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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FIVE HUNDRED DOLLARS; OR, JACOB MARLOWE'S SECRET ***



FIVE HUNDRED DOLLARS

OR, JACOB MARLOWE'S SECRET.

BY

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"THE YOUNG ACROBAT," ETC.**

NEW YORK

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CHAPTER I.

A NEW ARRIVAL IN LAKEVILLE.

Slowly through the village street walked an elderly man, with bronzed features and thin gray hair, supporting his somewhat uncertain steps by a stout cane. He was apparently tired, for, seeing a slight natural elevation under a branching elm tree, he sat down, and looked thoughtfully about him.

"Well," he said, "Lakeville hasn't changed much since I left it, twenty years since. Has there been any change among those who are near to me? I don't know, but I shall soon find out. Shall I receive a welcome or not? There ought to be two families to greet me, but——"

Here a boy appeared on the scene, a boy of fifteen, with a sturdy figure and a pleasant face, whose coarse suit indicated narrow means, if not poverty. Seeing the old man, with instinctive politeness he doffed his hat and with a pleasant smile bade him good-morning.

"Good-morning," returned the traveller, won by the boy's pleasant face and manner. "If you are not in a hurry won't you sit down by me and answer a few questions?"

"With pleasure, sir; my business isn't driving."

"This is Lakeville, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"I used to know the place—a good many years since. It hasn't grown much."

"No, sir; it's rather quiet."

"Chiefly a farming region, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir; but there is a large shoe manufactory here, employing a hundred hands."

"Who is the owner?"

"Squire Marlowe."

"Ha!" ejaculated the old man, evidently interested. "Albert Marlowe, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir; do you know him?"

"I haven't met him for twenty years, but we are acquainted. I suppose he is prosperous."

"He is considered a rich man, sir. He is a relation of mine."

"Indeed! What then is your name?" asked the old man, eagerly.

"Herbert Barton—most people call me Bert Barton."

Bert was surprised at the keen scrutiny which he received from the traveller.

"Was your mother Mary Marlowe?" the latter asked.

"Yes, sir," returned Bert. "Did you know her, too?"

"I ought to; she is my niece, as the man you call Squire Marlowe is my nephew."

"Then you must be Uncle Jacob, who has lived so many years in California?" said Bert, excitedly.

"The same."

"Mother will be very glad to see you," added Bert, cordially.

"Thank you, my boy. Your kind welcome does me good. I hope your mother is well and happy."

"She is a widow," answered Bert soberly.

"When did your father die?"

"Two years ago."

"I hope he left your mother in comfortable circumstances."

Bert shook his head.

"He only left the small house we live in, and that is mortgaged for half its value."

"Then how do you live?"

"Mother covers base-balls for a firm in the next town, and I am working in the big shoe shop."

"Doesn't Squire Marlowe do anything for your mother?"

"He gave me a place in the shop—that is all."

"Yet he is rich," said the old man, thoughtfully.

"Yes, he lives in a fine house. You can see it down the street on the other side that large one with a broad piazza. He keeps two horses and two handsome carriages, and I am sure he must have plenty of money."

"I am glad to hear it. I have been a long time among strangers. It will be pleasant to come to anchor at the house of a rich relation. Where does your mother live?"

"In a small cottage at the other end of the street. Won't you come home with me, Uncle Jacob? Mother will be glad to see you."

"I must call at Albert Marlowe's first. What family has he?"

"He has one boy about my own age."

"I suppose you are very intimate—being cousins."

Bert laughed.

"He wouldn't thank you for calling us cousins," he answered. "Percy Marlowe is a boy who thinks a good deal of himself. He puts on no end of airs."

"Like his father before him. Is he a smart boy?"

"Do you mean in his studies?"

"Yes."

"I don't know what he could do if he tried, but he doesn't exert himself much. He says it isn't necessary for him, as his father is a rich man."

"How is it with you?"

"I only wish I had his chance," said Bert, warmly. "I am fond of study, but I am poor, and must work for a living."

"You have the right idea, and he has not," said the old man, sententiously.

At this moment a light buggy was driven swiftly by. Seated in it was a boy about the age of Bert, apparently, but of slighter figure. The horse, suddenly spying the old man, shied, and in a trice the buggy was upset, and the young dude went sprawling on the ground.

Bert grasped the situation, and sprang to the rescue. He seized the terrified horse, while the old man helped reverse the carriage, which fortunately had not met with any material damage. The same may be said of the young driver who, with mortified face, struggled to his feet, and surveyed ruefully the muddy stains on his handsome suit.

"I hope you're not hurt, Percy," said Bert, with solicitude.

"I've spoiled my suit, that's all," returned Percy, shortly. "What made you scare my horse?"

"I didn't," answered Bert, with spirit. "What right have you to charge me with such a thing?"

"Then if it wasn't you, it was that old tramp you were talking with," persisted Percy, sullenly.

"Hush, Percy!" said Bert, apprehensive lest the old man's feelings might be hurt. "You don't know who this gentleman is."

"I never met the gentleman before," rejoined Percy, with ironical deference.

"Then let me introduce him as your uncle, Jacob Marlowe, from California!"

Percy's face betrayed much more surprise than pleasure as he stammered, "Is that true?"

"Yes," answered the old man, smiling calmly; "I have the honor to be related to you, young gentleman."

"Does father know you are here?"

"No; I am going to call upon him."

Percy hardly knew what to think. He had heard his father speak of "Uncle Jacob" and indulge in the hope that he had accumulated a fortune in California. His shabby attire did not suggest wealth, certainly, but Percy was wise enough to know that appearances are not always to be relied upon. If this old man were wealthy, he would be worth propitiating. At any rate, till he knew to the contrary he had better be polite.

"Will you ride to the house with me, sir?" he asked, considerably to Bert's surprise.

"No, thank you. There might be another upset. Jump into the buggy, and I'll walk along after you."

Percy was relieved by this decision, for he had no wish to be seen with such a companion.

"All right, sir," he said. "I'll see you at the house."

Without a word of acknowledgment to Bert, Percy sprang into the buggy and drove rapidly away.

"Shall I go with you, Uncle Jacob?" asked Bert.

"No, thank you. I can find the way. Tell your mother that I will call on her very soon."

CHAPTER II.

UNCLE JACOB'S RECEPTION.

Percy found his father at home, and quickly acquainted him with the arrival in town of Uncle Jacob. His news was received with interest by Squire Marlowe.

"Why didn't you invite him to ride home with you?" asked the squire.

"I did; but he preferred to walk."

"What does he look like?"

"Like an old tramp," answered Percy.

Squire Marlowe was taken aback; for, without having received any definite intelligence from the long absent relative, he had somehow persuaded himself that Uncle Jacob had accumulated a fortune at the mines.

"Then he is shabbily dressed?" said the squire, inquiringly.

"I should say so. I say, father, I thought he was rich. You always said so."

"And I still think so."

"Then why don't he dress better?"

"He is rather eccentric, Percy; and these California miners don't care much for dress as a rule. I shouldn't wonder if he were worth half a million. You'd better treat him with attention, for we are his natural heirs, and there's no telling what may happen."

11

"Enough said, father. I don't care how he dresses if he's got the cash."

"I must go and speak to your mother, or she will treat him coldly. You know how particular she is."

Squire Marlowe managed to drop a hint to his wife, who was as worldly wise as himself, and saw the advantage of being attentive to a wealthy relative.

By this time Uncle Jacob had reached the door.

Squire Marlowe himself answered the bell, as a mark of special attention, and gazed with curiosity at the old man.

Jacob Marlowe, though coarsely clad, was scrupulously neat and clean, and there was a pleasant smile on his bronzed face as he recognized his nephew.

"I believe you are Uncle Jacob," said the squire, affably.

"Yes, Albert, and I'm mighty glad to see a relation. It's twenty-five years since I have seen one that was kin to me."

"Welcome to Lakeville, Uncle Jacob. I am glad to see you. Percy told me he met you on the road: Why didn't you ride up with him?"

"It wasn't worth gettin' in to ride a quarter of a mile. I am used to exercise in California."

12

"To be sure. Come into the house, and lay your valise down anywhere. Here is my wife, Mrs. Marlowe. Julia, this is Uncle Jacob, of whom you have heard me speak so often."

"I am glad to see you, Mr. Marlowe," said the lady, formally, just touching the old man's hand.

"Where are you going to put Uncle Jacob, Julia?" asked the squire.

"You may take him to the blue room," said Mrs. Marlowe, in a tone of hesitation.

This blue room was the handsomest chamber in the house, and was assigned to those whom it was considered politic to honor.

"Come right upstairs, Uncle Jacob. I'll show you your room myself," said Albert Marlowe.

"I ain't used to such luxury, Albert," said the old man, as he gazed around the comfortably appointed apartment. "You ought to see my cabin at Murphy's diggings. I reckon your servant would turn up her nose at it."

"I know you don't care much for style in California, uncle."

"No, we don't, though we've got as handsome houses in 'Frisco as anywhere else. Why, Albert, this room is fine enough for a prince."

13

"Then you can think yourself a prince," said the squire, genially. "Now, if you want to wash your face and hands, and arrange your toilet, you will have abundant time before dinner. Come down when you have finished."

Albert Marlowe returned to his wife.

"Mr. Marlowe," said she, "are you very sure that old man is rich?"

"I have no doubt of it, Julia."

"But what an old fright he is! Why, he looks dreadfully common, and his clothes are wretchedly

shabby."

"True, Julia; but you must remember miners are not very particular about their dress."

"I should think not, if he is a fair specimen. It makes me shudder to think of his occupying the blue-room. The hall bedroom on the third floor would have been good enough for him."

"Remember, my dear, he is in all probability very wealthy, and we are his heirs. I am not so well off as people imagine, and it will be a great thing for us to have a fortune of a quarter or half a million drop in by and by."

"There's something in that, to be sure," the lady admitted. "But can't you induce him to wear better clothes?"

"I will suggest it very soon. We mustn't be too precipitate, for fear he should take offense. You know these rich uncles expect to be treated with a good deal of consideration."

"Do you think he will expect to live with us? I shall really give up if I have got to have such a looking old tramp as a permanent member of the family."

"But, Julia, if he is really very rich, it is important for us to keep him strictly in view. You know there will be plenty of designing persons, who will be laying snares to entrap him, and get possession of his money."

"How old is he? Is he likely to live long?"

"I think he must be about sixty-five."

"And he looks alarmingly healthy," said Mrs. Marlowe, with a sigh.

"His father died at sixty-seven."

Mrs. Marlowe brightened up. "That is encouraging," she said, hopefully.

"I don't think he looks so *very* healthy," added the squire.

"He has a good color."

"His father was the picture of health till within a few weeks of his death."

"What did he die of?"

"Apoplexy."

"To be sure. The old man looks as if he might go off that way."

"In that case we should only need to be troubled with him a couple of years, and for that we should be richly repaid."

"They will seem like two eternities," groaned the lady, "and the chief burden will come on me."

"You shall be repaid, my dear! Only treat him well!"

"Will you give me half what money he leaves to us?"

"Say one-third, Julia. That will repay you richly for all your trouble."

"Very well! Let it be a third. But, Mr. Marlowe, don't let there be any mistake! I depend upon you to find out as soon as possible how much money the old man has."

"Trust to me, Julia. I am just as anxious to know as you are."

In twenty minutes Uncle Jacob came down stairs. He had done what he could to improve his appearance, or "slick himself up," as he expressed it, and wore a blue coat and vest, each provided with brass buttons. But from close packing in his valise both were creased up in such a manner that Squire Marlowe and his wife shuddered, and Percy's face wore an amused and supercilious smile.

"I declare I feel better to be dressed up," said the old man. "How long do you think I've had this coat and vest, Albert?"

"I really couldn't guess."

"I had it made for me ten years ago in Sacramento. It looks pretty well, but then I've only worn it for best."

Percy had to stuff his handkerchief in his mouth to repress a laugh. Uncle Jacob regarded him with a benevolent smile, and seemed himself to be amused about something.

"Now, Uncle Jacob, we'll sit down to dinner. You must be hungry."

"Well, I have got a fairish appetite. What a nice eatin' room you've got, Albert. I ain't used to such style."

"I presume not," said Mrs. Marlowe, dryly.

CHAPTER III.

A VISIT TO THE FACTORY.

During dinner the old man chatted away in the frankest manner, but not a word did he let drop as to his worldly circumstances. He appeared to enjoy his dinner, and showed himself entirely at his ease.

17

"I'm glad to see you so well fixed, Albert," he said. "You've got a fine home."

"It will do very well," returned the squire, modestly.

"I suppose he never was in such a good house before," thought Mrs. Marlowe.

"By the way, just before I fell in with you here," went on Jacob, "I ran across Mary's boy."

"Herbert Barton?" suggested the squire, with a slight frown.

"Yes; he said that was his name."

"They live in the village," said his nephew, shortly.

"They're poor, ain't they?"

"Yes; Barton was not a forehanded man. He didn't know how to accumulate money."

"I suppose he left very little to his widow."

"Very little. However, I have given the boy a place in my factory, and I believe his mother earns a trifle by covering base-balls. They don't want for anything—that is, anything in reason.

"Bert Barton seems a likely boy."

"Oh, he's as good as the average of boys in his position."

"I suppose he and Percy are quite intimate, being cousins."

"Indeed we are not!" returned Percy, tossing his head. "His position is very different from mine."

18

Uncle Jacob surveyed Percy in innocent wonder.

"Still, he's kin to you," he observed.

"That doesn't always count," said Percy. "He has his friends, and I have mine. I don't believe in mixing classes."

"I expect things *have* changed since I was a boy," said Uncle Jacob, mildly. "Then, all the boys were friendly and sociable, no matter whether they were rich or poor."

"I agree with Percy," broke in Mrs. Marlowe, stiffly. "His position in life will be very different from that of the boy you refer to. Any early intimacy, even if we encouraged it, could not well be kept up in after-life."

"Perhaps you are right," said the old man. "I've been away so long at the mines that I haven't kept up with the age or the fashions."

Percy smiled, as his glance rested on his uncle's creased suit, and he felt quite ready to agree with what he said.

"I was thinkin' how pleasant it would be if you would invite Mary and her boy to tea—we are all related, you know. We could talk over old times and scenes, and have a real social time."

19

Mrs. Marlowe seemed horror-struck at the suggestion.

"I don't think it would be convenient," she said, coldly.

"It would be better for you to see Mrs. Barton at her own house," put in the squire, hastily.

"Well, perhaps it would."

"By the way, Uncle Jacob, I hope your experiences of California are pleasant," insinuated Squire Marlowe.

"They're mixed, Albert. I've had my ups and downs."

"I have heard of large fortunes being made there," pursued the squire. "I suppose there's some truth in what we hear?"

"To be sure! Why, ten years from the time I went to the mines I had a hundred thousand dollars deposited to my credit in a Sacramento bank."

Squire Marlowe's eyes sparkled with pleasure. It was just what he had been hoping to find out.

So Uncle Jacob was rich, after all! The squire's manner became even more gracious, and he pressed upon his relative another plate of ice cream.

"No, thank you, Albert," said the old man. "I'm used to plain livin'. It isn't often I sit down to a meal like this. Do you know, there's nothing suits me better than a dinner of corned beef and cabbage."

20

"How vulgar the old man is!" thought Mrs. Marlowe. "He may have money, but his tastes are *very* common."

"We never have corned beef and cabbage here," she said, with a slight shudder.

"Very likely Bert Barton's mother has it very often," suggested Percy.

"My dear," said the squire, urbanely, "if Uncle Jacob really enjoys those dishes so much, you might provide them for his special use."

"I will think of it," replied Mrs. Marlowe, shortly.

Now that Uncle Jacob had hinted at the possession of wealth, Squire Marlowe beheld him as one transfigured. He was no longer a common, shabby old man, but a worthy old gentleman of eccentric ideas in the matter of wardrobe and manners.

"I wonder if Uncle Jacob wouldn't advance me twenty-five thousand dollars," was the thought that was passing through his mind as he gazed genially at his countrified guest. "It would help me amazingly in my business, and enable me to do double as much. I will mention it to him in good time."

"I've a great mind to come upon the old man for a handsome birthday present," thought Percy. "Fifty dollars wouldn't be much for him to give. I shan't get more than a fiver from the governor."

21

"Uncle Jacob," said the squire, as they rose from the table, "suppose you walk over to the factory with me; I should like you to see it."

"Nothing would please me better," said Jacob Marlowe, briskly.

"Will you come along, Percy?" asked his father.

"No, papa," answered Percy, with a grimace. "You know I don't like the smell of leather."

"I ought not to dislike it," said the squire, with a smile, "for it gives me a very handsome income."

"Oh, it's different with you," returned Percy. "Just give me the profits of the factory and I'll go there every day."

"He's a sharp one!" said the squire, with a smile.

"I am afraid he is too sharp to suit me," thought Uncle Jacob. "It seems to me the boy's mind runs upon money, and his own interests."

The shoe factory was a large building of two stories, and within it was a hive of industry.

As the squire led the way he explained the various workings to the old man, who was really curious and interested. It was on a larger scale than was common at the time he left for California, and the use of machinery had to a greater extent supplemented and superseded the work of the hands.

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Finally they came to a room where several boys were pegging shoes, for this work was still done in the old-fashioned way. Uncle Jacob's eyes lighted up when in one of them he recognized Bert Barton.

He hurried forward, and put his hand on Bert's shoulder.

"So this is your business," he said.

"Yes," answered Bert, with a smile.

"Do you find it hard work?"

"Oh, no! That is, I am used to it. It used to tire me at first."

"Did you tell your mother I was in town?"

"Yes," answered Bert, "and she says she hopes you will call."

"To be sure I will. I may call this evening."

"He's a likely boy, Albert," said Uncle Jacob, rejoining the squire, who stood aloof with a look of annoyance on his face.

"He works very well, I believe," was the cold reply. "Shall we move on?"

"Albert doesn't seem to feel much interest in his poor relations," thought Uncle Jacob. "Well, it's human nature, I suppose."

"You seem to be doing a large business, Albert," he said aloud.

"Yes; but with a little more capital I could very much increase it," rejoined the squire. "With twenty-five thousand dollars now, I would enlarge the factory to double its present size, and do twice the business I am now doing."

"I am afraid you want to get rich too fast, Albert."

"It would gratify my spirit of enterprise, Uncle Jacob. I feel that I have the ability to make a big business success."

"Very likely, Albert. I've seen enough to convince me of that."

"He'll lend me the money if I work things right," Squire Marlowe said to himself. "He'll be like wax in my hands."

CHAPTER IV.

UNCLE JACOB'S STARTLING REVELATION.

"Uncle Jacob was at the factory this afternoon," said Bert to his mother, when he went home. "He says he may call here this evening." 23

"I hope he will. He was my poor mother's favorite brother—always kind and good-hearted. How is he looking, Bert?" 24

"He seems in good health for an old man. His face is browned up, as if he had been out in the open air a good deal."

"I hope he has. It is twenty-five years since he went to California. Does he look as if he had prospered?"

"I am afraid he is poor, mother, for although his clothing is neat and clean, it is plain and the cloth is faded?"

"I am sorry to hear that, but I will welcome him none the less warmly. It will indeed seem like old times to have Uncle Jacob in my house."

Meanwhile Bert had been bringing in wood and doing chores for his mother.

"Did Uncle Jacob tell you how long he intended to stay in Lakeville?"

"No, mother; I only had a short time to talk with him when Percy rode by, and then he started to call on the squire. Do you know, mother, I am rather surprised that he should have been so well received, poor as he looks."

"I think better of Albert for it. It shows that he is not so worldly as I feared. Certainly Uncle Jacob ought to be well received by Albert Marlowe, for when Albert's father was in trouble Jacob lent him five hundred dollars—all in money he had—and I feel sure the money has not been repaid to him to this day." 25

"I don't think Percy will be very cordial. You know what high notions he has."

"He gets them principally from his mother, who is extremely aristocratic in her ideas."

"Was she of a high family?"

Mrs. Barton smiled.

"Her father was a fisherman," she replied, "and when a girl she used to run barefoot on the sand. Later on she sewed straw for a living. She is no worse for that, certainly, but it doesn't give her any claims to aristocracy."

"Do you think Percy knows about his mother's early life?"

"I presume she has kept it secret from him."

"I shall think of it when Percy gets into one of his patronizing moods."

"Remember, Bert, that neither he nor his mother is any the worse for her humble birth."

"I understand that, I hope, mother, just as I don't feel ashamed of our being poor."

"As long as we can make an honorable living, we have no right to complain." 26

"That reminds me, mother, that I heard bad news at the shop to-day."

"What is that?"

"That the shop is likely to be shut down all next month."

"Why is that?" asked Mrs. Barton, an anxious look coming over her face.

"I believe the market is over-supplied with shoes, and it is thought best to suspend temporarily. It'll be rather hard on me."

"Yes, it will," said his mother, gravely. "I earn so little at sewing balls."

"Don't you think I could get a job at that, mother?"

"No, you could not do the work satisfactorily. Besides there are hands enough for all that is required. Well, we must hope for the best."

"I think I can manage to earn something, mother," said Bert, hopefully. "I'll try hard, anyway."

"We won't worry till the time comes, Bert."

An hour later there was a knock at the door. Mrs. Barton answered it in person.

"Why, Uncle Jacob, is it really you?" she exclaimed, joyfully.

"I'm delighted to see you, Mary," said the old man, his face lighting up. "I've been waiting twenty-five years for this meeting." 27

"Come right in, Uncle Jacob. I can hardly believe it is really you. Now tell me why you have not written these many years."

"I've no good excuse, Mary, but perhaps I shall think of one bimeby. Now tell me how you are getting along?"

"I am not rich, as you can see, Uncle Jacob; but as long as Bert and I have our health, and work to do, I shall be contented."

"Do you know, Mary," said Jacob Marlowe, looking about the plain little sitting-room, "I like your house better than Albert's?"

"I don't think you will find many to agree with you."

"Perhaps not, but this seems like home, and that doesn't."

"Albert's house is finely furnished."

"True, and he lives in fine style; but I don't think I should ever be contented to live with him."

"Has he invited you?"

"Yes," answered Jacob; "but," he added, with a smile, "I don't think the invitation will hold good after to-morrow."

"Why not?"

"The fact is, Albert and the whole family think I am rich." 28

"I shouldn't think they would judge that from your appearance."

"Oh, they think I am eccentric and plain in my tastes, and that I've got my pile safe somewhere."

"I wish you had, Uncle Jacob."

"Happiness doesn't depend on money, Mary, as you realize in your own case. I am an old man, to be sure, but I am well and strong, and able to work for a living."

"But at your age, Uncle Jacob, it would be comfortable to feel that you could rest."

"Come, Mary, don't make me out a patriarch. I'm only sixty-five, and I can tackle a pretty good day's work yet."

"You might be sick, Uncle Jacob."

"Don't let us imagine unpleasant things, Mary. I don't mean to be sick."

"And at any rate you can come and stay with us. You will always find a home here, though an humble one."

"Do you really mean that, Mary?" said Uncle Jacob, earnestly. "Would you really be willing to take in the old man, and provide for his comforts?"

"Of course I would, Uncle Jacob," answered Mrs. Barton, heartily. "I hope you didn't think so poorly of me as to doubt it."

"No, I was sure you hadn't changed so much since you were a girl. Well, Mary, I may some time remind you of your promise." 29

"You won't need to remind me, Uncle Jacob. I was afraid Albert would take you wholly away from us."

"So he might if I were as rich as he thinks I am; but now let us talk about other things. Remember, I haven't heard any family news for many years, and I have a great many questions to

ask."

The rest of the evening was spent in such conversation as Uncle Jacob suggested, and when he had occasion to look at his watch, he started in surprise.

"Bless my soul!" he exclaimed. "It is nearly ten o'clock. I ought to be getting back to Albert's."

"Then Bert shall accompany you as far as the house. It will be lonely to go alone."

Uncle Jacob reached Squire Marlowe's house as the church clock struck ten, and he bade Bert good-night.

Shortly after his return, Uncle Jacob was shown to his room, and being fatigued he soon fell asleep, not waking till seven in the morning.

After breakfast, Squire Marlowe said graciously: "Have you any plans, Uncle Jacob, in which I can assist you? If you would like to consult me about any investments, I can perhaps be of service to you."

30

"Now for it!" thought the old man.

