

The Head of His House

By Conrad Richter

I have often wondered whether good old Tim, who did what he did, was sanctioned by God as head of the house of Mast.

Tim had always been my ideal head of a house. Kindly, humble, lovable, quaint, dependable as daylight he ruled over his little twenty-foot-front kingdom with a rule that I, a neighbour boy, or any one else, never felt was there until we committed some crime against it, broke one of his rose bushes or tormented the alley cat. And then Tim's calling us to account was so frank and gentle that it made every boy of us in the square love him like a father.

His wife was queen of his little kingdom. When she was on the front porch I never saw him come up the sidewalk without lifting his hat to her with an elaborate sweep and with a twinkle in his eye. As a rule he would pause gravely ten feet away and absurdly ask some respectful question in a solicitous voice perfectly audible to the neighbours for several doors. One time I remember it was, "Beg pardon, but do you think the lady of the house would give me boarding here?"

It seems I can still hear Mrs. Tim repeating to my mother: "Oh, Mrs. Connor. It's the pleasantest husband in the world I have." Often to-day I still see her and Tim rocking disconsolately on their front porch in the throes of the grippe. As if it were yesterday I can hear the old lady's half-sobbed words: "Oh, Tim, nothing tastes good to me any more." And I can still see old Tim shake his head and hear him sadly say: "No use, Lyddy. The sun doesn't shine any more."

They had never had children of their own. That, I think, was the greatest cross that Tim had to bear. But he carried it bravely. In his and Mrs. Tim's old age they took a nameless baby from their church orphanage and gave it the name of Mast and the first name of Shirk after Mrs. Mast's family. And now as the son grew up I saw the first evidence that some day there was going to be a question of whether Tim would always be the head of his house.

Tim was a well-read man, devouring newspapers, books and magazines, saving drawers full of clippings that he never had time to read again. But Shirk came from different blood. At the age of sixteen he clamoured to stop school. Through one of his companions, he secured a job as call boy for the railroad, and he offered six dollars a week to Tim just when Mrs. Tim after a long, hard illness had died. Tim had doctor bills and nurse bills and undertaking bills and very little money and nothing more than a rented house. But, although it was only another cross, he gave way to the boy and did not force him back to school. "Tim, Tim," I muttered to myself. "You must watch yourself if you want to stay the head of your house."

For months I saw Tim's pathetic face. Then I brought pressure to bear in the office of the train-master where I worked. Before long Shirk was advanced to the office job of night crew caller. After the third year it paid him sixty dollars a month, and before I knew it he was married.

I think Marjy married him rather because she loved old Tim than because she loved Shirk. She was one of the sweet, unassuming girls of town. She and Tim had often been comrades on walks and talks. Shirk could never understand her or any other's interest in his father. He didn't seem to see an ounce of worth in the old man. And the older he grew, the less he seemed to appreciate Tim. It used to make me blue to think what an amazing father Tim would have made to some

other boy. And the worst of it was that every day now Tim was getting nearer the time when, the chances were, Shirk would try to put him out of his own house.

It was as common a matter as insurance that brought the first clash. At our sitting-room window I had been picking apart the Sunday paper. Through the screen across our narrow alleyway I heard Tim's voice in proud admonition.

"Now, son of mine! You've come to the time you must do your figuring on double harness. Go slow for a while on cigarettes and movies and pool, and buy your wife a wedding present. It isn't fair to Marjy if you don't take care of her, when you know that the railroad relief only pays funeral expenses."

"I don't see much in life insurance except for a big corporation to make money out of a man," observed Shirk. "You don't have any us to get anything out of when you die."

"Shirk!" I heard Marjy's voice reproaching him.

"That's to my sorrow, son," came Tim's steady tones. "God knows I would buy it to-day, but though such things are cheap for the age of you, nobody sells it to an old man."

There was a little silence. Then Tim's voice came firmly.

"To-morrow, son, you will be going down town to take out two thousand dollars life insurance. I've read that it would cost you about twenty dollars a thousand. I'll pay one twenty dollars a year, and you will likely want to pay the other."

"I told you I didn't believe in insurance," declared the boy shortly. "Much less in throwing my good money away."

"If you think that, all right," answered old Tim. "Life's too short to try to change certain metals into gold. But to-morrow you're to go down town and get two thousand dollars life insurance. And as long as you put your feet under my table, my son, you're to remember that I am the head of this house."

"You may be now," Shirk answered sullenly. "But we'll see about that when I'm twenty-one."

"Twenty-one or thirty-one, son," old Tim replied, "if I am alive, I shall be your father, and the head of this house."

