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A Medal for Mr. Truitt

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A Medal for Mr. Truitt . . .

. . . Robert Koupal

In every respect, Elmer Truitt was an average man. He was *the* average man. You could find him in every village or small town and you could find thousands of him in a big city. He was no more inconspicuous in a large crowd than he was if you saw him on the street alone. When people were introduced to him at a party or a convention (adventures he rarely enjoyed) they invariably forgot his name. He wasn't homely—nor was he good-looking. He was plain.

Elmer Truitt was the husband of a thin, but average looking, middle-aged wife who worried about prices. He had two average children who were both in the public school. He smoked nearly a pack of cigarettes every day and read most of the newspaper after his six o'clock dinner. He mowed his lawn on Saturday and enjoyed watching the fights on Wednesday and Friday nights. He owned a small automobile which he did not drive to work for it was too difficult to find a parking place. On Sunday he usually washed the car.

Every working day he arrived at the bank five minutes before opening time wearing either a gray or a dark blue suit. Truitt was a teller with the 4th National Bank. He wasn't a particularly good teller—but then again he wasn't a bad one. He was honest and did his job from nine in the morning until closing time. Although people sometime complained to the bank about some of its employees, they never seemed to complain about Truitt.

On an average Thursday morning at the bank he was bothered by some ink that had been spilled on the long glass covered table in the center of the marble floor, and left his cage to blot it up. While he was crouched over the table three men in coats walked into the bank. One of the men had a sub-machine gun.

"This is it," said one of the men.

Elmer Truitt did not hear the man but he did hear the scream of one of the women in the bank. The man with the sub-machine gun stood very close to Elmer Truitt. He reached out and pushed on the man, trying to knock the gun from his hands, but fell down while doing so. The man turned quickly and fired the gun. One of the trio in the coats lurched back as if punched and his head went thwack on the marble floor. A woman fainted and more women screamed

at the sound of the gun. The man with the gun looked down at his weapon strangely, dropped it and ran out the door. The other man started for the door as Truitt got up and he ran into him. Elmer Truitt fell down again and so did the man in the coat. The man in the coat was knocked unconscious.

"Hay, git ya final Post-Dispatch," whined the newsboy. "Man foils robbers . . . saves big loss. Gitcha paap-ear. Hay ya wanna read about uh big bank robbery. Teller foils crooks. Hay . . ."

At 5217 Tennessee, the house next to Truitt, a man read the front page story to his wife.

"That ain't all either, Hon. It says here Truitt, who was born and raised here, used to play baseball for Cleveland High in '35 an' '36. Funny . . . I was at Cleveland then and I never even heard of the guy. Oh yeah . . . Truitt! Sure . . . good ol' Elmer Truitt. Hell yes I remember Truitt. Why Hon, me an' him was just like this in school. Funny how I forgot that. Boy, has he ever changed," he said, looking at a picture of Truitt pointing to the spot where the man in the coat knocked him down. "Think of it, Hon, ol' Truitt livin' right next door to us all these years an' I never even recognized him. Always knew that he had it in him though. We all did. All of us that hung around with him. Had more guts than any of us . . . ol' Truitt did."

At 5215 Tennessee, Truitt's home, photographers took pictures of Elmer Truitt kissing his wife. They took pictures of him smiling down at his two children while they looked up at him proudly. For some pictures he posed in a boxer's stance and for others he held his father's hand-me-down revolver. Under those pictures was the caption, "Truitt is an excellent shot." The reporters asked him about how it felt when it happened and if he feared for his own life. They asked about his family and how it felt to be a hero. They even asked him if he thought he would do it again. The police, since one of the men had escaped, offered to post patrolmen near the house. Telephone calls came nearly all of the first night. Most of them said, "Good boy, Truitt, I knew you had it in you," or, "You probably don't remember me Elmer, but I knew you when you wasn't no higher than this, an' I wanna tell you it was a fine thing that you done."

The president of the bank excused Elmer Truitt from work the next week. Elmer spent the week speaking to assemblies at public schools and being guest speaker for the Elks, Shriners, Rotarians and a high school football rally. His children were idols at the public school and his wife was the envy of the party-line and bridge club.

On Sunday Elmer Truitt did not wash his car. He slept nearly the whole day.

As he rode the bus downtown Monday morning people pointed and whispered about him. He was forced to talk with two traffic policemen while walking to the bank and arrived five minutes late.

All the bank help said "Hello" to him as he walked toward his cage in the rear. There were very many people in the bank for so early in the morning and nearly all of them noticed Truitt as he walked through. A large number of them were milling about his cage.

At the end of the marble floor the bank president waited for Truitt. He shook his hand and asked him how he enjoyed his little vacation. He asked him to come on in his office.

"Elmer, ol' man," the president began, "I've been noticing your work for quite some time now and have often thought of taking you out of the teller's cage. Trouble was that there just wasn't anyplace else to put you. You know how slow openings are in a bank. But now, we're creating a new position here, Elmer. Sort of a public relations manager is what the job really amounts too. Won't be too hard a job for the man that gets it and it will give him a good chance to get out of the old place now and then. Now, Elmer . . . I've a good hunch I've found the man. I think that you could do it. What do you say Elmer? Be a good raise with the job too."

From his metal desk with the place card reading "Elmer Truitt, Public Relations Mgr." on it, he often looked at the spot where the ink had spilled.

Customers always remembered him as the man, the brave man, who foiled the holdup. He wasn't a particularly good public relations man nor was he a bad one. He was always on time and he worked at his job until closing time. People whom he met often had trouble remembering his name.