"I was thinkin', Albert," he said, "of askin' your advice. I'm gettin' on in years, and can't work as well as I could once. Do you think it would pay me to open here in Lakeville a cigar and candy store, and——"

"What!" exclaimed Squire Marlowe, with an expression of horror and disgust on his face.

"You see I've got about five hundred dollars, which I think would be enough to stock it comfortably and——"

"But I thought you were a rich man," gasped Squire Marlowe. "Didn't you tell me you had a hundred thousand dollars in a Sacramento bank?"

"Yes, many years ago; but I bought mining stocks, and after a while they went down to nothing, and——"

"Then you are a pauper!" said the squire, harshly.

"No. I have five hundred dollars, and I hope with that to get started, so as to earn an honest living."

Words cannot describe the scorn and disgust that appeared on the faces of Percy and his mother at the old man's confession of poverty.

"Albert," said the wife, "may I speak with you outside a moment?"

"Certainly, my dear."

"Get rid of the old man as soon as you can!" she said, imperiously. "He doesn't eat another meal in my house!"

"Be easy, my dear," said the squire. "I'll manage it."

CHAPTER V.

UNCLE JACOB RECEIVES HIS WALKING PAPERS.

Squire Marlowe returned to the breakfast room, wearing rather an embarrassed expression. Percy had followed his mother, and the old man found himself for a short time alone. There was a twinkle of amusement in his eyes, which vanished on the reappearance of his nephew.

"I am sorry to have left you alone, Uncle Jacob," said the squire, civilly.

"Oh, don't treat me with any ceremony, Albert. Being as we are such near relations, we ought to be free and easy like."

32

"I am glad to hear you say so, for I shall be obliged to treat you unceremoniously."

"Eh?" said Uncle Jacob, inquiringly.

"I regret to say that my wife, who is of a *very* delicate organization, is taken suddenly ill, and I am afraid I shall have to ask you to cut your visit short, and come again some other time."

"I'm surprised to hear that, Albert. I thought Mrs. Marlowe looked in excellent health."

"You can't always tell by outward appearances. She is subject to severe headaches, and in that condition can't bear the least noise or excitement. That is why I can't invite you to stay any longer."

"I understand," said Uncle Jacob, with—it might have been—a little significance in his tone.

"I have no doubt," went on the squire, "that Mrs. Barton will be glad to have you pay her a short visit. I will get Percy to drive you down there."

"Thank you," answered the old man, dryly, "but it's only a little way, and I don't mind walking."

"Just as you prefer," said the squire, relieved by Uncle Jacob's declination of his offer, for he knew that Percy would not enjoy the trip. 33

"I'll get ready to go at once, Albert. Oh, about my plan of opening a cigar store in Lakeville?"

"I cannot advise you to do it," rejoined the squire, hastily. "You wouldn't make enough to pay your rent, or not much more."

"Don't the men in your factory smoke? There's a good many of them. If I could get their trade —"

"They smoke pipes for the most part," said the squire, hurriedly. "They'd find cigars too expensive."

"I meant to combine candy with cigars. That would be a help."

"They keep candy at the grocery store, Uncle Jacob."

"I see there isn't much show for me. Now if I only understood your business, you could give me something to do in the factory, Albert."

"But you don't, and, in fact, Uncle Jacob, it's too hard work for a man of your age."

"Then what would you advise me to do, Albert?" asked the old man, earnestly.

Squire Marlowe assumed a thoughtful look. In fact, he was puzzled to decide how best to get rid of the troublesome old man. To have him remain in Lakeville was not to be thought of. He would gladly have got rid of Mrs. Barton and her son, whose relationship to his family was unfortunately known, but there seemed to be no way clear to that without the expenditure of money. To have Uncle Jacob for a neighbor, in addition, would be a source of mortification, not only to himself, but even more to his wife and Percy, whose aristocratic ideas he well knew. 34

"I think you told me you had five hundred dollars," he said, after a pause.

"About that."

"Then I really think it would be the best thing you could do to go back to California, where you are known, and where you can doubtless obtain some humble employment which will supply your moderate wants. It won't cost you much for dress——"

"No, Albert; this coat and vest will do me for best five years longer."

"Just so! That is fortunate. So you see you've only got your board to pay."

"I might get sick," suggested Uncle Jacob, doubtfully.

"You look pretty healthy. Besides, you'll have part of your five hundred dollars left, you know."

"That's so! What a good calculator you are, Albert! Besides, if things came to the worst, there's that five hundred dollars I lent your father twenty-seven years ago. No doubt you'd pay me back, and——" 35

"I don't know what you refer to," said Squire Marlowe, coldly.

"Surely you haven't forgot the time when your father was so driven for money, when you were a lad of fifteen, and I let him have all I had except about fifty dollars that I kept for a rainy day."

"This is news to me, Uncle Jacob," said the squire, with a chilling frown. "You must excuse me for saying that I think you labor under a delusion."

Uncle Jacob surveyed his neighbor intently, with a gaze which disconcerted him in spite of his assurance.

"Fortunately, I am able to prove what I say," he rejoined, after a slight pause.

He drew from his pocket a wallet which bore the signs of long wear, and, opening it, deliberately drew out a folded sheet of note paper, grown yellow with age and brittle with much handling. Then, adjusting his spectacles, he added: "Here's something I'd like to read to you, Albert. It's written by your father: 36

MY DEAR JACOB:

I cannot tell you how grateful I am to you for lending me the five hundred dollars I so urgently need. I know it is very nearly, if not quite, all you possess in the world, and that you can ill spare it. It will save me from failure, and sometime I hope to repay it to you. If I cannot, I will ask my son Albert to do so when he is able. I don't want you to lose by your kindness to me.

Your affectionate brother,

"You can see the signature, Albert. You know your father's handwriting, don't you?"

Squire Marlowe reluctantly took the paper and glanced at it.

"It may be my father's writing," he said.

"May be!" repeated the old man, indignantly. "What do you mean by that?"

"I dare say it is. In fact, I remember his mentioning the matter to me before he died."

"What did he say?"

"That it was quite a favor to him, the loan, but that he repaid it within three years from the time he received it."

"What!" exclaimed Uncle Jacob, pushing his spectacles up, in his amazement. "Your father said that?"

37

"Yes, he did," answered Albert Marlowe, with unabashed effrontery.

"That he paid back the five hundred dollars I lent him?"

"That's what I said," repeated the squire, impatiently.

"Then it's a lie—not of my brother's, but of—somebody's. That money remains unpaid to this day."

Squire Marlowe shrugged his shoulders. "No doubt you think so," he said, "but you are growing old, and old people are forgetful. That is the most charitable view to take of your statement."

"I wouldn't have believed this, Albert," said the old man, sorrowfully. "And you a rich man, too! I don't mind the money. I can get along without it. But to be told that I am claiming what has already been repaid!"

"I don't lay it up against you," went on the squire, smoothly. "I've no doubt you have forgotten the payment of the debt, and——"

"I don't forget so easily, though I am sixty-five. Don't fear that I shall ask for it again—indeed, I haven't asked for it at all—but I shall not forget how you have treated my claim. Of course it amounts to nothing in law—it's outlawed long ago—but I only wish my poor brother were alive to disprove your words."

38

Even Albert Marlowe was shamed by the old man's sorrowful dignity.

"We can't agree about that, Uncle Jacob," he said; "but if ever you get very hard up, let me know, and I'll see if I can't help you—in a small way."

"You are very kind," answered the old man, "but I don't think that time will come. As you say, my wants are few, and I am still able to work. I'll go up to my room and get my valise, and then I'll go over to Mary Barton's."

"Thank Heaven! I've got rid of him," mused the squire, as from the doorway he saw Uncle Jacob walking slowly down the street. "I was afraid he'd mention that money he lent father. With twenty-seven years' interest it would amount to a good deal of money—more than I could well spare. I don't think I shall hear from it again."

"Has he gone, Albert?" asked Mrs. Marlowe, returning to the breakfast-room.

"Yes; I told him you were indisposed, and couldn't stand excitement."

"No matter what you told him, as long as we are rid of him."

39

CHAPTER VI

SQUIRE MARLOWE IS SURPRISED.

Mrs. Barton was washing the breakfast dishes, and was alone, Bert having gone to his daily work at the shoe shop, when the outer door opened and Uncle Jacob entered the cottage, valise in hand.

"I've accepted your offer sooner than you expected, Mary," he said.

"You are heartily welcome, Uncle Jacob," responded his niece, with evident sincerity. "If you can put up with our poor accommodations after being entertained in Albert's luxurious home——"

"Don't trouble yourself about that, Mary," interrupted the old man. "Albert doesn't want me. He civilly asked me to find another stopping place."

"You don't mean it!" exclaimed Mrs. Barton indignantly.

"You see," explained Uncle Jacob, with a quiet smile, "his wife was taken suddenly indisposed—after she found I wasn't as rich as she expected."

"I hope you won't take it too much to heart, Uncle Jacob," observed Mary Barton, in a tone of solicitude.

40

Uncle Jacob's amused laugh reassured her.

"It is just what I expected, Mary," he said, "and I shan't grieve over it much. You ought to have seen how they all looked when I asked Albert's advice about opening a small cigar and candy store in the village. You can imagine what a mortification it would be to my high-toned nephew to have my sign out,

JACOB MARLOWE,

Candy and Cigars.

over a small seven by nine store, when our relationship was known."

"I hope that won't prevent your carrying out the plan, Uncle Jacob. If your gains are small, you can make your home with us and pay what you can afford."

"Thank you, Mary, you are a true friend, and I shan't forget your kind offer. But I never had the slightest idea of opening such a store. I only mentioned it to test Albert."

"But you will have to do something, Uncle Jacob," said Mary Barton, perplexed; "and that would be as easy as anything. Bert could go in the evening and help you if you found it too confining."

"I have something else in view in the city," returned Jacob. "I don't need to earn much you know. I don't set up to be a dude," he added, with a comical glance at his rustic attire, "and I don't mean to board at the Fifth Avenue Hotel."

41

"I am sorry you can't stay in Lakeville," said Mrs. Barton regretfully.

"I will stay here a week, Mary, to get acquainted with you and your boy. I have taken a fancy to him. He is a fine, manly youth, worth a dozen of such fellows as Percy Marlowe."

"Indeed, he is a good boy," said his mother proudly. "I don't see what I could do without him."

"So, Mary, if you'll show me where you are going to accommodate me, I'll go up and take possession."

"Will you mind my putting you in with Bert? I have but two chambers."

"Not a bit. It will be all the better. If I were going to stay here permanently I would build an extension to the house for you."

"But that would be expensive, Uncle Jacob."

"So it would. I'm always forgetting that I am not a rich man. You see I was rich once. As I told Albert, I have seen the time when I had a hundred thousand dollars to my credit in a bank of Sacramento."

"Oh, Uncle Jacob! Why didn't you invest it in government bonds, and you would have been independent for life?"

42

"Because I was not so prudent as my niece, I suppose. However, it's no use crying over spilt milk, and I've got a matter of five hundred dollars left."

"But that won't last long, Uncle Jacob."

"Not unless I work. But I'm pretty rugged yet, and I guess I can manage to scrape along."

When Bert came home to dinner, he was surprised and pleased to find Uncle Jacob installed and evidently feeling quite at home.

"I wish I could stay at home this afternoon to keep you company," he said; "but I have only an hour for dinner."

"Business first, my boy!" said the old man. "For pleasure we'll wait till this evening. Is there a livery stable in the village?"

"Yes, sir; Houghton's."

"Then after supper we'll hire a buggy, and you and your mother and I will take a ride."

"But, Uncle Jacob, you forget that it will cost a dollar, or perhaps two."

"No, I don't, Mary; but I'm having a vacation, and I want to enjoy myself a little before pitching into hard work again. I am sure you will be the better for a ride."

"Yes, I shall. I haven't had one for months, and it will be a real treat."

43

"Then we will cast prudence to the winds for once, and have a good time. I suppose you can

drive, Bert."

"Oh yes, sir; I like it. I worked for a few weeks in the grocery store, and drove every day. I like a horse."

"So do I; but I don't care much about handling the reins myself. You'll promise not to upset the carriage, as Percy did the other day?"

"Not unless we meet two tramps, as he did," said Bert, laughing.

"I declare, Mary, there is your boy calling his old uncle a tramp."

"And myself, too, uncle."

"That makes it seem a little better. Are you going back to the shop?"

"Yes, uncle; my time is up."

"I'll walk along with you."

As the two walked together, Uncle Jacob took a five dollar bill from his pocket, and handed it to Bert.

"There, Bert," he said, "I want you to give that to your mother toward buying groceries and meat this week, as her expenses will be increased by my being in the house."

"But, Uncle Jacob, we don't want you to pay board."

"I am able to do it, and prefer it, Bert. So say no more about it."

In truth, this donation was a relief to Bert and his mother, for they were compelled to economize closely, and yet wanted to live well while Uncle Jacob was visiting them.

About seven o'clock Bert drove round to the house in a handsome top buggy, drawn by a spirited black horse, the best in Houghton's stable.

"I'll let you have it, Bert," said Mr. Houghton, "because I know you're a careful driver. There are few persons I would trust with Prince."

"You may depend on me, Mr. Houghton."

"I know I can, Bert;" and with a few directions the stable keeper resigned the turnout to Bert.

"You have got a stylish rig, Bert," said Uncle Jacob. "I think we shall have to drive by Albert Marlowe's."

"Just what I would like," remarked Bert, with a smile.

Bert had his share of human nature, and rather enjoyed being seen by his aristocratic relatives in such a stylish turnout.

Supper was over at Squire Marlowe's and the family were sitting on the piazza, the evening being warm, when Percy espied the buggy approaching.

"I wonder who's driving Houghton's best team?" he said.

"By gracious, if it isn't Bert Barton and his mother and Uncle Jacob!" he exclaimed, a minute later.

The squire adjusted his eyeglasses, and looked at the carriage now nearly opposite.

"You are right, Percy," he said.

"What can it mean, Albert?" asked his wife, in bewilderment, as Uncle Jacob bowed from the buggy.

"It means that a fool and his money are soon parted," answered the squire.

"I thought your uncle was poor."

"So he is, and he will soon be poorer from all appearances. Uncle Jacob never was a good financial manager. He was always too liberal, or he wouldn't be as poor as he is now. Why with five hundred dollars he probably feels as rich as a nabob."

"No doubt Bert Barton will help him spend it," said Percy. "It won't last long at any rate, if he drives out every evening."

"When his money is all gone he will probably throw himself on you for support, father."

"I wash my hands of him," said Squire Marlowe, in a hard tone. "If he squanders his money, he must take the consequences."

"I am glad to hear you speak in that way, Albert," commented his wife, approvingly.

Uncle Jacob enjoyed his drive and paid two dollars at the stable without letting the thought of his extravagance worry him.

"I hope you enjoyed it, Mary," he said.

"I don't know when I have enjoyed myself so much, Uncle Jacob."

"Nor I," put in Bert.

"Then I think the money well spent. It makes me feel young again, Mary. I think I made a mistake in staying away so long."

CHAPTER VII.

UNCLE JACOB LEAVES LAKEVILLE.

46

On his way home to dinner the next day, Bert fell in with Percy Marlowe.

"I saw you out driving last evening," remarked Percy.

"Yes," answered Bert composedly.

"You had Houghton's best team?"

"Yes."

"How much did you have to pay?"

"I believe Uncle Jacob paid two dollars."

"He must be crazy to pay two dollars for a ride. Why, he's almost a pauper."

47

"I think that is *his* business, Percy. As to being a pauper, I don't believe he will ever be that."

"Don't be too sure of it. Why, he told father he had only five hundred dollars. How long do you think that's going to last him if he throws away his money on carriage rides?"

"It's only for once, and, as I said, that isn't our business."

"I don't know about that, either. When he has spent all his money he'll be coming upon father to support him."

"I don't believe he will," said Bert, to whom it was disagreeable to hear the kind old man spoken of slightingly.

"You see if he doesn't. But it won't do any good. Father says as he makes his bed he must lie on it. And I say, Bert Barton, it isn't very creditable to you and your mother to help the old man squander his money."

"I don't thank you for your advice, Percy Marlowe," retorted Bert, with spirit. "If ever Uncle Jacob does come to want, I'll work for him, and help him all I can."

"You! why you're as poor as poverty itself!" exclaimed Percy, with a mocking laugh.

"Good morning!" said Bert shortly, provoked, but not caring to prolong the discussion.

48

When he reached home, he gave Uncle Jacob an account of his conversation with Percy.

The old man laughed.

"So Albert says that as I make my bed I must lie upon it?" he repeated.

"Yes, sir; but I hope you won't be troubled at that. You will always be welcome here."

Uncle Jacob's eyes grew moist, and he regarded Bert with affection.

"You are a good boy and a true friend, Bert," he said, "and I shall not forget it."

"I don't know but Percy was right, Uncle Jacob. It does seem extravagant paying such a price for a ride."

"It's only for once in a way, Bert. You mustn't grudge the old man a little enjoyment in his vacation. I shall be going to work next week."

"You will? Where?" asked Bert eagerly.

"In New York. An old California friend of mine, who is in charge of a mine that has been put on the New York market, will give me a clerkship and a small salary which will support me in comfort. So you see I am all right."

"I am very glad to hear it, Uncle Jacob," said Bert joyfully. "I was afraid you wouldn't find anything to do, and would have to spend all your money on living."

49

"Come, Bert, that isn't much of a compliment to my ability. If I *am* sixty-five, I am able to earn a living yet, and though twelve dollars a week isn't much——"

"If I could earn twelve dollars a week I should feel rich, Uncle Jacob."

"True, but you are only fifteen."

"Almost sixteen."

"I forgot that," said Uncle Jacob, smiling. "Well, even at sixteen, a boy can hardly expect to earn as much as twelve dollars a week. By the way, how much does Albert pay you?"

"Four dollars a week."

"Is that about the usual price for boys employed as you are?"

"Most shoe bosses pay more. The squire pays low wages all round."

"Then why don't the men go elsewhere?"

"Because they live here, and it is better to work cheaper here than to move. Some have gone away."

"Well, keep up your courage, Bert, and the time will come when you will be earning twelve dollars a week like your rich old uncle. If the office were only in Lakeville, so that I could board with your mother——"

"I wish it was, Uncle Jacob."

"Well, Mary, I shan't have to open a cigar store in Lakeville," remarked Uncle Jacob, as his niece entered the room.

Mrs. Barton looked an inquiry, and Bert exclaimed: "Uncle Jacob has secured a clerkship in New York at twelve dollars a week."

"I am *really* glad!" said Mrs. Barton, with beaming face.

"Come, Mary, did you too think, like Bert here, that I was headed for the poorhouse?"

"I felt a little anxious for you, Uncle Jacob, I admit."

"You see that your fears were idle."

"Will you have to work very hard?" asked Mrs. Barton.

"No; my employer is an intimate friend."

"When do you commence work?"

"Next Monday, so that I must leave you on Saturday."

"Bert and I will both miss you; but as it is for your good, we won't complain. Now, Uncle Jacob, I hope you won't take it amiss if I urge you not to be too free with your money, but to try to save up some of your salary so that you can add to your little fund."

"Thank you, Mary. I suppose you are afraid I will be driving fast horses in Central Park, eh?"

"I am more afraid you will be too generous with your money, and give away more than you can afford."

"Well thought of, Mary! So far from that, I am going to turn miser and hoard up every cent I can."

"I don't think there is much danger of that."

"Oh, you have no idea how mean I can be if I try. However, as I shall be acting according to your advice, you can't find fault with me."

"I see you don't mean to follow my advice, Uncle Jacob."

"Still I am glad you gave it. It shows that you feel a real interest in your shabby old uncle. Some time—I can't promise how soon—I shall invite you and Bert to come and spend the day in New York. I will get a day off from the office, and we'll have a nice excursion somewhere."

On Friday, Uncle Jacob called on Squire Marlowe; not at the house, however, but at the factory.

"I've come to bid you good-by, Albert," he said.

"Are you going back to California?" asked the Squire.

"No, I am going to New York."

"It is expensive living in New York."

"I have obtained a situation there."

"Ah, indeed! That is different. What sort of a position?"

"I shall be a clerk in a mining office."

"What pay will you get?"

"Twelve dollars a week."

"Very fair! I congratulate you. You ought to live on that and save money besides."

"That's what Mary Barton says."

"Then she gives you very sensible advice. It will be a great deal better than opening a cigar store in Lakeville."

"I wouldn't do that after what you said on the subject," returned Uncle Jacob in a deferential tone, though there was a twinkle in his eye.

"I am glad you recognize the fact that I counseled you for your good," said the Squire pompously. "As an experienced business man, my judgment is worth something, I apprehend."

"Quite so, Albert; quite so! Is your wife feeling better?"

(Uncle Jacob had seen Mrs. Marlowe riding out the day before, apparently in full health.)

"She is somewhat improved, but still delicate," said Squire Marlowe guardedly. "I am sorry I cannot invite you to dine with us again before you go to the city."

"I should hardly be able to do so, as I go away to-morrow."

"Just so! I will say good-by for you, and that will do just as well."

"That's a load off my mind!" soliloquized the squire, after Uncle Jacob had left him. "I was afraid the old man would squander all his money, and then come upon me for that old loan. I hope he'll keep away from Lakeville in the future."

The next day Uncle Jacob left town. As he quitted the house, he put a sealed envelope into Mary Barton's hand.

"If you are ever in trouble, and cannot communicate with me," he said, "open this envelope. Take good care of it!"

"I will, Uncle Jacob. I will put it away in my trunk."

"Well, good-by, Mary, and God bless you!"

A minute later and Uncle Jacob was gone. Mrs. Barton went back to covering balls and Bert to his place in the shoe shop. Their united earnings enabled them to live comfortably, and they were content, though they had nothing to spare. But trouble was close at hand, though they did not suspect it.

What that trouble was will be disclosed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER VIII.

DISCHARGED.

Three days later, while on his way to the factory, Bert overtook Luke Crandall, who was employed like himself in pegging shoes.

"Have you heard the news, Bert?" asked his friend.

"No; what is it?"

"All the peggers are to be discharged; you and I, and the two other boys."

"Is that true?" asked Bert, stopping short, and surveying his friend with a look of dismay.

"Yes; I wish it wasn't."

"What is the reason?"

"The squire has bought a pegging machine, and he has hired a man from out of town to run it. So he will have no need of us."

"How soon is he going to put it in?" asked Bert, with a sinking heart.

"Next Monday. At the end of this week we shall be discharged."

"What are you going to do?" Bert inquired, after a pause.

"I shall be all right. I have an uncle who keeps a store in Bradford, and I am going there to tend in the store, and shall board in the family. What shall you do?"

"I don't know," answered Bert soberly. "This has come on me so suddenly, that I haven't had time to think."

"There's precious little chance for a boy in Lakeville, unless he goes to work on a farm."

"I don't even know if there is a chance to do that. All the farmers are supplied with help. Besides, they generally pay a boy in his board and clothes, and I need money to help support my mother."

"Isn't old Marlowe your uncle?"

"No, but he is my mother's cousin."

"Then he ought to do something for you out of relationship."

"I don't expect it," answered Bert. "He appears to feel very little interest in us."

They had reached the factory, and entering, were soon at work. Before noon the bad news was confirmed, and the boys were informed that their services would not be required after Saturday night.

At dinner Bert informed his mother, and she too was dismayed. It was a calamity she had never dreamed of. She supposed Bert was sure of continued employment in pegging till he was old enough to be employed in some other part of the business.

"I don't see what we shall do, Bert," she said. "There is no other shop in Lakeville. If there were, you might get a chance there."

"There is no business of any kind here outside of Marlowe's shop."

"True. What are the other boys going to do?"

"Luke Crandall is going into his uncle's shop at Bradford, and the other two boys talk of leaving town."

"I do think Albert Marlowe might find some place for you. We are near relations, and he knows how I depend on your earnings."

"He isn't a man to consider that, mother."

Mrs. Barton was silent, but she determined to make an application to her cousin in Bert's behalf. Accordingly, in the evening, she said to him. "Bert, I am going out to make a call. I would like to have you look after the house while I am gone."

"Yes, mother."

Mrs. Barton did not venture to let Bert know of her intention, for he would have done his best to prevent her applying to the squire for a special favor. Perhaps he was too proud, but it was an honorable pride. Besides, he knew very well that the appeal was likely to prove ineffectual.

