

## Mr. Copernicus And The Proletariat.

by H. C. Bunner

The old publishing house of T. Copernicus & Son was just recovering from the rush of holiday business—a rush of perhaps a dozen purchasers. Christmas shoppers rarely sought out the dingy building just around the corner from Astor Place, and T. C. & Son had done no great business since young T. C., the “Son,” died, fifteen years before. The house lived on two or three valuable copyrights; and old Mr. Copernicus kept it alive just for occupation’s sake, now that Tom was dead. But he liked to maintain the assumption that his queer old business, with its publication of half-a-dozen scientific or theological works per annum, was the same flourishing concern that it had been in his prime. That it did not flourish was nothing to him. He was rich, thanks to himself; his wife was rich, thanks to her aunt; his daughter was rich, thanks to her grandmother. So he played at business, and every Christmas-time he bought a lot of fancy stationery and gift-books that nobody called for, and hired a couple of extra porters for whom the head-porter did his best to find some work. Then, the week after New Year’s, he would discharge his holiday hands, and give each of them a dollar or two apiece out of his own pocket.

“Barney,” he said to the old porter, “you don’t need those two extra men any longer?”

“Deed an’ we do not, sorr!” said Barney; “th’ wan o’ thim wint off av himself the mornin’, an’ t’ other do be readin’ books the whole day long.”

“Send him to me,” Mr. Copernicus ordered, and Barney yelled unceremoniously, “Mike!”

The figure of a large and somewhat stout youth, who might have been eighteen or twenty-eight years old, appeared, rising from the sub-cellar. His hair was black, his face was clean-shaven, and although he held in his hand the evidence of his guilt, a book kept partly open with his forefinger, he had an expression of imperturbable calm, and placid, ox-like fixity of purpose. He wore a long, seedy, black frock-coat, buttoned up to the neck-band of his collarless shirt.

“How’s this?” inquired Mr. Copernicus. “I’m told that you spend your time reading my books.” The young man slowly opened his mouth and answered in a deliberate drawl, agreeably diversified by a peculiar stutter.

“I haven’t been reading *your* b–b–books, sir; I’ve been reading my own. All I had to do was to hand up boxes of fuf–fuf–fancy stationery, and—“

“I see,” interposed Mr. Copernicus, hurriedly, “there hasn’t been any very great call for fancy stationery this year.”

“And when there wasn’t any c–c–call for it, I read. I ain’t going to be a pip–pip–porter all my life. Would *you*?”

“Why, of course, my boy,” said Mr. Copernicus, “if you are reading to improve your mind, in your leisure time—let’s see your book.”

The young man handed him a tattered duodecimo.

“Why, it’s Virgil!” exclaimed his employer. “You can’t read this.”

“Some of it I kik–kik–can,” returned the employee, “and some of it I kik–kik–can’t.”

Mr. Copernicus sought out “Arma virumque” and “Tityre, tu patulæ,” and one or two other passages he was sure of, and the studious young porter read them in the artless accent which the English attribute to the ancient Romans, and translated them with sufficient accuracy.

“Where did you learn to read Latin?”

“I p–p–picked it up in odd hours.”

“What else have you studied?”

“A little Gig–Gig–Greek.”

“Any thing else?”

“Some algebra and some Fif–Fif–French.”

“Where do you come from?”

“From Baltimore,” drawled the prodigy, utterly unmoved by his employer’s manifest astonishment. “I was janitor of a school there, and the principal lent me his bib–bib–books.”

“What is your name?”

“M–M–Michael Quinlan.”

“And what was your father’s business?”

“He was a bib–bib–bricklayer,” the young man replied calmly, adding, reflectively, “when he wasn’t did–did–drunk.”

“Bless my old soul!” said Mr. Copernicus to himself, “this is most extraordinary! I’ll see you again, young man. Barney!” he called to the head porter, “this young man will remain with us for the present.”

A couple of days later, Mr. Copernicus sent for Michael Quinlan, and invited him to call at the Copernican residence on Washington Square, that evening.

“I want to have Professor Barcalow talk with you,” he explained.

At the hour appointed, Mr. M. Quinlan presented himself at the basement door of the old house, and was promptly translated to the library, where Professor Barcalow, once President of Clear Creek University, Indiana, rubbed his bald head and examined the young man at length.

Quinlan underwent an hour’s ordeal without the shadow of discomposure.

He drawled and stuttered with a placid face, whether his answers were right or wrong. At the end of the hour, the Professor gave his verdict.

