Title: Archie's Mistake

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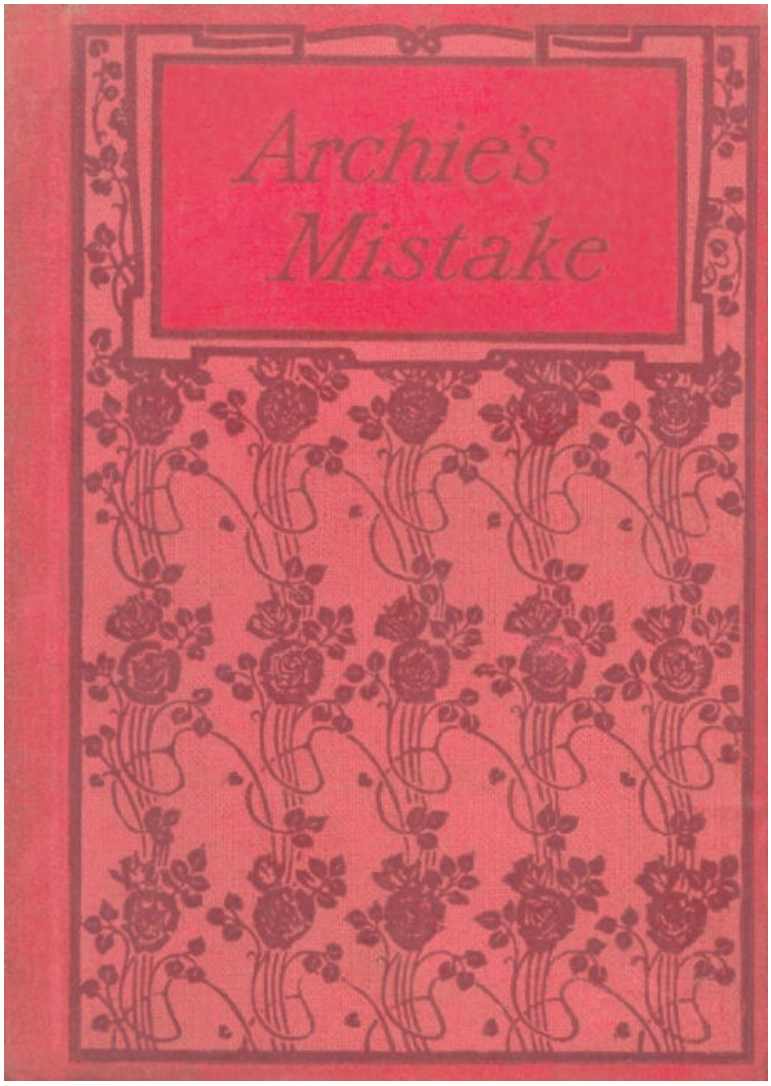
Release date: March 13, 2007 [eBook #20809]
Most recently updated: January 1, 2021

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Suzanne Shell, Sam W. and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at https://www.pgdp.net



ARCHIE'S MISTAKE

BY

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&c. &c.

THOMAS NELSON AND SONS
London, Edinburgh, Dublin, and New York
1912

"Simon Bond's strong hands grasped Stephen's ear and collar." **Page 32.**

ARCHIE'S MISTAKE.

[Pg 7]

"Father, why do you have such a beggarly-looking hand at the mill as that young Bennett?" asked Archie Fairfax of the great mill-owner of Longcross.

"Why shouldn't I?" he replied. "He comes with an excellent character from the foreman he has been under at Morfield. He does his work very well, Munster says, and that's all I care for. I don't pay for his clothes."

Archie said no more, but he still felt aggrieved. As a rule, his father's work-people were a superior, tidy-looking set, but this new lad was literally in rags, and his worn, haggard face and great, hungry-looking eyes seemed, in Archie's mind, to bring discredit on the cotton-mill.

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"He's no business here," he said to himself.—"I wish you'd send him away."

Archie had only lately had anything to do with the mill, as he had been at a large public school. But now he was eighteen, and had left school. He had come into his father's office as secretary, that he might learn a little about the business which was to be his some day.

Mr. Fairfax had some excuse for the pride he took in his manufactory, for a better looked after, better managed, or more prosperous one it would have been difficult to find, though of course there were *some* rough people among the workers. Long experience had taught his work-people to respect and trust an employer who acted justly and honourably in every transaction; and it was Mr. Fairfax's boast that there had never yet been a "strike" among his men, nor any difficulty about work or wages which had not been settled at last in a friendly spirit.

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But this very "superiority" was a snare to the mill-hands. For if they once took a dislike to any one who had been "taken on," they left him no peace until they got rid of him. It was looked on as a sort of privilege in Longcross to belong to the Fairfax mills, and the men chose to be very particular as to whom they would admit among themselves.

They all disapproved of poor Stephen Bennett from the first day of his coming.

As they walked away that evening they discussed his appearance with eager disapprobation.

"Who is he?" "Where does he come from?" "Where's he living?" "What's made the master take such a ragamuffin on?"

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These were some of the questions asked, but no one was able to answer them.

"I'll get it all out of him to-morrow," said Simon Bond, a big savage-looking lad, with his hat on one side, and his pipe in his mouth.

"P'raps he won't be quite so ready to tell as you are to ask," said some one else.

"He'd better be, then, if he's got any care for his skin," answered the boy, and the others laughed.

So the next day Simon followed the stranger out of the mill, and began his questions in a rude, hectoring voice.

To his utter astonishment, Stephen refused to answer them. He made no reply while Simon poured out his questions, until the latter said,—

"Well, dunderhead, d'ye hear me speaking?"

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"Yes, I hear you," responded Stephen, looking at him with a half-frightened, half-defiant expression.

"Then why don't you answer?" he inquired with an oath. He was getting angry. "If you cheek me, 'twill be the worse for you, I can tell you."