With a faltering step Mrs. Barton advanced and rang the bell of her cousin's handsome house. It was a call from which she shrank, but she was spurred by necessity.

"Is Mr. Marlowe in?" she inquired.

"I will see, ma'am."

Squire Marlowe was at home, and she was ushered into his presence.

Albert Marlowe was not, on the whole, surprised to see his cousin. He guessed the errand that brought her, and he frowned slightly as she entered the room.

"Good evening," he said, in a distant tone. "I hope you are well."

"Well in health, but anxious in mind, Albert," she said. "Bert tells me that he has been discharged from the shop."

"Yes, but he is not the only one. There are three other boys."

"It has come upon us like a thunderbolt. I had no idea that he was in any danger of losing his place."

"I have nothing against your son, Mrs. Barton. It is a business necessity that compels me to dispense with his services."

"Why a business necessity?"

"You may have heard that I intend to introduce a pegging machine. It will do the work cheaper and more effectually than under the present system."

"Oh, why couldn't you have let matters remain as they were? You may gain something, but you are depriving the boys of their livelihood."

"You don't regard the matter in a business light, Mrs. Barton. I must keep up with the times. Other manufacturers are making the change, and I should stand in my own light if I adhered to the old-fashioned system."

"I don't pretend to know about business, Albert, but I do know that in dismissing Bert you deprive us of more than half our income, and Heaven knows we need it all."

"Your son can find something else to do."

"What is there for him to do in Lakeville? I shall be grateful if you will suggest anything."

"No doubt he can get a chance to work on a farm."

"I know of no farmer who needs his services, and even if there were one he would not get money for his services, and that is what we want."

"Of course farming isn't the only thing," said the squire vaguely. "If he looks round sharp he will come across something——"

Mrs. Barton shook her head.

"You know how little business there is in Lakeville," she answered. "Isn't there some other department in the factory in which you can employ him?"

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Squire Marlowe shook his head.

"He is too young for any other work," he said.

"Then what are we to do?"

"Oh, you'll think of something," said the squire indefinitely. "He is to be in the shop the rest of the week, and that will give you time to think the matter over."

"Then you can't hold out any hope!" said Mrs. Barton mournfully.

"No, but you mustn't be despondent. Something will turn up."

Mrs. Barton was silent, and her sad face made the squire vaguely uncomfortable. He wished she would go.

"Mrs. Marlowe is not feeling well this evening," he said awkwardly, "or I would invite you to meet her. Some other evening——"

"I am not in the mood to meet any one to-night, Albert," she said. "I will be going," and she rose from her chair and moved toward the door.

"Good-evening, then. I am glad to have seen you."

Mrs. Barton did not reply to the compliment. Her heart was too full of sorrow to respond to what she knew to be insincere and unmeaning. She understood very well that Albert Marlowe was glad to be rid of her.

60

"How unreasonable women are!" muttered Squire Marlowe, impatiently, as he closed the door upon his unwelcome guest. "Mary Barton would have had me postpone all improvements in my shop for the sake of keeping that boy of hers in his place. Business considerations are as nothing to women. They are so unpractical."

Mrs. Barton walked homeward slowly, musing bitterly on her cousin's want of feeling.

"How cold-hearted he is!" she murmured. "He evidently cares nothing for our needs, or the prospect of our hardships. He lives in a fine house, and rears his family in luxury, while Bert and I are likely to want even the necessaries of life."

Perhaps Mrs. Barton was a little too despondent. Perhaps she ought to have had more trust in Providence; but there had been sorrows in her life which had robbed her of her natural hopefulness, and she was no longer as courageous in the face of threatening misfortune as she had once been.

She had nearly reached home when, from out of the darkness, a man's figure advanced from the roadside and laid his hand upon her arm.

"Who are you!" she asked faintly, suppressing a scream.

"Don't be frightened, Mary," was the reply, "I am your husband, Simeon Barton."

61

CHAPTER IX.

MRS. BARTON'S SECRET.

Mrs. Barton staggered, and would have fallen, had not the other held her up. "You here," she exclaimed, in amazement, "after being absent so many years?"

"Yes; it has been a cruel exile. We have been very unfortunate."

"Where have you been these last ten years, Simeon?"

"For the last eight years in Canada."

"And you did not write me?"

"No; I feared it would set officers on my track. I have heard from you now and then, indirectly. Have you suffered much?"

"It has been a weary time. It would have been easier to bear if I had heard from you."

"A letter from Canada would have been sure to attract attention and invite comment. Besides, I had no money to send you. Misfortune has pursued me, and I have only been able to support myself. When I think of the probable author of my misfortunes, I own it has made me feel revengeful."

62

"To whom do you refer, Simeon?"

"To Albert Marlowe."

"What do you mean? How is he responsible for your—misfortune?"

"I will tell you. I believe that it was he who stole the bonds, the loss of which was imputed to me."

"Is it possible that you have any proof of this?" asked Mary Barton eagerly. "The bond that was found in your possession——"

"Was placed in my overcoat pocket for the express purpose of throwing suspicion upon me. You remember that it was a bond for five hundred dollars, while the amount stolen was six thousand."

"Yes."

"Albert and I were both at work in the same establishment. We were on a level, so far as means are concerned."

"Yes."

"Now he is a rich man," added Simeon Barton significantly.

"Yes; he is considered worth thirty thousand dollars."

"It was the stolen money that gave him his start, I verily believe."

63

"He did not start in business for himself for more than a year after—the trouble."

"No; for he thought it would invite suspicion. I have reason to think that he disposed of the bonds in Canada, and with the proceeds started in as a manufacturer. How otherwise could he have done so? He was only earning two dollars a day when we were working together, and it cost him all of that to support his family."

"I have often wondered where he obtained money to go into business."

"I don't think there is any mystery about it."

"And you have been compelled to bear the consequences of his wrong-doing while he has been living in luxury?" said Mary Barton bitterly.

"Yes; but mine is not a solitary case. Wickedness often flourishes in this world. We must look to the future for compensation."

"Do you think you will ever be able to prove your innocence, Simeon?"

"It is all that I live for. If I can do that, we can live together again. But tell me, before I go any further, how are you and the boy getting along?"

"We are comfortable," answered Mary Barton briefly. She did not care to add to her husband's anxieties by speaking of Bert's discharge.

64

"I wish I had some money to give you, but I only had enough to bring me here and return."

"You had an object in coming?"

"Yes; there was a man who was employed by Weeks Brothers at the time of the loss of the bonds. I learned some months since—it is not necessary to explain how—that he could throw light on the long unsolved mystery—that he knew the real thief. I am in search of him. Some time I hope to find him, and make clear my innocence by the aid of his testimony."

"Oh, Simeon, if you only could!" exclaimed Mrs. Barton, clasping her hands.

"I shall try, at all events."

"I wonder if it would not be well to consult Uncle Jacob?"

"Uncle Jacob!" repeated Simeon Barton in surprise.

"Yes; I have not told you. He has returned from California, and is now in New York."

"Have you seen him?"

"Yes; he spent a week at our house."

Mrs. Barton went on to give the particulars of Uncle Jacob's visit.

65

"He is a poor man," she concluded. "As I understand, he brought home but five hundred dollars, but he is lucky enough to be employed in an office in New York at a salary of twelve dollars a week."

"If I were earning that, and could hold up my head an honest man, without a stain—an undeserved stain—upon my name, I should be happy."

"Can you tell me Uncle Jacob's address?" he asked, after a pause. "I don't think I shall venture to call upon him, for I am subject to arrest on the old charge, as you know, and the New York detectives are sharp, but I might write to him and ask his advice. But stay! he thinks me dead, does he not?"

"Yes."

"And Bert—is that what you still call him?—he still thinks that he has no father living?"

"You wished it so, Simeon."

"Yes; but the time may come when the secret can be revealed to him. I may disclose myself to Uncle Jacob. I don't remember him very well, but——"

"He is the best and kindest of men. I wish, he could have found employment here."

"Did he visit Albert?"

"Yes; he remained at his house one night."

66

"Was he well received?"

"At first; for, coming from California, Albert supposed him rich. When he found he had but five hundred dollars, he lost no time in turning him out of the house."

"Poor Uncle Jacob! It must have hurt the old man's feelings."

"I feared it would, but he only seemed amused—not at all offended."

"He has seen so much of the world that he probably expected it. The old man seemed in good spirits, then?"

"Yes; he declared that he was well able to earn his own living still, though he is sixty-five, and was as gay and cheerful as a young man. He insisted on paying his board while he was with us."

"There is nothing mean about Uncle Jacob."

"No; and it is a mystery to me why such men as he, who would make so good use of riches, should almost always be poor."

"And men like Albert Marlowe are rich."

"Yes."

"There are a good many things that are difficult to make out. Where are you going to stay to-night, Simeon?" she asked, after a pause.

67

"I—don't know."

"I wish I could invite you to the house where you have the best right to be."

"I wish so, too."

"Bert doesn't know that you are alive. Perhaps I might introduce you as an old friend of his father."

"If you think it would do. He would not speak of your having a visitor?"

"Not if I told him not to do so."

"You have tempted me strongly, Mary. I should like to see our boy, to see with my own eyes how he is looking at fifteen. And it would be a comfort to rest once more beneath the same roof as the wife from whom I have been so long separated."

"I think we can risk it, Simeon. I must introduce you under another name."

"Call me Robinson. That is the name I have borne for some years past."

"Mother!" was heard from a little distance.

"Bert has come out in search of me, being alarmed by my long absence. Now, be on your guard."

"Is that you, mother? Where have you been so long? I got quite anxious about you."

"I met an old friend of your father, Bert, and in talking with him I forgot how time was passing. Mr. Robinson, this is my son Herbert."

Bert greeted the stranger politely. As his hand rested for a moment in the hand of Mr. Robinson, he felt the latter tremble.

"Do you remember your father, Herbert?" asked the supposed stranger.

"Not very well. He died when I was quite a young boy."

"True! It was indeed a long time since," murmured Robinson, with a sigh.

"Bert, I have invited Mr. Robinson to stay with us to-night. It is long since I have seen him and we may not meet again for some time. He will share your room."

"Certainly, mother."

They went together to the cottage. Mrs. Barton prepared some tea, and they sat down to a slight meal.

"Oh, if it could only continue thus!" thought Simeon Barton, as he looked wistfully at the wife and son from whom he had been so long separated. "It is like a sight of the promised land."

"Do you know my mother's cousin, Albert Marlowe?" asked Bert, during the evening.

"I used to know him some years ago."

"Shall you call upon him? He is a rich man now."

"I think not I never—liked—him much."

Bert laughed.

"Ditto for me!" he said. "He is a cold, selfish man. He is not popular with his workmen."

"By the way, Bert," said his mother, "you need not mention Mr. Robinson's visit. His business requires secrecy."

"All right, mother! I'll bear it in mind."

CHAPTER X.

STOLEN MONEY.

Saturday afternoon arrived, and with it came Bert's discharge from the shoe shop. He put the four dollars in his pocket, and with a sober face went home.

"There are my week's wages, mother," he said. "I don't know when I shall have any more money to hand you."

"We won't borrow trouble to-night, Bert," responded Mrs. Barton, concealing her solicitude under a cheerful exterior. "To-morrow is Sunday, and we will defer all worldly anxieties till it is over."

"You are right, mother," said Bert, readily chiming in with her cheerful humor. "I am young and strong, and there is plenty of work to be done in the world."

"Keep up your courage, Bert, and you will be more likely to win success."

When Sunday was over, however, Bert felt that he must begin to look about him. But the more he looked the more downhearted he became. He went to the village store, having heard that the boy employed there was about to leave. After buying a pound of sugar for his mother, he ventured to say, "Mr. Jones, don't you want to hire a boy?"

"Why should I want to hire a boy?" asked the store-keeper, in a tone of surprise.

"I thought that Herman was going to leave you."

"So he was, but he has changed his mind."

"Oh!" ejaculated Bert, disappointed.

"Are you asking for yourself?" inquired the merchant.

"Yes, sir."

"I thought you were at work in the shoe shop."

"So I was, but I have lost my place."

"Ha!" exclaimed the store-keeper suspiciously. "If Squire Marlowe has discharged you, I don't want to hire you."

"You are mistaken, Mr. Jones, about the cause of my discharge. He had no fault to find with me." 71

"So *you* say," returned Jones, in evident skepticism. "Boys don't get discharged for nothing."

Bert felt inclined to be angry, but he controlled his temper.

"I am a pegger, and the squire has introduced a pegging machine, so he has discharged all the peggers."

"Oh, that's different. Well, I'm sorry for you, but I have no vacancy."

"If Herman should change his mind again, will you think of me?"

"Yes, I will. I think you are a good boy, and you look strong for your size."

Bert felt a little encouraged by this promise, though it was very doubtful if it would ever amount to anything.

Day after day passed, and no employment offered. But one morning a bright idea came to Bert. Blueberries were just coming into the market, and he knew of a large pasture a little over a mile away.

"Mother," he said, "if you'll give me a large tin pail, I'll go after some berries. I may be able to sell them at the hotel."

"If you can't, we can use them ourselves," rejoined Mrs. Barton. 72

"It will be better to sell them, for I hear they are bringing fifteen cents a quart. They won't stay long at that figure, so we will put off having them ourselves till they are cheaper."

It was with a light heart that Bert set out for the berry pasture. He had become tired of having nothing to do. Any sort of employment seemed desirable. Besides, they were very much in want of money, and here seemed a chance of earning some.

Bert spent five hours in the pasture. Berries were high, because they were scarce, and it took fully twice as long to gather a quart as it would two weeks later. But he kept steadily at his task, and at length the pail—which held four quarts—was full. He was tired enough and his back ached, but still he felt happy as he left the field and trudged toward the Lake House, which was the name of the village hotel. There were a few summer boarders there from New York and Philadelphia, who were glad to exchange the brick walls and crowded city streets for the verdure and pure breezes of the country.

Fortunately Bert found the landlord on the piazza, and to him he preferred his request.

"Would you like to buy some blueberries?"

"Go round to the side door, Bert," said Mr. Holbrook, the good-natured landlord. "I leave all such matters to Mrs. Holbrook." 73

"Blueberries?" exclaimed the landlady.

"Why, it's just what I wanted. Mrs. Casewell, from Philadelphia, has been teasing me for some blueberry pudding. What do you ask?"

"Fifteen cents a quart," answered Bert. "You know they have just come into the market."

"That's true. Well, I will pay you your price," said Mrs. Holbrook, who received a good income from her boarders, and was willing to be liberal to others. "How many have you got?"

"I think there are four quarts, but you can measure them."

There proved to be four quarts, and Bert was made happy by receiving sixty cents in silver.

"It is almost as much as I made in the shop," he reflected complacently. "And perhaps I can sell some more to-morrow."

Bert continued to pick berries, but the price fell rapidly until it touched six cents, and it was not so easy to sell the berries at all, for many others engaged in picking them, and the market was overstocked.

Bert occasionally fell in with Percy Marlowe, but the manufacturer's son usually took very little notice of him. This did not trouble Bert, however, who felt independent, and cared little for the opinion or notice of his wealthy cousin. 74

In one respect, however, Percy resembled Bert. He was always short of money. His father allowed him two dollars a week for spending money, more than any other boy in Lakeville received, but Percy felt that it was too little. He had formed an intimacy with Reginald Ward, a young man from New York, who was boarding at the hotel, and with him he used to play pool, which he found rather an expensive game; and still worse, he played poker with him in his own room, locking the door carefully, as this game was not looked upon with favor in Lakeville. The young man from the city was much sharper than the country boy, and steadily won his money till Percy found himself in debt to him in the sum of ten dollars. For this Percy gave his note, but no

one knew better than Reginald Ward that it was not valid in law, and he resolved to secure the money, if possible.

"Percy, you owe me ten dollars," he said one afternoon.

"I know it," admitted Percy, rather ruefully.

"When are you going to pay me?"

"I don't know," answered Percy.

"But that won't do, don't you know," returned Reginald frowning. "I may go away next week, and I want my money."

"I would pay it to you if I had it," said Percy; "but you know I have only my allowance of two dollars a week."

"Stuff and nonsense! Do you think you are going to put me off that way?" demanded Reginald angrily. "I must have my money."

"Then I don't see how you're going to get it," said Percy doggedly. "I can't pay what I haven't got."

"Go to your father and ask for it."

"As if he would give it to me! You don't know him."

"Doesn't he ever leave money lying round?" asked Reginald significantly.

"What do you mean?" asked Percy, reddening.

"I see you understand. I was only suggesting a way to get the money."

"I am not a thief."

"Who said you were? I see I shall have to take the matter into my own hands."

"How? What do you mean?" asked Percy nervously.

"I will go to your father, show him this I O U of yours, and ask him for the money."

"You wouldn't do that, Reginald? He would be awful mad with me, and you wouldn't get your money, either."

"I must do something. I can't afford to lose the money."

"Just wait a day or two. I'll see what I can do."

"Mind you do something, then."

Percy regretted that he had ever made the acquaintance of Reginald Ward, or consented to play poker with him, but the regret came too late. The mischief was done, and he saw from Ward's determined look that he must do something. He was just in that frame of mind when temptations have the most power.

In the evening he went to the village store to purchase a fishing-line, for he had made an arrangement to go out fishing with Reginald Ward the next day. He made the purchase, and was about to go when his eye caught sight of a twenty-dollar bill lying on the desk. Mr. Jones had gone to the other end of the store, and no one was looking. On the impulse of the moment he seized the bill, and with his heart beating quickly, he left the store. As he passed through the door Bert Barton entered with a kerosene can in his hand, and walked up to the counter, taking his stand near the desk.

CHAPTER XI.

THE TWENTY-DOLLAR BILL.

In order to understand what followed, it is necessary to explain that the evening previous Bert and his mother found themselves out of money. About a dollar was due the latter for covering balls, but it would not be paid for three days, and meanwhile they were in an embarrassing condition.

"What shall we do?" asked Mrs. Barton, with a troubled look. "If Uncle Jacob were only here, I would ask his advice."

"He left a note to be opened if we got into trouble," said Bert, brightening up.

"So he did. Do you think the time has come, Bert?"

"I have no doubt of it. Where is it, mother?"

"I put it in a bureau drawer in my room."

"Shall I go up and get it?"

"No; I will do so, as I know exactly where it is."

She went upstairs, and returned almost immediately with the letter in her hand. Bert produced his knife and cut open the envelope at one end. Then, drawing out the contents, he found them to be a half sheet of note paper and a bank bill.

78

"It's a twenty-dollar bill, mother!" he exclaimed joyfully.

"Shall I read the note?"

"Yes, read it, Bert."

Bert read as follows:

MY DEAR NIECE: AS I know your income is small, and you are liable, in case of sickness or loss of employment to need help, I put a twenty-dollar bill into this envelope, which I wish you to use freely. Do not fear that it will inconvenience me to give it. My health is good, and I hope to earn my living for years to come.

Your affectionate uncle,

JACOB MARLOWE.

"Dear Uncle Jacob," said the widow gratefully, "how good and kind he is. With his small savings I don't feel that he can afford to be so generous."

"I will pay him back some time, mother."

"You think then that we are justified in using it, Bert?"

"Uncle Jacob meant us to do so. Before it is gone I shall probably find something to do, and then I may gradually be able to pay back the money."

79

"In that case, Bert, I am afraid we must break into it to-morrow. Probably Mr. Jones can change it for us."

So it happened the next evening that Bert, with the kerosene can in his hand, went to the store, entering, as already described, just as Percy left it with the bill which he had purloined on the impulse of the moment.

"I would like two quarts of kerosene, Mr. Jones," said Bert, handing over the can.

The proprietor went to one corner of the store to fill the can, and brought it back.

"Please take your pay out of this," said Bert, handing him the twenty-dollar bill.

Mr. Jones started in surprise, and his face darkened ominously. He scanned the desk on which he remembered placing his own twenty-dollar bill, and it was nowhere to be seen.

"Why, you audacious young thief!" he exclaimed in a fury.

"What do you mean?" demanded Bert angrily.

"What do I mean?" gasped Jones. "You know what I mean well enough. I never knew such audacity."

"Please explain yourself, Mr. Jones," said Bert with spirit. "I didn't come here to be insulted."

80

"You are a hardened young reprobate! Do you mean to say you didn't steal this twenty-dollar bill from my desk, where I laid it five minutes since?"

"I don't know anything about any twenty-dollar bill of yours, Mr. Jones. This money is mine, or rather my mother's, and I brought it with me from home."

"Do you expect me to believe this bold falsehood, Bert Barton?" the store-keeper exploded wrathfully.

"I don't expect you to believe any falsehood at all, Mr. Jones. Will you either change that bill or give it back to me?"

"I will do neither."

"Then, sir, it is you who are the thief."

"You impudent young rascal, now I won't have any mercy on you. For your mother's sake, I might have done so, but as you persist in brazening out your guilt, I will see that you have a chance to repent. Here is the constable come in just at the right moment. Mr. Drake, please come here."

A tall, pleasant-looking officer, who had just entered the store, approached the desk.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Jones?" he asked.

81

"Arrest this boy!" said Jones, pointing with flushed face at his young customer.

"Arrest Bert Barton!" exclaimed Constable Drake, in amazement. "What on earth has he done?"

"Stolen a twenty-dollar bill from my desk, and then presented it to me in payment for some kerosene."

"The charge is false!" said Bert, his eyes glowing with indignation.

"Hear him deny it!" said Jones, looking at the circle that had gathered around them.

"I find it hard to credit your charge, Mr. Jones," replied the constable. "We all know Bert Barton, and I don't believe he would be guilty of theft."

"I require you to arrest the boy!" persisted the store-keeper, stamping his foot in excitement.

"Wait a moment! Did you see him take the bill?"

"No," answered Jones reluctantly.

"Then why do you accuse him? Please state the circumstances."

"A few minutes since I was paid twenty dollars by Mr. Holbrook of the hotel, in settlement of his weekly bill for groceries, and being somewhat hurried I laid it down on the desk while I was filling an order."

"Go on!"

"Five minutes since Bert Barton came in and took up his position where he is now standing. He asked me for two quarts of kerosene. I filled his can for him, and he gave me a twenty-dollar bill from which to take payment. I was naturally surprised, and looked for the bill I had left on the desk. *It was gone!*"

Mr. Jones gazed about the circle triumphantly.

"What do you say to that?" he asked.

Sympathetic eyes were turned upon Bert. Things certainly looked black for him.

"I don't think I need say any more," added the store-keeper. "I want you to arrest that boy."

Bert looked at the faces that encircled him. He saw that they believed him guilty, and a feeling of hot indignation possessed him.

"Bert, my boy," said Officer Drake, "what have you to say to this?"

"That the twenty-dollar bill I handed to Mr. Jones belongs to my mother. I know nothing of the bill he says he laid on his desk."

"That's a likely story!" put in Mr. Jones, in a tone of sarcasm. "How many more twenty-dollar bills have you got at your house? I wasn't aware that your mother was so wealthy."

Again opinion was unfavorable to poor Bert. His mother's straitened circumstances were well known, and it certainly did seem improbable upon the face of it that she should have a twenty-dollar bill in her possession.

"This was the only twenty-dollar bill that my mother had," replied Bert.

"Oh, indeed! I thought as much," said Mr. Jones significantly. "Mr. Drake, do you intend to arrest that boy?" he added angrily.

"I have no warrant," returned the officer. "If you will swear that you saw him take the bill, I will assume the responsibility."

"I didn't see him take it," the store-keeper again admitted reluctantly; "but it stands to reason that it is mine."

Here a young man in the outer circle stepped forward. He was a summer boarder at the hotel, and Bert knew him slightly.

"I am a lawyer," he said, "and if Bert will place his interests in my hands I will see what I can do to throw light upon this mystery."

"I shall be very glad to do so, Mr. Conway," answered Bert.

"No lawyer is needed," sputtered Jones. "The case is as plain as can be. I have no more doubt that the boy took my bill than if I had seen him do it."

"That isn't legal proof; it is only an assumption," said the young lawyer. "Squire Marlowe is, I believe, your magistrate here, and I agree in behalf of my client to have the matter brought before him to-morrow morning. Meanwhile, Mr. Jones, will you hand the twenty-dollar bill in dispute to officer Drake?"

"Why should I? The bill is mine," said the merchant sullenly.

"That remains to be proved. Do I understand that you refuse to give up the bill?"

"I do?" answered Jones doggedly.

