**The Unknown Quantity**

O. Henry

The poet Longfellow—or was it Confucius, the inventor of wisdom?—remarked:

“Life is real, life is earnest;

And things are not what they seem.”

As mathematics are—or is: thanks, old subscriber!—the only just rule by which questions of life can be measured, let us, by all means, adjust our theme to the straight edge and the balanced column of the great goddess Two-and-Two-Makes-Four. Figures—unassailable sums in addition—shall be set over against whatever opposing element there may be.

A mathematician, after scanning the above two lines of poetry, would say: “Ahem! young gentlemen, if we assume that X plus—that is, that life is real—then things (all of which life includes) are real. Anything that is real is what it seems. Then if we consider the proposition that ‘things are not what they seem,’ why—”

But this is heresy, and not poesy. We woo the sweet nymph Algebra; we would conduct you into the presence of the elusive, seductive, pursued, satisfying, mysterious X.

Not long before the beginning of this century, Septimus Kinsolving, an old New Yorker, invented an idea. He originated the discovery that bread is made from flour and not from wheat futures. Perceiving that the flour crop was short, and that the Stock Exchange was having no perceptible effect on the growing wheat, Mr. Kinsolving cornered the flour market.

The result was that when you or my landlady (before the war she never had to turn her hand to anything; Southerners accommodated) bought a five-cent loaf of bread you laid down an additional two cents, which went to Mr. Kinsolving as a testimonial to his perspicacity.

A second result was that Mr. Kinsolving quit the game with $2,000,000 prof—er—rake-off.

Mr. Kinsolving’s son Dan was at college when the mathematical experiment in breadstuffs was made. Dan came home during vacation, and found the old gentleman in a red dressing-gown reading “Little Dorrit” on the porch of his estimable red brick mansion in Washington Square. He had retired from business with enough extra two-cent pieces from bread buyers to reach, if laid side by side, fifteen times around the earth and lap as far as the public debt of Paraguay.

Dan shook hands with his father, and hurried over to Greenwich Village to see his old high-school friend, Kenwitz. Dan had always admired Kenwitz. Kenwitz was pale, curly-haired, intense, serious, mathematical, studious, altruistic, socialistic, and the natural foe of oligarchies. Kenwitz had foregone college, and was learning watch-making in his father’s jewelry store. Dan was smiling, jovial, easy-tempered and tolerant alike of kings and ragpickers. The two foregathered joyously, being opposites. And then Dan went back to college, and Kenwitz to his mainsprings—and to his private library in the rear of the jewelry shop.

Four years later Dan came back to Washington Square with the accumulations of B. A. and two years of Europe thick upon him. He took a filial look at Septimus Kinsolving’s elaborate tombstone in Greenwood and a tedious excursion through typewritten documents with the family lawyer; and then, feeling himself a lonely and hopeless millionaire, hurried down to the old jewelry store across Sixth Avenue.

Kenwitz unscrewed a magnifying glass from his eye, routed out his parent from a dingy rear room, and abandoned the interior of watches for outdoors. He went with Dan, and they sat on a bench in Washington Square. Dan had not changed much; he was stalwart, and had a dignity that was inclined to relax into a grin. Kenwitz was more serious, more intense, more learned, philosophical and socialistic.

“I know about it now,” said Dan, finally. “I pumped it out of the eminent legal lights that turned over to me poor old dad’s collections of bonds and boodle. It amounts to $2,000,000, Ken. And I am told that he squeezed it out of the chaps that pay their pennies for loaves of bread at little bakeries around the corner. You’ve studied economics, Dan, and you know all about monopolies, and the masses, and octopuses, and the rights of laboring people. I never thought about those things before. Football and trying to be white to my fellow-man were about the extent of my college curriculum.

“But since I came back and found out how dad made his money I’ve been thinking. I’d like awfully well to pay back those chaps who had to give up too much money for bread. I know it would buck the line of my income for a good many yards; but I’d like to make it square with ’em. Is there any way it can be done, old Ways and Means?”

Kenwitz’s big black eyes glowed fierily. His thin, intellectual face took on almost a sardonic cast. He caught Dan’s arm with the grip of a friend and a judge.

“You can’t do it!” he said, emphatically. “One of the chief punishments of you men of ill-gotten wealth is that when you do repent you find that you have lost the power to make reparation or restitution. I admire your good intentions, Dan, but you can’t do anything. Those people were robbed of their precious pennies. It’s too late to remedy the evil. You can’t pay them back”

“Of course,” said Dan, lighting his pipe, “we couldn’t hunt up every one of the duffers and hand ’em back the right change. There’s an awful lot of ’em buying bread all the time. Funny taste they have—I never cared for bread especially, except for a toasted cracker with the Roquefort. But we might find a few of ’em and chuck some of dad’s cash back where it came from. I’d feel better if I could. It seems tough for people to be held up for a soggy thing like bread. One wouldn’t mind standing a rise in broiled lobsters or deviled crabs. Get to work and think, Ken. I want to pay back all of that money I can.”

“There are plenty of charities,” said Kenwitz, mechanically.

