

SARA WARE BASSETT



THE STORY OF
LEATHER

This edition published 2025
by Living Book Press
Copyright © Living Book Press, 2025

ISBN: 978-1-76153-459-1 (hardcover)
978-1-76153-467-6 (softcover)

First published in 1915.

This edition is based on the The Penn Publishing Company printing by 1915.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any other form or means – electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner and the publisher or as provided by Australian law.



A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

THE STORY OF LEATHER

by

SARA WARE BASSETT



**OTHER BOOKS IN THIS SERIES AVAILABLE FROM
LIVING BOOK PRESS**

The Story of Glass	The Story of Lumber
The Story of Leather	The Story of Wool
The Story of Silk	The Story of Cotton
The Story of Sugar	The Story of Iron
The Story of Porcelain	The Story of Gold and Silver

PLEASE NOTE

These books were written about 100 years ago and show the way people talked, thought, and acted back then. They tell the story of how resources like cotton, lumber, leather, and gold were developed—a process that depended on the hard work of many people. Sometimes the work was done by those who made the profits, and other times it was done by people who were not free, including enslaved individuals.

We know that some parts of these stories include ideas that we now understand to be hurtful and unfair. Our aim in republishing these books is not to support those old views but to share our history so we can all learn from it. By looking at the past, including its mistakes, we hope to learn important lessons that will help us create a kinder and fairer future.

We invite you to read these stories with an awareness of their time and to think about how far we have come—and how much work there is still to do.

CONTENTS

1. THE THUNDERBOLT	1
2. PETER WINS ANOTHER NAME	13
3. A NEW FRIEND	28
4. PETER'S MAIDEN SPEECH	40
5. A CATASTROPHE	58
6. TWO PETERS AND WHICH WON	68
7. THE CLIMB UP THE LADDER	81
8. A NARROW ESCAPE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES	93
9. PETER AIDS IN A SURPRISE AND RECEIVES ONE	107
10. THE CLIMB BECOMES DIFFICULT	116
11. TOLMAN EXPERIENCES A SHOCK	131
12. MR. CODDINGTON TELLS A STORY	142

To
Mr. A. C. Lawrence
*whose friendship has followed me all my life
and but for whose kindly aid this book could
never have been written.*
S. W. B.



CHAPTER I

THE THUNDERBOLT



PETER CODDINGTON sat in the afternoon sunshine on the steps of his big colonial home looking absently out over the circular drive, and the quaint terraced garden, to the red-tiled roof of the garage beyond. But he was not thinking of the garage; he could not, in fact, even have told you the color of its vivid tiling. No! He had far more important things to think of than that—disquieting things which worried him and made him very unhappy. For about the twentieth time he took from his pocket his school report and ran his eye down the column of figures written upon the white card. He did not read because the reading gave him pleasure. Neither was the bit of pasteboard white any more. Instead it was thumbed and worn at the corners until it had gradually assumed a dismal grayish hue—a color quite in harmony with Peter's own mood.

Peter really did not need to look at the report at all, for already he could close his eyes and see before him in glaring type:

Algebra	-	-	-	-	-	40
History	-	-	-	-	-	20
Latin	-	-	-	-	-	30
French	-	-	-	-	-	30
Drawing	-	-	-	-	-	25

What a horrible fascination there was in those marks! He found himself repeating them aloud to impress upon his mind the fact that they actually were true. But what was far more tragic than these testimonials of defeat was a foot-note written in red ink in the well-known hand of Mr. Christopher, the principal of the school. It read:

“In consequence of Peter Coddington’s poor scholarship and unsatisfactory deportment it is against the rules of the Milburn High School that he retain any position in school athletics until such time as both his studies and his conduct reach the standard required by the school authorities.”

It was that single sentence that made Peter’s face so grave. The marks alone were bad enough. He was heartily ashamed of them because he knew that if he had studied even a reasonable amount of time he could easily have passed in every subject. It was by no means difficult work for a boy of his ability. But to be put off the ball team! Why, it was on his pitching that the whole Milburn school was pinning its faith in the coming game against Leighton Academy. “Peter will save the day!” the fellows had declared. What would they say when they discovered that their hero was to be dropped from the team—that he had not passed one of the freshman examinations?