"Then I will apply at once for a warrant for your arrest for holding property belonging to my young client," said Mr. Conway.

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CHAPTER XII.

MR. JONES IS EXCITED.

The astonishment and wrath of Mr. Jones were almost ludicrous as he stared at the lawyer, who, cool and composed, reiterated his threat.

"I never heard of such a thing!" he gasped. "You take my own money from me?"

85

"It remains to be proved whether it is your own money. The boy says it is his."

"The boy lies."

"Really, Mr. Jones, I cannot allow you to make such charges against my client, unless you are ready to substantiate them by proof."

"It stands to reason," began Mr. Jones, but the young lawyer interrupted him.

"Nothing stands to reason that you can't prove," he said. "We will give you an opportunity to prove your ownership of the bill to-morrow in court. Now hand the bill to officer Drake."

Very much against his will, Mr. Jones felt compelled to do this.

"Isn't the boy going to be arrested?" he demanded, with an ugly look at Bert.

"It is unnecessary. You can bring a formal charge against him before Squire Marlowe to-morrow."

"The boy may escape during the night. I won't trust him."

There was a murmur of disapproval among those present. All liked Bert, and Mr. Jones, from his quick temper and ugly disposition, was by no means a favorite. The store-keeper saw that it would not be good policy to insist upon Bert's arrest, and he said, sullenly, "I will hold you responsible for his presence at the trial."

86

Mr. Conway smiled.

"If he is not present, I will myself see that you do not suffer in consequence. Besides, flight would be tantamount to confession, and the case would go against him by default."

"And should I in that case get the twenty-dollar bill?"

"I will take it upon me to offer no opposition," said the lawyer.

"Now, can I go?" asked Bert.

"Yes; I will accompany you home for consultation."

Bert took the can of kerosene and was about to leave the store, when the store-keeper said harshly: "Put down that kerosene! you haven't paid for it!"

Bert flushed and looked embarrassed. It was true that he had not paid for it, nor did he have the money to pay, outside of the twenty-dollar bill which had been taken from him.

"I have no money," he said. "I will leave it till to-morrow."

"How much is it, Mr. Jones?" asked Conway.

"Twenty-five cents."

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"I will advance the money. Bert, take your can."

"You are very kind, Mr. Conway," said the boy gratefully.

"We will settle hereafter. Now let us be going."

In explanation of the price mentioned, I may say that kerosene is now much cheaper than at the date of my story.

"Now, Bert," said Mr. Conway, "as your legal adviser I shall have to ask you to tell me just where you obtained the bill you offered in payment to Mr. Jones for the kerosene. I have no doubt of your innocence, but we must make it plain to all who may attend the trial."

"I should like to have you come home with me, Mr. Conway. Mother will confirm what I say."

"I shall be glad to do so. Will your mother be alarmed?"

"Yes, I think she will; but you can make things clear to her."

Mrs. Barton was indeed startled when she learned that Bert had been charged with theft, but after a free talk with Mr. Conway she felt much relieved.

"Your defence is perfect, I think," said the young lawyer. "Of course Mr. Jones or his lawyer may claim that you wrote the letter yourself."

"Will it be necessary to send to Uncle Jacob and get him to testify?"

"I don't think so. I think your defence will be complete without it. There is another point of considerable importance which I shall look up to-night. If things turn out as I suspect they will, we shall not need to disturb your Uncle Jacob."

At nine o'clock Mr. Conway took his leave and returned to the hotel. He had a short conference with the landlord, which was evidently satisfactory.

"I think we shall prove too many for Mr. Jones," he murmured softly, as he went up to bed.

CHAPTER XIII.

PERCY GETS RID OF THE BILL.

When Percy Marlowe left the grocery store with the stolen bill in his hand, he was tremulous with excitement and agitation. He felt that he had committed a crime, and he was almost tempted to go back and replace the money. But it was possible that its loss had already been discovered, and he might be connected with it. He felt that it would be safe to get as far away as possible from the store.

"Nobody will suspect me," he said to himself, plucking up courage.

Then there was the pleasant thought that he could pay up his debt to Reginald Ward, and have ten dollars left over. It would be very comfortable to have ten dollars to spend, and Percy, whose conscience was not sensitive, began to consider what would be the pleasantest way of disposing of it. He soon came to a decision on this point, having, like most boys, rather a talent for spending money.

"I'll go round by the hotel," he said to himself, "and if I find Reg there I'll pay him what I owe him and get it off my mind."

Percy walked around to the Lake House, and found Reginald Ward in the billiard room. Ward treated him rather coldly.

"Good-morning, Percy," he said.

"Good-morning, Reg."

"I hope you have come prepared to pay me what you owe me. I may have to go back to New York to-morrow."

"I wish he would," thought Percy. "Then, if there's any trouble about this money, he will be well out of the way, and nobody can find out about it."

"I can pay you to-night," said Percy.

"You can? You're a trump!" said Reginald, in gratified surprise.

"Suppose we go up to your room," went on Percy nervously, "and don't talk about it here. I don't want anybody to know that I am owing you any money."

"I understand. The governor wouldn't like it, hey?"

"No, he'd be awful mad."

"Follow me, then, Percy," and Ward led the way up to his room.

"Lock the door," said Percy.

"Seems to me we are mighty mysterious," commented Ward, laughing. "Oh, well; anything to accommodate. Now, where are the spondulicks?"

"Can you change a twenty-dollar bill?" asked Percy.

"Whew! you are wealthy," said Ward, in surprise. "Let me see!" and he opened his pocket book. "Much as ever," he replied, after investigating the contents. "Here is a five, a two, a silver dollar,

and I think I can make up two dollars in small change. It'll take up about all I've got."

"Then perhaps you'd rather wait till I have a chance to get the bill changed," suggested Percy.

"Not much," returned Reginald, with a crafty smile. "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush,' as somebody says. I am willing to be inconvenienced for the sake of getting the debt paid."

"Oh, well; just as you say," rejoined Percy, secretly glad to get the tell-tale bill out of his possession, and to replace it in his pocket with the smaller bills and silver which Ward proposed to give him.

When the transfer was made, Ward asked, "Where did you raise the twenty, Percy?"

Now it was that Percy looked embarrassed.

"It is some money I had given to me a long while ago," he answered with hesitation.

"Oh!" exclaimed Ward, evidently incredulous.

"I promised not to use it, but to keep it saved up," continued Percy, "and I meant to; but you wanted me to pay what I owed you, and so——"

"You acted like an honest young man," said Ward, finishing his sentence for him.

"Yes."

There was a peculiar smile on Reginald Ward's face, but he did not think it best to question Percy's statement. His money had been paid him, and that was all he cared for.

"Percy's found it in his father's desk, I reckon," he said to himself, "but that doesn't concern me. I've got my money and that's more than I expected."

"By the way, Reg," said Percy hurriedly, "don't mention to any one my paying you this money."

"Why not?"

"It would be found out that I had been playing cards for money, and there'd be no end of a row. Besides, then it would come out that I had parted with this bill."

"All right, Percy. I'll keep mum. Won't you go down and have a game of billiards?"

"Not to-night. I'm rather tired."

"That boy's got something on his mind," thought Reginald Ward.

CHAPTER XIV.

BERT STANDS TRIAL.

Percy went to bed early, and heard nothing of Bert's arrest for the theft which he had himself committed till at the breakfast table the next morning his father said: "Well, young Barton has got into a bad scrape."

"What is it, father?" asked Percy, pricking up his ears.

"He is charged with stealing a twenty-dollar bill from Mr. Jones, the store-keeper."

This was certainly amazing, and Percy, in his agitation, nearly choked with some coffee that went the wrong way.

"Be more careful, Percy!" said his mother sharply.

"I was so surprised, mother, at what father told me," apologized Percy.

"I don't know why you need be surprised," said Mrs. Marlowe. "I never had a very good opinion of the boy."

"How did it happen?" asked Percy, curious to know how suspicion could have fallen upon Bert.

"It appears that Mr. Jones laid a twenty-dollar bill on his desk—a very careless proceeding, by the way—while he was waiting upon a customer in another part of the store. About five minutes afterward the Barton boy called upon him to fill a small can with kerosene, and actually had the hardihood to offer his own twenty-dollar bill in payment."

"Bert Barton offered Mr. Jones a twenty-dollar bill?" asked Percy, in great surprise.

"Yes; no wonder you are surprised at his boldness."

"Perhaps it wasn't the same bill," Percy was constrained to suggest.

"You must be a fool, Percy. Where else could he have got so large a bill as that? We all know how poor the Bartons are. Besides, the bill on the desk had disappeared."

Percy was silent for a moment. He felt bewildered, and could not understand it at all. He knew very well that it was not the same bill. But where did the other bill come from? How happened a poor boy like Bert Barton to have such a large bill in his possession? That was certainly mysterious.

"Was—was Bert arrested?" he asked, in a hesitating tone.

"He would have been but for the interference of a meddling young lawyer, who, it appears, is staying at the hotel."

"Mr. Conway?"

"I believe that is his name. He offered to defend the Barton boy, and would not permit him to be arrested."

Percy was glad to hear this. He was mean and selfish, but he was not mean enough to wish Bert to suffer for a crime of which he knew him to be innocent.

"What was done, then?" he asked, after a pause.

"The boy was allowed to go home, but his trial is to take place before me this morning at ten o'clock. You can be present, if you desire."

"I—don't—know as I do," said Percy.

His father looked surprised.

"I thought you would be eager to be there," he said.

"I may come in," said Percy; "but I am sorry for Bert, and I should not like to see him under arrest."

"You are too good-hearted, Percy," said his mother. "I am sure I hope the boy did not do what is charged, though I don't think there is the slightest doubt of it; but if he is guilty I want him punished. That is the only way to protect the community from further thefts."

"What would mother say if she knew I did it?" thought Percy, shivering. "I wish I hadn't done it."

But it was too late to wish that. He had appropriated the money, and it had been paid away. Suppose Reginald Ward should betray him? Percy earnestly hoped that he would leave town before he had a chance to hear of the stolen money, for he felt certain that sharp young man would suspect him of having had something to do with it.

As the time drew near, Percy decided that he had better not attend the trial. He was afraid that some one would call to mind that he too had been standing near the desk just before the bill disappeared. He felt nervous and excited. He wished it was all over, and Bert was acquitted. Suppose he were found guilty and sentenced to imprisonment? It would be terrible, Percy admitted to himself; but what could he do? He couldn't confess, and incur the same punishment himself. The very thought made him shudder. He walked about the streets in a very uncomfortable frame of mind till about a quarter of ten. Then he suddenly encountered Bert, who, in company with his lawyer, was on his way to a room in the town hall where the trial was to take place. Bert held his head erect, but his face was flushed with shame at the unpleasant predicament in which he found himself. When he saw Percy approaching he said to himself bitterly: "There is one who will rejoice at my misfortune."

What was his surprise, then, when Percy came up with a pleasant smile, and said, "Good-morning, Bert."

Bert looked at him sharply, to see if there was anything triumphant in his smile, but Percy's manner was cordial and friendly.

"Have you heard of my trouble, Percy?" asked Bert abruptly.

"Yes, Bert, and I am very sorry for it."

"Do you believe me guilty?"

"No, I don't," returned Percy, and he offered his hand.

"Thank you, Percy," said Bert, moved in spite of himself. "I misjudged you. If *you* don't believe me guilty, I hope others won't. Are you going to the trial?"

"I wasn't thinking of doing so, but I will walk with you as far as the town hall."

There was quite a crowd gathered near the entrance to the building, for it was generally known that Bert was to be tried for the theft that morning. Some of those composing it—in fact most—were Bert's friends; but there were a few who delighted in scandal and looked forward with eagerness to hearing the details, and did not care much how Bert might be affected by it.

The surprise was general when Bert approached, apparently in friendly converse with Percy Marlowe, a boy whose want of cordial feeling toward him was generally known. The occasion was

a trial for Bert, but Percy's unexpected friendliness sustained him, though he had not got over his surprise at it.

All parties entered the court-room, and presently Squire Marlowe himself appeared. He walked with dignity to the platform, and took his seat behind the desk over which justice was dispensed.

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"Who is the complainant in this case?" he asked.

"I am, squire," said Mr. Jones, advancing eagerly.

"State your case."

"I charge this boy—Bert Barton—with stealing a twenty-dollar bill from my desk last evening."

"Have you counsel?"

"No, squire. The case is plain, and I can manage it myself."

"I represent the defendant," said the young lawyer Conway.

"You are a lawyer, are you?" asked Squire Marlowe, frowning.

"Yes, sir."

"Have you any evidence or certificate to show this?"

"I can prove it, if necessary; but I will venture to suggest that your doubts on the subject are very singular, and that, lawyer or no lawyer, I am at liberty to appear for the defendant if he desires it."

Squire Marlowe coughed and looked displeased at this remark.

"State your case, Mr. Jones," he said, after the latter had been sworn.

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The grocer told the story as it happened, making it bear as heavily against Bert as possible.

"Do you wish to ask the witness any questions, Mr. Conway," inquired the judge.

"Yes, sir. Mr. Jones, what makes you think my client took your twenty-dollar bill?"

"It stands to reason—" commenced the grocer.

"Never mind about that! Please stick to facts."

"Well, the bill disappeared."

"Admitted. Go on."

"The Barton boy was standing near the desk."

"Did you see him take it?"

"No; how could I? My back was turned."

"This is important. Then, so far as your knowledge goes, any other person may have taken the bill."

"Didn't I tell you that the boy was brazen enough to offer me the same bill in payment for some kerosene which I got for him?"

"You are very sure it was the same bill, are you, Mr. Jones?" asked Conway carelessly.

"Why, of course it was."

"That won't do! How can you prove it was?"

"Because," said the grocer triumphantly, "the bill I lost was a twenty-dollar bill, and the bill the boy offered me was a twenty-dollar bill," and Mr. Jones looked around the court-room with a complacent and triumphant smile. Squire Marlowe, judge though he was, gave a little nod, as if to show that he, too, thought the argument was unanswerable. Even Bert's friends in the court-room glanced at each other gravely. It certainly looked bad for our hero.

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CHAPTER XV.

BERT'S TRIUMPHANT VINDICATION.

"You have not answered my question, Mr. Jones," persisted the young lawyer.

"I rather think I have," said the grocer, looking around him triumphantly.

"But not satisfactorily. I ask you again, how do you know that the twenty-dollar bill tendered you by my client was the same bill which you left on the desk?"

"It stands to reason——"

"Stop there! That is no answer."

"It seems to me you're mighty particular," retorted the grocer sharply.

"My young client's interests require it. Now for your answer."

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"Well, there wasn't any other twenty-dollar bill around."

"How do you know! Young Barton says he brought the bill from home."

"He says so!" repeated Mr. Jones, with a suggestive sneer.

"Upon that point I propose to call a witness who will corroborate his statement. Mrs. Barton!"

The widow Barton came forward, pale and anxious, and was sworn. She was regarded with sympathy by all present except the grocer and the acting judge. After one or two unimportant questions, Mr. Conway asked: "When your son went to the grocery store, did he take any money with him?"

"Yes, sir."

"How much?"

"Twenty dollars."

"Was it in the form of one bill, or several?"

"It was a single twenty-dollar bill."

Mr. Jones, who had now taken his seat, looked insultingly incredulous.

"Can I ask a question?" he said, turning to Squire Marlowe.

"You can."

"I should like to ask Mrs. Barton where the prisoner obtained the twenty-dollar bill?" And the grocer looked around the court-room again, triumphantly.

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"It came from my uncle, Jacob Marlowe," answered Mrs. Barton.

"Ah, that's it! Is Mr. Jacob Marlowe in town?"

"No, sir."

"When was he in town?"

"Three or four weeks since."

"When did he give you the money?"

"He left a sealed envelope containing it, which we were not to open unless in case of need."

"When did you first open it?"

"Last evening."

"Can you produce the envelope?" asked Jones, with an ironical smile.

"Here it is."

The envelope was taken and examined by the grocer.

"There is nothing to show that this could not have been prepared by the defendant, without the knowledge of this convenient uncle," he said.

"There was a note accompanying it," Mrs. Barton added.

"Let me see it."

"I will read it," said Mr. Conway, taking it in his hand.

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This note has already been quoted in Chapter XI.

Mr. Jones looked somewhat nonplussed.

"I am free to confess," he said, after a pause, "that I doubt the genuineness of this note. Nothing could be easier than to prepare it."

"I appeal to the court to protect the witness from insult," interposed Mr. Conway.

"I do not consider that she has been insulted," said Squire Marlowe coldly. "The credibility of testimony is always a matter to be considered."

Mr. Jones eyed the young lawyer with a triumphant smile.

"Have you any further questions to put, Mr. Jones?" added Conway.

"No, sir, I am satisfied."

"Then the witness may step down. I call upon Mr. Jones to take the witness stand again."

"I have no objection, I am sure!" said the grocer jauntily. He saw that the judge was with him, and he confidently anticipated Bert's conviction.

"From whom did you obtain the twenty-dollar bill which you charge my client with taking?" asked Mr. Conway.

"From Mr. Holbrook, the landlord of the hotel."

"You are sure of this?" demanded Conway sternly.

"Of course I am."

"And you will swear that this is the case?"

"Certainly!" answered Mr. Jones aggressively, thinking it very important that he should substantiate this fact.

"That will do, Mr. Jones."

The grocer took his seat, feeling that he had scored a victory and foiled the lawyer. It was not long before he had occasion to change his opinion.

"Mr. Holbrook," called Conway.

The landlord of the Lakeville Hotel took the stand. He was a pleasant-looking, good-hearted man, and he glanced sympathetically at Bert and his mother.

"Mr. Holbrook," said Conway, "do you remember paying Mr. Jones, the complainant, a twenty-dollar bill?"

"Yes, sir."

The grocer smiled again. Everything seemed to favor his side of the case.

"For what was the payment made?"

"For groceries furnished by Mr. Jones."

"Would you recognize the bill you paid if you should see it again?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is this the bill?" asked the lawyer, exhibiting the note taken from the grocer, and now in the custody of the court.

Mr. Holbrook took the bill in his hand, and, turning it over, looked at the reverse side. All eyes were upon him, and there was a hush of expectation, for it was felt that the whole case hinged upon the answer to this question.

"This is not the same bill," answered the landlord composedly.

Bert's friends looked joyful, and Mr. Jones looked dismayed.

"He is mistaken!" ejaculated the grocer, much perturbed.

"Of course," continued the young lawyer, "you have some means of identification. Please state to the court how you know that this is not the same bill."

"The bill which I paid to Mr. Jones," answered the landlord, "had the letters I. W. written in red ink on the back. This note has no such mark."

Conway looked triumphant. It was his turn now. He took the bank-note, and holding it up in sight of all, called the attention of the court and those present to the fact attested by the witness.

"It is clear," he said, "that nothing was ever written on the back of this note in red ink."

"It might have been effaced," suggested the grocer querulously.

"The bill, since it was taken from the complainant, has been in charge of the court," said Conway. "I hardly think the complainant will dare to assert that it has been tampered with. And now, your honor," turning to the presiding judge, "I submit that the charge has been completely answered. We have shown that the bill tendered by my client was not the bill lost by Mr. Jones. I claim his discharge."

Squire Marlowe hesitated, but he could think of no pretext for holding Bert, since the case against him had so signally failed.

"The prisoner is discharged!" he said briefly, and rose from his seat.

Bert's friends surrounded him, and he began to fear that in their enthusiasm they would shake his hand off. It was almost as serious as being a Presidential candidate. It is needless to say,

however, that Mr. Jones was not one of the friends who congratulated him. He, on the other hand, looked decidedly grumpy, and as if he had lost his best friend. He pushed his way through the crowd up to the young lawyer.

"This is all very fine, Mr. Lawyer," he said, "but will you tell me how I am to get my money back?"

"What money, Mr. Jones?"

"The twenty-dollar bill taken from my desk, of course."

"I wish I could, Mr. Jones, but I know no more than the man in the moon."

"Is that all the satisfaction I am going to get?" demanded Jones angrily.

"From me—yes. You will have to find the person who actually took the money."

"I don't see how I am to do it. I would have sworn that it was Bert Barton, and I am not sure now ___"

"Stop there, Mr. Jones! If after my client's full vindication you insinuate any charge of dishonesty, I shall advise him to sue you for defamation of character."

The grocer looked startled, and Conway continued:

"But I will volunteer the suggestion that as you can now identify the bill, you can advertise that a note so marked has been stolen from you, and call upon any one into whose hands it may come to help you trace it back to the thief. There is a chance that you may recover it."

CHAPTER XVI.

WHAT BECAME OF THE STOLEN NOTE.

Among the attentive listeners at Bert's trial was a tall young man with light hair and pallid complexion, upon whose thin face there played a shrewd smile. He seemed unusually interested, as was indeed the case, for he strongly suspected that he knew who was the actual purloiner of the stolen twenty-dollar bill. It is hardly necessary to say that the young man was Percy's friend, Reginald Ward.

When the landlord gave his testimony, he was no longer in doubt, for he had himself noticed the letters I. W. on the back of the bank-bill.

As he left the court-room, he saw Percy lingering near the door.

"Come with me, Percy," he said, linking his arm with that of the boy. "I have something to say to you."

"I have an engagement," pleaded Percy, trying to release himself. "I will call round this afternoon."

"I can't wait till afternoon," said Reginald decidedly. "I must speak to you now on a matter of importance."

"How did the trial come out?"

"The boy was acquitted."

"I thought he would be."

"Why?" asked Reginald Ward, eyeing Percy curiously.

"Because I don't think he would steal."

"Is he a friend of yours?"

"No; he is only a working boy."

"Still you think he is honest?"

"Oh, yes."

"How then do you account for the bill's being stolen?"

Percy shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't feel sure that any bill was stolen," he said. "I don't think much of old Jones. I dare say he made up the story."

"That is hardly likely. What object could he have?"

"He wanted to get hold of Bert Barton's bill. Where did Bert get it from? Did he say?"

"He said it was left in an envelope by some old uncle of his."

"Uncle Jacob?"

"Yes; I think that was the name."

"I didn't think the old man had so much money to spare."

"You seem to know him then?"

"I have heard of him."

By this time they had reached the hotel, and Reginald asked Percy to come up to his room.

"What was it you wanted to speak to me about?" asked Percy, as he took a seat at the window.

"I wanted to tell you that the stolen bill came from Mr. Holbrook. Mr. Jones testified to this effect, and Mr. Holbrook also."

"Well, what of that?"

"Mr. Holbrook described the bill and stated that the letters I. W. were written in red ink on the reverse side."

Percy began to see the point, and waited anxiously for Reginald to continue.

Ward drew from his pocket the twenty-dollar bill, and held it up to open view.

"This is the bill you paid me last evening," he said. "You will observe the letters I. W. as described by the landlord. Now, where did you get this bill?" he asked searchingly.

Drops of perspiration stood on Percy's forehead, and he hesitated to reply. Finally an inspiration came to him, and he said, "I picked it up in the street, near the grocery store. The thief must have dropped it."

"You didn't tell me that when you paid it to me."

"No, I didn't think it necessary. I was anxious to get out of debt to you."

"Percy Marlowe, that statement of yours won't pass muster. Weren't you in the grocery store last evening?"

"No—yes," stammered Percy.

"And you saw this bill on Mr. Jones's desk—yes or no?"

"I don't see what right you have to question me," said Percy sullenly.

"Because you have paid me stolen money, and if I keep it I am likely to get into trouble. Indeed, I came very near it this morning. I was on the point of paying it to Mr. Holbrook for my board. You can imagine that he would have recognized it at once."

"I don't see as you are to blame."

"No, I am not; but if the bill were known to be in my possession, the only thing I could do would be to state from whom I received it."

"You wouldn't do that!" said Percy, in alarm.

"I should have to. But I don't mean to run the risk. I will give you back the bill, and you must return me the ten dollars I gave you in change."

"But what can I do with the bill?"

"That is your lookout. Of course you will still owe me ten dollars."

Reluctantly Percy drew out the ten dollars he had received in change, not having yet spent any of it, and Reginald Ward gave him back the unlucky bill. Percy thrust it quickly into his vest pocket.

"Now, Percy," said Reginald, "let me advise you as a friend to get that bill out of your possession as soon as possible. If it is traced to you, you will get into hot water."

"I can't pass it here."

"You have no right to pass it anywhere."

"You could pass it in New York."