“Our young friend,” he said, “has certainly done wonders for himself in the way of self–tuition. He is *almost* able—mind, I say *almost*—to pass a good Freshman examination. Of course, he is not thorough. There is just the same difference, Mr. Copernicus, between the tuition you do for yourself and the tuition that you receive from a competent

teacher as there is between the carpentering you do for yourself and the carpentering a regular carpenter does for you. I can see the marks of self-tuition all over this young man's conversation. He has never met a competent instructor in his life. But he has done very well for himself—wonderfully well. He is entitled to great credit. Try to remember, Quinlan, what I told you about the use of the ablative absolute.”

Quinlan said he would, and made his exit by the basement door.

“If he works hard,” remarked the Professor, “he will be able to enter Clear Creek by June, and work his way through.”

“And as it happens,” said Mr. Copernicus, “I'm going to lose my night-watchman next week, and I think I'll put Quinlan in. And then I've been thinking—there are all poor Tom's books that he had when he went to Columbia. I'll let the boy come here and borrow them, and I can keep an eye on him and see how he's getting along.”

“H'm! yes, of course,” the Professor assented hesitatingly, dubious of Mr. Copernicus's classics.

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“Well, Barney,” Mr. Copernicus hailed his head-porter a month or two later, “how does our new night-watchman do?”

“Faith, I've seen worse than him,” said Barney. “He's a willing lad.”

Barney's heart had been won. He came down to the store each morning and found that Quinlan had saved him the trouble of taking off the long sheets of cotton cloth that protected the books on the counters from the dust.

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Every week thereafter, Quinlan presented himself at the basement door, shabby, but no longer collarless, was admitted to the library, by way of the back-stairs, and received from Mrs. Copernicus the books that Mr. Copernicus had set aside for him. But one day Mr. Copernicus forgot the books, and Mrs. Copernicus asked the young man into the parlor to explain to him how it had happened. When she

had explained, being a kindly soul, she made a little further conversation, and asked Quinlan some questions about his studies. Greek was Greek indeed to her; but when he spoke of French, she felt as though she had a sort of second-hand acquaintance with the language.

“Floretta,” she said to her daughter, “talk to Mr. Quinlan in French, and find out how much he knows.”

Floretta blushed. She was a wren-like little thing, with soft brown hair, rather pretty, and yet the sort of girl whom men never notice. To address this male stranger was an agony to her. But she knew that her French had been bought at a fashionable boarding-school, and bought for show, and her mother had a right to demand its exhibition. She asked M. Quinlan how he portrayed himself, and M. Quinlan, with no more expression on his face than a Chinese idol, but with a fluency checked only by his drawl and his stutter, poured forth what sounded to Mrs. Copernicus like a small oration.

“What did he say then, Floretta?” she demanded.

“He said how grateful he was to Papa for giving him such a chance, and how he wants to be a teacher when he knows enough. And, oh, Mama, he speaks *ever* so much better than *I* do.”

“Where did you learn to speak so well?” inquired Mrs. Copernicus, incredulously.

“I lived for some years in a French house, Ma’am. At least, the lady of the house was French, and she never spoke any thing else.”

Beneficence is quick to develop into an insidious habit. When Mr. Copernicus heard this new thing of his prodigy and protégé, a new idea came to him.

“Old Haverhill, down at the office, speaks French like a native. I’ll let him feel Quinlan’s teeth, and if he is as good as you say he is, he’d better come once a week and talk French to Floretta for an hour. You can sit in the room. She ought to keep up her French.”

And every Wednesday, from four to five, Mr. Quinlan and Miss Floretta conversed, Floretta blushing ever, Quinlan retaining his idol-

like stolidity. Sometimes the dull monotony of his drawl, broken only by his regular and rhythmic stutter, lulled Mrs. Copernicus into a brief nap over her book or her fancy work.

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Spring had come. The trees had brought out their pale and gauzy green veils, the beds of tulips and Alpine daisies made glad spots in the parks, and Quinlan, at his employer's suggestion, had purchased a ready made Spring suit, in which he looked so presentable that Mr. Copernicus was half minded to ask him to dinner.

For Mrs. Copernicus had said something to Mr. Copernicus that had set him to thinking of many things. The Chinese idol had abated no jot of his stolidity, and yet—perhaps—he had found a worshiper. Floretta began blushing of Wednesdays, a full hour before the lesson.