The months went on and it drew close to the time when Shirk would be twenty-one. Then one day I noticed that Marjy had become nervous and sallow. When I questioned my mother, she explained it with one five-lettered word. And the next day I heard that Marjy's young husband was gambling with his job. He had begun to sleep on his desk after midnight instead of staying awake and paying attention to business. Just the night before, Logan the night train-dispatcher had a hurry call for two crews—one for the yard, and one for Belt Line Junction. It was about three o'clock A.M. He rang long for his crew caller without getting an answer. So he crossed the yards and found Shirk "cocked up" on his desk asleep. The men said he was only Logan's good heart that had agreed to report it next time instead of at once.

I felt my friendship for Tim command me. Much as I disliked to do it, I leaned over the fence between back yards one evening and told Tim the story

"They tell me since, Tim," I added grin4y, "that Shirk has started to 'cock up' again, only now he turns the other way so his head is nearer his telephone bell. It's a bit safer, perhaps, Tim. But it's 'cocking-up' just the same. If Logan ever catches him again, it will be all over. He'll be queered with the company anywhere. And you know what other chance a boy or man has in this town, especially if it becomes known that the railroad company discharged him."

"I am grateful to you, Wally," said Tim quietly. "I won't mention your name. But after to-night the boy won't sleep on the job again." He drew himself up resolutely, and though he said nothing aloud, I knew he had said to himself, "I am the head of my house."

But Tim was getting old, and the inevitable happened. One night Logan failed again to get a reply from his crew caller's office. He crossed the yard, and found Shirk once more asleep on his desk. He had to shake the boy to get him awake. Next morning Logan reported the case to the superintendent, and Shirk was at once called and discharged.

I disliked to go home that evening, and once in the house I locked myself in. But it was of little use. About eight o'clock came a knock to the back door and there was Tim quietly asking to see me. I brought him in and tried to explain what had happened.

"You see, Tim, it isn't that the boy went to sleep. Everybody gets sleepy and everybody knows it's hard to keep awake and nobody knows it better than Logan himself. But the boy didn't fall asleep in his chair. He 'cocked up' on his desk again—cleaned off all the stuff, wrapped up an old coat for a pillow and laid himself down as though he didn't have another tap to do all night. It wasn't sleeping at the post, it was premeditated sleeping."

"I understand," said Tim gently. "It isn't that that I came over for. I was wondering would they give the boy one more chance! You remember that Paul had to be struck by lightning before he could become Paul."

"I—don't know if they will, Tim," I stammered. "I might try them."

I did what I could for the boy. I saw Logan and then had a talk with my boss, Schaffer, the train-master. He took me in to see Manx, the superintendent. I told Manx chiefly about the boy's lovable old father and the critical sickness of the young wife.

"What sense does he have monkeying with his job when he has a good old dad like that and a sick wife in the house!" Manx demanded savagely.

There was nothing for me to say.

"Well." Manx stared at his desk. "We'll give him another chance. But his job's been filled. About the only thing now until something better turns up will be flagging down at Winter Street. Tell him to be on duty down there at six o'clock to-morrow morning."

I thanked him and left. That evening I reported my little success to Tim.

"Tell Shirk to take the job, and not to be discouraged," I told him. "Manx hinted there would be something better for him later. He may even have something in mind now, and may be offering this other job just to try Shirk out."

Tim thanked me with such gentle dignity that I felt fortunate to have been able to be of help to such a man. But somehow I had my doubts about Tim being able to manage much longer the insubordinate member of his house. I was still awake that evening when Shirk came home, likely from movies or pool. He came in the side way. I heard the alleyway gate slam below my open window. In a little while I heard the murmur of Tim's news. Then the boy's voice answered distinctly.

"Me go back to the company flagging like a cripple at twenty-five a month! Not on your life."

"This is only a job to try you, son. The superintendent told Mr. Connor it was," Tim explained.

"I don't care what that fool said. The company got smart and fired me. They can whistle till I come back—anyhow not to flag at a crossing at twenty-five a month."

"But they wouldn't want you back at all as far as they are caring," said Tim. "It was Mr. Connor who was the kind enough neighbour to ask the superintendent to try you again."

"What do you know!" raged the boy. "You never worked outside the shop in your life. I tell you it's Logan who wants to see me flagging down at Winter Street so he can come along and point me out as the fellow he had fired."

"You are blind, son," said Tim clearly. "What does Mr. Logan care about you more than to get out of you as much work as the company pays you for? You have never worked hard enough to

make yourself valuable to anybody. The railroad company can get a hundred others glad enough for every job they have to offer you.”

“And I can get a hundred other jobs if I want them!” declared Shirk. “You’d be the one to make me flag at a crossing when I could be having a decent job at three times the money.”

“You’ve always had a chance, son,” rebuked Tim slowly. “In the morning I’ll ask Mr. Connor to report you off sick for two days; that’s how long you have to show that you can get another job, a decent one. If you don’t get one by Friday night—Saturday morning you start working wherever the railroad company wants you, if it’s keeping cows from off the track.”