Reginald Ward considered a moment, but shook his head. "No, it would be too dangerous," he said. "It might be traced to me, and it would be known that I have been in Lakeville. I should have to expose you to screen myself."

"Then what would you advise me to do?"

"Get it back to Mr. Jones in some way. Here, take an envelope, inclose the bill, and mark the grocer's name on it. Then drop it somewhere, and the thing will be done; Jones will be happy and

you will be safe."

"All right!"

Percy followed Reginald's advice, and then put the letter in his pocket.

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"When are you going back to New York?" he asked.

"To-morrow. I will leave you my address, and hope you will have the honesty to pay me what you owe me as soon as possible."

"Yes, I will, but I am afraid that won't be soon."

"You ought to make an effort to pay me."

"It isn't as if I really owed it to you. It is money I have lost at cards."

"If you are a boy of honor," said Reginald impressively, "you will feel that such debts ought to be paid above all others."

"Why should they?" asked Percy, and there will be many others who will be disposed to echo the question. "Why should gambling debts take precedence of honest obligations?" It is not necessary to repeat Reginald's explanation, as it was shallow and sophistical.

Two hours later Sam Doyle, a young Irish boy, espied, under a bush by the roadside, what seemed to be a letter. He picked it up, and, though his education was by no means extensive, he made out the name of Mr. Jones.

"Shure Mr. Jones must have dropped it out of his pocket," he said. "I'll carry it to him."

He entered the store, and attracted the attention of the grocer, who was behind the counter, and in a bad humor, smarting still from his loss of twenty dollars.

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"Clear out, you Sam Doyle!" he said, "unless you want to buy something. I don't want any boys loafing round my store."

"Is this your envelope, Mr. Jones?" asked Sam, producing the envelope.

"Give it to me."

Mr. Jones read his name on the envelope in some wonder and tore it open. What was his amazement and delight when he saw the lost bill!

"Where did you get this, Sam?" he asked.

"I found it under a bush by the side of the road, near the blacksmith's shop."

"When?"

"Shure it wasn't more'n five minutes."

"Do you know what was in the envelope?"

"No."

"You are sure no one gave you the letter to hand to me?" said the grocer, with a searching glance.

"Shure, I found it."

"Well, I'm glad to get it. You are a good boy to bring it to me. Here's ten cents."

Sam took the money, as much surprised as pleased, for the grocer was considered, and justly, a very mean man.

"Thank you, Mr. Jones," he said.

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"You are sure that Bert Barton didn't give you the letter?"

"Yes, sir. I haven't seen Bert since mornin'."

"Did you see any other boy near?"

"Yes, sir, I saw Percy Marlowe."

"Did he speak to you?"

"Yes, sir; he asked me what I'd got in my hand."

"What did you say?"

"I showed him the letter."

"Did he say anything to you then?"

"He told me it was for you, and he said I'd better take it right over to your store."

"He gave you good advice. Wait a minute, and I'll do up a pound of sugar and send it to your mother as a present."

"What's come to the old man?" thought Sam. "Shure he's gettin' generous in his old age!"

"I wish I knew who took that bill," thought the grocer meditatively. "However I've got it back, and that's the main thing."

When Percy dropped the envelope, he remained near at hand, and seeing Sam pick it up, instructed him to carry it to the grocer. He then breathed a sigh of relief, and felt that he was lucky to get out of a bad scrape so safely.

CHAPTER XVII.

AFTER THE TRIAL.

"Mr. Conway," said Bert, as they walked home together from the trial, "I am very grateful to you for getting me out of my trouble. If you will let me know your fee, I will pay it."

"My dear boy," rejoined the young lawyer, "this is my vacation, and I only took up your case to keep my hand in."

"You are very kind, and I shall always remember it."

"Lawyers are not always mercenary, though they have that reputation with some. I should like, by the way, to find out who did steal the bill."

"So should I. I have no idea for my part."

"If you ever find out, let me know. I go back to New York to-morrow, and am glad to leave the memory of a professional triumph behind me."

"What is your address, Mr. Conway?"

"No. 111 Nassau Street, Room 15. Here is my card. When you come to New York, call and see me."

"I shall do so, though it may be some time in the future. Do you think I could get anything to do in New York?"

"Yes; but perhaps not enough to pay your expenses."

"I find the same trouble here."

"You have been at work in the shoe factory, I believe."

"Yes; but I have been discharged. My place has been taken by a machine."

"That is unfortunate. Is there no other opening in Lakeville?"

"I have not found any yet."

"I will keep your case in mind, and if I hear of anything I will let you know."

When Squire Marlowe returned home from the trial, his wife inquired with interest, "How did the case come out?"

"The boy was acquitted," answered her husband shortly.

"Acquitted! Why, you thought it was a close case."

"So I did, but it came out on the trial that there were two twenty-dollar bills, and the one which the Barton boy presented was left for him by Uncle Jacob."

"By that old man? Why, I thought he was poor."

"So he is—worth only five hundred dollars, and he is making ducks and drakes of that as fast as he can."

"And then he will fall back on you?"

"I suppose so."

"Then I hope you will let him go to the poor house," said Mrs. Marlowe with energy.

"I shall. I have no pity for a man who throws away his money."

Percy came home to dinner in lively spirits. He was free from anxiety, and felt that he had been remarkably fortunate.

"Were you at the trial, Percy?" asked his mother.

"No, ma."

"I thought you would be interested in seeing that boy on trial."

"I was sorry for him, and didn't want to be present."

"Sorry for him?"

"Yes; I felt sure he had not taken the money."

"Seems to me this is a new streak, Percy," said the squire. "I thought you didn't like Bert Barton."

"I am not intimate with him, for he is only a working boy; but all the same I don't want him convicted when he is innocent."

"It is a mystery to me who could have taken the other twenty-dollar bill," said the squire. "Can you think of anybody?"

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"No; how should I?" returned Percy, nearly swallowing a spoonful of soup the wrong way.

"There are so few people in the village, that it must be some one we know."

"Perhaps old Jones didn't lose any money, after all."

"There is no doubt on that point. The stolen bill has been returned to him in an envelope by Sam Doyle."

"Is that so?" exclaimed Percy, counterfeiting surprise. "Why, it must be the same envelope Sam showed me."

"He showed you the envelope?"

"Yes; he picked it up by the roadside. It was directed in pencil to Mr. Jones. So that contained the stolen bill?"

"Yes."

"Then perhaps it was taken in joke."

"A poor joke! No; the thief got alarmed, and took that way of returning it. I suggested to Jones that the handwriting on the envelope might furnish a clew to the thief."

"What did he say?" asked Percy, alarmed.

"He said he should do nothing about it, now that he had the money back."

"I guess he's right," said Percy, relieved.

120

In the afternoon Bert met Percy in the street. He advanced cordially.

"Well, Percy, I got free, after all."

"Yes, I am glad of it."

"I feel grateful to you for believing in my innocence."

"It's all right," said Percy, in a patronizing tone. "Even if you are a working boy, I was sure you wouldn't steal."

Bert's feelings cooled a little. Somehow Percy's manner kept him aloof.

"Yes, I am a working boy," he replied, "or at any rate I would like to be, but I don't find it easy to get work."

"Just so! If I hear of anything I will let you know. Good-morning!"

"I don't know what to make of Percy," thought Bert, perplexed. "He was as kind as he could be this morning, and now he is offish. At any rate, he didn't believe me guilty, and I won't forget that in a hurry."

Two more weeks passed, and Bert still found himself unable to find employment. Berries had become so plenty that he was unable to sell any, and only picked some for consumption at home. The sum of money which had been received from Uncle Jacob gradually dwindled, and Bert became alarmed. What would they do when it was all gone? He had no doubt that Uncle Jacob would give them further assistance, if appealed to, but both he and his mother felt that it would be an imposition on the old man, with his limited fund of money, to ask anything more of him.

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"I don't want any more of Uncle Jacob's money, mother," said Bert; "but I should like to ask him if he could find me a place in New York."

"I couldn't bear to have you leave me, Bert."

"But I must take work wherever I can find it."

So Bert with his mother's permission, wrote to Uncle Jacob, informing him of his discharge from the factory, and his desire to obtain work elsewhere. This letter reached Jacob Marlowe, and led to his writing as follows to the squire:

NEPHEW ALBERT:

I hear by a letter from Lakeville that you have discharged Bert Barton from your employment, and that he cannot secure any other kind of work. I am surprised that you should treat Mary's boy in this manner, considering the relationship that exists between you. I appeal to your better nature to reinstate him in his old place. I can assure you that you will have no cause to regret it. I have steady work here, and am quite well satisfied with my position and prospects.

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JACOB MARLOWE.

"The stupid old meddler!" ejaculated the squire, throwing the letter from him in impatience. "I suppose the Barton boy has been writing to him. He evidently considers it my duty to support all my poor relations, himself included. I will undeceive him on that point." He drew writing materials toward him and wrote as follows:

UNCLE JACOB:

I have received your letter asking me to reinstate the Barton boy in his old place. This is a business matter, and I don't permit any interference with my business. I may add that, even if he is a poor relation, I do not feel called upon to support all my needy relations. I am glad you have obtained a situation in which you can make an honest living. I hope you will keep it, and won't squander the small sum of money you have in reserve.

Yours, etc.,

ALBERT MARLOWE.

When Uncle Jacob read this letter, he smiled.

"It is what I expected," he said to himself. "Albert Marlowe is thoroughly selfish, and so, I think, are his wife and son. I must find some other way of helping Bert."

The day succeeding the receipt of Uncle Jacob's letter, the squire met Bert in the post-office.

"Have you been writing to Jacob Marlowe?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"I suppose you asked him to urge me to take you back into the factory?"

"No, sir."

"At any rate, he has done so; but I allow no one to interfere in my business affairs. You hear, do you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then remember it!" and Squire Marlowe turned his back rudely upon Bert.

"Here is a letter for you, Bert!" said the postmaster.

Bert opened the letter in some surprise, and read it with interest and excitement.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BERT OBTAINS WORK.

123

To begin with, the letter, which Bert so unexpectedly received, contained a ten-dollar bill.

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"It must be from Uncle Jacob!" he thought. He turned to the next page, and looked for the signature. It was, as he anticipated, Jacob Marlowe. It was brief, as will be seen from the copy given below:

MY DEAR NEPHEW:

I am sorry to hear that you have lost your place in the factory. I think Albert Marlowe might at any rate have retained *you*, knowing how much you and your mother needed your weekly wages. I have written to him, asking him to take you back into the shop, but I do not suppose he will. It is more to test him than anything else that I have made the request. But, at any rate, we will give him a chance to deal considerately. Next week, Thursday, if you should not have found work, come up to the city and seek me at the office where I am employed, No. 111 Nassau Street, Room 19, and I may have it in my power to employ you in an important matter. Bring all your clothes with you, but take only money enough to

get to the city, leaving the balance with your mother. Give my love to her, and tell her to keep up good courage.

Your affectionate uncle,

JACOB MARLOWE.

"I am to go to New York!" thought Bert joyfully. "Perhaps Uncle Jacob will find me a place there. I shall enjoy that ever so much. Let me see, I am to go next week, Thursday, and it is now Saturday. I wish the time had come!"

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Of course, Bert carried the letter home and showed it to his mother.

"How kind Uncle Jacob is!" she murmured. "But I am afraid he is too generous. He is a poor man. He cannot afford to be giving us money all the time."

"He is earning a good salary, you know, mother."

"Only twelve dollars a week, Bert."

"But that is a good deal. If I were earning twelve dollars a week I should feel rich."

"It doesn't go very far in a large and expensive city like New York."

"I could save half of it, if I had it. Would you mind much, mother, if I should take a place in New York?"

"It would be terribly lonely for me, Bert," sighed Mrs. Barton.

"But you would not oppose it?"

"Not if your Uncle Jacob thought it best. He seems to be our only friend just now."

"Yes; I don't know what we should have done without him."

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On Monday morning, considerably to his surprise, Bert received an offer of employment.

About a mile from his mother's cottage lived Silas Wilson, an old farmer about sixty years of age, who had the reputation of being one of the meanest men in Lakeville. Even his horses and cows had a hungry look, and it was easy to see that they were not pampered or injured by over-feeding. This was the man who stopped his farm wagon in front of Mrs. Barton's dwelling, and spoke to Bert, who was just coming out of the front door.

"Here, you, Bert Barton!"

"Good-morning, Mr. Wilson," replied Bert.

"Squire Marlowe tells me you are out of a job."

"Yes, sir."

"And I've been thinkin' I could give you work on my farm."

Bert was not overjoyed at this announcement, but he felt that he ought to take into consideration any offer that might be made to him.

"Would you expect me to board at your house?" he asked.

"Sartin! All my boys board with me."

"How much wages would you be willing to pay?"

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"Fifty cents a week and board. I calculate that would be about right."

"Fifty cents a week and board?" repeated Bert, by no means dazzled by the tempting offer.

"Yes. What do you say?"

"I shouldn't be willing to work for that."

"You wouldn't, hey? What did you get in the shoe shop?"

"Four dollars a week."

"Board's worth that, so I give you what's equal to four dollars and a half."

Bert had heard something of the kind of board supplied by the farmer, and he was hardly prepared to rate it so high.

"It wouldn't be worth that to me," he said. "I would rather work for three dollars and a half in cash, and board at home."

"I've got to have my boy in the house," said Silas Wilson decidedly. "Come, now, what do you say?"

He regarded Bert with some anxiety, for he had been suddenly left in the lurch by a hired man who had received a better offer elsewhere, and hardly knew where to turn for assistance.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," said Bert. "I've got to go to New York on Thursday on business, but I'll come and work for you till Wednesday night for half a dollar and my board."

"I'll give you thirty-five cents," replied the farmer cautiously.

Bert shook his head.

"Forty, then, and that's high pay for a half grown boy."

"I'm more than half grown," returned Bert. "It's no use, Mr. Wilson, I won't take less than fifty cents."

"Then jump on the wagon. It's a big price to pay, but I'm in a hole, and won't stop to dicker."

"I will go and tell my mother first."

"Well, hurry up, for part of the day is gone already."

"I don't believe you'll like it, Bert," said Mrs. Barton.

"Nor I, but I made up my mind to accept the first offer I got, and I shall feel better satisfied if I keep my word. I'll come round this evening, after work, and tell you how I like it as far as I've got."

Bert seated himself in the wagon next to the farmer.

"Be you the boy that Jones charged with stealin'?" asked Silas.

"Yes, sir."

"You didn't do it?" asked Silas, in some apprehension.

"No, of course not!" answered Bert, indignantly. "Didn't you know I was acquitted, and that it was shown that there were two twenty-dollar bills?"

"It's wicked to steal," observed the farmer, apparently a little anxious still.

"Of course it is."

"One of the boys that worked for me stole some money from a chest-of-drawers in my chamber. You see Mis' Wilson and me sleep in a bedroom on the first floor openin' out of the settin' room."

"Did the boy take much?" asked Bert, in some curiosity.

"Yes; he took a twenty-five cent piece," answered Silas Wilson, soberly.

Bert wanted to laugh, but controlled his facial muscles, though he eyed his companion with a queer look.

"That was a good deal of money," he said, soberly.

"Yes, it was."

"How did you find him out—the boy, I mean?"

"He spent the money at Jones's store."

"What did he buy with it?"

"He bought some doughnuts."

"Did he board with you?" asked Bert significantly.

"Yes, he did."

"Then," thought Bert, "I don't wonder much that he was tempted."

"I've got fifty cents in my pocket," he said aloud, producing the coin. "I show it to you, so that if you hear of my spending money you needn't think I took it from you."

Silas Wilson eyed the half-dollar with a covetous look, which the sight of money always brought to his face.

"Hadn't you better give it to me to keep for you?"

"No, thank you; I am very careful. I shall not lose it."

"Boys ginerally are keerless. They are apt to lose money."

"I don't believe you ever lose money, Mr. Wilson."

"Not since I was a boy. I lost two cents once, but it was a lesson to me, and I've never lost a copper since."

By this time they had reached the farm-house. The farmer drove into the barn and put up the horse.

"Now we'll go to work," he said.

The work which awaited Bert was in the cornfield. He was set to hoeing, and kept it up for three hours, along with the farmer in the adjoining row. Noon came, and Silas, pausing in his work, said: "I calculate Mis' Wilson will have dinner ready. We'll go to the house."

CHAPTER XIX.

BERT'S EXPERIENCE AS A FARMER'S BOY.

Bert followed the farmer into the kitchen, in the center of which a table was set. A bony and angular woman was just placing on it a large pitcher of water.

"Mis' Wilson," said the farmer, "this is Bert Barton, who is helping me about the farm work."

Bert was no stranger to Mrs. Wilson, whose pew in church was near the one he occupied.

"How's your ma?" she inquired jerkily.

"Pretty well, thank you, Mrs. Wilson."

"I'm glad to hear it. She looks like a friend of mine, Mrs. Dusenberry, who died of heart disease."

"I don't think her heart is affected," said Bert, not without anxiety.

"Maybe not, but you can't tell. Folks lives along for years with their hearts out of kilter, who never find it out till some day they drop dead."

Mrs. Wilson decidedly was not a cheerful converser. She prided herself on detecting signs of unsuspected diseases.

"Mebbe you've got heart disease yourself, Sophia," remarked the farmer jocosely.

"Just as likely as not," answered Mrs. Wilson calmly. "I'm sure my liver's affected, for I feel it squirm sometimes."

"Mebbe I'd better look out for a second Mis' Wilson," suggested the farmer smiling.

"You ain't over healthy yourself, Silas," responded his better half, surveying her husband in a business-like manner. "It looks to me as if your kidneys was out of order, and you're the very image of Jed Pettibone, who died of apoplexy. He lived next door to my mother. One day he was alive and well, and to-morrow he was as the grass of the field."

The farmer's face wore a very uncomfortable look, and he was evidently by no means pleased with his wife's prognostications.

"Nonsense!" he said testily. "I'm as well as any man of my age in Lakeville."

"Boast not thyself of to-morrow!" quoted Mrs. Wilson solemnly.

"Come, Bert, let us set down to dinner," said Silas hastily. "What have you got for us, Sophia?"

"I've warmed over them beans we had yesterday," answered his helpmeet, "and there's two sausages besides. I don't want any. You'd ought to make a dinner off of that."

"Why, to be sure! Beans and sausages is hearty, and will stand by us in the field. The laborer is worthy of his meat."

"Where's the meat," thought Bert.

Silas Wilson put a moderate portion of beans on a large plate, flanking it with a thin, consumptive-looking sausage.

"Help yourself to potatoes," he said, as he handed the plate to Bert.

Bert availed himself of the invitation, and helped himself to a potato in that condition known as soggy. He tried to eat it, but, though fond of potatoes, he left it almost entire on his plate. This, however, was not all. There was a plate of rye-bread on the table, from which Bert helped himself to a slice. It was apparently two or three days old, and needed something to make it palatable.

"Please give me some butter," asked Bert, not having observed that this was a prohibited article on the Wilsons' dinner table.

"There ain't none," answered Mrs. Wilson promptly.

"I beg pardon. I hadn't noticed," said Bert, blushing.

"We never have butter at dinner," explained Silas Wilson. "It's apt to lead to humors, particularly in boys, isn't it, Mis' Wilson?"

"So I've always heard, Silas. Besides, as we have it at breakfast and supper, that's enough. It goes fast enough, even then. Why, we used most a pound last week."

"And butter twenty-seven cents a pound!" chimed in the farmer. "Why, it's extravagant!"

"Do you know, Silas, how much butter is used in Squire Marlowe's family?"

"No," answered the farmer, with interest.

"Hannah—Mrs. Marlowe's girl—told me they used six pounds and a half last week, and there's only four of them, including the girl. What do you think of that?"

"What do I think? I think it's sinful—positively sinful! Six pounds and a half at twenty-seven cents ___"

"They pay thirty-two, and get the best in the market," amended his wife.

"Worse and worse! That comes to what—Bert?"

"Two dollars and eight cents," answered Bert promptly.

"Sho! Did you ever?"

"Well, I s'pose the squire can stand it. No doubt they live on the fat of the land. I just wish they'd invite me to tea, so I could judge for myself. I could tell within five cents how much the supper cost."

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It must be confessed that Bert did not enjoy his dinner. The sausage was far from rich or juicy, and the beans were almost cold. The potatoes and bread have already been referred to. However, there was to be a second course, and to that Bert looked forward anxiously, for he had by no means satisfied his appetite. It was a plain rice pudding, and partially satisfactory, for it takes very little skill to boil rice, and there is little variety in the quality. By way of sauce Mrs. Wilson provided cheap grade of molasses. Still Bert enjoyed it better than any other article on the table.

"There's nothing like a good dinner to strengthen us for the labors of the field," said Silas Wilson complacently, as he rose from the table. "Come, Bert, now let us get to work to make up for lost time."

"So Mr. Wilson considers the time spent in eating as lost time," thought Bert. "I'd rather have one of mother's dinners than half a dozen like this. Ugh! how nasty those potatoes were."

Bert returned to the field, and resumed his work. He found it hard to keep up with Silas Wilson, whose energies seemed to be quickened by his midday meal.

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About four o'clock a man came along who wanted to see Silas on business, and he went back to the house, leaving Bert to continue his work alone.

"This is about the longest day I ever passed," thought Bert, pausing to wipe his moistened forehead. "I am afraid I shall never want to be a farmer. I mustn't forget, though, that I am to receive sixteen cents and a little over per day, besides board—and such board! Yet this is the way Silas Wilson has lived all his life, and he must be sixty-five at least. How much more enjoyment Uncle Jacob has out of life, though he is a poor man compared to the farmer."

At this moment he heard wheels passing on the road hard by, and looking up he recognized Percy Marlowe, neat and trim in his attire, driving a light buggy.

"Hallo!" called out Percy, checking his horse.

"Hallo, Percy!"

"Are you working for Silas Wilson?"

"Yes, for a few days."

"I guess you'll make a fortune in that time?" said Percy laughing.

"It seems like it," responded Bert.

"How much does he pay you?"

"Fifty cents for three days and board."

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Percy laughed.

"I should want fifty cents an hour, and then I wouldn't do it."

"I'd work all the year round at that price," said Bert.

"I never expect to work—with my hands," went on Percy.

"Have you decided what to do?" asked Bert curiously.

"My father wants me to be a manufacturer, but I think I shall be a lawyer."

"I am afraid I shan't have much choice. I must take what I can get."

"You might stay with Mr. Wilson and be a farmer."

"I don't think that will suit me at any rate, unless I can work for a different man."

"Perhaps father can take you back into the shop when you are older."

"I wish he would take me back now. I like it a great deal better than working out in the field here."

"You mustn't get too high notions into your head, Bert. You know you are a working boy and mustn't expect to have things all your own way."

"I am not likely to forget that I am a working boy, especially with kind friends to remind me of it. But we live in the best country in the world, and there is many a working boy who grows up to be a distinguished man."

Percy laughed ironically.

"I wouldn't get such silly ideas into your head," he said.

"Why are they silly?"

"You talk as if you expected to be a distinguished man. Ha, ha!"

"I hope to be a successful man," answered Bert stoutly.

Percy laughed again and drove on. Five minutes later Bert saw the farmer running from the house in a state of great apparent excitement.

"Have you seen anything of my wallet?" he gasped, as he came within hearing distance.

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CHAPTER XX.

BERT IS PLACED IN AN EMBARRASSING POSITION.

Bert regarded his employer with surprise.

"Your wallet?" he repeated.

"Yes," answered Silas Wilson impatiently. "I had it in my pocket when I was at work here. I didn't think about it till just now, after Mr. Dexter had left me. Then I found that my pocket was empty."

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"I haven't seen it, but you may have dropped it somewhere."

"Just help me look for it. Has anybody been here?"

"No; at least not in the field. Percy Marlowe passed in his buggy, and——"

"Never mind about that. Help me look for the wallet."

The rows of corn were of considerable length, and there were a good many of them. At least ten minutes elapsed before anything was seen of the missing article, and dark suspicions of his young assistant entered the mind of Mr. Wilson. But at last Bert's sharp eyes espied a faded leather wallet between two hills in one of the rows which the farmer had hoed.

"Is this it?" he asked, holding it up in his hand.

"Yes!" exclaimed Silas delighted. "Where did you find it?"

"Just here."

Mr. Wilson opened it, anxious to see whether the contents were intact.

"It's all safe," he said, with a sigh of relief.

"Was there much money in it?" asked Bert.

