

LITTLE LOUIS EPSTINE

By Clarence S. Darrow.

~~Adapted from the story~~  
~~How Louis Epstine~~  
~~lost his hand, etc..~~

This story is about little Louis Epstine, aged nine years. As might be guessed, Louis was a Jew. But there are different kinds of Jews. There are Jews who live on Grand Boulevard, and Jews who live on Maxwell Street. For the most part, the Jews on Grand Boulevard own wholesale clothing stores, and, for the most part, the Jews on Maxwell Street work in the stores. Louis Epstine lived on Maxwell Street. When this tale began, he had only one hand. How he lost the other is a matter quite outside of this story. It seems as if he was run over by a beer wagon when he was a baby. His nurse - or, no, it was an older sister, just past five - left him for a moment alone on the street, and the wagon came along. But he had long since forgotten all about this, if indeed he ever knew.

When Louis Epstine was nine years old, he went to a Jewish charity school. This was kept up by the wealthy Jews, who wished to do something for the poor. The fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters of the little fellows worked for the men who paid for the charity school. The patrons of the school never asked why their employees had to use the charity school. People do not get rich by asking foolish questions of this sort.

Louis was not the only child in the family. His mother had five more besides him, and they all lived together in two large rooms back of a bakery. They had lived a whole year without moving. The rent was five dollars a month. Louis had plenty of playmates when he was a child, for Maxwell Street is full of houses and shops and flats, and even then there is not room for all the children. Some of them live in the basements. Over on Grand Boulevard there are great houses and big yards, and the people fancy it is a good place for children, but Maxwell Street is a much better place. Either

poverty makes large families, or large families make poverty; at least there are a hundred children on Maxwell Street to every one on Grand Boulevard.

When Louis was nine years old, he helped the family by selling papers. He got up at five o'clock in the morning and went over to Newspaper Alley and bought his papers, and then stood on the corner until about eleven o'clock, and sold them; then he went to school in the afternoon. In this way he managed to make three or four dollars a week, sometimes even five. Once in a while a good man would come along and give him a nickel for a paper, and now and then some kind-hearted fellow would give him a paper which he had read, and then Louis would sell it again. He never took a nickel from a customer and then ran to a corner to get it changed and forget to come back, although he knew some boys who did. Louis' mother had told him that this was not honest and that he would never get rich if he got money that way, although the boys who did it always seemed to get along as well as the others, sometimes better. But Louis' mother had taught him to be honest, and he had heard of a man who once sold papers and who always gave the change, and he was now a floor walker in a department store. Louis had seen the man himself. Louis' mother was a good woman and she loved her child and he loved her, although he never said anything about it to any one. She kept him and the other children as clean as she possibly could, and they almost always had something to eat. It is not necessary here to tell how she managed to get it, indeed, perhaps we could not tell. Really, the mother hardly knew herself, but if any one doubts the fact, let them visit Maxwell Street. No one can tell how all the children are fed, but all the same they live. True, some of them do not grow to be very old, but there are always plenty of new ones to take their places if they die.

Well, Louis got along fairly well up to his ninth year. Nothing serious happened to him, barring the loss of his hand, and this never bothered him a great deal; in fact, he never thought anything about it. If boys had three hands, they would doubtless use them, but one is really quite enough. Louis could do almost anything that the other boys could do. Of course, he could run as fast, he could play all sorts of games, he could throw stones at cats, he never had any trouble to eat everything his mother gave him, and even his stub of a left arm was quite useful; he could hold papers under it and fix his hat on his head and use this stub in connection with his right hand to do almost anything he wished to do. He really felt quite lucky to think that only his hand was gone. He knew a boy who had lost his whole arm, and it was his right one, too.

One day, Louis' mother had been better to him than usual. She had bought him a nice warm cap that pulled down over his ears, and cost twenty-five cents at the department store. He had never seemed to know how good she was before, and then suddenly in his boyish mind he commenced to think how hard she worked, what poor clothes she had, how she never went to a circus or killed a rat in the gutter, or had any kind of fun; how she got up every morning and fixed his breakfast before he was out of bed; and how she washed the dishes after he had gone to sleep. He felt very tenderly toward her. It was really more pity than love. And then he remembered a string of great red <sup>glass</sup> beads that he had seen hanging in the department store on the corner where he sold his papers, and which were marked forty-eight cents, and he thought how happy his mother would be if he could buy this string of beads. He was only a boy, and did not know why the beads were not as valuable as a string of pearls, and perhaps they were. So in his foolish, boyish mind he conceived the thought of saving enough money to buy the beads and

giving them to his mother at Christmas time. He kept out a penny or two each day and carefully hid it away until he had thirty-five cents that no one but himself knew anything about. Every morning when he took his stand before the great store he looked in through the polished window to see that the beads were still hanging in their place. As Christmas time drew on, he always looked with quaking heart, for he felt almost sure that some rich lady would buy them before he had saved enough.