"I don't want to cheek you," said Stephen; "but I don't see as my affairs is your business, any more than your affairs is my business."

Simon could hardly believe his ears as he listened to this answer. This little shrimp to defy him like that!

But his anger soon outweighed his amazement.

He seized Stephen by the collar, saying, as he gave him a shake,—

"Answer my questions this instant, or—"

His gestures completed the sentence.

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Stephen turned very white, but he replied firmly,—

"I've told you I ain't going to, and I sticks to my words. If you threaten me like that, I'll go to the foreman and complain. There he comes."

Simon looked down the street, and saw Mr. Munster advancing just behind two other mill-hands. He was obliged to let Stephen go, but rage filled his heart.

"I'll pay you out," he muttered, "one of these days." Then he turned round a side street and

disappeared.

And what did Stephen do?

He walked on till he came to a baker's shop, where he bought some bread; then to a grocer's, where he got sugar, tea, and a candle; and so on, till his arms and pockets were full of parcels. But the odd thing was that he bought so much. That was what struck a man—one of the mill-hands—who was in the shop. [Pg 13]

Most of the work-people lived in one particular quarter of the big city—Fairfax Town it was called in consequence. But Stephen threaded his way to quite a different part—a much poorer one—and turned into an old tumble-down house, with all its windows broken and patched, which had stood empty and deserted until he came to it.

Weeks passed on, and still, in spite of constant persecution, Stephen remained at the mill. Scarcely any one spoke a kind word to him except Mr. Fairfax, but he very seldom saw him. Even old Mr. Munster, the head foreman, addressed him sharply and contemptuously, which was not his usual custom. The lad did his work well enough, but he was such a miserable-looking fellow, and so untidy and shabby.

Mr. Munster said something of the sort to Archie one day, when he met him outside the office, just as Stephen was going away after receiving his week's wages. [Pg 14]

"Yes," replied Archie eagerly; "did you ever see such a scarecrow? But he has good pay, hasn't he?"

"Yes, Mr. Archie; very good for such a young hand. He has fifteen shillings a week."

"He drinks—depend upon it he drinks spirits, and that's what gives him that hang-dog look," said Archie.

"You've never seen him the worse for drink, have you?" asked Mr. Munster, not unwilling to have an excuse for getting rid of the ragged stranger.

"Well, I don't know," he answered. "He was leaning up against a wall the other day when I passed, and when he saw me coming he tried to stand upright, and he regularly staggered. I could see it was as much as ever he could do." [Pg 15]

"H'm!" said Mr. Munster thoughtfully; "I shall watch him, then. If I catch him like that at his work, I shall soon send him packing."

"And there's another thing," Archie went on. "What does he do with the things he buys? What do you think I saw him getting last week?"

"Couldn't say, sir, I'm sure."

"Why, three boys' fur caps, and a lot of serge, and a girl's cloak, and four pairs of cheap stockings, and other things besides. I was in Dutton's shop when he came in. He didn't see me because of a pile of blankets, and I heard him buy all those things, and carry them off. He paid for half, and the rest he said he'd pay for this week. He must have bought things there before, or they wouldn't have trusted him. But, you know, they'd come to very nearly as much as his wages." [Pg 16]

"Yes; I don't understand it," said Mr. Munster. "But, after all, it isn't our business if he does his duty at the mill."

"No, I know," said Archie; "but I believe there's something wrong about him, and I should like to know what it is."

"Well, 'give him enough rope and he'll hang himself,' as they say," rejoined Mr. Munster—"that is, if your ideas about him are true."

Archie said no more on the subject then, but he made up his mind to keep a sharp look-out upon Stephen's conduct. Whenever he met him, therefore, he looked keenly at him; and he would sometimes come through the great room where Stephen worked, with a number of other men and lads, and stand close to him, silently scrutinizing him. If he spoke to him, it was always to ask a question which obliged young Bennett to say a good deal in reply; and Archie was forced to own that he displayed a considerable knowledge of the branch of business in which he was occupied. [Pg 17]

But Stephen soon discovered that he was regarded with suspicion, and he came to dread his young master's approach, and the cold, searching glance of his blue eyes.

Stephen had looked haggard and careworn from the first, but as weeks passed on he seemed to get worse. He still did his duty as well, or almost as well, as ever, but he grew perceptibly weaker every day, and at last he could hardly drag himself along.

"I doubt if I'll last much longer," he said to himself, as he reached the mill one morning about three months after his first arrival at Longcross, "but father's time will be out next week. I must write to him to-day or to-morrow and warn him what may be coming." [Pg 18]

There was only one man at the mill who had ever been the least civil to Stephen. This was a gay, thoughtless young fellow named Timothy Lingard.

He always rather prided himself on taking a different side from the other men, and in his light, careless way he had rather patronized Stephen when he saw him.

Not that they met very often, for Timothy's work was to stay in the mill all night, and go round the premises at intervals in order to see that there was no danger of fire.

Sometimes he was not gone when Stephen came in the morning; and then, as the latter waited outside for the doors to be opened, Timothy would enter into a conversation with him, just to show the other men that he took a different line from theirs. [Pg 19]

One evening—it was about a week after the discussion about Stephen between Archie and Mr. Munster—Timothy met the pale, careworn lad dragging himself wearily home from the mill. He looked more ragged than ever—his clothes seemed almost ready to drop off.

"Hullo!" said Timothy; "you look as if you hadn't too many pennies to chink against each other. What d'ye do with your wages? They don't go in clothes—that's clear enough."

Stephen flushed deeply, in the sudden way that people do who are in a very weak state, but he made no answer.

"I can put you in the way of earning an extra pound, if you like," said Timothy carelessly.