What was to come of it? On the face of it, it seemed impossible. A Quinlan and a Copernicus! And yet—great-grandfather Copernicus, who founded the family in America—was not he a carpenter? And did not his descendants point with pride to his self-made solidity? And here was native worth; high ambition; achievement that promised more. And Floretta was twenty-four, and had never had an offer. “What,” inquired Mr. Copernicus of himself, “is my duty toward the proletariat?”

One thing was certain. If the question was not settled in the negative at once, Quinlan must be educated. So, instead of inviting Quinlan to dinner, he invited Mr. Joseph Mitts, the traveling agent of the Hopkinsonian Higher Education Association, who, by a rare chance, was in town.

Cynical folk said that the Hopkinsonian Association existed only to sell certain textbooks and curious forms of stationery which were necessary to the Hopkinsonian system. But no such idea had ever entered the head of Mr. Mitts. He roamed about the land, introducing the System wherever he could, and a brisk business agent followed him and sold the Hopkinsonian Blackboards and the Hopkinsonian Ink and the Hopkinsonian Teachers' Self-Examination Blanks, on commission.

As they smoked their cigars in the Library after dinner, Mr. Copernicus told Mr. Mitts about Quinlan. Mr. Mitts was interested. He knew a Professor at a fresh-water college who would put Quinlan through his studies during the vacation.

“Well, that’s settled,” Mr. Copernicus said, and he beamed with satisfaction. “I knew you’d help me out, Mitts. Only it’s so hard ever to get a sight of you—you are always traveling about.”

“We don’t often meet,” Mr. Mitts assented. “And it is curious that this visit should have been the means of giving me sight of a man in whom I want to interest *you*. His name is Chester—Dudley Winthrop Chester. He is the son of my old clergyman, and he has given his parents a deal of trouble. I don’t know that Dud ever was vicious or dissolute. But he was the most confirmed idler and spendthrift I ever knew. He couldn’t even get through college, and he never would do a stroke of work. He made his father pay his debts half a dozen times, and when that was stopped, he drifted away, and his family quite lost sight of him. I met him in Baltimore last year, and lent him money to come to New York. He said he was going to work. And just as I came in your front door, I saw him going out of your basement door with a package under his arm, so I infer he is employed by one of your trades-people—your grocer, perhaps.”

“Just as you came in? Why—a large, dark-haired young man?”

“Yes; clean-shaven.”

“Why, that was Quinlan!”

“No,” said Mr. Mitts, with the smile of superior knowledge. “It was Chester, and if I’m not mistaken, he was kissing the cook.”

“Then you *are* mistaken!” cried Mr. Copernicus; “my cook is as black as the ace of spades. There isn’t a white servant in the house.”

“Why, that’s so!” Mr. Mitts was staggered for the moment. “But—wait a minute—does your man Quinlan speak with a drawl, and just one stutter to the sentence?”

“I think he does,” replied his host; “but—“

“Dudley Chester!” said Mr. Mitts.

“But, my dear Mitts, where did he get the Latin and Greek?”

“He had to learn *something* at Yale.”

“And the French?”

“His mother was a French Canadian. That’s where he gets his French—and his laziness.”

Mr. Copernicus made one last struggle.

“But he has been most industrious and faithful in my employ.”

“What is he?”

“My—my night—watchman.”

“Mr. Copernicus,” inquired Mr. Mitts, “have you a watchman’s clock in your building?”

“No, sir,” said Mr. Copernicus, indignantly. “I have none of those degrading new-fangled machines. I prefer to trust my employees.”

“Then Dudley Chester is asleep in your store at this minute.”

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A soft, moist breeze, with something of the sea in it, blew gently in at an open window of the second floor of the business establishment of T. Copernicus & Son. Near the window a gas-jet flickered. Under the gas-jet, on, or rather in, a bed ingeniously constructed of the heaped-up covering-cloths from the long counters, lay Mr. Michael Quinlan, half-supported on his left elbow. In his other hand he held, half-open, a yellow-covered French novel. Between his lips was a cigarette. A faint shade of something like amusement lent expression to his placid features as he listened to Mr. Copernicus puffing his way up the stairs, followed by Mr. Mitts and Barney. The hands on the clock pointed to eleven. Mr. Quinlan’s attire was appropriate to the hour. He wore only a frayed cotton night-shirt. His other clothes were carelessly disposed about his couch.



He waited calmly until his visitors had appeared before him, and then he greeted them with a gracious wave of his hand—an easy gesture that seemed to dismiss Quinlan and announce Chester.

“Gentlemen,” he drawled, “you’ll excuse my not gig–gig–getting up to welcome you. Ah, Joseph! I saw you this evening, and I supposed the j–j–jig was up.”

