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A HUGE SPIDER WEB

By John W. Kramer.

I told the truth, and tried to obey the law, and for so doing had to pay a penalty. The ship docked on Sunday evening about half-past seven o'clock. In my care was some church regalia which cost \$17, entitled to free entry, belonging to a feeble parish that cannot afford extravagance. The law on the point of free entry in the case is clear. The customs officers, with whom this small bundle had to contend, are not known to me by name, with exceptions that will be noted, and numerical designations may be used, quite respectfully, to indicate each and every one.

No. 1 boarded the ship at quarantine. He asked if I had anything beside personal effects. Truth required me to answer "yes," and to tell what it was. He bade me leave this package on the ship over night with my trunk.

The next morning I went to the ship and claimed the baggage my family had been compelled to leave. No. 2, a customs inspector, examined my trunk and parcels. The church regalia was shown him and the bill of purchase also. He called No. 3 to appraise the goods. As there was no duty to be paid, No. 3 sent me with No. 2 to No. 4. This officer bade No. 2 take me to No. 5, with the package open. No. 5 said that he would have to take charge of it; that he would give me a receipt for it, that it would be necessary for me to go down to the custom house and declare the goods there, when an order for them would be given me, and that this had better be done on the next day. Noon was now past and other business required my attention; and it did not seem a great inconvenience to wait for the morrow to give me the package.

Tuesday, I went to the custom house in the morning. The receipt was presented to No. 6. He sent me to No. 7. He took me into the collector's office, the very throne-seat of the great power which had arrested the goods, and introduced me to Mr. Couch (No. 8), who stands next to the collector himself in every official duty. Indeed, Mr. Couch is the experienced and learned man of the collector's department, without whom, it is said, no collector we have had at this port for many years has presumed to take any important step in official action. Mr. Couch received me most courteously, and said that No. 5 should have taken my oath on the dock, given me the goods, and saved me all trouble, but that now certain forms must be complied with, and he bade No. 7 show me what to do. No. 7, as we came from the interior parlor to the rotunda, intimated that it would take time, and perhaps a broker had better be employed by me to get "through." Beginning to get a little

irritated, chiefly because the great authority had told me that unnecessary trouble was given by the inspector on the dock, I scorned this suggestion, firmly persuaded that my intelligence was sufficient to cope with a clearly worded section of the law; and besides, had not Mr. Couch directed No. 7 to aid me? Surely no one would thwart me; might not every official be expected to help me? No. 7 had me go back to No. 6 and get some four blank forms. I brought them to No. 7, who kindly directed me to fill them up and sign them. A broker standing near overheard the conversation, and followed me to say that there was an additional form to be filled in duplicate which the government does not supply, but that it could be purchased at the stationer's stand just where we stood. No. 7 had not told me of this, but as two other papers could not harm what had been given me to fill and sign, the duplicates were bought for five cents. The broker added, "You need a broker," and said that his charge would be two dollars. My answer was thanks for what he had shown me to do, the expression of desire to save a poor church any expense, and of my purpose to get along without further aid; the words of a fool.

In front of the circular desk, where the public are supposed to be served, were inkstands, and I went to work on the blanks. Some one asked me to get out of his way. Mildly resenting this petition, it was revealed to me that the inkstand positions were claimed as places of business by brokers. A second and a third location, unoccupied for a time by claimants, were used before my papers were filled and signed. These were taken to No. 7, who was very busy, but patient and courteous, and he put his signature to forms of affidavit, though I was not sworn. But he now noticed that a "church oath" was not included, and sent me back to No. 6 to get another form which was filled and signed. My broker friend was near us again, and showed me to the window-hole of No. 8, through which the papers must be passed. He also offered to watch further progress without making any charge for services, and said that it would be an hour before my papers could be returned with an order for the goods. I went to luncheon, and was back at the end of the hour. No. 8 did not have the papers, and went to inquire after them. He brought me word that they might be found in the error-box. "Where is that?" Being directed to it, my forms were found. The error could not be discovered by me, and No. 7 had disappeared. But the friendly broker came to my side, and he discovered a mistake at once. He took the papers to him whose error it was, and had corrections made. Again they were given to No. 8, and advice was offered me to take a walk of half an hour. Chafed in spirit, my walk was not a pleasant one. At its end my papers were once more in the error-box. The broker was there and informed me that some one had put his signature on the wrong form. This was now corrected, but information given me of another half-hour's delay. The papers were now bound to the naval officer. I stood my ground. Three o'clock came and the outer doors of the great temple were closed. A No. 9 was to be watched, to whom the papers would be returned. At nearly half after three o'clock an order was given me which I was directed to take to the public stores, with assurance that my package would at once be delivered. The broker was thanked for his services, and a small remuneration given him as a present.