"Oh, how—how?" cried Stephen with sudden animation, clutching at Timothy in his eagerness, and then holding on to him to keep himself from falling. [Pg 20]

"There—don't go and faint over it," said Timothy, pushing him off; "and don't throttle a man either for doing you a good turn. That ain't no encouragement. What I mean is, that I've a rather partic'lar engagement to-morrow night, and for several nights to come—in fact, till next Friday—and I want to get some one to take my place at the mill."

"But will Mr. Munster let any one else come?"

"I ain't a-going to ask him. It don't matter to *him* who's there, so long as there *is* some one to look after the premises. I'm going to put in my own man; and you can have the job if you like, and take two-thirds o' my pay—that's twenty shillings. I shall be back by three or four o'clock in the morning, so as to give you time for a nap before your own work begins. But if you ain't feeling up to the double work, just say so. Now I look at you, I have my doubts, and it won't do for you to go falling off asleep, or fainting, mind. What d'you say to it?" [Pg 21]

"I could do it—I'm sure I could. I wouldn't go to sleep—I promise you I wouldn't. The only thing is, I should like—I think—if you say it won't matter—yes, I really should like—"

"Have it out, and have done with it, and don't stand spluttering there like a water-pipe gone wrong. Will you do it, or not?"

"Yes," said Stephen, in a low voice.

"Then mind, you ain't to say a word about it to any one—not as there's any harm in it, but I don't want the foreman to hear of it sideways. I shall come here as usual at six o'clock, and if you'll come up about seven—it's pretty near dark by then—I'll let you in, and be off myself."

"All right. But—but, Tim, I—I was going to ask—" [Pg 22]

"Well? Do get on—what an ass you are! What do you want?" interrupted the other impatiently.

"'Twas about the money. Could you—I mean, would you mind paying me first? I'll do the work—I will, indeed."

"It'll be the worse for you if you don't," said Timothy. "But as for paying first, I don't know as I've got the money. What d'you want it for?"

"I can't tell you—at least, I mean, for food and clothes," answered Stephen, looking extremely distressed and embarrassed. "But never mind, Tim; if you can't do it, I'll wait."

"No; you can have it. I daresay I'll be making more to-night," said the reckless Timothy, and he got out two half-sovereigns and gave them to Stephen.

"Now, remember," he said, "if you say I ain't paid you, or if you don't do the work properly, and anything happens while I'm away, I'll break every bone in your body." [Pg 23]

No one could look at the two and doubt Timothy's power to wreak his anger on the slim, weakly-looking youth, some ten years younger than himself.

"All right; I'll take care," answered Stephen, who never wasted words; and they separated.

The following evening Stephen arrived, as arranged, in the twilight, at the big mill, and was admitted by Timothy at a little side-door.

"Mind," said the latter, "you ain't supposed to go to sleep. You goes your rounds four times. There's the rules." He pointed to a card on the wall, and added—"I take forty winks myself every now and then, but *I* can wake up if a fly jumps on the table. Now, I'm off. I'll be back in lots o' time."

He departed, whistling as he went, and not feeling the least ashamed of betraying the trust [Pg 24]

reposed in him, by thus entrusting the safety of the whole mill to a comparative stranger. Timothy was not in the habit of asking whether things were *right* before he did them, but only whether they were pleasant or convenient.

He did not notice Archie Fairfax, who was standing at the office-door as he walked quickly by, just under a newly-lighted lamp.

There was some one else watching too, from under the shadow of a projecting buttress, whom neither Archie nor Timothy perceived. It was Simon Bond—Stephen's bitterest enemy.

Ever since the day when the lad had refused to answer his rude questions, Simon had been on the look-out for his revenge. Twice he had waylaid Stephen, and tried to give him the thrashing [Pg 25] he had promised him.

But once Stephen had eluded him by going through a big shop which had an opening on the other side; once some one had come up just as Simon had got his foe into a quiet corner.

It was of no use for him to track Stephen to his home, for he knew how crowded it was in those narrow streets; and though a "row" would probably be a matter of daily occurrence, there was every likelihood that the men who looked on might take the side of their own neighbour against a stranger like Simon.

"But my time'll come yet," he said to himself, "if I wait long enough."

He contented himself, while waiting for the longed-for day of vengeance, with adding what he could to Stephen's load of trouble.

His work was in the same big room, and he took care that Stephen should have the draughtiest [Pg 26] corner of it, and be the last to get into the office on pay-day. And he managed that if anything did go wrong, suspicion should fall on Stephen—in which Archie was his unconscious helper. Then, if Stephen ventured to speak while waiting outside for admittance in the morning—which he did very seldom—Simon would repeat his words in a loud, mocking voice, and comment upon them, and turn them into ridicule, till poor Stephen dreaded the sight of him more than of all the other men put together.

"What's up now, I wonder," thought Simon, as he watched Timothy come out and Stephen go in at the little door of the manufactory. "Why, there's Tim Lingard going off right away. Is he gone for the night? I should like to know. If he is, now's my time. I don't suppose the little chap will [Pg 27] lock the door, so I'll just slip in while he's going his rounds, and be ready for him when he comes back—that'll all be as easy as sneezing. I'll make it pretty hot, though, for Master Stephen when I've got him."

He went home to his tea; and Stephen, all unconscious of the plots being laid against him, entered the little room where the night-watch sat, and got out his meagre supper, which he had had no time yet to swallow. The room had two doors; one led to the courtyard through which Stephen had entered, and the other, the upper half of which was glass, took into Mr. Fairfax's private office and the larger counting-house beyond, out of which the passages leading to the general workrooms opened.

"I hope the little 'uns 'ull get on all safe for a few nights without me," he said to himself, as he ate his slice of bread. "Polly's so sensible, she'll do all right, if those rackety boys 'ull do as she tells [Pg 28] 'em. They promised me they would, but there's no tellin'."

He sat thinking for some time, and then started off on his first round of inspection.

