

Weights and Measures

by

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(based on COTY)

The doctor, a kindly, grey-haired man whose sixty-fourth birthday was within sight, slid his glasses down his nose. With a sigh and a cluck of his tongue, he peered over the half-moon lenses at the weights of the scale.

"Three pounds under, son," he said to the anxious young man. "I'm sorry."

"No- no, I can't be!" He wasn't much more than a boy - tall, gangly, russet-haired. He had a blend of awkwardness and promise to his form, like a moose too young to challenge the older bulls. "I've been exercising for six months."

"I know, son, but-"

"I've been eating right, too. I've done everything I'm supposed to, Doc-"

"I'm sure you have-"

"It isn't right!" the young man cried, slamming his hand against the wall. "It can't be! There's got to be something wrong with the scale- have you checked that?"

The suppressed rage in his voice was overwhelmed by the pleading, desperate look in his eyes; with a sigh, the doctor pushed his glasses back up again. "Afraid so, Billy. The scale's accurate."

Billy's shoulders sagged. "This can't be happening," he whispered, staring at the floor.

The doctor shook his head slowly. "I don't know what to tell you, son. You said you've been exercising?"

Billy nodded, looking up at the older man's words. "Lifting weights," he said. "And running, too. A little bit more every day, like Milo."

"Who?"

"A- an ancient Greek farmer. My mother told me about him. She said he picked up a calf the day it was born, and lifted it over his head every day. When it was a full grown bull he could still pick it up, because he'd been getting a little stronger every day."

The doctor whistled. "Well, that'd explain your shoulders, all right. You've got a lot more muscle on you than I would've thought for such a skinny young man. Maybe in another six months-"

"No! Doc, please! I can't wait that long! He'll get away!"

"He?"

Billy's expression went suddenly grim. "The outlaw who murdered my father."

The doctor looked down at his papers again. Oh, yes, this was Bob Preston's son. Had it really been six months? Apparently so. "I'm sorry, son," said the doctor slowly. "I know it's hard, I really-

He stopped; a gleam of light on glass in the next room had caught his eye. Billy turned, trying to see what he was looking at. "Doc?"

"Son," said the doctor suddenly, "get off that scale. I need to test it one more time."

The young man's eyes lit up, and he fairly leaped backwards. "Yes sir!" he cried energetically; the doctor chuckled to himself, shaking his head a little.

"Don't thank me just yet, Billy." The object he wanted was in the storage closet. "You may not be so glad in a few hours."

"Beg pardon, sir?"

The doctor just smiled, suppressing a grunt as he hefted the bottle from the bottom shelf. "I need to test the scale with a known weight," he said conversationally. "Set the weights to zero, would you?" His eager expression now tinged with undeniable curiosity, the young man did so. "Thanks," said the doctor. "Now, let's see. . .this is five gallons of distilled water I've got here. So that's. . . refresh my memory, Billy. How much does water weigh?"

The young man thought for a moment. "Ten pounds to the Imperial gallon, sir."

"Right, right." The doctor eased the bottle onto the scale, stepping back for a moment to fiddle with the marker weights. "So logically, if the scale is measuring properly, it should read fifty and. . ."

Billy's blue eyes flicked from the numbers to the bottle, and then up to the doctor's face. He said nothing.

"You know," said the doctor very casually, "I don't recall seeing how much that bottle weighs on the shipping manifest."

The young man's expression changed not a whit, but his gaze fell to the bottle of water and stayed there.

"I'm going to go check," the doctor decided aloud. "If I can't find the forms, I'll just have to estimate. It could take me a while - there's a lot of files it could be in."

Slowly, very slowly, Billy nodded. The doctor left the room, humming to himself. It was amazing, he thought, how much paperwork could build up in an average day around here. Ottawa did like to keep track of absolutely everything to do with the Northwest Mounted Police, and who was he to argue? Oh, yes, lots of papers. Lots and lots of papers.

Eventually he returned to the examination room, shaking his head. "You know," he said, "I couldn't find it. I must've gotten rid of the shipping papers once everything was accounted for. Going to have to estimate, I suppose."

The young man, who was seated on the examination table with a somewhat strained expression, nodded. "Whatever you think is best, sir," he said quietly.

"Somehow I thought you'd feel that way." The doctor kept right on humming, adjusting the weights a bit and making a mark on his forms. "Put the bottle back for me, would you?"

Billy nodded again and silently hoisted the bottle up to his shoulder. The doctor had to admit- for all that he hadn't quite got enough muscle on him yet to satisfy the Powers That Were, it looked like there was more than enough there to get a Mountie's job done. Casually, while the young man's back was turned, he scratched out his mark and tared the scale back to zero. "All right, son," he called out, "let's give it one more try. . . and may I suggest you not try running anywhere any time soon?"

"You don't have to tell me twice, sir."

The doctor smiled.

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