Half the pride and glory of the freshman class centered

about Peter. Throughout the grammar school he had made a wonderful record in athletics; his unerring drop kick had won him fame at football long before he was out of the sixth grade, and he could pitch a ball with a speed and curve almost professional in its nicety. "Wait until Peter Coddington gets into the high school!" had been the cry. "Milburn can then wipe up the ground with every school within reach." As Peter had never been much of a student the gate of this temple of learning had been difficult to reach; but at last the day came when he managed to squeak inside the coveted portals where all the honors promised him were at once laid at his feet. He became a member of the football eleven, pitcher on the freshman nine, president of his class. Friends swarmed about him, for he had a pleasant way of greeting everybody, he treated generously, and he had a winsome little chuckle that spread merriment wherever he went.

None of these qualities, however, helped his poor scholarship, which he jauntily excused by explaining to his father at the end of the first quarter that he had not really got into the game yet. In consequence Mr. Coddington listened and was patient. When the mid-year record dropped even lower Peter's argument was that it took time to adjust one's self to novel conditions. But as spring brought no improvement Mr. Coddington, a man of few words, remarked severely: "I will give you one more chance, son."

The list of figures in Peter's hand were the fruit of that chance.

Peter had a wholesome awe of his father. He was not a man to be bamboozled. On the contrary Mr. Coddington was a keen, direct person who came straight to a point in a few terse

sentences; predominant in his character was an unflinching sense of justice which was, however, fortunately tempered with enough kindness to make a misdoer mortified but never afraid in his presence. Peter admired his father tremendously and if for one reason more than another because he was so "square." Never during all the span of the lad's fifteen years could he recall a single instance when Mr. Coddington had broken his word. It was this knowledge that made Peter so uncomfortable as he glanced once more at the bedraggled report card. What had his father meant by saying he would grant him one more chance?

The boy wished now that he had considered the matter in a more serious light. He had known all along that his marks were dropping behind, and every morning he had vaguely resolved to make a spurt that day so that when examination time came he might cross the tape neck and neck with if not in advance of the other fellows. The promised spurt, however, had not been made. Instead he had drifted along, studying only enough to keep his head above water and putting all his zeal into tennis or baseball until the present climax with its direful calamity had been reached.

Unquestionably it was perfectly fair that he should forfeit his place on the team. All the boys knew the rule of the school. But somehow it did not seem *REAL*. When a fellow could kick a goal and pitch a ball as he could something must surely intervene to prevent such a fate. Nothing dreadful had ever happened to Peter before. It was not likely, he argued optimistically, that it could happen now. Considerably cheered by this logic he slipped his grimy report into its still more grimy envelope and began to whistle. Buoyed up by comfort-

able reveries he whistled fully five minutes, when the tune came to an abrupt end. A step on the gravel had arrested it. Looking around Peter saw his father coming along the drive toward him.

“Not at the game to-day, Peter?” exclaimed the elder man in surprise.

“No, sir.”

“How is that?”

“I did not feel like going, Father.”

“Not feel like going! Why, that’s something new for you. You’re not sick?”

Peter was conscious of a swift scrutiny.

“I’m worried about something,” he blurted out.

“I’m sorry to hear that, my boy. What is the trouble? Grass stains on your new white tennis flannels?”

Peter shook his head in reply to the smiling question.

“It is a real trouble this time,” he answered.

Silently he drew from his pocket the crumpled envelope which he handed to his father. As Mr. Coddington took out the card and scanned it rapidly the quizzical expression that had lighted his face gave way to a frown of displeasure.

“Well?” he questioned.

“I’m mighty sorry, Father,” began Peter. “You see I kept thinking I would make up my work before the exams came; but somehow I have been hustling more for the baseball championship than——”

A curt question cut short further apologies:

“Your studies have not been too difficult for you, then?”

“Oh, no. I can easily make them up with a tutor,” was the eager response. “I guess if you ask Mr. Christopher he will

let me take the examinations over again before school closes and the next time——”

“There is to be no next time,” put in his father quietly.

Peter stared.

“Wh-a-t—do—you mean, sir?”

“You will see.”

Without another word the older man turned away. Peter saw him walk to the garage, and a few moments later the motor-car shot past, spun down the drive, and the music of its siren horn announced that it was turning into the street. Where had his father gone so suddenly?

