

■ A tale of deep and unselfish dedication to a business that failed.

I LEARNED ABOUT LIFE IN A LAUNDRY

Biologists study life through a microscope, sociologists through statistics, but I have studied it at great pains through the pajama, the undershirt, the handkerchief. No, I wasn't a research worker. I was just a laundryman's son.

Nobody ever says anything nice about the laundryman. He is always late with the wash. He loses things. He breaks the buttons on your best shirt. And if, by some miracle, he returns your bundle intact, he does it three days late — so you lace into him.

It's about time somebody came to the defense of this poor, overworked, browbeaten fellow. He, too, is a human being. He has problems, despair, comedy, tragedy and a family of his own, although he never sees them unless they all are working in his store. And

usually they are. For 20 years I was a laundryman's son. And though I worked, ate and slept laundry, I still say my father was a fine man — and I will poke anyone who disagrees.

Life in my father's New York laundry began when I was six years old. What I have gone through since then, including 20,000 pockets and unmentionables, would fill several curio shops. A man's private life is not his own anymore — nor is a woman's.

My father had a store in Greenwich Village and, in keeping with the artistic temperament of the Village, it was called the La Boheme Hand Laundry. I remember the early evenings when I helped my father fold handkerchiefs and mangle undershirts. I used to gaze out the window at the same time, watching Life pass by. The

Village had a magic flavor then. The people who entered our store were not just customers. To me, wallowing in the golden dreams of youth, they were the great writers and artists of America. So we had a noble purpose in life.

I remember the young woman who used to bring in her laundry every week. She was always sweet and gracious, and never complained about our service. But after several years, she stopped being a customer. Then one day she returned, and we found a man's collar in the wash. Then an occasional man's shirt, then a half-dozen at a time! And so they were married and lived happily for almost a year.

One day the lady vanished, and my father's social research became fraught with obstacles. In time, the husband started bringing his laundry to the store, but it was all masculine now. No more negligees! But true to the laundryman's creed, my father asked no questions. Then, lo, the negligee appeared again! And some time later, baby things arrived. Thus the marriage

was resumed and our whole staff settled down once more to normal living.

We watched this family grow from two to seven — and another from two to fourteen. We watched another shrink when one of its members went off to war, and the young man's shirts never came back. We have followed families from one era of their lives to another from diapers to girdles, and we have learned plenty....

Many people used to bring their laundry to our shop without counting what was in the bundle. Several weeks later they would dash in, aflame with righteous indignation, and cry: "A shirt is missing!"

My father would shrug helplessly and say: "I'll check with the steam laundry. Come back next week and I'll let you know."

This always killed the customer's rage. After a cooling-off period of several weeks, during which the customer was supposed to become resigned to his fate, he was handed a shirt which my father had been saving for just such an occasion.

Lost shirts were always a headache. When a customer raised Cain about a shirt that was *actually* lost — he was reimbursed not according to the value of the garment but according to his value as a customer. The client invariably said, "You know, that shirt was brand-new. And it cost five dollars."

Both the laundryman and the customer knew this was a lie, but the laundryman accepted the statement.

Besides having the entire family help in the store, my father also had a salaried employee, an elderly woman who ironed the family wash and made his coffee every morning. Her name was Katey and she had silver hair. As I remember her, she was the kindest and most wonderful woman in the world. She was like a mother to us. She worked for my father for 20 years and ruled over the laundry and all us kids with a loving heart.

When my father came home one night and told us that he had to let Katey go, we all cried. He

wouldn't tell us why. He merely said she was getting old and needed a rest. He couldn't keep her forever, could he? We sat listening in silence, too shocked to answer.

When my father finished talking, he walked slowly into his bedroom and closed the door. At that moment we all hated him. How could he do this to Katey — Katey, who was always a part of our lives, just as were the ironing tables and the warm pleasant smell of the store?

We found out the next morning. My father never opened the store again. After 20 years, they had taken his maritime pass away and the local trade had by this time gone elsewhere. He had to give up the store. That's why he had to let Katey go. There was no work left for either of them and, after a great career as a laundryman, my father was, at last a broken man.

We couldn't cry any more after that, but we could never forget Katey or the laundry. Years later, I would sometimes walk past the empty store. But I

couldn't look in. A thin layer of dust covered the window and the once-shiny letters were broken, like the memories of those childhood days.

And as I passed by, I would think of my father and Katey, of how they stood side by side so many years until there were hollows in the floor under their feet, and how finally their lives went down the drain, along

with the gray water and the soapsuds....

Whenever I tell people about father's laundry, they smile. Perhaps I imagine it, but I seem to detect sadness in their smile, and a kindlier feeling toward their laundryman. Never again, I tell myself, will they heap abuse on him if he breaks their buttons or returns their shirts three days late. For they will understand. — *Herman Styler, from Coronet.*

IDEALS

I consider an human soul without education like a marble quarry, which shows none of its inherent beauties till the skill of the polisher fetches out the colours, makes the surface shine....

Gladness of the heart is the life of man, and the joyfulness of a man prolongeth his days.

A faithful friend is a strong defence and he that hath found such a one hath found a treasure.

He who has a thousand friends hath not a friend to spare but he who hath an enemy shall meet him everywhere.

Get wisdom and with all thy getting get understanding.

He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city.