"Yes; two dollars and sixty-seven cents. It's a narrow escape! Suppose a dishonest person had found it?"

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"It would have been terrible!" said Bert, successfully checking his disposition to laugh.

"I'm much obliged to you, Bert, for findin' it. I suppose you don't want any reward?"

"Oh, no! I am working for you, you know, and it wasn't my own time I was using."

"That's true! Still, I am willin' to give you two cents to encourage you to be honest."

"Thank you, Mr. Wilson; but I don't need any reward for that."

"You're a good boy, and if you stay with me I'll make a man of you."

"Thank you."

Bert was privately of opinion that if he remained till the age of twenty-one in Silas Wilson's employ, boarding at his table, he would grow into a very thin, under-sized man indeed.

Supper was a less substantial meal than dinner in the Wilson household, consisting of bread and butter and tea, with the addition of a plate of doughnuts, which were so tough and hard that it occurred to Bert that they would make very good base-balls if they had been of the right shape.

After supper he went home for an hour.

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"Don't you feel very tired, Bert?" asked his mother.

"Yes, mother, but I feel still more hungry. If you've got anything left from supper I think I can dispose of it."

"Certainly, Bert; but didn't you eat supper at Mr. Wilson's?"

"Mother, they don't know what good living is there. I'd rather have one of your suppers than a dozen of Mr. Wilson's. I begin to think that the board part won't be worth over fifty cents for three days. I am sure it won't cost them any more."

"I wish you were going to sleep here, Bert. I shall feel lonely."

"So do I, but I shall only be away two nights. Silas Wilson promises to make a man of me if I'll stay, but I'd rather grow to manhood somewhere else."

Bert returned to the farm-house, and about half-past eight went to bed. He knew he must be early astir, and he felt fatigued by his day of labor in the field. Besides, Mr. and Mrs. Wilson went to bed at this hour. The farmer was not fond of reading, nor indeed was there anything in the house to read, for neither he nor his wife had a literary taste. Once he took an agricultural paper for a year at a cost of two dollars, but whenever the paper arrived he groaned in spirit over the cost, and deplored his extravagance in subscribing for it.

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The room assigned to Bert was over the kitchen, which was in the ell part. The roof was sloping, and, toward the eaves, very low. There was one window near the bed which he occupied.

Bert went to sleep in ten minutes, and slept soundly for three or four hours. Then something roused him, and he opened his eyes. What he saw startled him. By the bright moonlight he perceived a man climbing in at the window.

To say that Bert was perfectly calm would not be true. He was very much startled, as I think almost any boy, or man either, would have been under the circumstances.

"It is a burglar!" thought Bert in excitement. "What can I do?"

Some one evidently had heard of Silas Wilson's miserly disposition, and judged that there would be a good chance to secure booty in the farm house. Bert, though he did not admire Mr. Wilson, felt that it was his duty to protect him from being plundered, if possible. He knew that he was in some personal peril, but he was naturally a brave boy, and his spirit rose to the occasion.

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He waited until the supposed burglar was in the room, and then, sitting up in bed, asked stoutly: "Who are you? What brings you here?"

The man turned swiftly toward the bed, and fixed his eyes on Bert, but did not immediately speak.

"If you are a burglar," continued Bert, emboldened by the man's hesitation, "you had better get out of the window again, or I shall call Mr. Wilson."

"No, don't call him, at least not yet," said the intruder, sinking into a chair a few feet from the bed. "Are you working here?"

"Yes."

"Who are you?"

This seemed a singular question. What could his name matter to a burglar? However, Bert answered mechanically, "My name is Bert Barton."

"The widow Barton's boy?"

"Yes; how do you know that?" demanded Bert, in bewilderment.

"Don't you know me?" was the unexpected rejoinder.

He drew nearer to the bed, and Bert gazed at him earnestly, but no light dawned upon him.

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"No, I don't know you," he said, shaking his head.

"I am Silas Wilson's son," said the stranger.

"Phineas Wilson?"

Now Bert remembered that eight years before, the farmer's son, a man grown, had left Lakeville, and, so far as he knew, had not been heard of since. He had contracted a habit of drinking and

had tired of farm work. Moreover, when he left, he had taken fifty dollars of his father's money with him, which had led to bitter feelings on the part of the farmer, who appeared to mourn the loss of his money more than that of his son. And this was the young man who had crept into his father's house like a thief in the night.

"Why did you get into my window?" asked Bert. "Why didn't you come to the door?"

"I—didn't know if I would be welcome. I wanted to ask. Do you know how my father feels toward me?"

"No; I have only been here one day. He ought to be glad to see his son."

"I took some money with me when I went away," said Phineas hesitating. "Father's very fond of money."

"Yes," assented Bert.

"And he would find it hard to forget that."

"Why didn't you come back before?"

"I didn't dare to come till I could bring the money. I have got it with me, but not a dollar more. If you want to know what brings me back, look in my face and see for yourself."

The moon came out from behind a cloud, and by its light Bert saw that the young man's face was thin and ghastly.

"I am sick," he said; "irregular hours and whiskey have done their work. I am afraid I have got to pass in my checks."

"What does that mean—die?"

"Yes."

"Don't give up!" said Bert, feeling his sympathies go out toward this prodigal son. "You are young. It takes a good deal to kill a young man."

"You're a good fellow, Bert. That's your name, isn't it? Will you do me a favor?"

"To be sure I will."

"I am famished. I haven't had anything to eat for twenty-four hours. Can you slip downstairs and fetch me something to eat—no matter what—and a glass of milk?"

Bert hesitated. He could get what was required in the pantry, but suppose the farmer or his wife should wake up! It would make his position a very awkward one.

"Hadn't you better go down yourself?" he asked.

"I can hardly stand, I am so tired. Besides, I don't know where mother keeps things."

"I will try," said Bert; and he slipped on his pantaloons, and went softly downstairs.

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CHAPTER XXI.

THE MIDNIGHT VISIT TO THE PANTRY.

"Suppose Mrs. Wilson sees me?" thought Bert uncomfortably. "She will take me for a thief."

He was actuated by the kindest motives, but he heartily wished his errand were done. As he stepped into the kitchen he heard the deep breathing of Mrs. Wilson and the noisy snore of her husband, and rightly judged that it would not be easy to rouse either of them. He opened the pantry door, and by the light of the moon was able to inspect the shelves. There was a half loaf of bread on one shelf, half a dozen doughnuts on a plate on the shelf below, and a few cold beans close beside them. Then there was a small pitcher half-full of milk.

"I don't think the beans or doughnuts will set well on an empty stomach," Bert reflected. "I'd better take the milk and two or three slices of bread."

Here the cat, who had been asleep on the hearth, roused herself, perhaps at the sight of the milk pitcher, and, mewling loudly, rubbed herself against Bert's legs.

"Scat!" cried Bert, in a low voice, anxiously looking toward the door of the bed chamber in which the farmer and his wife lay asleep.

The cat got between his legs and nearly tripped him up, but he managed to get out of the room and upstairs. Phineas looked at him eagerly.

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"I have some bread and milk here," said Bert. "I couldn't find any butter. There were some cold beans and doughnuts, but—"

"The bread and milk are better. Give them to me. I am almost famished."

The bread was dry and stale, but Phineas was not in the mood to be particular. He ate like one famished, and drained the pitcher to the last drop.

"I feel better," he said then, with a sigh of relief.

"I suppose I had better take the pitcher back to the kitchen. It will be missed," reflected Bert, and he started downstairs again in his bare feet. He paused at the kitchen door, and heard the farmer talking in his sleep. This alarmed him. He decided that it would not do to replace the pitcher in the pantry, as he would be likely to be heard. He waited where he was for five minutes, and then ventured into the kitchen. This time he was successful, and with mind relieved returned to his chamber.

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Phineas was dozing in his chair.

"You had better get into the bed, Mr. Wilson," said Bert, filled with compassion for the weary wayfarer. "I'll lie on the floor."

"If you don't mind. I am fagged out."

Bert made a pillow of his coat and trousers, and stretched himself on the floor. He found that there was an inside bolt, with which he fastened the door, to guard against any unexpected visit from Mr. or Mrs. Wilson.

He fell asleep again, and was only roused by a loud voice at the foot of the back stairs.

"Time to get up!" called the farmer.

"All right!" responded Bert in a loud tone.

Fortunately Silas Wilson did not think it necessary to come up. Had he done so it would have been embarrassing, for Phineas was sound asleep on the bed. Bert thought it best to rouse him before he went down stairs.

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"Are you not afraid some one will come upstairs and find you here?" he asked.

"No; mother never comes up till after she has got breakfast out of the way and the dishes washed."

"I suppose you know best," said Bert doubtfully.

"If necessary I shall tell her who I am."

Bert went below, and sat down at the breakfast table. It was clear from the expression on Mrs. Wilson's face that she had something on her mind.

"Silas," she said solemnly, "something mysterious has happened during the night."

"What is it?" asked the farmer in a tone of surprise.

"We have been robbed!"

"What of?" he asked, turning pale. "Do you miss any of the spoons?"

"No."

"Or—or money?" and he pulled out his wallet hurriedly.

"No, no, it isn't that."

"What is it, then?"

"I left that pitcher half full of milk when I went to bed last night. This morning there wasn't a drop in it, and the pantry door was open."

"Cats are fond of milk," suggested Silas, with a glance at Tabby, who was lying near the fire-place.

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"It wasn't the cat. She couldn't get her head inside the pitcher. Besides, there are three slices of bread missing."

"Won't cats eat bread?"

"It was a two-legged cat!" replied Mrs. Wilson significantly.

Bert reddened in spite of himself, and tried to look unconscious. He saw that Mrs. Wilson was on the point of making a discovery, and that suspicion was likely to fall upon him. This he could clear up, but it would be at the expense of the poor fellow who was asleep upstairs.

"But how could anybody get into the house?" asked Silas. "The doors were locked, weren't they?"

"Yes, Silas. In forty years I have never failed to lock the door before I went to bed."

"Then I don't see—"

"Nor I—yet!" said Mrs. Wilson significantly, and Bert thought—but he may have been mistaken—that her eyes turned for a moment in his direction.

"At any rate it isn't much of a loss. Was there anything else in the closet?"

"There were some doughnuts and beans."

"Were any of them taken?"

"No, not that I can see."

"Cats don't care for them."

"Don't be a fool, Silas! That poor cat had no more to do with the robbery than I have."

"Mebbe you're right; but cats have been known to steal. I like dogs better myself."

"I don't!" cried Mrs. Wilson with emphasis. "I'm not going to have any dog trapesing over my floors with his muddy feet."

"Just as you like, Sophia. You'd better lock the pantry door in future."

"I'm not sure that that will answer, unless I hide the key."

"Do you seriously think a human being took the things?"

"Yes, I do—in the middle of the night."

"By gracious! that's serious, He might have come into our room and taken my wallet and watch."

"And maybe murdered us in our beds!" added Mrs. Wilson grimly.

"Did you hear anybody walking round the house last night, Bert?" asked the farmer, who was by this time worked up into a state of agitation.

"No," answered Bert.

"I am glad he did not ask me whether I *saw* anybody," thought he. "I don't want to tell a lie."

"I usually sleep pretty sound," he added, a little ashamed of his duplicity, yet not knowing how else to avert suspicions.

"So we all do!" said the farmer's wife. "We might be all murdered in our beds without knowing anything about it."

"I shouldn't want to know anything about it if that was going to happen," observed Silas, not without reason. "I don't think it could have been a very desperate ruffian, if he contented himself with taking bread and milk."

"He may come again to-night," suggested Mrs. Wilson.

"I hope not," said Silas fervently. "I—I couldn't sleep if I thought so."

"We must get to the bottom of this," went on his wife resolutely. "I am not willing to have such goings on in my house."

"How are you going to do it, Sophia? Probably the thief's miles off by this time."

"He may be, or he may not be!" said Mrs. Wilson in an oracular tone.

"I've heard of folks walking in their sleep," she added, after a pause.

"You don't mean me?" asked Silas.

"No; if you did it I'd have had a chance to find out in forty years. Do you ever walk in your sleep?" she asked, turning suddenly to Bert.

The question was so unexpected that he could not help changing color, and this served to increase Mrs. Wilson's dawning suspicions.

"Not that I ever heard of," Bert answered, after a pause.

"I knew a boy once that did—it was a second cousin of my brother's first wife."

"I am sure I never get up in my sleep."

The door leading into the entry from which the back-stairs ascended was open, and through this, just at this moment, was heard a sound that startled all three who were sitting at the breakfast table.

It was a loud, unmistakeable sneeze, and it came from the chamber which Bert had occupied.

The farmer and his wife started as if the house had been shaken by an exploding bombshell. Both turned as pale as death, looked fearfully at each other, and clutched tightly at the edges of the table.

CHAPTER XXII.

A PANIC AT FARMER WILSON'S.

Silas Wilson was not a brave man, and at his wife's suggestion he turned pale, and looked panic-stricken.

"Do—you—think so?" he asked feebly.

"Do I think so? I know so," returned Mrs. Wilson energetically.

"How could he get up there?"

Mrs. Wilson walked to the window, and her lynx eyes detected the ladder by which Phineas had climbed to the window of Bert's room.

"Do you see that?" she asked.

It is rather surprising that she did not suspect Bert of knowing something about the matter, but she had not yet had time to put two and two together.

"It's terrible!" murmured Silas, mopping the cold perspiration from his forehead. "What can we do?"

"What can we do? Go and get your gun, Silas, and go up and confront the villain. That's what we can do."

Somehow the suggestion did not seem to find favor with Mr. Wilson.

"He would shoot me," he said. "He's probably waitin' for me with a loaded weepun upon the landin'."

"Silas Wilson, I am ashamed of you. Are you going to let a villainous burglar rampage round upstairs, stealin' whatever he can lay his hands on? Come now!"

"I believe you care more for the few things upstairs than for your husband's life," said Silas reproachfully.

"Do you want *me* to go, Silas? What'll the folks in the village say when they hear of it?"

"I don't know as I know where the gun is," said Silas nervously.

"It's out in the woodshed behind the door."

"I don't know as it's loaded. Besides I wouldn't want to be took up for murder."

"Not much danger, Silas Wilson! Such men as you don't get into such scrapes as that."

Mrs. Wilson went out into the woodshed, and returned, holding the gun in such a way that it pointed directly at her husband.

"Don't you know no better than to p'int that gun at me, Sophia?" exclaimed Silas in no little terror. "Beats all what fools women are about firearms."

"They may be fools, but they ain't cowards," returned Mrs. Wilson. "Come, are you going up or not?"

"Hadn't I better go to the foot of the stairs and fire up?" asked Silas with a bright idea.

"And then he'd come down on you, when your gun was discharged, and run his bayonet into you," said Mrs. Wilson, who knew that at the battle of Bunker Hill the muskets had bayonets attached.

"I'll give him warnin'!" continued Silas. "It'll only be fair. He'll probably be frightened and climb down the ladder."

"I never did see such a 'fraid cat in my life!" quoth Mrs. Wilson contemptuously.

"Mebbe you're braver'n I be. If you are, go up yourself!" said Silas Wilson angrily.

"You want to put your wife in danger, do you?" returned Mrs. Wilson, who was as averse to facing the burglar as her husband, though she talked more courageously.

"And you want to expose your husband to danger," retorted Silas, "so it's an even thing, so far as I can see."

It is hardly necessary to say that Bert enjoyed the dispute between the husband and wife, though

he maintained an outward gravity which helped him to conceal his secret amusement. By this time he thought it time for him to take part.

"I'll go up," he said.

"You will?" exclaimed Silas in surprise and relief.

"Yes, I am not afraid."

"To be sure! The burglar wouldn't do you no harm. You're only a boy. Do you know how to fire a gun?"

"Yes, but I shan't need the gun. I am sure the burglar wouldn't harm me."

"You're a brave boy, Bert," said the farmer. "You're doing just what I would have done at your age."

"You *never* would have done it, Silas! I should be ashamed anyway to own up I was more of a coward as a grown man than as a boy."

"Sophia, you don't know much about burglars and their ways. Don't be afraid, Bert; I'll back you up; I'll stand at the door of the kitchen with the gun in my hand, and help you if you need it."

Bert smiled, for he knew just how valuable Silas Wilson's assistance would be, but he made no comment, and started on his perilous enterprise.

"I hope he won't come to no harm," said Mrs. Wilson. "I don't know but I'd better go with him."

"It would be safer for you, Sophia, for burglars don't shoot women."

"Much you know about it, Silas."

The two moved toward the kitchen door, Silas handling the gun as if he were afraid of it. They listened with painful attention, and presently heard the sound of voices, though they could not make out what was being said.

"The boy's speakin' to him!" said Silas, awe-struck. "I never see such a terrible time. I wish I'd told Bert to tell the burglar to go back the same way he came, and we wouldn't fire at him. I don't want to be too hard on the transgressor. Mebbe he's driven to his evil ways by destitution."

Mrs. Wilson paid very little attention to what her husband was saying, being more intent on what was passing upstairs.

After a short interval Bert came down.

"Well?" said Silas eagerly. "Did you see the burglar?"

"Yes."

"Where is he?"

"In my room."

"What is he doin' there?"

"He is lying on the bed."

"Well, if I ever saw such impudence!" ejaculated Mrs. Wilson.

"Has he got a gun with him? Did he offer to shoot you?"

"No," answered Bert gravely. "The poor fellow is sick."

"Poor fellow, indeed!" sniffed Mrs. Wilson. "What does he mean by getting into a respectable house through a window? He'll end up his days in jail."

"Does—does he look desperate?" inquired Silas Wilson. "Would he be likely to hurt me or Mis' Wilson?"

"No; he says he would like to have you come up."

"Well, of all things!" ejaculated Sophia.

"I've got something to tell you," went on Bert, turning from one to the other. "He wants me to tell you before you go up. It is some one whom you both know, though you haven't seen him for a good many years."

Silas did not understand, but a mother's instincts were quicker.

"Is it our son—Phineas?" she asked.

"Yes," answered Bert; "it is your son."

"Who stole fifty dollars from his father, and crept away like a thief in the night!" exclaimed the farmer indignantly.

"He has suffered, and is very weak," rejoined Bert. "He hadn't had anything to eat for twenty-four

hours, and I may as well tell you that it was I who came downstairs in the night and took up the bread and milk to him."

"You did quite right," said Mrs. Wilson, who was half-way upstairs by this time. He was her own son in spite of all, and though she was not an emotional woman, she yearned to see the face of her only child, with a mother's feelings all aroused within her.

"He took fifty dollars!" repeated Silas Wilson, still harping on a wrong which he had never forgotten nor forgiven.

Bert was rather disgusted at the farmer's meanness, but he relieved his anxiety.

"He's brought you back the money!" he said shortly.

"He has!" exclaimed Silas in a tone of gladness. "Did he tell you so?"

"Yes; it is all the money he had, and he went without food rather than spend any of it."

"Come, that's encouragin'," said the farmer. "He's turnin' from his evil ways."

When they reached Bert's chamber they saw Mrs. Wilson kneeling beside the bed, her harsh features softened by the light of an affection which had been absent from them for years. She looked contented and happy, now that her boy was restored to her.

"Got back again, Phineas, hey?" said Silas Wilson. "You're lookin' kinder peaked."

"Yes, father, I've been sick, but now——"

"I'll soon get him well!" interposed Mrs. Wilson. "I'll go right down and bring up some breakfast."

"I can eat it, mother. I have had nothing except the bread and milk Bert brought me."

On Wednesday evening Bert closed his engagement with the farmer, and declined to continue it, though urged strongly to do so. He went home in a whirl of excitement, for Phineas Wilson had told him something which overwhelmed him with astonishment.

CHAPTER XXIII.

BERT FORMS A RESOLUTION.

"Mother," said Bert abruptly, as he entered the cottage at the close of his engagement with the farmer, "when did father die?"

Mrs. Barton sank into a chair, and looked searchingly in her son's face.

"Why—do—you—ask?" she said slowly.

"I have been told to-day that he was living only a year since."

"Who told you?"

"Phineas Wilson, the farmer's son."

"Did he see him a year ago?"

"Yes, in some town in Canada—near Toronto, I believe. But, mother, you don't seem surprised."

"No, Bert, for I knew your father was living."

"Then why don't he come home. Why don't he live with us? Is there some mystery?"

"Yes, Bert, and a painful one for your unfortunate father. It is the fear of a prison that has kept him away from home."

"Surely, mother," said Bert, painfully shocked, "my father was not a criminal?"

"No, but circumstances made him appear such."

"Tell me the story."

"It is time that you heard it. Ten years ago your father and Albert Marlowe were employed by Weeks Brothers, large shoe manufacturers in a Massachusetts town. Both were skilled workmen——"

"Did Squire Marlowe work at the bench?"

"Yes, his position was precisely the same as your father's, no worse and no better. Both received the same pay—two dollars a day."

"Does Percy know this?"

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"Probably not. Albert Marlowe is not fond of speaking of his early days when he was a common workman. At that time our families were intimate and associated on equal terms. Our circumstances and ways of living were the same. We lived in a double house, Albert occupying one tenement, we the other."

"Were you and Mrs. Marlowe friendly then?"

"Yes; she had not yet become a fine lady, but did her own work, dispensing with a servant. We lived plainly, and, if anything, your father was the more prosperous of the two, as we managed to save from fifty to seventy-five dollars a year, while I don't believe Albert saved anything. But one day a terrible thing happened. Mr. Weeks, the senior partner, was a trustee and guardian for some minor children. A part of their property was invested in United States bonds, 5-20's as they are called. He kept them in his safe in the factory. One morning when he opened the safe they were missing. You can imagine the dismay of the guardian and his indignation against the unknown thief. The loss was publicly proclaimed, and a reward of one hundred dollars was offered to any one who could and would give any information that would lead to the discovery of the thief. Some one—a young man named Harding—entered the office of the firm and informed them that he had seen your father thrusting a paper, looking like a government bond, into the inside pocket of his overcoat—it was in the middle of winter. The workmen kept their coats in a small room near the entrance of the factory. Of course the room was visited, your father's coat was examined, and in one of the pockets was found one of the missing bonds, one for five hundred dollars. Your father was summoned, charged with the theft, and required to tell what he had done with the remaining bonds. He was thunder-struck at the accusation, and denied in the most positive terms any knowledge of the stolen property. His statement was not credited. He was arrested, tried for the offense, and sentenced to a term of imprisonment."

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"Bert's face flushed with indignation, and he clinched his fist almost unconsciously.

"Did he go to prison?" he asked hoarsely.

"No; some of his friends, who believed in his innocence, helped him to escape, and supplied him with funds to get out of the country. Now you know why he has remained absent all these years."

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"But why was I never told of this, mother? Why did I not know at the time?"

"You were only six years of age, and were sent away during the excitement to the house of a friend living at some distance. I moved away from the town in which my misfortunes were known, and eventually came here, learning that Albert Marlowe had established himself in business here. You readily believed that your father was dead."

"I understand now, mother. But is it not terrible that the happiness of a family should be broken up in this way?"

"Yes, Bert. Providence permits it for some wise purpose, no doubt, though it is hard for us to understand why it should be."

"One thing I don't understand, mother. You say that Squire Marlowe was a common workman, like my father, and a poor man?"

"Yes, Bert."

"How is it that he is now a rich manufacturer? Where did he get the necessary capital?"

"Nobody knew. He took all his friends by surprise when he went into business for himself on a large scale. Whatever the amount of his capital, he has never been financially embarrassed, and has gone on prospering."

"Till now he is a rich man, living in luxury, while we are living from hand to mouth, and poor father is an exile somewhere."

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"Yes, Bert."

"Don't you receive letters from father?"

"If I should, it would draw attention to him, and might imperil his safety."

"I might meet him sometime, and not know him."

"Have you no recollection of him?"

"Not the least? Haven't you any picture of him, mother?"

"Yes, I have a daguerreotype upstairs—an old-style picture."

"Why have you never shown it to me?"

"Because it would have led you to ask questions which would have been embarrassing for me to answer. You might have mentioned the existence of the picture before some visitor, and compelled me to produce it. Suppose this had been the case, and it had been recognized, it might have got your father into trouble."

"Now that I know all the circumstances, won't you show me the picture, mother?"

"Yes, Bert; the only objection I had is now removed."

Mrs. Barton went upstairs, and soon returned with one of those old-fashioned pictures of which many of my readers may have specimens in their homes—a daguerreotype.