He had but just come home, and it was never his custom to dash off in such an abrupt fashion. It was easy to see that he was annoyed about the school report. That was not strange—of course he would be. Peter was himself. But at least Mr. Coddington had not lost his place as pitcher of a ball team, and since he hadn't there seemed to be no reason why he should be so cut up. Then an inspiration came to the boy. Perhaps his father had gone to demand that Mr. Christopher take his son back on the nine. Ah, that must be it! His father was much interested in athletics Peter knew, and when in college had pulled the winning shell to a spectacular victory for his Alma Mater. His father would never stand by and see the star pitcher of the Milburn High School swept off the team just because of a few failures in Latin, algebra, and other such rubbish.

Peter drew a sigh of relief.

Yes, his fortunate star would rise again; he was confident of it. All would yet be well. He would tutor up for the examinations, pass them gloriously, and win back his place on the team.

None of the fellows need be the wiser. His father would fix it up—nay, he probably was fixing it up at this very moment.

Until dusk Peter waited anxiously for the sound of the motor's return.

It was nearly seven when over the gravel rolled the heavy rubber-tired wheels that announced Mr. Coddington's arrival. The boy sat in precisely the spot where his father had left him and after alighting from the car the elder man made his way toward the motionless figure sitting so still in the June twilight.

"I have been to see Mr. Christopher," began Mr. Coddington when he came within speaking distance, "and have made all the arrangements for your future career."

Eagerly Peter looked up.

"I'm going back on the team?" he cried joyously.

"You are going to work!" was the sharp retort.

"What!"

"I have been very busy during the last two hours," continued Mr. Coddington. "I have got for you the first, last, and only job I shall ever get. It is up to you now."

"But I don't understand," protested Peter, aghast.

"Why not? It is not a difficult thing to comprehend. You have fooled away your days and my money long enough. Life is a serious business—not a game. It is time you took it in earnest. To-morrow morning at eight o'clock you are going to work, and you must make good at the position I've found for you, or you will lose your place. If you do I shall not lift a finger to help you to find another."

A great lump rose in Peter's throat but he managed to choke it back.

“Where am I going?” he gasped when he was able to speak. “To the tannery,” was the laconic reply.

If the clouds had fallen or the earth opened Peter could not have been more astounded.

The tannery!

Of course he knew his father owned the vast tanneries to the west of the town, for that was the reason the Coddingtons lived at Milburn instead of migrating to the near-by city, as had so many of their prosperous neighbors; but beyond the fact that it was the tanneries which indirectly provided him with tennis racquets, skates, bicycles, motor-cars, and spending money Peter knew nothing about them. They were red brick buildings covering a wide area, and from their doors at noon and night hundreds of workmen with lunch-boxes and newspaper bundles poured out into the streets. Peter never spoke of the tanneries. Even when, on the highway, he encountered the heavy carts laden with hides and marked “H. M. Coddington, Leather,” he always looked the other way and hurried past as fast as he could. Occasionally in hot weather when the wind was in a certain quarter and brought a faint odor from the beamhouses into the fashionable part of the town where Peter lived their neighbors complained, and the boy always felt with a vague sense of mortification that everybody blamed him and his family for the annoyance. Sometimes this breath of damp, steamy leather even forced itself in at the windows of the Coddington library and mingled shamelessly with the rich hangings and paintings that furnished it. Peter always resented the intrusion. How dare it follow them there!

Mr. Coddington, on the other hand, although not revel-

ing in the unpleasant tannery smells, had a sincere respect for the industry which furnished him his living, not only because it enabled him to provide his family with a luxurious home, but also because he regarded it as a life-work that was well worth the doing. Was he not giving to the world a necessity which it could not do without? It was a self-respecting trade. Therefore why should he not feel there was dignity in the long buildings with their whirring wheels, their hundreds of busy workmen, and their ponderous green trucks which, loaded with skins, ever rumbled back and forth through the main street? His pride was the more justifiable since alone, and aided only by his brain and his perseverance, he himself had built up this mighty industry which had become the chief support of the flourishing little New England town. Milburn, in fact, had grown up around the business that he had founded. From the lowest rung of the ladder he had worked his way up to the highest. The climb had been no easy one. On the contrary it had been hard work. How could he help but feel a pride—nay, an affection, even, for the great throbbing world of labor which he had created, and which furnished thousands of people with homes, food and clothing!