“Saturday morning you’ll have nothing more to do with me,” returned the boy defiantly. “I’ll be of age, and I’ll work where I want to, and when I want to.”

“A boy may thirty-one and still need a head of his house, son,” answered Tim quietly.

“If you’re the head of the house, why don’t you own it! Why don’t you make enough money to feed the people in your house!”

Old Tim was silent. I could imagine his wounded eyes.

“Why don’t you support your house so I don’t have to work, if you’re the head of it!” jeered the boy. “You, making only a dollar eighty-five a day, trying to boss me—you make me sick.”

“You have two days to find a better job in,” said Tim gravely. “Then you and I will see who is the head of the house.”

Before I was up next morning Tim had asked my mother whether I would please report Shirk off sick for two days—that he, Tim, would explain later. I did as he requested, and spent the remainder of the day wondering what means Tim was going to take if Shirk found no job and still refused to flag. I wondered if Tim would try force. I hoped he wouldn’t. Shirk was too big. And he was young, while Tim was starting to wobble. I resolved to stay close by and give the old man help if he needed me.

The evening of Shirk’s second day I sat in our sitting-room and tried to read. Though the evening was unusually cool I had the window raised. Through the screen I could see Tim alone with a light in his dining-room, patiently smoking his pipe. Marjy was likely upstairs in bed. Old Tim had told mother early the morning before that her doctor had said that the girl’s only chance now was the fresh air, mental diversion and physical recreation of some sanatorium in the mountains. Tim had mentioned that he was going to try to borrow some money for the trip as soon as Shirk started to work again.

I was wondering how much money the old man would have to scrape together and where he would get it, when I heard some one coming in through the alleyway. The footsteps echoed dully. By the walk I knew it was Shirk, but it wasn’t the walk of a man who had just landed a job.

Through my screen I heard the door close behind him. Then I saw father and son confronting each other from across their dining-room table. After a moment Tim turned and pulled down the blind. I was out of it. I couldn’t hope to hear through Tim’s closed windows. And now the possible danger of the old man began to worry me.

I made up my mind to go boldly over and call. But before I was even up from my chair a shot rang through the loose Mast windows and echoed cavernously in the alleyway.

Other neighbours heard it, too, but I was the nearest. I do not know to-day whether I scaled the fence or scuttled around by the alleyway. But I remember bursting in old Tim’s back door, and I shall never forget that scene in Tim’s dining-room.

The house was anything but wide, and this room like ours, chopped off for the alleyway extension, was about ten feet narrow. A few moments before, it might have been cheerful. A

golden oak sideboard stood against the wall with its glasses and dishes as neatly arranged as when Mrs. Tim was alive. Drawn up cosily to the table were two of the half dozen golden oak chairs. The table was covered with a cheerful red cloth. Beside the white of the few dishes and the yellow of Tim's old pipe, the cloth looked bright red, but it seemed hopelessly faded where its corners dragged the floor beside the rich wine colour that stained the face and hair of Shirk. He lay the carpet quiet except for an almost imperceptible ooze from the ugly dark hole where his hair and temple met.

I don't remember what I first stammered to the old man. I only recall a fervent prayer to myself that I might see Shirk get to his feet and sneer familiarly into my face. But, except for the trickle of blood down his temple, there was nothing about the boy that moved. I tried to imagine what had happened. Somehow I had no idea that old Tim had done it until he straightened up from the floor and laid an old blue revolver on the red cloth. I could not help shrinking from him, but I pitied from the bottom of me his dazed grey eyes and shaking fingers.

"He said I wasn't the head of the house," old Tim faltered. "I had to show him I was." He drew a breath almost quietly. "I had to show him."

"But, Tim, you didn't do it—not with that!"

He nodded faintly.

"Even in self-defence, Tim! A thing like that! Was he killing you?"

"No," said Tim slowly, shaking his head. "I didn't have to do it in self-defence."

"Then for God's sake don't tell anybody," I flung at him. "Don't say a word until I get you a lawyer. Don't open your mouth."

A moment more and the kitchen and sitting-room doorways were crowded with frightened neighbours' faces. Later came the police and to the first question asked him Tim replied: "He said I wasn't the head of the house—and I had to show him."

"Tim!" I whispered in his ear, shaking his shoulder, "for God's sake keep your mouth shut."

The police took him away and after tearing myself from knotted neighbours, I went down to the railroad and told Logan the story. Logan was tremendously affected and seemed to take some of the blame on himself. He gave me a card to an attorney friend of his named Munson and told me to engage him—that he would pay the bill. The next morning I reported off and was waiting in the lawyer's office before he came in. I found him a ready listener. But when I had finished telling him the case and everything I knew, he shook his head.

"I'm sorry, but your old man's got no case at all unless we change his story. A man has no legal right, you know, to kill his son in order to make him accept this or that or any other job."