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Bert scanned it attentively, and he first looked bewildered, then surprised.

"I have seen a face like that," he said after a pause.

"Where, Bert?"

"I don't remember. Is it possible that I can remember so far back?"

"It may be an accidental resemblance."

"No, the face is like in every respect. Can't you explain it to me, mother?"

"Think a little, Bert. Perhaps you will recall where you saw a face like this."

"I have it now," said Bert, his face brightening up. "It is like Mr. Robinson—the friend of father, who called here a few weeks since."

"Bert," said his mother slowly, "Mr. Robinson was not your father's friend. It was your father himself."

Bert looked the picture of astonishment.

"Why did you not tell me, mother?"

"How could I? You did not even know that he was alive. Ever since then I have been seeking an opportunity to tell you the truth."

"I am glad to know. What did father have to say?"

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"He thinks he has found out—at any rate he has strong suspicions—who was the real thief for whom he suffered."

"Who is it, mother? Is it any one I ever knew?"

"Yes, Bert."

"Tell me quick."

"Then you must promise to keep it secret till we are in a condition to prove the truth of our suspicions. It was Albert Marlowe."

"The squire?"

"Yes."

"That must explain his being able to go into business for himself."

"Yes. Your father is on the track of a man who was his accomplice, or rather his tool, in the matter—the young man named Harding, on whose information your father was arrested. Of course he is placed under a disadvantage in making these inquiries, being under the ban of the law."

"Mother," said Bert solemnly, "I am going to solve the mystery, if possible, make my father's evidence clear, and expose the real criminal. I am only a boy, and I don't know how I shall accomplish it, but I won't rest till I have done it."

"May Heaven grant you success, my dear boy!" responded Mrs. Barton fervently.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE OFFICE OF THE MAGNET MINE.

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Bert took the morning train to New York, and arrived about half-past seven o'clock. He met with no adventures on the way, and as soon as he reached the Grand Central Depot took a Fourth Avenue car down, as instructed by Uncle Jacob. In a large building of many stories on Nassau Street, on the sixth floor, was an office on the door of which Bert read

MAGNET MINING CO.

This, as he understood, was the office where Jacob Marlowe was employed.

Bert was considering whether he ought to knock or not, when a brisk-looking gentleman stepped up, and, opening the door, entered. Bert followed him in.

"Whom did you wish to see?" asked the brisk-looking man.

"Mr. Jacob Marlowe. Is this the office where he is employed?"

"Yes," answered the man, with a smile.

Bert hardly needed this assurance, however, as he had already discovered Uncle Jacob sitting in an inner room, at a desk, conversing on business, apparently, with an elderly man of dignified appearance.

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"He will soon be at leisure," said the one who had just entered, and seated himself at another desk in the outer room.

"That must be Uncle Jacob's employer," thought Bert.

"What news do you hear of the mine?" he heard the elderly man ask.

"Excellent," answered Uncle Jacob. "It has gone up five points within two weeks. The output is steadily increasing."

"Do you know anything of it from your own knowledge?"

"Certainly; I ought to, for I was myself its discoverer."

This rather surprised Bert.

"It was a rich find," continued Uncle Jacob, "and I have no hesitation in putting it on the New York market."

"There are so many wild-cat mines, you know, that a man needs to be very cautious."

"Quite true. In such mines it is only the men who capitalize them who make money. I would not lend myself to any such scheme of deception. I have a reputation to sustain, and I value that more than money. Our mine has found favor with some of the most conservative investors in the city." Here Uncle Jacob mentioned several names, so prominent that they were familiar to Bert, country boy though he was.

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"You may put me down for five hundred shares," said the elderly man, apparently convinced. "I will send you round a check to-morrow. To whom shall I make it payable?"

"To me."

"Very well."

The old gentleman rose, drew on his gloves, and went out, Uncle Jacob accompanying him to the door. This brought him face to face with Bert.

"So you have come, Bert," he said with a pleasant smile. "How did you leave your mother?"

"Very well, uncle."

"At what time did you breakfast?"

"At half-past six."

"Then you must be hungry. It is rather early for my lunch, but I will go out with you now. Mr. Bascom, I shall be back within an hour. If any one calls to see me, try to keep him."

"Yes, sir," answered Bascom deferentially.

"He can't be Uncle Jacob's employer," thought Bert. "He is too respectful. I had no idea uncle was such a man of business. He doesn't appear to be afraid of anybody."

They descended in the elevator, rather to Bert's surprise, who had climbed up by the staircase. Crossing the street they entered a dairy restaurant, which in spite of the name supplied the usual variety of dishes. They found a table at which no others were seated, and Uncle Jacob ordered a substantial meal of roast beef and vegetables.

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"Did you find me easily, Bert?" he inquired.

"Oh, yes, uncle. I had to inquire the way once only. Do you like your place?"

"Very well, indeed, Bert."

"Is it a good man you work for?"

Uncle Jacob smiled.

"I have no fault to find with him," he answered.

"I thought perhaps that man with black hair and whiskers might be the boss."

"No, he is a clerk."

"Like you?"

"Yes," answered Jacob, with another smile.

"Does the boss often come in?"

"He doesn't interfere much. You see he has a good deal of confidence in Mr. Bascom and myself."

"So I thought."

"What made you think so?"

"You seem to talk and act as if you were independent."

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"It's a way I have, Bert. As I understand the business thoroughly, more than anybody else, there is no reason why I shouldn't, is there?"

"Oh, no!"

"That is why I enjoy my position so well."

"Do you get paid your wages every Saturday night?"

"Often, if I please," answered Jacob Marlowe, seeming amused. "If I happen to get short in the middle of the week, I can draw in advance."

"You seem to have a very good position, Uncle Jacob. It is a great deal better than opening a cigar store in Lakeville."

"Yes, I think so myself—Albert Marlowe was right in advising me against it. Have you seen him lately?"

"I see him about every day, but not to speak to."

"It was mean in him to discharge you from the factory."

"So I thought, Uncle Jacob."

"I wrote asking him to take you back."

"What did he say?" asked Bert, with interest.

"He in effect told me to mind my own business. I hope you and your mother have not suffered for want of money?"

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"No, thanks to you, Uncle Jacob. Mother thought you ought not to have sent so much."

"I don't think I shall miss it, Bert," said Uncle Jacob. "I am glad that it helped you."

"The twenty-dollar bill got me into trouble."

"How was that?"

Bert told the story of his arrest on the charge of robbing Mr. Jones, and gave an account of his trial.

"And you were tried before Albert Marlowe?"

"Yes."

"I suppose Percy rejoiced in your humiliation?"

"No, he didn't. He behaved like a brick. He walked to the court-room with me, and told me he was sure I was not guilty."

"I am certainly surprised, but I am pleased also. That is a point in Percy's favor, an unexpected one. He shan't lose by it."

"I am afraid I shouldn't have got off if it hadn't been for a young lawyer from New York, named Conway, who volunteered to defend me."

"Go on. Give me an account of it. Can you give me the address of Mr. Conway?"

"Yes, uncle. I have it here."

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"I may be able to throw a little business in his way. One good turn deserves another."

"I wish you would, Uncle Jacob. Mr. Conway refused to accept a fee, knowing that I could not afford to pay him."

Uncle Jacob asked other questions as the dinner proceeded. Finally Bert brought out his most important piece of news.

"I have just found out that my father is still alive," he said.

"Yes, I knew that," returned Uncle Jacob calmly.

"You knew it?"

"Yes, he has been to see me."

"He has! When?"

"Last week."

"You don't think him guilty of the charge which was brought against him?"

"No; I think him a badly-used man."

"I wish I could be the means of proving his innocence."

"I mean that you shall be."

Bert surveyed his uncle in surprise.

"In fact, it is for that reason I have sent for you. Your father has put his case into my hands, and I propose to see him righted. This evening, when I am free from business cares, I will speak further with you on this subject."

Uncle Jacob called for his check, paid it, and they returned to the office.

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CHAPTER XXV.

AN ADVERTISEMENT AND WHAT CAME OF IT.

Uncle Jacob left the office at five o'clock, and Bert, who had been exploring the lower part of New York, went uptown with him on the Sixth Avenue road. They got out at Twenty-third Street, and Jacob Marlowe led the way to a large, roomy house near Seventh Avenue. He took out a night-key, and opening the outer door proceeded to a large, handsomely furnished apartment on the second floor, with a bedroom attached.

"This is where I live, Bert," he remarked, as he took off his hat and hung it up in a closet.

Bert looked around him. To him the room looked quite luxurious, being furnished in a style which would compare favorably even with Squire Marlowe's, the best house in Lakeville.

Bert knew nothing of room rents in New York; but, inexperienced as he was, he was surprised that his uncle, on a salary of twelve dollars a week, should be able to live so well. He would have been even more amazed had he known that the weekly rent of the room he was in was twelve dollars.

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"You've got a splendid room, Uncle Jacob," he said. "I shouldn't think you could afford to live in such style."

"Some of my friends think I am extravagant," observed Jacob Marlowe with a smile. "Perhaps they are right."

"I am afraid you can't save anything," went on Bert gravely. "What if you should get sick?"

"I see, Bert, you are more prudent than I am. However I have invested some of my money in the Magnet Mine, and it is likely to double. So I feel justified in making myself comfortable."

"I am glad to hear that, Uncle Jacob. You deserve to succeed, you are so kind to others."

"I am glad you think so, Bert. I want to do some good while I live. It gives a man something to live for."

After supper, which was taken at a restaurant near by, Uncle Jacob said: "Now let us come to business. I promised your father that I would do what I could to prove him innocent of the charge made against him ten years since."

"Where is my father? Is he in the city?"

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"No; it is not safe for him to stay here, as he is subject to arrest, and might be recognized. He has gone back to Canada. Do you know the particulars of his story?"

"Yes; mother told me all about it last night."

"You know, then, that a young man named Ralph Harding informed against him, and that it was his testimony that led to your father's arrest."

"Yes."

"Your father is under the impression that this Harding was in league with Albert Marlowe, and was employed by him to throw suspicion upon your father. The weak point of the prosecution was that your father could only be connected with the five-hundred dollar bond found in his overcoat pocket, while a large balance was wholly unaccounted for. That made it seem like a cunning conspiracy, as undoubtedly it was."

"Were the other bonds never traced?"

"I understand not. No list of the numbers had been kept, and, not being registered, they could easily be sold. Your father thinks that upon these the present prosperity of Albert Marlowe was built up."

"How are we to prove that?"

"It will be difficult. One thing is absolutely essential. We must find this Ralph Harding, and persuade him, if we can, to exonerate your father and place the guilt where it properly belongs."

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"Does father know where to find Harding?"

"No; if he did, the greatest difficulty in our way would be removed."

"Then I don't see that we can do anything," said Bert, disappointed.

"The task is difficult, but not impossible. All we know is, that only two months after the robbery Harding disappeared. It was reported that he went to the West, but this was by no means certain. From that day to this, nothing is positively known as to his whereabouts."

"Then I don't see what can be done," repeated Bert.

"There is one thing to guide us," continued Uncle Jacob; "the man's occupation. There is a fair probability that he is working in some shoe town, that is, if he is still alive."

"There are a good many shoe towns," objected Bert.

"True; the clew is only a faint one, yet sometimes a faint clew leads to important discoveries."

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"Have you taken any steps yet, Uncle Jacob?"

"Yes; your father remembered that Harding was a Pennsylvanian by birth, and this made it possible, at least, that he had gone back to his native State. Accordingly, last week, I inserted an advertisement in two daily papers printed in Philadelphia, calling for information touching the man of whom we are in search. I will show you a copy of it."

Uncle Jacob took from his wallet a newspaper clipping and showed it to Bert.

It ran thus:

WANTED.—Information as to the present residence of Ralph Harding, who in the year 1873 was employed in the shoe manufactory of Weeks Brothers, in Lynn, Mass. He will hear something to his advantage.

"Have you had any answer to this advertisement?" asked Bert.

"Not till this morning, when I received a letter from Harrisburg, written in a feminine hand. Here it is."

He placed in Bert's hands the following letter:

DEAR SIR: I have read in the Philadelphia *Ledger* your advertisement for a man named Ralph Harding. A man by that name boarded with me two months ago. He was working in a shoe shop in this city, so he may be the one you are after. You say you know of something to his advantage. If there is any money coming to him I want you to see that I am paid a just debt. Mr. Harding was owing me eight weeks' board when he left the house, at four dollars a week, and dirt cheap that is; for, if I do say it myself, there are not many boarding-houses in Harrisburg where so good a table is kept for four dollars as I give. I inclose my bill, and will be very glad if you will send me the money by return of mail, taking it out of any money that is to come to Mr. Harding. I work hard for my money, and I can't afford to lose thirty-two dollars, and it isn't right that I should.

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Hoping to hear from you very soon, I remain,
Yours respectfully,

AMELIA STUBBS.

P. S. You can send me a check, as I can get it cashed by my grocer.

"Mrs. Stubbs means business," remarked Bert with a smile. "Have you sent her the money?"

"Not yet. I don't hold myself liable for Ralph Harding's debts, even if this is the man I am after. However, I am willing to pay Mrs. Stubbs for information, if she can furnish any that will help us."

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"Have you written to her?"

"I am going to send a letter to her by you."

"Am I to go to Harrisburg?" exclaimed Bert, pleasantly surprised.

"Yes; I shall send you there to-morrow."

"I should like to go. What am I to do when I get there?"

"First of all you must call on Mrs. Stubbs. It may be well for you to engage board at her house for a week, paying in advance, as that will put you in her good graces. You will, of course, learn all you can from her, but it will be necessary also to seek information outside. I shall have to leave a good deal to your discretion."

"I hope your confidence in me won't prove to be misplaced, Uncle Jacob."

"I know you will do your best, Bert, but it is quite possible you may fail. As the poet says: 'Tis not in mortals to *command* success.' I am sure you will deserve it."

"Isn't it going to cost considerable to make this journey, Uncle Jacob?"

"I think we can find money enough for it."

"I am afraid your money will soon melt away, uncle. Think how much you have spent for us already."

"You remember what I told you as to my lucky investment in the Magnet Mine. At any rate it will be worth something to vindicate your father, who, for ten long and tedious years, has been compelled to pass his life in exile under the ban of a crime which he never committed."

"Yes, Uncle Jacob, but it ought not to come out of you."

"Make yourself easy, Bert. The money we spend for worthy purposes is well invested, and we are often repaid tenfold. And now, as you are unacquainted with New York, I will take you out for a walk and show you how it looks by gaslight."

Nothing could have pleased Bert better than this proposal. They returned at nine o'clock, and both he and Uncle Jacob retired at an early hour.

CHAPTER XXVI.

BERT SECURES BOARD IN HARRISBURG.

Bert arrived in Harrisburg about four o'clock in the afternoon. He had in his hand a gripsack purchased for him by Uncle Jacob, who also provided him with a fuller supply of shirts, socks, and underclothing than he had brought with him.

"You may be gone some time," he said.

Just as Bert got into the cars, Uncle Jacob handed him a wallet.

"This contains a sum of money for your immediate needs," he explained. "When you are out, send to me."

After the cars started, Bert opened the wallet, and to his surprise found that he had fifty dollars in his possession.

"Uncle Jacob's money won't last long at this rate," he said to himself. "I must be very careful and economical. I should like to take back to him a part of this sum."

Of course Bert enjoyed his trip. The sun shone brightly, the air was cool and invigorating, and the scenes through which he was rapidly speeding were new to him. In spite of the sense of responsibility which rested upon him, he felt cheerful and exhilarated.

"If I can only succeed in my mission!" he thought. "If I can only find Ralph Harding, and induce him to vindicate my father's reputation, I shall feel happy!"

It so happened that he had seated himself in the smoking car, the car behind, which he first entered, being full.

A tall, thin man, wearing a white hat, sat down beside him.

"Have a cigar, young man?" he asked, as he produced two of rather poor quality, one of which he lighted and proceeded to smoke.

"No, thank you, sir."

"Better accept a good offer," urged the stranger.

"Thank you, but I don't smoke."

"Indeed! How old are you?"

"I am sixteen," replied Bert.

"Then you are a *rara avis*—that means a rare bird. Most boys of your age smoke."

"They'd be better off without it."

"Perhaps so. I see you are a prudent young man. How far are you going?"

"To Harrisburg."

"So am I. Queer coincidence, isn't it?"

"I don't know," answered Bert, smiling. "I presume there are other passengers on board who are also bound for that city."

"Very possibly. Ever been there before?"

"No, sir."

"I have often, and the long ride is rather tedious. What do you say to a little game of cards to fill up the time?"

"Thank you, but I would rather look out of the window."

The stranger seemed disappointed, but a man in the seat just behind, leaning over, said: "If you want a game, I'm your man."

"All right!" said Bert's companion, brightening up. "What game do you play?"

"Anything."

"Poker?"

"All right."

The two took seats opposite, between which was a small table, and the game began. Bert looked over now and then, and saw that they were playing for money. He was startled, for he had been taught to regard gambling with horror. It seemed evident after awhile that his late seat-mate was losing. He became more and more excited and nervous, and his face was overspread with gloom. At length he came over to Bert, and said, eagerly: "My young friend, will you do me a favor?"

"What is it, sir?"

"Lend me five dollars."

This seemed to Bert an extraordinary request from a perfect stranger.

"You must excuse me, sir," he answered.

"Haven't you got as much about you? Say two dollars, then."

"The money I have with me is not my own," said Bert. "I cannot lend anything."

"But, let me assure you, I will give it back to you before the train reaches Harrisburg. I have had a streak of bad luck, and that man over there has won all my money. But I've got on to his game, and I will soon have it all back, if I get a start. You'll be doing me a great favor, and there will be no risk."

"He must take me for a fool," thought Bert.

"You had better apply to some one else," he said coldly. "I can't possibly help you."

"So young and so hard-hearted!" murmured the other, eying Bert reproachfully. "'Twas ever thus from childhood's hour. I was born under an unlucky star. Sir, I am afraid I must withdraw from our pleasant game unless you will kindly lend me a dollar to continue."

His late antagonist shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't see how that would benefit me," he said. "We'll wait till another time when you are in funds. Then I shall be happy to accommodate you."

"Did you lose much?" asked Bert, as his companion resumed a seat at his side.

"Fifteen dollars! 'Tis not much, but 'twas my all. If you would oblige me with a dollar, I can win it all back."

Bert shook his head.

"I have no money of my own," he said.

"Never mind! Twenty times I have been on the threshold of fortune, and failed to secure it by my funds giving out. Be it so! I will no longer resist, but float downward to oblivion over the rapids of disappointment."

"You are an actor, are you not?" said Bert.

"Yes; at least, so I sometimes flatter myself, though the critics do not all concede it. If you are going to remain in Harrisburg long enough, come and see me act."

He gave Bert his card, and then closing his eyes, passed the remainder of the journey in dozing.

Arrived in Harrisburg, Bert found himself besieged by hackmen, representing different hotels. But he did not think it right to waste Uncle Jacob's money in unnecessary expense. He picked out a bootblack, and showing him the address of Mrs. Stubbs, asked: "Is that near by?"

"'Bout quarter of a mile," answered the street boy.

"What'll you ask for showing me the way?"

"A dime."

"Go ahead, then!"

In five minutes Bert found himself standing in front of a rather shabby three-story house, in a decent, but not fashionable, street. The name Stubbs was on the door.

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Bert rang the bell, and inquired for Mrs. Stubbs.

He was ushered into a small reception room on one side of the front door, furnished in cheap, boarding-house style, and took a seat on a stiff-backed cane chair.

Presently a thin lady, with cork-screw curls, and a pale, washed-out complexion, entered the room.

"Did you wish to see me, sir?" she said.

"Yes," answered Bert. "You answered an advertisement about Ralph Harding. I come from New York."

"Have you brought my money?" asked Mrs. Stubbs, with animation.

"What money do you refer to?"

"Mr. Harding's board bill. I sent it in the letter."

"We don't feel called upon to pay Mr. Harding's debts," returned Bert, who had been instructed by Uncle Jacob to say this.

"Must I lose thirty-two dollars, then?" said the lady tragically. "It's a shame."

"No doubt it is, but we don't even know Mr. Harding."

"Then why did you advertise for him?"

"Because we want his testimony in a law case."

"The advertisement said that it would be for Mr. Harding's advantage to report to you."

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"So it will, if we can find him. He will receive money enough to settle your bill, and more, too. We will see that he does, if you help us find him."

"I am sure I am willing to do all I can," said Mrs. Stubbs, considerably mollified.

"Have you got a small room vacant?" asked Bert. "I may be detained in Harrisburg for a while."

"Yes; you can have the one Mr. Harding used to occupy. If you occupy it alone, it will be five dollars a week with board."

"I will take it," said Bert promptly. "Can I have possession at once?"

"Yes. Let me show you the way."

The room was on the third floor. It was a small one, but would answer the purpose. Bert took out his clothes, and laid them away in the pine bureau near the window.

"Well," he said, as he waited for the bell to summon him to supper, "I have taken the first step toward finding Ralph Harding. I am occupying the room which was once his. What shall be the next step?"

He little anticipated the singular experience that same evening had in store for him.

CHAPTER XXVII.

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A BOARDING-HOUSE IN HARRISBURG.

At the supper table Bert made acquaintance with his fellow-boarders. There were eight in all. Three of them worked in the shoe factory where Ralph Harding had been employed, two young ladies were saleswomen in a dry-goods store, Professor Silvio and wife taught a dancing school, and the eighth was the landlady's daughter, a young woman of twenty-five, who resembled Mrs.

Stubbs closely. Bert learned afterward that she was employed in a millinery store.

"Gentlemen and ladies," said Mrs. Stubbs, as Bert took the vacant chair that had been assigned to him, "let me introduce a new boarder, Mr. Barton."

Eight pairs of curious eyes were fixed upon Bert, and he blushed a little, not being accustomed to the scrutiny of strangers.

"He is a friend of a former boarder, Mr. Harding, whom some of you will remember."

"Have you heard from Mr. Harding lately, Mr. Barton?" asked Angelica Stubbs, who sat next to our hero.

"No," answered Bert.

"He left quite suddenly, owing me eight weeks' board."

"So I heard."

"Do you think he will ever pay it up?"

"If I succeed in finding him I think there is some chance of it."

"Mr. Harding and I were very good friends," continued Miss Stubbs. "He—in fact—showed quite a fondness for my society," she added, casting down her eyes modestly.

"No wonder!" said Bert, smiling.

"Oh, you sad flatterer!" said Miss Angelica, appearing pleased at what she regarded as a compliment.

"Didn't he tell *you* where he was going?" asked Bert.

"No; I think he was called away by bad news."

"What sort of a looking man was he?" Bert inquired.

"You ask me that?" said Angelica, in surprise. "I thought you were a friend of his."

"I never saw him in my life."

"That's funny. Why then did ma introduce you as a friend of his?"

"She thought me so. I am interested in finding him, that is all."

"You are not a horrid detective, I hope? Has poor Mr. Harding committed a crime? Oh, tell me quick. You actually make me creep all over."

"I don't mean any harm, but his testimony is wanted in a law case. You haven't told me about his appearance yet."

"I've got his photograph, and will show it to you after supper."

"Oh, thank you!" said Bert, much pleased.

"That is, if you are sure it won't do him any harm. He used to talk to me very confidentially, and I can't help liking him, even if he did get in debt to ma."

"Perhaps he was unfortunate and couldn't pay."

"That's what I tell ma, but ma's rather severe on boarders that go away without paying her."

"Did he take all his baggage with him, Miss Stubbs?"

"He left behind a box of books and papers. They weren't of much account—some old letters and such."

"Did your mother preserve them?" asked Bert eagerly.

"Yes, I believe so; but she would have preferred to have him leave his trunk. That might have been sold for a part of his board bill."

"Do you think I could look over the books and papers?" asked Bert.

"What for?" inquired Angelica, her face expressing curiosity.

"You know I want to find him, and some of the papers might throw light on his movements."

"I don't know but you could," answered Angelica indifferently.

"I'll be willing to pay your mother one week's board for the box and its contents."

"Then I am sure she will let you have them. They are worth nothing to her. I only wonder she hasn't used them to kindle the fire with before now."

"I hope she hasn't," returned Bert anxiously.

"No; I know she hasn't, for I saw them in the attic only last week. I'll look them up for you some day when I am at leisure."

"Thank you."

"I wonder Mr. Harding hasn't written to you," he said, a little later.

