marry me."

"I like you now, James," stated Mr. Bains. "If you married Bobette would you go to Detroit and stay there with your father?"

"Sure," said Jimmy. "Sure I would. I don't like this town a little bit—it's too slow. And I owe it to my father. He's raised me and he's been good to me. I want to show him that I appreciate it.

"I like the old man in spite of his faults. And I want to learn the street railway business. Besides, Bobette says she'd like to live where life is worth living."

Bobette, in a scarlet golfing jacket, entered.

"'Lo, daddy dear!" said she to her father. She turned to the younger man. "Jimmy, did you ask him?"

"I asked him," replied Jimmy, kissing her squarely on the mouth, "and he said yes."

He turned to Frederick M. Bains, president of the Consolidated Corn-Flake Company, and father of the one and only girl in the world.

"Didn't you?" he submitted.

"I did," admitted Mr. Bains with a sigh. "Hurry up and get the wedding over with. I can't be worried to death! I've got my work to do! I've got my letters to write!"

"Father-in-law's a busy man," agreed James John Jones, Junior.