The eighteenth of December came around. The day can easily be remembered, because it was so very cold. This morning was far the coldest of the winter, and all through the night Louis had kept waking up because there were not enough quilts on the bed. In the morning he was ready to get up and go after his papers before the usual time. His mother urged him not to go, telling him it was too cold, but Louis would not hear to this; it was only a week till Christmas time, and, besides, if it was cold he could sell more papers, for some of the other boys would stay away. So his mother got him a cup of coffee and a big slice of black bread with some yellow stock yards' butter - not a bad breakfast for a poor child in the Ghetto. In fact, somehow he had been getting pretty well fed this fall and winter. He still had the memory of a nice turkey that the alderman had sent them on Thanksgiving, and there was a rumor in the ward that this year another one would be sent on Christmas. Some of the boys said that the alderman wanted to be assessor in the spring. Louis did not know what this was. He had never even seen an assessor, but then he had never seen a king.

Well, on this morning, after breakfast, Louis' mother bundled him up the best she could. His shoes were not very good. He had bought them "second hand", or whatever it is with shoes. And they were really not mates, but neither were his feet exactly, for that matter. One shoe had a hole on the side and was ripped down the back,

but otherwise was pretty good. The other was worn through in one place on the bottom and his old stocking stuck out at the toe. Both of them were pretty large, but his mother had always told him that large shoes wore the best and would wear the longest and would not make corns. As he understood it, only rich people wore shoes that were too small, and then mostly ladies. His pants had most likely been made from gray cloth, and certainly for some one else. These, too, were quite large, and had a number of patches scattered around in various places like sores. There was one on each leg about the knee and quite a large one in the back, and a few more besides. Then there were several places where there was no patch. The cloth did not seem to hold the thread very well, and anyhow Louis expected a new pair - or, rather, another pair - this winter. He could have had them long ago only for the beads. His pants were held up by a black strap, just like the swells that he had seen on State Street, well, not just like them, but still with a black strap. His coat was really a prize affair. It was the best garment he had except a woolen comforter which we have not yet reached. This coat had been given him two years before by a charity society. It is not sure where it came from, but it must have been from some rich people on the North Side. There was not much wrong with the coat. The lining, of course, was torn, and when Louis put his hand into the sleeve he had to grasp hold of the wristband of his shirt, and hold it until his hand came out at the bottom of the sleeve, but this was partly because the buttonhole of the shirt was broken out. This was his right hand. He always put his left stub down through the arm very carefully, as a navigator would steer a ship through the shoals. He put this arm through first. Then his mother wound a wool comforter around his neck. This was really a grand affair, or had been once. Now so many threads had been broken that it was getting pretty ragged, and it seemed to be about the same color all the way through, although

it would be hard to tell what that was. His mother often told Louis how it looked years ago. It had been given to her by a rich uncle in Russia who was a peddler, but it really was very warm. Then on top of his head, best of all, was the new cap, the cause of all his trouble. This he pulled clear down over his face so that only his eyes could be seen. There is no use to describe his shirt and things like that. Even poor boys ought to have some privacy, and besides you could only see his shirt in one place, down below his coat, and not then unless his back was turned. Of course, he had no overcoat. None of the boys had these, except some of the little dudes that he had seen their mothers leading into the department stores on State Street.

When Louis went to get his papers, he was in the habit of going down Van Buren Street and then along Franklin Street. The buildings on these streets were so big that they kept the wind away. When he would go down on the cold mornings, he would meet men and boys with great stacks of overcoats on their heads and in their arms. They were carrying them in and out of the great stores; none of the men and boys wore overcoats, except now and then one that was very old and poor; and then he would pass great rows of clothing stores - miles and miles of these kind of stores, and he looked in through the great square windows and saw endless heaps of overcoats, and other nice new coats and pants, too, piled up in great high heaps and long rows as far as he could see. There was not much else the whole line of Franklin Street, except these clothes, and now and then a great building full of shoes, and Louis used to think that there were more coats than all the boys on the whole West Side could wear, more than all the boys he ever heard of could possibly use; and then in his foolish way he wondered why these were locked up all the cold winter when none of the little boys had coats; but Louis was not a statesman or a political economist, he was only a poor little Jew boy, nine years old.