Since this was his point of view it naturally was impossible for him to appreciate the horror that his words brought to the boy who sat on the steps beside him. Peter knew his father too well to offer protest at the judgment that his own misdeeds had brought. It was a perfectly fair retribution. Moreover, he had been warned—Peter clearly recalled the fact now. But he had rushed blindly on, not heeding the warning.

“The tannery?” he at last repeated aloud.

“Yes. That is where I began, Peter, and it won’t hurt you to do the same.”

“Shan’t I go back to school at all?”

“Not for the present.”

“And the school team——”

“It must get on without you as best it may.”

Peter fought to keep back the tears.

“Will everybody know?” he faltered after a pause.

“No. I simply told Mr. Christopher that I had decided to take you out of school. He knows nothing more, nor does any one else. Now, Peter, I do not wish you to take this as a punishment.” Stooping, Mr. Coddington put his hand kindly on the lad’s shoulder. “In so far as it is the consequence of misspent, wasted time it is, to be sure, a punishment; none of us can escape the direct results of our own actions. In another sense, however, it is merely a fresh opportunity—a chance to substitute success for failure, to make good at a different kind of work. It is in this light that you must try and regard it, son. I want to make a man of you if I can. I must make a man of you. You are the only child I have, and if I stand by and allow you to make a fizzle of your life I shall be quite as much to blame as you. Remember that unhappy as you are this affair is costing me something, too.”

There was a break in Mr. Coddington’s voice.

As the boy raised his head and looked into the face bending over him he read in it an expression quite new—a softness and sympathy that he had never before caught in the gray eyes which, but a moment previous, had regarded him so sternly.

As a result when Peter answered much of the bitterness had crept out of his tone.

"I suppose all the men at the factory will have to know who I am," he reflected.

"I'm afraid so. I see no way that that can be avoided," assented his father.

"I hate to have them. They will all be grinning over the knowledge that I was put into the factories because I flunked at school. Isn't there any way to prevent their knowing? Couldn't I take another name when I go into the tannery and let them think I am somebody else?"

Mr. Coddington mused a few seconds before answering.

"Why, yes," he replied meditatively, "I suppose it could be done. Nobody knows you at the works, so there would be no danger of your being recognized. My plan to send you there I have kept to myself. You could easily enter under some other name if you chose. You must consider, however, that if you decide to go in simply as an ordinary boy I shall not be able to help you much; nor can you expect to be favored in any way by the men. You would have to stand on your own feet and take your own chances." Again Mr. Coddington ruminated. "That might not be a bad idea, either," he observed, half aloud.

"Oh, I would so much rather take another name, Father," pleaded Peter.

But Mr. Coddington did not heed the interruption; he was still thinking.

"I do not mean to stand behind you after you are in the tannery, anyway," he went on. "In every department there is a foreman to whom you will be accountable—not to me. Nor must you come running home and here report every real or fancied injustice. So far as business goes I am the president of the company and you are simply a boy in my employ. Out

of working hours we will be father and son and will enjoy our drives, walks, and reading together just as we have in the past. One rule, however, must be strictly adhered to—we will not talk shop.”

“I understand, sir,” nodded Peter.

“Now just a last word,” concluded Mr. Coddington. “Tomorrow morning you must be prompt at the works. Eight o’clock is the hour you are to present yourself and that does not mean before eight or after eight; it means on the stroke of eight. You will carry a luncheon which your mother will see is put up for you. You are to hand to Mr. Tyler, the superintendent of Factory 1, a card bearing my signature and you are to say to him that you are the boy I telephoned him about. He does not know who you are, but he understands that I am interested in you and he will start you in wherever he thinks best. On the card I shall write your name—and by the by”—a smile flitted over Mr. Coddington’s face—“what is your name to be?”

Peter hesitated; then his lips curved into a faint reflection of his father’s merriment.

“I think I will enter the tannery as Peter Strong,” he answered.



CHAPTER II

PETER WINS ANOTHER NAME



HE next morning when, at half-past six, the small alarm clock at his bedside shot off with metallic clangor Peter raised himself drowsily on his elbow and glanced about. What had happened? What was all this jangling about?