Meanwhile Archie Fairfax had gone home to dinner, his mind full of the proofs he thought he had acquired of Stephen Bennett's untrustworthiness. He said nothing about it, however, until he and his father were left alone after dinner.

"Who's the caretaker at night now, father?" he asked, as he peeled an apple.

"Timothy Lingard," was the answer. "Why do you want to know?"

"Oh, only because he isn't there to-night; so I thought he might have been dismissed."

"Not there to-night! What do you mean, Archie?" [Pg 29]

"Why, I saw him come away this evening, just before I came back here, and Stephen Bennett went in instead. I can't say he looks quite the sort of fellow to be in charge of a big place like that all night—a fellow of his habits, too."

"What do you know about his habits?"

"Oh, nothing particular. But, of course, one can't help suspecting there's something wrong about a chap who draws the pay he does, and goes staggering about the streets with his arms full of children's clothes, and his own things looking like a beggar's."

"Do you mean you think the lad drinks, or is dishonest? Speak out, Archie, like a man, and don't throw stones in the dark."

"I don't want to do the fellow any harm," responded Archie, who felt that, in spite of his watching, [Pg 30] he knew far too little to speak definitely; "but what I have seen of him I don't like, and that's a fact. I can't help thinking there's something behind. What business has he to be at the mill to-

night, when the regular man's away?"

"None at all, of course. Most likely Lingard has gone off on some errand of his own, and paid Bennett to take his place. But it is not regular or right, by any means; I don't like the idea of it at all.... I think I shall go round myself presently, and find out all about it."

By the time Stephen got back from his round it was nearly nine o'clock. He sank into a chair, and leaning his elbows on the table, rested his head in his hands.

"I'm a deal weaker than I was last week," he murmured; "but I must try and last out till father's [Pg 31]
back. I'll write to him now, and tell him how fast I'm going. If there was any one a bit friendly, I'd tell 'em about it all, and ask 'em to look after the little 'uns if I go quicker; but there isn't. They all seem against me and my rags. I thought Mr. Archie looked so kind at first, but I can see now he thinks worse of me than any."

He got out some sheets of paper he had in his pocket, and pulled the pens and ink on the table towards him.

He did not write very fast, and as he had a good deal to say, he was some time over his letter. About twenty minutes had passed, when the room seemed to get very misty. The pen dropped out of Stephen's hand, and he fell back, with his eyes shut, and his head against the rail of the chair.

He had remained thus, asleep from very weakness, for about an hour, when he was suddenly [Pg 32]
aroused by a rough voice in his ear.

"Wake up, skulker! your time's come at last."

He opened his eyes, his heart throbbing violently, and there stood the burly form of Simon Bond. He looked bigger than ever in the dimly-lighted room; and as his great grimy face came nearer, and his strong hands grasped Stephen's ear and collar, he felt that his last moment had come, and even sooner than he had expected.

"Get up!" said his enemy, giving him a kick, and dragging him roughly from the chair. "Now," he went on, "I think you refused to answer my questions last time I asked 'em. You'll please to alter your ways from to-night, or you'll get more o' *these* than you'll quite like."

As he spoke he let go of the lad's collar with his right hand, and brought it swinging down with all [Pg 33]
his force on the side of Stephen's head.

Instantly the boy dropped like one dead at his feet.

At the same moment the office-door opened, and the appalling sight appeared of Mr. Fairfax's tall form, followed closely by his son Archie.

Not a second did Simon lose. He turned to the door, and was off like a flash of lightning.

Archie made a rush, as though to follow him.

"Cowardly lout!" he cried.

"No; stop, Archie," said his father. "You couldn't catch him; and if you did, you couldn't keep him. We'll examine him to-morrow—we both saw who it was. Now let us look after this poor lad."

"See, father, he was writing a letter," said Archie.

Mr. Fairfax took up the paper. This is what it said:— [Pg 34]

"Dear Father,—The little 'uns is all well, and I've got money now to last 'em till you are out, if I'm took before, which I'm that bad and low I can't hardly creep along. I've give Polly the money to use when wanted. She's been a good girl all along. Come to the above address as soon as you are out. I done my best, father, as you told me. And now good-bye, if I'm gone.—Your loving son,

"Stephen Bennett.

"*P.S.*—I never believed as you did it, father, and I don't now. God will make it right, so don't fret."

The envelope lay by the letter. It was directed to—

Ambrose Bennett, No. 357,
Eastwood Jail.

Mr. Fairfax gave them both to his son. "There, Archie," he said; "read these, and see if you still [Pg 35]
think you were right."

Then he went to Stephen, and did what he could to restore him to consciousness. But he was in such a weak state that nothing seemed of any use.

"Father, I've been a suspicious *brute*," cried Archie, flinging down the letter. "But for my cold looks and constant spying, which I daresay he's noticed, he might have told me all this, and I might have helped him. Now he's starving and friendless. But I'll try to make up now, if it isn't too late. Do let me carry him home, father—may I?"

"No," said Mr. Fairfax; "I'll go back and order some brandy, and send for the doctor. You stay here and take care of him and the mill."

He went away, and very long did the time seem to Archie before the doctor arrived. Now he had time to think over his own unkind—nay, cruel—suspicions, founded on nothing but Stephen's shabby appearance. [Pg 36]

"It's my way, I know, to make up my mind too quickly, and by a fellow's outside," he thought. Then, somehow, the words of the last Sunday's epistle came into his mind—"Charity thinketh no evil." He knew that charity means love.

"No," he said to himself, "I shouldn't have thought evil of him, and I certainly had no right to say what I did to father and Mr. Munster. Poor fellow! how lonely and miserable he must have been; and I might have stood his friend, if I'd only given him the chance of speaking about his troubles, instead of glaring at him as I did. Is it too late now to make up?"

Just then the doctor came in; but for a long, long time he could not restore Stephen to consciousness.