"But there's something wrong somewhere," I stammered. "Tim is one of the finest, gentlest souls in the world. He would never hurt a fly without cause."

"What do you mean by cause? There isn't much cause in law except self-defence."

"I believe it *was* self-defence," I muttered.

"Your defendant doesn't seem to support you," said Munson thoughtfully. "I think we had better go down and get his version."

We readily gained admittance to Tim's cell, and I encouraged Tim to trust his new friend with everything."

"As I'm to be your counsel," explained Munson earnestly, "I must know everything just as it happened. It doesn't say that I will tell everything I know. But I cannot and dare not make a defence for you until I am assured that the prosecution will have no vital facts that I don't know."

"The only way, Tim," I urged again, "is to tell everything."

Tim nodded and then repeated merely what he had related to me the night before.

“You cannot convince me that you used a revolver on your son without more cause than that,” insisted Munson clearly. “It’s ridiculous. Tell me every step, please, just as it happened.”

“He was only home a few moments,” insisted Tim. “There is nothing more to tell.”

“But I want to know every word that was said, every move you both made. Don’t you realise, man, that you may hang for this if you do not tell me what I have every right and reason to know in order to try to save you.”

Old Tim bent forward helplessly.

“There was nothing else. If I must hang for it, they must hang me. I am sorry, Wally, for the neighbourhood—and for Marjy. How is Marjy?”

“Mother has her over at our place,” I told him “She is not much better.”

“Wally!” Tim leaned toward me anxiously. “Before long there may be some money come to her from the poor lad. Will you take it, please, and send her up in the mountains to the best place the doctor can find.”

“I’ll see that she gets there right away, Tim,” I promised him.

Before we left, Munson tried again to force some reasonable explanation from the old man’s lips. But Tim could add nothing to his story. We gave up at last and went to Munson’s office, where he summed up Tim’s best defence. Briefly, it was that the boy Shirk resisted Tim, his father, as I had heard him do before, and that old Tim because of his advancing years had used the revolver to threaten—and it had gone off against his will, partially turning his mind.

In due time the case came to trial. But it was a losing fight with Tim unmanageable as he had been from the first. To his own disaster and to the frenzy of Munson he repeated twice to the jury, “My son said I was not the head of the house—and I had to show him I was. I had to show him!” The only satisfaction we had was in the fact that the prosecution was able to force no more from Tim than had Munson or I.

They sentenced old Tim for life and as soon afterward as I could I went to see him. He tried to smile to me as I came in, but it was only a wistful, forlorn twist that threatened every moment to turn to tears. I did my best to cheer him and was glad that I had news.

“Mother got a letter from Marjy to-day,” I told him. “Marjy says she and the baby are getting better every day and will be down to see you soon. She says it was the mountains and nothing else that helped her.”

“Thank God,” muttered Tim, closing his eyes. His lips moved silently. To me they seemed to form words that could only make strange meaning.

“Tim,” I demanded, an incredible assumption working in my brain, “what have you known all this time that you haven’t told us!”

Tim opened his eyes and wiped them tremblingly with the freckled back of his hand.

“Nothing, Wally,” he muttered.

I was sure now that I had struck a trail. I caught hold of his shoulder.

“Tell me, Tim,” I urged. “Trust me! I’ll say nothing to anybody. Sit down. You’re weak, man! You’re sick!”

But he stubbornly kept standing.

“You promise never to breathe a word—till I’m gone?” he questioned closely.

“I promise, Tim.” I held up my right hand. For a moment he seemed to falter.

“Oh, Wally,” he sobbed, breaking down and blinking the tears from his old grey eyes. “Did you never guess when you stood by me so hard? The poor, headstrong laddy. He couldn’t help it. He came from other stock than we.”

“Couldn’t help what, Tim!” I floundered.

“For two days he tried for his job, but everybody refused him,” pleaded Tim. “He came home that night so blue. The poor soul, Wally. If he hadn’t been blue, he wouldn’t have done it—before I could get to him. My revolver was in the sideboard drawer, under the red napkins. He knew it, and till I got to him it was too late.”

“Tim!” I demanded of him, amazed. “Why have you been lying to us, to everybody, as you have?”

Tim’s eyes entreated me.

“The document!” he reminded. “It’s written there that if the policy-holder takes his life, no money will be paid until it’s a year after the insurance was taken out. And for the boy it was only seven months. What would Marjy have done? I hadn’t even a dollar to give her to go away. And she had to go.”

But, Tim, Tim!” I faltered bewilderingly. “Why didn’t you say then that Shirk *attacked* you—that you had to do it in self-defence. You might have saved the insurance and yourself besides.”

Old Tim squared his unsteady shoulders and stood gently erect.

“I take care of my children, Wally,” he said, “the dead as well as the living. I am the head of my house.”