On this morning, Louis' mother opened the door and started him out. She did not kiss him good-by. This is no use when a mother has any other way of showing her love. She just opened the door and let him out. She told him to be sure and keep his coat buttoned up. He sang out, "Gee, ain't this cold!" And that was all that was said as he went away. He walked down the street to Jackson Boulevard, and then crossed to the South Side. He always liked to cross on the Boulevard. The buildings were so grand, and the walk so smooth. He went on down to Franklin Street, and turned north past the great clothing stores. The coats and pants and vests seemed to be piled up higher than ever. He looked at them and said, "Gee, I wish I had one o' dem." But he never thought of going in and getting it; poor people never do. In this way he got down to Newspaper Alley, where the boys were trying hard to trade their pennies for papers. There were fewer there this morning than before. He got his bundle of papers, thrust them under his stub arm and started off. Besides the cold, there was a cutting wind, and as he came north it was all he could do to walk, but when he turned south with his papers it was easier, though the drifting snow bothered him quite a bit. He darted along one or two alleys and in one place walked through an arcade. These made him a little warmer than before. Finally, he got down to the department store and took his stand just in front of the great red beads and began to call off something that they had told him was in the papers, something about some grand affair, a charity ball, or an inaugural, or something of the sort. Anyhow, he didn't know what it was. On the corner he missed the man who usually sold lead pencils and the boy without any legs, who always sat with his cap in his hand and raked out the pennies as fast as the people put them in.

Louis did not stand there very long until he began to get cold, so he commenced walking up and down the block and calling his

papers whenever anyone passed. There were not many people out on the street that morning and they all hurried pretty fast, most of them not stopping long enough to buy a paper. Along toward eight o'clock, his hand had begun to get very cold. He couldn't put it in his pocket and use the other one. He was obliged to make all the change with this one, and could only use his stub to hold the papers. Two or three times he stepped into the outside doorway of the store for a minute, but he could not sell papers there, and then the last time the floor walker drove him out. The floor walker had once sold papers, but this was long ago. He was now a self-made man. Louis had not yet learned never to expect anything from a self-made man. He did not know that the man who is born in poverty and misfortune almost always grows very hard, unless he keeps his poverty and misfortune. Indeed, he is obliged to grow hard to get over his poverty and misfortune.

Two or three times in the morning Louis thought he would give it up and go home, but then there were the glass beads and besides he had the papers and could not afford to get "stuck" with them on his hands; so he stayed at his post. It is possible he might have gone away anyhow, except that along about nine o'clock or half-past, his hand began to get warmer, and although his feet and body were pretty cold, he could move around and manage to stand this. So he stayed and sold out his papers and went back home about the usual time. Soon after he got into the house his hand commenced to feel queer - it was all prickly and numb, and seemed to burn. He told his mother, and she had him put it in cold water; still it ached so bad that she finally sent over to the corner for a doctor. He looked the hand over carefully and then shook his head. The doctor finally said that the hand was badly frozen, and he did not know whether Louis could ever use it again or not. But he put some stuff on it and wound it up in a cloth and went away. In a few days he



hours he came back. The hand did not pain as much as before, but it felt numb and queer. The doctor took off the bandage and shook his head again. It was red and purple clear up to the wrist. The doctor told Louis and his mother that he must go to the hospital, and he was afraid they must cut off the hand, but they would ask the doctor at the hospital first. Louis and his mother had no time to cry, - they had to start at once. They went in to the great big building. Louis thought it smelled pretty badly, although he was used to all kinds of smells in the Ghetto. They found the big doctor, and he looked at Louis' hand and said it must be amputated at once. Louis did not know exactly what that was, but of course he made no objection and his mother made none. It had all come so suddenly that neither of them fully realized what it meant, and then poor people never do object to anything that the rich say must be done. The doctor told Louis that it would not hurt, and this was the main thing at the time. They took him into a great long bedroom, where there were dozens of little white cots all the same size, and most of them with a child lying on top. They told him that they would give him something which would put him to sleep, but that he would wake up all right, and it would be all over without his knowing it.

There is no need to tell about the operation. If any one really has a taste for that sort of thing he can visit a hospital any day in the week. Most people stay away as long as they possibly can, and of course they would not like to read about it - for that matter, they do not like to see how poor people live.

Well, Louis went to sleep, and the next thing he knew he was lying in one of the little cots, and his mother, the doctor and a girl with a striped blue and white dress were standing by the bed. His hand was tied up in a cloth and was aching pretty bad. It took him some time to remember where he was, and then he asked them about

his hand, why it was hurting so much. Then his mother told him all about it, although it was almost as hard for her as for Louis. But the little fellow was rather dazed at first, and did not seem to think much about his hand. Then Louis lay still for quite awhile. He was looking at the ceiling and the walls, and following the zigzag pattern of the paper up and down. Finally, he turned away from his mother, and pretty soon they heard a sob. The poor woman went around to the other side of the cot, and stroked Louis' face and hair gently, and asked him not to cry. She told him that he would be well again before long, and that she and his brothers and sisters would always be good to him and take care of him as long as he lived. Louis told her that he knew this, but it was so near Christmas and he couldn't get the rest of the money. She asked him what he meant, and then between his sobs he told her about the beads. *all*