He was trying still when three o'clock struck. [Pg 37]

"Now he is really coming to—look, Dr. Grey," cried Archie, who had watched all the doctor's efforts with breathless anxiety.

Just then Stephen gave a great sigh, and opened his eyes.

"Where am I?" he asked feebly.

"All among friends," said Archie, "and going to have a jolly time, and be nursed up, and made as strong as a horse.—Now, Dr. Grey, let's get a cab. I'll go and call one," and he bustled off.

Outside he met a disgusting sight. It was Timothy Lingard, staggering towards the mill, very much the worse for what he had been drinking.

"You can't go there; go home at once," said Archie.

"Night-watch—caretaker—said I'd be here," mumbled Timothy, trying to brush past him; and then finding Archie still stood as a hindrance in front of him, he tried to strike him—of course not knowing who it was—only he missed his aim, and fell down into the gutter. [Pg 38]

There Archie left him, to seek a cab, which is not an easy thing to find at three o'clock in the morning. However, before long he did succeed in procuring one, and in it Stephen was conveyed to the nearest hospital.

Mr. Fairfax was just starting for his office the next morning when he was accosted by a respectable-looking working-man.

"Do I speak to Mr. Fairfax, sir?" he asked, touching his hat.

"Yes, that is my name. Can I do anything for you?"

"Would you be good enough, sir, to tell me where my son, Stephen Bennett, is? I hear he was taken ill last night."

"He's in the hospital. I'll take you—I was just going there myself," said Archie, who was with his father. [Pg 39]

"Your son has had a hard life, I fear, in your absence," said Mr. Fairfax, glancing curiously at the stranger, who did not look at all like a man capable of crime.

"Yes, sir," he answered somewhat bitterly; "it has pleased the Almighty to send me a heavy trial. First, I lost my wife; then I was accused, along with my fellow-workers in a brick-yard, of stealing fagots. I was sentenced to three months' imprisonment, and my time would have been out next week. My boy, which he's one in a thousand—though he was that weakly he was hardly fit for work—he brought the little 'uns, five of 'em, all under fourteen, to this place. 'We shan't be known at Longcross, father,' he says, 'and I'll work for 'em all till you're out.' So he come here. [Pg 40] And yesterday they come to me in the jail, and they says, 'Bennett, we find you're innocent. The man what took the fagots, he's up and confessed, and he says as you've had nothing to do with it.' So they wrote me this paper to say I'm pardoned, as they call it, and I come away; but they couldn't give me back the three months of my life."

"No," said Mr. Fairfax; "you have suffered indeed. But I trust that even yet you may find good come out of evil, as it so often does. We have come to know and respect Stephen, and as soon as he is well he shall be moved into a comfortable house, which I have now to let, and which is at your disposal, if you like to take it. Other help, too, I hope to be able to render you."

Thus talking, they arrived at the hospital. Stephen had not made much progress, and was still alarmingly weak. Scanty food and constant anxiety had told terribly on his delicate constitution. [Pg 41] But when he saw his father, and heard that he had been set free, and declared innocent, a new life seemed to come into him.

"I shall get well now, father," he said; "I feel I shall—only my head's so bad where the blow came that I can't think much. But that doesn't matter now; you'll look after the little 'uns. 'Twas the

having all them on me, and thinking about you, that seemed to crush me down; though I knew you was innocent, father—I knew it all along. Thank God for making it clear, though. I asked Him to do it, night and day, and He's done it."

"Now, Archie, my boy," said Mr. Fairfax, as he and his son walked back together, "you see how entirely wrong you were in your hasty judgment."

"Yes, father, I do see;" and the lad's voice was full of feeling. "Stephen may never lose the effects of this time of cruel hardship. I might have been his friend, and I was his enemy instead." [Pg 42]

"If I had listened, or allowed the foreman to listen, to your guesses, he might have been turned off altogether. It should be a lesson to you, Archie, never to injure another person's character again without absolute certainty, and even then only if it is necessary for the general good. Once gone, it is sometimes impossible to win back."

"I know—I know, father. I *will* try to be careful, and not so hasty."

"Don't judge merely by appearances, Archie. Above all, remember those words of the Great Teacher, 'Judge not, that ye be not judged.'"

"I KNOW BEST." [Pg 43]

"So the choir treat is fixed for Thursday, and we're all going to the Crystal Palace! What jolly fun we shall have!"

The speaker was Walter Franklin, a village lad of eighteen. But Christopher Swallow, the friend to whom he addressed himself, a youth who looked rather older, did not receive the news with the pleasure Walter expected.

"The old Crystal Palace again!" he grumbled. "Bother! What's the good of going to the same place twice over? *I* call it foolery and rubbish."

"Oh, but the rector said that no one but you and three of the older men had been before; and when he asked them whether they would like anything else better, they said no. Benjamin Sorrell said that once for seeing all over such a big place was nothing, and he'd like to spend a week there." [Pg 44]

"Let him, then; one day's enough for me. Of course, we must go as it's settled; but you won't catch *me* staying dawdling about, looking at the same old things over and over again as I see two years ago. I shall be off and enjoy myself somewhere else."

"But, Christopher, Mr. Richardson said most partic'lar we *must* all keep together or we should get lost; and we're all to wear red rosettes on our left shoulders, that we may know each other at a distance, if we should get separated by any accident."

"Oh, did he indeed?" replied Christopher scornfully. "P'raps some'll do it. I think I know *one* as won't." [Pg 45]

Walter said no more. Chris was well known to be what the others called "cranky" in his temper; and when he considered, as he generally did, that he was right, and every one else wrong, there was nothing for it but to leave him alone.

When Thursday came, it was a most lovely September day. There was hardly any one among the thirty members of the Hartfield Parish Choir, who drove in two big wagonettes to the station, that did not look prepared to enjoy the day's outing to the utmost.