As the public stores close at 4 P. M. haste was necessary. With some foot running and the use of rapid transit the stores were reached a few minutes before the time for closing. Hope had chased away indignation. No. 10 received me. He was trying to finish business for the day, was curt—evidently not glad to see me. "The goods are not here; if they were, you would not get them on that

order; read it for yourself, and see that it is not addressed to us; take it to the dock and present it to the inspector." Once more indignation was aroused, and hurried steps took me to the dock. No. 11 was there to represent No. 5. No. 11 was a positive and rather ugly character. But he was constrained to answer questions. My package had been sent to the public stores about two hours ago; he would endorse that statement on the order brought, which must be taken on the next day to the stores. Getting the endorsement, my tongue broke loose in railing against No. 5, using Mr. Couch's name as authority. No. 11 declared that Mr. Couch was wrong, that No. 5 did right, and he became so warm in defence of his colleague as to call up a brother officer, No. 12, to sustain him. No. 12 was quite sure that Mr. Couch knew nothing of special orders given appraisers by the secretary of the treasury. I was dazed. Could it be possible that the great man in the parlor of Wall street, who was thought to know everything, was ignorant? But No. 12 was disposed to put me in the right way. And this was the purport of his counsel: "Go down to the stores to-morrow and see Mr. Appraiser Cooper; tell him that this is a little matter which has given you much trouble, and ask him please to help you through with it." No, don't go to Mr. Cooper first, for that may make some of the deputy appraisers mad; find Mr. Burr." As warning had been given earlier in the day at the custom house against making "anybody mad," my resolution was to be careful on this point, though I myself was "mad." But No. 12 went on to frighten me and add to my indignation: "Don't wait a day; the goods may get buried under millions of dollars' worth of other goods, and perhaps be lost."

Wednesday I began with Mr. Burr (No. 13). He was courteous and obliging. A clerk was sent to show me to the appraiser's office, and there Mr. Cooper (No. 14) himself was found. Some one was worrying Mr. Cooper. I think it was about an appointment wished by a political friend. Mr. Cooper was excusing himself with the plea of business down at the custom house. My prospects were poor. However, when my case was briefly presented, the appraiser was most gentlemanly, and heard me. He was sincerely ready to help me. I was introduced to Mr. Rhodes, of his office (No. 15), and he was asked to do what could be done. It was found that no order had come from the custom house for the appraisement of the goods. This order would probably arrive by the next messenger, and a comfortable sitting place was given me to wait for it. The colored boy employed as office messenger was told to look through the batch expected, and bring this one to the desk. The batch came, but the order for my case not in it. I was now compelled to leave by professional duty which had been neglected. The only paper in my possession was handed to Mr. Rhodes, who kindly undertook to watch for the order and have appraisement made.

Thursday I went once more to the appraiser's office. My order had not come from the custom house. A deputy (No. 16) was called. He had orders all around my number, but not mine. Was advised to go down to the custom house and get my order. The colored boy was going down on duty and he volunteered to do the errand. He also gladdened me by saying to Mr. Rhodes that he had seen my parcel in "the locker." Remember that No. 12 had warned me on Tuesday that my business must be prosecuted diligently lest the goods should get buried. And now this boy had seen them, this very day; there was hope!—they were not buried. I was to return at 3:30 p. m., and did so. The order had been brought by the colored boy; but, alas! the "church oath" was missing, and it was too late to get it to-day. Mr. Rhodes and No. 16, eager to aid me, after a brief conference, offered to go down stairs

with me to General Williams (No. 17), who perhaps would make an exception of this case and give me the goods. But the general, though quite civil about it, felt that he could not do so. Then Mr. Rhodes and No. 16 took the trouble to write out directions for me in the way of procedure on the next day at the custom house, whom to see and what to ask for.

That night I met a friend who has much business to transact at the custom house, and he was good enough to offer me help should there be any further trouble.

On Friday my instructions sent me to the office of the deputy collector, seventh division. At the Wall street temple this was not easily found. I was directed to look for it on the third floor. Reaching that floor on the wrong side, and vainly seeking some sign to guide my steps, an employee was asked where was the office. He did not know, but he was sure that this was the fifth floor—the very top. Maybe so; my brain might be going wrong, and perhaps it could not count aright. I could count two at least, and down two flights my leg took me. Here was met another one who belonged to the place. His answer to my inquiry sent me back again two flights to find the office on the other side. Good! I was not yet mentally wrecked on this petty business; my counting had been right.

General Williams had authorized me to request that what he required should be entrusted to my hands. In this office No. 17 had my papers. He wrote a note to General Williams assuring him that the "church oath" was "all right." He then hesitated and took me to another room, where the case was laid before No. 18. He said that note would not "do," and No. 17 tore it up. Now they say that the difficulty is this: "An appraiser has reported the goods as wearing apparel, wool manufactured, subject to duty (49½ cents per pound and 60 cents ad valorem); this report must be altered by him and it must come back here." The figures of the duty are not in my notes and are given from memory. No. 18 would not consent to give me the papers to take uptown; a regular messenger must carry them, and I must return at 1 o'clock for what could, would, or should be given me.

Utterly wearied and beaten, I threw up the sponge. My foot-steps led me to the office of my friend. The gentleman who attends to the custom house business of the office took my written authority to act for me. That day, after two visits and some trouble, not reported to me in detail, the parcel—as I am told—was "yanked out of the locker," though papers and forms were yet inaccurate and incomplete.

In the progress of this history some five or more mistakes were made in the custom house, according to statements of officers against one another. No one suggested that he was willing to be bribed. Some officials were so considerate and helpful that it would be pleasant to know them better. But good-bye, old custom house, you are a huge spider web, through which strong lies and mighty false oaths break their way while you hold the truth in helpless captivity.

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