Mr. Copernicus was purple and speechless for the better part of a minute. Then he demanded, in a husky whisper:

*“Who are you?”*

Mr. Chester, with nothing of the Quinlan left about him, waved his hand once more.

“Mr. Joseph Mitts is a gentleman of irre–pip–pip–proachable veracity,” he said. “I can kik–kik–confidently confirm any statements he has made about me.”

“And why—” Mr. Copernicus had found his voice—“why have you humbugged me in this iniquitous—infamous way?”

The late Quinlan gazed at him with blank surprise.

“My dear sir, did–did–don’t you see? If I’d told you who I was, you’d have thought I was a did–did–damn fool not to know more than I did. Whereas, don’t you see? you thought I was a did–did–devil of a fellow.”

“Get up and dress yourself and get out of here!” said his employer.

“The jig, then,” inquired Mr. Dudley Chester, slowly rising, “is did–did–definitely up? No more Fif–Fif–French lessons? No? Well,” he continued, as he leisurely pulled on his trousers, “that’s the kik–kik–cussèd inconsistency. The j–j–jig is up for the gentleman; but when you thought I was a did–did–damn Mick, I was right in the bib–bib–bosom of the blooming family.”

“Here are your week’s wages,” said Mr. Copernicus, trembling with rage. “Now, get out!”

“Not exactly,” responded the unperturbed sinner: “a ticket to Chicago!”

“I’m afraid you had best yield,” whispered Mr. Mitts. “Your family, you know. It wouldn’t do to have this get out.”

Mr. Copernicus had a minute of purple rage. Then he handed the money to Mr. Mitts.

“Put him on the train,” he said. “There’s one at twelve.”

“We can make it if we hurry,” said the obliging Mr. Mitts. “Where’s your lodging-house, Chester?”

Chester opened his eyes inquiringly. “Why, this is all I’ve got,” he said; “what’s the mim-mim-matter with this?”

“But your—your luggage?” inquired Mr. Mitts.

Mr. Chester waved a much-worn tooth-brush in the air.

“Man wants but lil-lil-little here below,” he remarked.

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“You see,” explained Mr. Dudley Winthrop Chester, formerly Quinlan, as he stepped out into the night air with Mr. Mitts, “the scheme is bib-bib-busted here, but I’ve got confidence in it. It’s good—it’ll gig-gig-go. Chicago’s the pip-pip-place for me. I suppose if you flash up ‘amo, amas’ to a Chicago man, he thinks you’re Elihu Burritt, the learned bib-bib-blacksmith.”

“Aren’t you tired of this life of false pretences?” asked Mr. Mitts, sternly.

“You can bib-bib-bet I am,” responded Chester, frankly; “I haven’t said a cuss-word in six months. Did-did-did-damn—damn—damn—damn!” he vociferated into the calm air of night, by way of relieving his pent-up feelings. “How long is it, Dudley,” pursued the patient Mitts, “since your parents heard from you?”

“Two years, I gig–gig–guess,” said Chester. “By Jove,” he added, as his eye fell on the blue sign of a telegraph office, “did–did–damn if I don’t telegraph them right now.”

Mr. Mitts was deeply gratified. “That’s a good idea,” he said.

“Lend me a kik–kik–quarter,” said Dudley Chester.

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At midnight sharp, Mr. Mitts saw his charge ascend the rear platform of the Chicago train just as it moved out of the gloomy Jersey City station of the Pennsylvania Railroad.

A young woman of slight figure, with a veil about her face, emerged from the interior of the car and threw her arms around the neck of Mr. Chester, late Quinlan.

“I thought I wasn’t mistaken,” said Mr. Mitts to himself.

The next week he received an envelope containing a scrap roughly torn out of a daily paper. It read as follows:

MARRILL

SCHOFF.—At the by the Rev. Dr. Kroiel, BISCHOFF, daughter of off. to THEODORE BREUSING, of Osnabruen, many.

CHESTER—COPERNICUS.—At the rectory of the Church of St. James the Greater, by the Rev. Dr. Wilson Wilson. D. D., FLORETTA, daughter of Thomas Copernicus, of New York, to DUDLEY WINTHROP CHESTER, of Baltimore. Md. No cards.

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And yet, within six months, Mr. Mitts received cards. They bade him to a reception given by Mr. and Mrs. Chester at the house of Mr. Thomas Copernicus.

*“I couldn’t have done that,”* said Mr. Mitts to himself.