In a second more, however, he recollected. This was the day when school, fun, and friends were to be left behind, and when he was to set forth into a new world. He was going to work! Slowly, unwillingly, with a vague sinking at heart, he dragged himself to his feet and listened. It was very still. All the world appeared to have stopped and the only being alive in the great universe seemed to be himself. He prepared to dress. Half automatically he turned on the shower-bath. The chill of the cold water sent a tingle over him and quickened his awakening faculties. Pulling on his clothes he crept down over the stairs. It was bad enough to have to get up at this unearthly hour himself; he at least need not disturb the rest of the household. Of course his father would get up and start him off.

But to Peter's surprise nothing of this sort happened. Instead he sat down alone in the big dining-room to a forlorn breakfast, at the conclusion of which the waitress laid on the table beside him a carefully packed lunch-box. Now Peter detested taking a lunch. Whenever he went with his parents on motor trips or train journeys the family always stopped at hotels for their meals or patronized the dining-cars. It seemed such a vulgar thing to open a box and in the gaze of lookers on devour one's food out of it. Accordingly he eyed the lunch-box with disdain, mentally arguing that although he must, out of gratitude to his mother's thoughtfulness, carry it, he certainly should not open it. He would far rather go hungry than eat a lunch from a box!

On the porch still another unpleasant feature of this going to work greeted him. No motor-car, panting like a hound on the leash, stood waiting to carry him to the factory. Evidently his father had made no provision for him to get to the tannery. He must walk! So entirely unforeseen was this development that the boy stood a moment irresolute. It was a good mile to the tan yards; he had had no notion of walking, and there was now but scant time in which to cover the distance. Perhaps his father had forgotten to order the car. Peter had half a mind not to go. After all what difference would it make whether he went to-day or to-morrow? In fact, why wasn't it better to delay until to-morrow when he could be sure of not being late? He vacillated uneasily. Then the thought of what his father would say when he came down to breakfast and found that his son had not gone decided Peter.

Down two steps at a time he dashed and set out over the gravel drive with the even jog of a track sprinter. On he went.

Running in the June sunshine was hot work; nevertheless, hat in hand, he kept up the pace. He must be there promptly at eight, his father had told him. He could feel tiny streams of perspiration trickling down his back, and he sensed that his collar was wilting into a limp band of flimsy linen. Still he ran on. Eight was just on the stroke when he presented himself at the office of Factory 1.

A stout man bending over a ledger at a desk near the door eyed the panting lad with disapproval.

"What do you want?" he demanded sharply. "Boys are not admitted in this office."

"I want to see Mr. Tyler," gasped Peter.

"Well, you can't," the bookkeeper responded acidly. "He's busy. If you are wanting a job I can tell you right now that there are none to be had. We have more boys already than we know what to do with. You better not wait. It won't do any good."

"But I must see Mr. Tyler," persisted Peter. "My fa—— I was told to give him this card."

"Why didn't you say you had a card in the first place?" was the gruff question. "Give it here. You can sit down on that bench and wait."

As the accountant held out his hand Peter delivered up the card.

"Peter Strong—hump!" read the bookkeeper. "Sent by—oh, you're sent by Mr. Coddington, are you? Some relative of his, perhaps."

"Mr. Coddington said I was to present the card to Mr. Tyler," Peter answered, ignoring the implied query.

"He shall have it right away, Strong. You'll excuse my

brusqueness. I did not understand that you were sent here. We have so many young boys applying for work that we have to pack them off in short order," explained the man glibly.

It was evident that he was not a little discomfited at the chill reception he had accorded Peter, for he anxiously continued to reiterate excuses and apologies. Fortunately in the midst of his explanations an electric bell beside his desk rang and cut him short.

"That is Mr. Tyler now," he murmured. "I'll take in your card right away."

Peter watched him as he hurried down the center of the long room and disappeared into a little glass cage in the corner.