"Christopher don't look best pleased, though," thought Walter, as they drove along, glancing at his friend's gloomy face. "And there's Miss Richardson getting out the rosettes. I hope he won't go and make a row; but there's no telling." [Pg 46]

The Hartfield Choir consisted of men, lads, and boys, with about half a dozen little girls. The boys and girls, of course, sang alto and treble; the lads alto, if they could manage nothing better; and the men bass and tenor. There were eight men between thirty and fifty years of age, six lads like Walter, and sixteen children.

Half were in one long brake with the rector, and half in another with the schoolmaster and Miss Richardson. About half-way between Hartfield and the station, Miss Richardson produced a white cardboard box, which she opened.

"Here," she said, taking out a very bright rosette made of red ribbon, and a packet of pins, "I want each of you to put one of these on your left shoulder, and then we shall know one another when we are too far off to see each other's faces. There, I've put mine on." [Pg 47]

As she spoke she fastened one on to her jacket. Every one else did the same, amidst a good deal of laughing and joking—every one, that is, except one.

"Christopher, where's *your* badge?" asked Mr. White, the schoolmaster.

"In my pocket, sir," was the answer.

"We can't see through that, man; it isn't transparent, like a glass window. Get out the rosette and put it on."

Christopher plunged his hands into his two jacket-pockets and fumbled. Mr. White thought he was going to do as he was told, and took no further notice.

"Chris, you haven't put it on, now," whispered Walter, as the horses drew up at the station. "Ain't you going to?"

"Be quiet, will you? *You* ain't master," said Christopher roughly; and Walter was silent.

He noticed, though, that his friend kept well out of sight behind the others, and also that in the train he took a seat on the same side as Mr. White, and as far off as possible. Miss Richardson was with the little girls in another carriage. [Pg 48]

When the party reached the Crystal Palace station, they proceeded up the steps to the gardens.

"Now," said Mr. Richardson, when they got to the final flight leading into the great glass building —"now, I think we may as well separate for a bit. I will stay inside and take any who wish to see the poultry and rabbit show. The girls will like, I daresay, to go with Miss Richardson, and those who don't care for the animals can follow Mr. White to the garden; only be sure you all come to the terrace by one o'clock for dinner."

So saying, he turned towards the corridor where an immense cackling and cooing announced the presence of the poultry and pigeons, followed by four of the lads and some of the men and boys. [Pg 49]

"What shall you do, Chris?" whispered Walter.

"I shall see what schoolmaster's up to; and if I don't like what he does, I shall make off and get some jolly good fun by myself," was the answer. "You stick to me, Walter. I s'pose you don't want to be the only big chap among all them little 'uns?"

"No; I'll stick to you, Chris," he replied, but he did not feel very comfortable.

Walter was a well-meaning lad, but he was very weak, and easily led by the stronger-willed Christopher.

Mr. White knew the Crystal Palace well, and all its many attractions. He took his party to see a show where cardboard figures were made to walk and jump and open their eyes, just like real people. [Pg 50]

Then he proposed that they should try throwing sticks, provided for the purpose, at a row of penknives, and if any one knocked a knife over it would be his. This was amusing for a little while; but when no one could get anywhere near a knife, the boys grew tired of trying, especially as they each had to pay a penny for three tries.

At last they arrived at the place where a man has tricycles to let out. Every boy pulled out the rest of his money and begged for a ride. In a few minutes half a dozen little green tricycles where whirling round the curve.

Walter and Christopher despised the idea at first of doing what the little boys did; but when they saw some other youths like themselves get on, they put their pride in their pockets, and each mounted a tricycle. How they did waggle from side to side; and how impossible it was not to laugh and shout at the absurd feeling of the thing! [Pg 51]

"This is rare good sport," said Chris at last.

He had but just spoken when he met Mr. White.

"It's ten minutes to one," said the latter. "We must go, or we shan't be on the terrace as soon as the rector. Come along, boys; it's dinner-time."

There was a general turning round of tricycles, and in a few minutes the little party were making their way towards the palace.

"What's the matter, Chris?" asked Walter. "I thought you liked that."

"So I did; 'twas the only bit of fun I've had. It's a regular nuisance to be at some one else's beck and call like this, just when one *is* getting a little pleasure. Why should we come before we want to?" [Pg 52]

"Why? Because it's dinner-time. Aren't you hungry? I am, I know."

Christopher grunted sulkily, but in spite of his ill-humour he managed to get through the meat-patties and plum-pudding with a most excellent appetite.

Dinner over, the rector proposed that every one should come with him to see a panorama of the siege of Paris, which was to begin at three o'clock.

"I should like it awfully. Wouldn't you, Chris?" said Walter.

"I don't know. No—it sounds dull and schoolish," replied Chris, who was no scholar. "I won't be led about like a monkey on a chain, either. I know best how to amuse myself, and I tell you what—I'm going back for another ride on that tricycle. You'd better come too, Wat. The panorama doesn't really begin till half-past three. I saw it up on the board outside." [Pg 53]

"But I've only got three half-pence left," said Walter, "so *I* can't ride any more."

"Oh, I'll lend you the money. I've got heaps."

"But could you find your way back, Chris? This is such a thundering big place," urged Walter doubtfully.

"Yes, you idiot, of course I can. But don't come if you're afraid."

Chris knew very well that such a suggestion would break down Walter's hesitation at once; and so it did. He followed his friend, and soon forgot all about the panorama in his delight at having improved so much since the morning in the management of his tricycle.

Suddenly a clock struck. One, two, three, FOUR.

"Chris, Chris, *did* you hear? It's four o'clock!" he cried.

"Well, what of that?" was the cool rejoinder. [Pg 54]

"Get off at once, Chris. The panorama must be half over. Bother it all! and I did so want to see it."

Chris proceeded slowly and leisurely back to the starting-point, and got off his tricycle.

"How much?" he asked the man in charge.

"One and sixpence each, please."