“Easy enough,” said Dan, in a cloud of smoke. “I suppose I could give the city a park, or endow an asparagus bed in a hospital. But I don’t want Paul to get away with the proceeds of the gold brick we sold Peter. It’s the bread shorts I want to cover, Ken.”

The thin fingers of Kenwitz moved rapidly.

“Do you know how much money it would take to pay back the losses of consumers during that corner in flour?” he asked.

“I do not.” said Dan, stoutly. “My lawyer tells me that I have two millions.”

“If you had a hundred millions,” said Kenwitz, vehemently, “you couldn’t repair a thousandth part of the damage that has been done. You cannot conceive of the accumulated evils produced by misapplied wealth. Each penny that was wrung from the lean purses of the poor reacted a thousandfold to their harm. You do not understand. You do not see how hopeless is your desire to make restitution. Not in a single instance can it be done.”

“Back up, philosopher!” said Dan. “The penny has no sorrow that the dollar cannot heal.”

“Not in one instance,” repeated Kenwitz. “I will give you one, and let us see. Thomas Boyne had a little bakery over there in Varick Street. He sold bread to the poorest people. When the price of flour went up he had to raise the price of bread. His customers were too poor to pay it, Boyne’s business failed and he lost his $1,000 capital—all he had in the world.”

Dan Kinsolving struck the park bench a mighty blow with his fist.

“I accept the instance,” he cried. “Take me to Boyne. I will repay his thousand dollars and buy him a new bakery.”

“Write your check,” said Kenwitz, without moving, “and then begin to write checks in payment of the train of consequences. Draw the next one for $50,000. Boyne went insane after his failure and set fire to the building from which he was about to be evicted. The loss amounted to that much. Boyne died in an asylum.”

“Stick to the instance,” said Dan. “I haven’t noticed any insurance companies on my charity list.”

“Draw your next check for $100,000,” went on Kenwitz. “Boyne’s son fell into bad ways after the bakery closed, and was accused of murder. He was acquitted last week after a three years’ legal battle, and the state draws upon taxpayers for that much expense.”

“Back to the bakery!” exclaimed Dan, impatiently. “The Government doesn’t need to stand in the bread line.”

“The last item of the instance is—come and I will show you,” said Kenwitz, rising.

The Socialistic watchmaker was happy. He was a millionaire-baiter by nature and a pessimist by trade. Kenwitz would assure you in one breath that money was but evil and corruption, and that your brand-new watch needed cleaning and a new ratchet-wheel.

He conducted Kinsolving southward out of the square and into ragged, poverty-haunted Varick Street. Up the narrow stairway of a squalid brick tenement he led the penitent offspring of the Octopus. He knocked on a door, and a clear voice called to them to enter.

In that almost bare room a young woman sat sewing at a machine. She nodded to Kenwitz as to a familiar acquaintance. One little stream of sunlight through the dingy window burnished her heavy hair to the color of an ancient Tuscan’s shield. She flashed a rippling smile at Kenwitz and a look of somewhat flustered inquiry.

Kinsolving stood regarding her clear and pathetic beauty in heart-throbbing silence. Thus they came into the presence of the last item of the Instance.

“How many this week, Miss Mary?” asked the watchmaker. A mountain of coarse gray shirts lay upon the floor.

“Nearly thirty dozen,” said the young woman cheerfully. “I’ve made almost $4. I’m improving, Mr. Kenwitz. I hardly know what to do with so much money.” Her eyes turned, brightly soft, in the direction of Dan. A little pink spot came out on her round, pale cheek.

Kenwitz chuckled like a diabolic raven.

“Miss Boyne,” he said, “let me present Mr. Kinsolving, the son of the man who put bread up five years ago. He thinks he would like to do something to aid those who where inconvenienced by that act.”

The smile left the young woman’s face. She rose and pointed her forefinger toward the door. This time she looked Kinsolving straight in the eye, but it was not a look that gave delight.

The two men went down Varick Street. Kenwitz, letting all his pessimism and rancor and hatred of the Octopus come to the surface, gibed at the moneyed side of his friend in an acrid torrent of words. Dan appeared to be listening, and then turned to Kenwitz and shook hands with him warmly.

“I’m obliged to you, Ken, old man,” he said, vaguely—“a thousand times obliged.”

“Mein Gott! you are crazy!” cried the watchmaker, dropping his spectacles for the first time in years.

Two months afterward Kenwitz went into a large bakery on lower Broadway with a pair of gold-rimmed eyeglasses that he had mended for the proprietor.

A lady was giving an order to a clerk as Kenwitz passed her.

“These loaves are ten cents,” said the clerk.

“I always get them at eight cents uptown,” said the lady. “You need not fill the order. I will drive by there on my way home.”

The voice was familiar. The watchmaker paused.

“Mr. Kenwitz!” cried the lady, heartily. “How do you do?”

Kenwitz was trying to train his socialistic and economic comprehension on her wonderful fur boa and the carriage waiting outside.

“Why, Miss Boyne!” he began.

“Mrs. Kinsolving,” she corrected. “Dan and I were married a month ago.”