It was an oblong room in which reigned the din of typewriters. Over against the farther wall a dozen or more men were bending so intently over heavy, leather-bound ledgers that it seemed as if they must have sat in that exact spot from the beginning of the world, adding, adding, adding! Vacantly the lad's eye wandered along to the space just opposite him where, framed in neat oak, hung a printed notice headed: "Labor Laws of the State of Massachusetts." For the want of a better amusement Peter sauntered over and began to read. The length of the working day, he gathered, was ten hours except for boys under sixteen, whom the law forbade working longer than eight hours. A smile passed over the lad's face. Eight hours was surely long enough—from eight until twelve, and from one until five. What if he had been sixteen instead of fifteen, and been forced to get to the tannery at seven o'clock in the morning and work until six at night! There must be boys who did. For the first time in his life Peter was thankful that he was no older.

Just at this moment he saw the bookkeeper returning.

"If you please, Strong," said the older man with a deference that contrasted markedly with his former greeting, "will you step this way? Mr. Tyler is expecting you."

Peter followed through the central aisle of the long room and entered the small, glass-enclosed space where a man surrounded by a chaos of papers and letters was sitting at a roll-top desk.

"This, Mr. Tyler, is young Strong," announced the bookkeeper to the superintendent.

"I am glad to see you, Strong."

So sharply did his eye sweep over Peter that the boy trembled lest this oracle suddenly announce:

"I know all about you. Your name is not Strong at all. You are Peter Coddington, and you have been sent to the mill because you flunked your examinations."

Nothing of the sort happened, however. The superintendent merely remarked with a nod: "That will do, Carter. You may go."

Peter heard the latch click as Mr. Carter went out.

"Well, young man, so you want a job in the tannery?" were Mr. Tyler's next words.

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Coddington telephoned me about you. He told me that you are entirely inexperienced and with no knowledge of the business. I should say the only thing for you to do is to begin at the very bottom of the ladder, if you want to make anything of yourself."

"I suppose so, sir."

The superintendent tilted back in his chair and carefully studied the lad before him.

"You look able-bodied."

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Not afraid of work?"

Peter hesitated.

"I don't mind working if I like what I'm doing, sir," he replied with naive truthfulness.

It was obvious that the honest reply pleased Mr. Tyler.

"I guess that is the way with many of us, Strong," he laughed. "But if you are to have a position here you will have to stick at your work whether you like it or not."

"I mean to try to."

"That's the proper spirit. You are not afraid of getting your hands dirty?"

Peter laughed contemptuously. Later he remembered that laugh and smiled grimly at his own ignorance.

Mr. Tyler seemed satisfied.

"Well, I can set you to work right away unloading skins," he said. "We are short-handed and can use a boy to advantage. Are you over sixteen?"

"No, sir, I am fifteen."

"That's bad. I don't like to take these eight-hour boys. The time we want workmen most is in the early morning and at closing time. Those are the very hours you under-age fellows are not here. However, since you have come at Mr. Coddington's recommendation we'll have to get on without you the best way we can. Strong, your name is! Do you know Mr. Coddington personally?"

"I've known him all my life," was the reply.

"Then you know an honest, upright gentleman," declared Mr. Tyler warmly. "His friendship is well worth having and

a possession to be proud of. Take care you do not disappoint him.”

“I do not mean to disappoint him,” was Peter’s quick reply. “He told me, though, that after he got me the place he should not do anything more for me. I’ve got to make good myself. He’s the president of the company and I am just a boy in the works.”

Unconsciously the lad repeated his father’s very words.

“That’s right. That’s the way to go at it,” the superintendent assented cordially. “It is very kind of Mr. Coddington to bother his head about you at all, for he is such a busy man that he has more things to remember in a day than most of the rest of us have ever thought of in all our lives. After you once get in here he, of course, can’t take the time to follow you up. Having done you the favor of giving you a start he will drop you from his mind. You cannot expect anything else and I am glad you have common sense enough to see it.”

At the thought of his father “dropping him from his mind” Peter smiled inwardly. Of course Mr. Tyler could not see the smile, and even if he had he would not have understood it. As it was he now cut short the interview by touching a bell at his elbow in response to which a messenger appeared.

“Take this boy down to the yard, Johnson,” he said. “Introduce him to Carmachel and tell him he is to help unload skins. His name is Strong. Good luck to you, young man. Remember the world is a large place and there are plenty of fine positions waiting for the men who prove themselves big enough to fill them.”

Peter took the superintendent’s hand but he forgot to answer. Somehow Mr. Tyler’s words awakened a train of