"What a plague you are, Wat, to have come without any money," said Chris, as he paid the three shillings. "I didn't come to spend all my cash on you."

"How do you come to have so much?" inquired Walter.

"Why, my jolly old brick of an uncle gave me five shillings when he heard I was coming here."

"I wish he was *my* uncle," sighed Walter, whose parents were very poor. "But I say, Chris, is this the way to the panorama?" [Pg 55]

"No, but I'm thirsty. I'm going into the palace to get a glass of beer. You can go on to the panorama if you're so anxious about it."

But Walter was far too much afraid of getting lost among the crowds of people in the "thundering big garden" to part from his companion. He had never been more than ten miles from his native village until to-day, and he felt quite bewildered at all the strange sights and sounds.

He followed Chris, who proceeded to a refreshment counter, and asked for beer.

"We don't sell wine or beer, or anything of the sort, sir," was the answer. "It's against the rules of the palace, and we've no licence."

Nothing made Chris so savage as to be thwarted in anything he wanted to do.

"Then it's a stupid place, and it ought to be ashamed of itself," he said angrily; "but if I can't get it here, I'll go where I can." [Pg 56]

He turned on his heel and walked quickly away, followed by the much-vexed Walter.

In vain did he ask Chris where he was going, and what he meant to do—not a word could he extract. The other lad stalked on, looking every now and then at the printed directions on the walls, telling whither each turning led.

He reached a sort of entrance-place at last, where there were the same kind of turnstiles as those through which Mr. Richardson had brought his party in the morning.

"Way out" was written above one. Without a word to his companion, Chris went through it.

"But, Chris, that takes us outside. What *are* you doing?" cried Walter.

"I know what I'm about," answered the other. "Are you coming or not I? I can't wait all day. You'll never find your way back to the others alone. You'd a deal better stick to me that knows the way." [Pg 57]

Walter looked round despairingly.

"What shall I do?" he said to himself. "I *wish* I hadn't come with Chris. He's so cross and disagreeable, it's no fun to be with him; but I could no more find my way back through all those twists and turns than fly. I suppose I must keep with him now," and he went through the turnstile and caught up his friend, who had grown tired of waiting and had gone on some way.

"Oh, you've come, have you?" said he, as Walter came running up. "I thought you liked best wandering about all proper and lonely inside that fine place you seem so fond of."

Walter made no reply, but walked by the side of his companion, who marched along as if he knew [Pg 58]

very well what he wanted, and meant to have it.

At length they came to a street corner, where they saw written up, "Crystal Palace Arms."

"Now, here's just the place for me," cried Chris, pushing the door open and going in.

Walter, though he felt more uncomfortable than ever, saw no choice but to follow.

"Me and my pal wants a glass of beer," said Chris loudly, throwing down a sixpence with the air of one who had plenty more.

"No, I don't want any, thanks, Chris," interrupted Walter hastily.

"Then you can go without," answered Christopher, deeply offended. "I'm not going to offer it to you again, nor anything else either, you great hulking killjoy." [Pg 59]

He drank off his own beer, and then had some more, and some more again.

Walter began to feel really frightened now, for Chris was one of those childish people who, having once begun drinking, cannot stop themselves from taking more than is good for them.

But on this occasion, to his comrade's surprise, he did stop before long.

"It's no good for me to try and persuade him," thought Walter; "it 'ud only make him go the other way. I *wish* I hadn't gone with him; it's quite spoilt my day. I didn't get a holiday and come all this way from home just to spend the afternoon in a stuffy public-house, nor on the pavement outside, neither. It's six o'clock—there's the clock striking.—Chris, we shall only just get back to the palace in time to meet Mr. Richardson," he said aloud, beginning to walk very fast. "You know he's got all the tickets—we can't go without him." [Pg 60]

"All right—plenty o' time," rejoined Chris, speaking rather thickly, and lagging behind in a most irritating way.

Walter thought he never should get him to the gate, but they reached it at last. He thought it was the same man and the same entrance they had come in by before, but really both were quite different. The gatekeeper said at once,—

"Where's your money? But you can only stay five minutes."

"Oh, we paid this morning," replied Chris. "Don't you remember a big party with red rosettes on?"

"You can't come in again, anyhow, without paying. And *you* haven't no red rosettes."

"Yes, I have; it's in my pocket," said Walter, beginning to feel for it. But, alas! it was gone—drawn out, most likely, with his handkerchief. [Pg 61]

"Why did you make me take it off?" he said crossly. "Get out yours, Chris, and show it."

"Mine? Threw the old thing away hours ago. Not such a fool as I look," answered Chris rudely. —"I'm going through here, so you can just stop your row," he continued insolently to the gatekeeper, with a vague idea of obtaining admiration from the crowds now coming out through the turnstile.

The gatekeeper looked at him contemptuously for a moment, and then gave a little whistle. Instantly two very tall policemen appeared.

"Just turn these two chaps out, will you?" said he. "They're regular holiday-keepers, they are. Been at the Palace Arms, I should say, most of the day."

"Now then, you clear out," said the policemen, with voice and manner that even Chris dared not disregard. [Pg 62]

"Please, we want to go to the station. We're to meet the others to go by the half-past six train," said Walter desperately.

"You must look sharp, then—it's just off. There, be off down those steps as hard as you can split."

Walter obeyed. In his anxiety he forgot all about Chris; and not even when he reached the bottom of the steps, and caught sight of Mr. Richardson's troubled countenance looking for the truants from one of the carriage windows, did he recollect his friend.

The platform was crowded with people, and though Walter could see the rector, the latter could not distinguish him. If he had but worn the red badge upon his shoulder, matters might even yet have gone well; but, as it was, all Walter's efforts to shoulder his way through the masses of people only brought him to the front of the platform as the train steamed off! [Pg 63]

At the last moment of all, Mr. Richardson's eye fell upon him, and he called out something, but Walter could not hear what it was.

A feeling of despair came over him as he turned back towards the steps. He had just remembered Chris.

"What *shall* we do?" he thought. "I haven't a penny, and Chris can't have much left either. Oh, there he is!" as he caught sight of the other lad's ill-tempered, flushed face at the foot of the

steps.

"You sneak!" cried Chris angrily; "what d'ye mean by leaving me in the lurch like this?"

"But you wouldn't hurry, Chris; and as it is, we've lost the train—that was ours that's just gone. What are we to do now? Have you got any money?" [Pg 64]

"No; you know I ain't, else I shouldn't ha' left the 'public' so quick. It's all your fault," answered Chris savagely, the beer mounting to his head more and more every minute, and he as usual growing more unpleasant and ill-tempered as his power of self-restraint grew weaker.

Walter was wise enough not to try arguing with or blaming him. He knew it would be worse than useless.

It was now getting dark, and the station was being lighted up. By some happy chance, Walter found his way out of it, and into the town, still holding on to Chris.

"Leave go," said the latter roughly. "I ain't a baby, nor a perambulator neither, to be pushed about by you."

He walked, or rather stumbled, along some way without help, Walter feeling utterly disgusted both with himself and his friend. [Pg 65]

"But he shan't be my friend no more after to-day—I've made up my mind as to that," he said to himself. "Father's often told me he wasn't a good companion, and I know I didn't believe him. I thought Chris was a fine fellow, as really knew more than other folks—he always talked as if he did—but I see now 'twas all talk, and he ain't near so sensible nor so pleasant as some of the other chaps. I ain't going to tell tales, but if Mr. Richardson could see him now, I don't think Chris 'ud stay much longer in the choir."

By this time they had reached the Palace Arms again, and Christopher once more turned in at the door.

"What's he doing that for?" thought Walter, "when he said he hadn't a farthing left. *I* shan't go in —I've had enough of it." [Pg 66]

So he stayed in the street. He could hear voices—and very angry ones—within. They rose louder and louder, and then there seemed a sort of struggle.

Walter's anxiety to know what was going on had just conquered his reluctance to be mixed up in anything like a drunken row, when the door was hastily opened, and several men, among them the landlord of the tavern, appeared, all pushing and shoving at Chris in order to turn him out. They succeeded at last, and a very disgusting spectacle he presented as he half stood, half lounged against a lamp-post. His hat was gone—some one threw it out to him a minute later—his coat was torn, his collar and tie were all crooked, his eyes were bloodshot, and his expression was a mixture of fury and helplessness.

More than ever did Walter wish he was not obliged to claim companionship with this degraded, low-looking man. [Pg 67]

As he stood watching the impotent rage with which Chris kicked the lamp-post, as though he thought it was one of the enemies he wished to punish, a policeman came suddenly round the corner. Chris made a sort of rush at him with an angry yell.

"Hullo! Drunk and disorderly, are you? Come along o' me," said the constable coolly, quietly slipping a pair of handcuffs over Chris's wrists. The latter, with renewed passion, struggled vehemently, but the policeman took no notice; he merely led Chris along, without uttering a word. It was not far to the police-station. When they had got there, Chris's captor suddenly observed Walter, who had followed at a little distance.

"What do *you* want?" he asked. "A night in the lock-up?" [Pg 68]

He spoke in jest, and was very much astonished when Walter answered,—

"Yes, please."

"What? In here?" said the policeman in amazement, looking at the respectable, quiet lad. "Why, man, it's a sort of a jail."

"I don't *want* to go there, of course," replied Walter; "but me and him"—pointing to Chris—"has got lost, and if he's going there, why, I s'pose I must too."

"Is this your pal, then? You don't know how to choose your mates, I should say," observed the policeman. "'Tis too late for you to see a magistrate, or you could speak to Colonel Law. Where d'ye come from?"

Walter related his story, Chris meanwhile sitting on the steps almost asleep.

"It seems to me it's all your fault for not doing as the gentleman told you, but going by such as he," said the constable, looking disdainfully at Chris. "Now, look here," he added; "if you'll wait at the door while I take in this chap and speak to the superintendent, when I've done I'll take you to the colonel, and p'raps he'll see you." [Pg 69]

Walter thanked him, and waited patiently till he reappeared.

They soon reached the colonel's house, and were admitted to see him, when the policeman recounted Walter's adventures. The magistrate was a tall, thin old man, with a bristling white moustache, and a very sharp, quick manner.

"Well," he said to Walter, "if your story is true, you've been a very foolish fellow, and quite spoilt what might have been a very pleasant day. You can go and sit in the kitchen and have some supper, while I telegraph to your rector. If he says it is all as you say, I will lend you the money to go back by the 9.30 train." [Pg 70]

"Oh, thank you, sir, thank you," cried Walter, feeling as if his troubles were coming to an end at last. "But what about Chris?"

"Your friend in the lock-up? He must stay there till he is let out. When he is set free, I suppose his relations will send the money for his journey—you can see about that when you get home—and he will probably have to pay a fine also, before he can go."

Never had Walter enjoyed a supper more. An hour passed quickly away, and he was quite surprised at being summoned again so soon to the colonel's library. He looked less fierce this time.

"It's all right, Franklin," he said. "Mr. Richardson has requested me to help you, so here is the money. I hope you will get home safely, and learn from the events of to-day to choose your friends from among the steady lads of the village, and not to listen to the big talkers, who want you to despise your elders, and judge for yourself." [Pg 71]

"No, sir; I don't mean to be friends with Chris again," said Walter. "Thank you for helping me, sir. Good-night."

He shut the door, and as he walked away he said to himself,—

"I see now what it is that makes Chris so often go wrong. It's just that whatever any one tells him to do, he always says, 'I know best.'"

THE END.

Transcriber's Note:

The frontispiece illustration has been shifted to follow the title page.

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