"Oh, go along! You don't suppose there was anything between me and him?" said Angelica, who liked nothing better than to be teased about the attentions of members of the other sex. Bert was sharp enough to see this, and thought he might make it available in promoting the object he had in view.

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"I thought, perhaps, he had gone away because you didn't smile upon his suit."

Miss Angelica laughed and tossed her head in great delight.

"As if I would tell you," she said.

"I only hope he hasn't committed suicide."

"Oh, Mr. Barton, how can you? Really, I shall have to complain to ma."

All this was very amusing to Bert, who had a natural love of fun, and quite understood Angelica by this time, though, truth to tell, she was not difficult to read.

When supper was over, Miss Stubbs said graciously: "Mr. Barton, if you are not pressed for time, will you linger a while? I play a little on the piano, and if you are fond of music, I will play for you. Usually I have to be in the store, but this is my evening off."

"I shall be glad to stay, Miss Stubbs. I am fond of music."

"Mr. Harding often lingered with me in the evening hours. He liked to hear me play."

"As I no doubt shall."

"Do you sing, Mr. Barton?"

"No; I wish I did."

Miss Angelica's piano was probably twenty-five years old, and was very much out of tune. But even if it had been a Chickering Grand, her playing would hardly have captivated a musical ear. She had little taste, and the lessons she had taken had only given her the ability to play a few easy tunes.

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Bert found half an hour of Miss Angelica's music and society all he cared to enjoy at one time. He therefore excused himself, and taking his hat, went out for a walk. As he was a stranger in Harrisburg, he was not particular in what direction he strolled, but naturally bent his steps toward what appeared to be the central part of the city.

As he sauntered along, his attention was attracted to a flaring poster on a dead wall, setting forth the attractive features of

THE STREETS OF GOTHAM.

A Realistic Play of New York Life.

As given by a Star Combination of world-renowned Actors.

For one week only.

Reserved seats, 50 cents. Balcony, 25 cents.

Now Bert had seldom enjoyed an opportunity of attending a dramatic performance, and felt strongly tempted to avail himself of the one that now offered. He wished to be as economical as possible, and decided to content himself with a seat in the balcony.

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"Where is the theatre?" he asked of a boy who was studying the bill at the same time with himself.

"Just round the corner. I'll show you," was the reply.

"Thank you."

"Are you goin' to see de play?" asked the boy with interest.

"I think I shall."

"I'd go myself if I had another nickel," said the young guide. "I've got ten cents."

"But I thought twenty-five cents was the lowest price."

"I can go to de gallery for fifteen cents. De gallery is good enough for me."

"If a nickel will help you, here is one."

"Thank you," said the boy. "It's a boss play, dey tell me."

"I hope it is, as I am going myself."

The theatre was near at hand, and the two boys soon stood before it. It was rather early, being

only a quarter past seven, but a small crowd of boys was already waiting for a chance to obtain admission to the gallery.

There seemed to be no hurry about buying a ticket, and Bert took a standing position near the box office, surveying with interest the passers by. All at once he felt a hand on his shoulder, and these words fell upon his ear:

"We meet again, my dear boy. Shake!"

Bert immediately recognized his travelling friend who had lost his money on the train.

"Are you one of the dramatic company?" he asked.

"Yes; I play the leading villain—and am acting stage manager. My name is Orville—Jack Orville. You have heard of me."

"I have always lived in the country," said Bert apologetically, "and so have little acquaintance with actors."

Orville looked disappointed. He liked to be known and recognized.

"That accounts for it," he said. "I am surprised to hear that you are from the country. You have the city air."

Bert was pleased to hear it, though perhaps that might be a mark of weakness.

At the moment another man came up hurriedly, and spoke to Orville.

"Here's a pretty kettle of fish, Orville," he said. "Bob Hazleton is sick and insists upon going back to New York. Where shall we find a boy to take his place?"

Orville had an inspiration. He clapped his hand on Bert's shoulder, exclaiming: "Here he stands!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BERT'S FIRST APPEARANCE ON ANY STAGE.

Bert eyed the actor with amazement, rather disposed to doubt his sanity.

"Do you mean me?" he said.

"Certainly."

"Has he ever acted?" asked Pearson, the second actor, doubtfully.

"No, but he can act. I'll undertake to train him."

"There isn't much time. Hazleton can't appear to-night."

"Don't worry! I'll see that he is not missed."

As Pearson went away, Orville said: "You'll help us out, won't you, my boy?"

"What do you want me to do?" asked Bert, his heart beating with excitement.

"Take the part of a newsboy. You've seen and heard them in the streets of New York, haven't you?"

"Yes; but it seems sudden. I should have to learn the part."

"All told there are not more than twenty lines, and you won't come on till the second act. You've spoken pieces, haven't you?"

"Yes, and I like it."

"I was sure of it. Then you accept?"

"If you think I can do it, and will tell me exactly what to do."

"Come round at once to the stage entrance. I will give you your lines and tell you the business. We'll speak about terms later."

As Bert followed Orville round to the stage door he asked himself whether he was not acting foolishly in accepting, at such short notice, a position to which he was entirely unaccustomed. If he had not liked declamation, and felt moderately self-possessed before an audience, he would have promptly refused. As it was, the prospect, while it somewhat daunted, also pleased him. Besides, he saw that, though he might not be able to fill the place of Bob Hazleton, it was imperatively necessary that the part should be taken by some one, and there was no time to lose

in hunting up another boy. If he did poorly, he could limit his engagement to one evening.

He was not at home behind the scenes, and at the outset came near tumbling through a trap door. He followed Orville to the general dressing-room, where the manager assisted him to attire himself in the costume provided for the newsboy. It is needless to say that it was not of a costly description, and would have been dear at a dollar and a half.

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"I'll dress you first, and give you the lines afterward."

In five minutes Bert surveyed himself in a cracked mirror, and wondered if he were the same boy. Orville ruffled up his hair, taught him the free and easy walk of the typical newsboy, briefly instructed him in the "business" of the part, and then gave him his lines to commit.

"Read them to me," he said. "I want to see if you've caught the spirit of the part."

Of course Bert needed a little coaching, but "caught on," as Orville expressed it, with remarkable quickness. After a few minutes' rehearsal, his teacher said: "You'll do; that is, if you don't get rattled."

"What's that?"

"Get an attack of stage fright, and forget your lines."

"I won't do that," said Bert confidently.

"Then you'll have no trouble. Now, stay here till you get a summons from the call boy. I must make up for my part, though I don't appear, either, till the second act. Remember that we rely upon you."

"I'll get through," said Bert confidently.

By this time our hero looked forward eagerly to the moment when he would appear on the stage. He felt excited, and yearned to distinguish himself. He wanted to justify the stage manager's hasty, and, it must be confessed, rather imprudent, choice.

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He waited in the wings till he heard the call boy's summons, and then made his entrance as instructed by Orville. He glanced at the audience, but only got a confused impression of hundreds of faces. He did not allow himself to think of them, but addressed himself to the business of his part. A part of this was to rescue a little girl from the abuse of a tyrannical old woman. He recited his lines with spirit; and so enlisted the sympathies of those present by his manly bearing that he received a tribute of applause. The scene came just at the close of the second act, and when the curtain fell there was prolonged hand-clapping. Bert did not know what it meant, but Orville came up to him, and said; "Go before the curtain, leading Maud by the hand. Bow to the audience."

Bert was a little bewildered, but followed directions. The corner of the curtain was moved aside, and Bert walked across the stage, leading little Maud (who was a daughter of the leading actress) by the hand. Children are always well received, and there was plenty of applause.

When Bert reappeared behind the scenes, Orville said, "Barton, you did yourself proud! Keep it up when you appear again in the fourth act, and you may consider yourself an actor."

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In the fourth and last act Bert went on the stage in his street dress. His circumstances and his social position were supposed to have improved.

At the close of the performance Orville introduced Bert to the different members of the company.

"Do you mean to say you have never acted before?" asked Mr. Pearson.

"This is my first appearance on any stage," said Bert with a smile.

"Then you have done yourself great credit. I was myself trained at Wallack's Theatre, but had been a year on the boards before I could acquit myself as well as you."

"Thank you. I have done better than I expected."

"You more than filled Hazleton's place."

"Has he been long with you?"

"A year."

Bert felt this was indeed praise, that on his first appearance he should have equaled a boy with a year's experience.

"Of course you will play with us the balance of the week?" said Pearson.

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"If you wish me to do so."

"What salary will you expect?" Bert smiled.

"I hardly know what will be a fair price to ask."

"We will give you the same salary that Hazleton received, fifteen dollars a week, and you pay your own board. Is that satisfactory?"

Bert opened his eyes. Fifteen dollars a week seemed to him a large sum, for evening work. He found afterward that he was expected to appear at rehearsal; but even with this additional duty, the post appeared to him an easy one.

"I accept the terms," he said.

"All right; where are you boarding?"

He gave the address.

"Please be at the theatre to-morrow at ten, and Mr. Pearson will hear you rehearse and give you a few points."

Unknown to Bert there were two persons present at the theatre that night who recognized him. One of the male boarders, prompted by a rather significant hint from Miss Angelica, had invited that young lady to accompany him to the performance. They sat in the sixth row from the stage, though Bert, who attended only to his duties, did not see them.

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When he first came on as a newsboy, Miss Stubbs said: "How much that newsboy looks like Mr. Barton, ma's new boarder."

"He does look some like him."

"But of course it isn't he. I wonder if he is here this evening."

"I don't see him anywhere," said the escort.

When Bert appeared in his own clothes in the fourth act, Angelica exclaimed: "Why, it is Mr. Barton, after all! Is it possible that I know a live actor? Why, I was talking to him at supper, and he was really quite attentive to me."

"He is put down on the bill as Bob Hazleton," said the young man, consulting the programme.

"That must be his stage name. I will get him to tell me all about acting to-morrow. Do you know, Mr. Cutting, I should like to go on the stage myself? I should so like to play Juliet."

"If you do, will you let me be Romeo?"

"Yes, if you desire it," said Angelica, tapping her escort coquettishly with her fan.

It's safe to say that Mr. Cutting, who was barely five feet in height, and Miss Angelica, who was tall, thin, and angular, would have made a very remarkable Romeo and Juliet.

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As Bert left the stage door, a boy touched his arm. Looking round he saw that it was the one who had guided him to the theatre. The boy's face wore a respectful look as he said:

"Say, you didn't tell me you was one of de actors."

"I didn't know it myself," answered Bert.

"It was you that took off de newsboy," continued the boy.

"Yes, but I'm not the regular actor. He's sick and I took his place."

"It was tiptop. Are you goin' to act to-morrow night?"

"I shall act all this week."

"I'd like to see de play again. It's a boss play."

Bert felt in a liberal mood.

"Here is fifteen cents," he said. "Tell your friends to come."

"I'll bring 'em. I'll tell 'em I know one of de actors."

It may be remarked that Tom Roach, for this was the boy's name, gave such glowing accounts of the play to his intimate friends that no less than ten of them accompanied him to the theatre the next evening, and were especially enthusiastic when Bert was on the stage. Their liberal applause raised Bert in the good opinion of the management, who felt that they had secured a prize in the new actor.

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CHAPTER XXIX.

BERT SECURES A BOX OF MR. HARDING'S PAPERS.

When our hero went down to breakfast next morning, he found himself the observed of all observers. Miss Angelica Stubbs and her escort had already made known that he was a member

of the dramatic company, and as none of the boarders had ever before met "a live actor," all felt great curiosity and a desire to become acquainted with so distinguished a public character.

As he took his seat beside Miss Stubbs, she said: "I saw you on the stage last evening, Mr. Barton."

"Did you? I was not aware that you were in the house."

"Why didn't you tell me that you were an actor? I've got a bone to pick with you."

"I didn't know it myself, Miss Stubbs."

"You mean to say you didn't play the newsboy? Oh, Mr. Barton!"

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"Yes; but when I left the house I had no idea of playing. It so happened that the young actor who usually takes the part—Bob Hazleton—was sick, and I was applied to by the manager to take his place."

"Then he knew you were an actor?"

"No; I only fell in with him on the train from New York."

"Why you acted just as if you were used to it."

"I am glad you think so. I hardly dared to accept the part."

"Will you play the rest of the week?"

"I have agreed to do so. Hazleton goes home to-day."

"How nice! I must go again."

"I take that as a compliment."

"Can't you actors take your friends in free?" asked Angelica, whose rule was to make all she could out of her acquaintances.

"I haven't been an actor long enough to find out."

"I should consider it *such* a favor. I would get all my friends to go."

"On the same terms?" asked Bert with a smile.

"No. They can pay."

Bert did secure a complimentary ticket for Miss Stubbs, who boasted everywhere that she was intimately acquainted with one of the leading actors in "The Streets of Gotham," and that he was really very attentive to her.

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"What would my friends at Lakeville say if they knew my new business?" thought Bert. "I should be glad if Percy Marlowe could see me on the stage."

He determined, however, not to say anything in his letters about this new engagement, for, though he had been successful thus far, his success and popularity might not last.

"Did you see the notice of your play in the morning paper, Mr. Barton?" asked Miss Angelica.

"No; I haven't seen the paper yet."

"It speaks of one of the actors. I won't say who," continued Miss Stubbs, nodding playfully.

"Do you mean me?" asked Bert in excitement.

"Yes, here it is."

Bert ran his eye hastily over the notice, which occupied a quarter of a column. This is the portion that most interested him:

"The part of the newsboy was effectively taken by Mr. Bert Barton, who was engaged at the last moment to fill the place of Mr. Hazleton. His acting was spirited, and the fact that it was liked was shown by the hearty call before the curtain at the end of the second act. The management are fortunate in securing so good a substitute for Bob Hazleton."

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Bert's face showed his gratification. It almost seemed a dream to him that he had really appeared on the stage, and he was glad that he had given satisfaction.

At ten o'clock he reported at the stage entrance, where he was met by Mr. Pearson, who was associate manager. He went through a rehearsal which enabled him to look forward with more confidence to a repetition of the part.

The afternoon he had to himself, and a part of this he spent in trying to find out what he could about Ralph Harding. He learned that Harding had been employed in the shoe factory of Benedict & Co. Two of Mrs. Stubbs's boarders worked at the same place, but neither had been intimate with Harding. Bert learned that he was looked upon as "a rolling stone," never content to remain long in one place. He had been employed less than six months at the Benedict shop, when, without assigning any reason, he gave notice that he wanted to leave.

"What sort of a man is he?" asked Bert.

"He is restless and at times gloomy," answered Blanchard, to whom he had put the question. "I worked next to him, but he seldom made any conversation with me." 211

"Was he a good workman?"

"Excellent, but he evidently did not like the business. He often lamented that he had not the means of getting out of it."

"Have you any idea where he went when he left Harrisburg?"

"From what I have heard him say, I think it probable that he went to some Western town or city."

"You have not heard from him since he left Harrisburg?"

"No; he was not likely to correspond with me. I doubt if he was intimate enough with any one here to do so, except possibly with Miss Stubbs," added Blanchard, with a smile.

"She tells me Mr. Harding paid her a good deal of attention."

"It is more probable that Miss Stubbs paid him a good deal of attention. At present you are her favorite."

"I don't want to interfere with you, Mr. Blanchard," said Bert, much amused.

"I can't undertake to compete with an actor, Mr. Barton."

"I can't get over my surprise at being called an actor. However, as long as it pays me better than anything else, I don't object." 212

The next day Mrs. Stubbs intercepted Bert as he was leaving the house.

"My daughter tells me," she said, "that you are willing to pay four dollars for the papers which Mr. Harding left behind him?"

"Yes," answered Bert eagerly.

"I don't see why I shouldn't sell them. I can't afford to lose eight weeks' board."

"Quite true, Mrs. Stubbs. I don't see why they won't be just as safe in my hands as in yours."

"You don't want to do Mr. Harding any harm; though I don't know why I should think of that, after the way he has served me!"

"Instead of that, Mrs. Stubbs, I can assure you that it will be money in his pocket, if, through his papers, I am able to find him."

"And in that case you will try to get him to pay his honest debts?"

"I will, Mrs. Stubbs."

"Then, Mr. Barton, if you will come up to the attic I will hand you the papers."

Bert gladly followed Mrs. Stubbs upstairs, and was shown on the attic floor a wooden box about half full of old letters and other papers. The box certainly did not look very valuable, and Bert said so.

"I wouldn't have kept it," said the landlady, "if I could have got hold of his trunk. But he got the start of me, and it was in the hands of an expressman before I knew that he was going to move. I was downstairs in the basement when Mr. Harding took the expressman upstairs, and the trunk was brought down and put in his wagon before I knew what was going on. Mr. Harding didn't even say good-by, and I haven't seen or heard of him from that day to this."

"Well, Mrs. Stubbs, here are your four dollars, and I hope you will some day get the balance of the debt."

Bert carried the box downstairs and into his room, where he proceeded to examine the contents, among which he was destined to come across a document of considerable interest to him.

CHAPTER XXX.

BERT OBTAINS AN IMPORTANT CLEW.

Mr. Harding was not a literary man, and his papers would hardly have been of any value to a publisher. They consisted principally of letters, some of them ten years old. It seemed to have been a habit of Ralph Harding to keep his letters, though he probably set no great value upon them. 214

Bert opened fifteen or twenty, and glanced over them, only to find that they related to matters in which he felt no interest whatever. He began to doubt whether they were even worth the small sum he had paid for them, when all at once he made a discovery. He found a letter dated Lakeville.

"Who can have written him from Lakeville?" he asked himself, and naturally turned the page to read the signature.

His heart beat quickly when he read the name of the writer—Albert Marlowe. It was dated about two years previous, and ran as follows:

DEAR SIR: I have received your letter, and am surprised that you should have the boldness to write to me for money. I am sorry to hear that you have been in bad luck, but I presume it is your own fault. You are able to earn good wages, and ought to pay your own way without depending on anybody. Look at me! I was once a common workman like you, but, thanks to my energy and enterprise, I am now the owner of a large factory, and able to live in comparative luxury. I don't know why you should expect me to support you. I have a family of my own to care for, and my first duty is to them.

You intimate that you are in possession of a secret which, if made known, will injure me. I suppose I know what you mean. I don't think, however, that you will find any one to believe what you may say to my disadvantage, and I warn you to be careful what you do, or I may testify that you yourself took the missing bonds. Don't trouble yourself to write to me again, for it will be time thrown away.

ALBERT MARLOWE.

Underneath the signature were a few lines, evidently written by Ralph Harding:

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Who would believe that the writer of this letter is a thief, and that the capital on which he started in business was stolen? I bitterly repent that I was induced to join in the plot against poor Barton. He—poor fellow—is in exile, afraid to return to his own country, while the man who committed the crime which has shadowed his life, is rich and prosperous, and holds up his head in society. And I—miserable tool that I was—by my testimony helped him to fasten the crime on an innocent man. I don't know whether it will do any good to write again. I am a poor man, and Albert Marlowe is rich. He will defy me, and perhaps swear that I was implicated in the robbery myself. So I was, alas! for I accepted a bribe of two hundred dollars for my part in the matter. I wish I could see poor Barton righted!

Bert read this letter with flushed face and beating heart. Here was proof positive that his father was innocent; and Albert Marlowe, the rich manufacturer, the magnate of Lakeville, was guilty not only of robbery, but, what was even more contemptible, had schemed successfully to throw the guilt upon an innocent man, the husband of his cousin. Through him John Barton had suffered a ten-years' exile, and had been deprived for that time of his good name and the society of his family.

"I wouldn't take a thousand dollars for this letter," said Bert to himself in exultation. "I don't know what it amounts to in the eyes of the law, but I am sure it is valuable. Now, if I could only find Ralph Harding himself."

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Bert continued his search among the letters, and finally found one postmarked Peoria, Illinois, which appeared to have been received by Ralph Harding about a week before he left Harrisburg.

This is an extract therefrom:

It is five years since I have seen you. This is a long separation considering that we two are the only ones left of the family. If you are in your old business as I infer from your letter, why can't you get work just as well here in Peoria as in Harrisburg? There is a large shop here, where I think you would not have any difficulty in securing employment. I presume as good wages are paid here as at the East. We have a small room which you could occupy, and it would be pleasant for a brother and sister who have been so long separated to find themselves under the same roof.

My husband is a carpenter, as you know. His earnings are not large, and he doesn't always have work, but we have a little sum saved up which we can fall back upon in time of need. I can't lend you any money, and indeed you ought not to expect it, as you are a single man, and have no one to take care of but yourself. I am afraid you are not a very good manager. Come to Peoria, and I will see if I can't help you save money. Consider what a position you would be in if you should fall sick.

Your affectionate sister,

HELEN CLIFTON.

Underneath, in Ralph Harding's handwriting, was this brief indorsement:

All true, every word of it! Helen was always prudent and a good manager. It is

true, as she says, that there are but two of us. Why shouldn't I go to Peoria, and see her?

There was no more; but as Ralph Harding a week later left Harrisburg, it seemed fair to infer that he had adopted his own half-expressed intention, and gone to Peoria, to see his sister, especially as there seemed a good chance of his obtaining work there in his own line. 217

"Peoria!" repeated Bert thoughtfully. "The chances are that Ralph Harding went there from Harrisburg, and it is very probable that he is there now. I wish I could find some one that could tell me about the place."

"Mr. Pearson," he said, when he met the associate manager at rehearsal, "can you tell me anything about Peoria?"

"Yes," answered the actor. "What do you want to know about it?"

"How large a place is it?"

"About the size of Harrisburg. I don't believe there is a thousand difference in the population."

"Is it far from here?"

"A matter of six or seven hundred miles, I should think, perhaps a little more. It is southeast of Chicago. Why do you want to know?"

"I want to find a man who, I have reason to think, is now living there. I may have to leave the company, as it is very important for me to find this man." 218

"There will be no occasion for you to leave the company. When we leave Harrisburg, we jump to Chicago, and probably three weeks from now we shall be playing in Peoria. It is on our list of places, and is a very good city for a short engagement. Will that be soon enough?"

Bert hesitated. If he remained with the company, his expenses would be paid out to Peoria, and he would be earning fifteen dollars a week besides.

"Come, now, don't hesitate!" said Mr. Pearson. "We shouldn't know how to get along without you."

Naturally this pleased Bert, and helped to fix his resolution.

"I don't know but I can wait two or three weeks," he said slowly, "if you are sure we shall play at Peoria."

"I am certain of it. The route was made up this morning. We are having some new bills printed in which your name is substituted for that of Bob Hazleton. So you see, my boy, you will be getting a reputation under your own colors."

This had its effect, for Bert felt that he should like to have a bill of the play in which his own name appeared. Otherwise he might find his friends incredulous as to his having actually been upon the stage. Later in the day he gave his promise that he would go with the company when they left Harrisburg, but would not sign an engagement for any definite time, as he did not wish to put any obstacle in the way of his following any clew that might lead to the discovery of Harding. 219

"Well, Mr. Barton," said Mrs. Stubbs after supper, "did you find anything of value in that box of papers?"

"Yes; I obtained some information that will probably be of value. Besides it gave me a clew to his present residence."

"Indeed," said Angelica, who was present, "where is he?"

"In Peoria, Illinois. He has a married sister living there."

"Shall you go out West to find him?"

"I expect to go with the company. They will play an engagement in Peoria."

"If you see Mr. Harding, please remember me to him. Say—that is, you may hint that I still think of him with interest, and—and hope he will some day return to us."

"That message ought to bring him, Miss Angelica."

"Of course I only think of him as a friend, but we were very congenial, and it is not often that one meets a congenial spirit."

"Why not send a letter to Mr. Harding by me?"

"I—that is; mamma, do you think it would be proper?" asked Angelica with bashful hesitation.

"I don't know why not," answered Mrs. Stubbs promptly. "You might ask in the letter when it will be convenient for him to pay his board bill."

"Oh, ma, how unromantic!"

"It may not be romantic, Angelica, but it's business," said the practical mother.

CHAPTER XXXI.

SQUIRE MARLOWE IS SURPRISED.

It may be well to return to Lakeville, as something has occurred there which deserves to be recorded.

It is needless to say that Mrs. Barton missed Bert, whose bright and cheerful presence had filled the little house with comfort and gladdened his mother's heart. Still she knew that he was well, and heard from him every week, though Bert only detailed his experiences in general terms, not caring to raise expectations which perhaps might prove illusive.

Bert's absence from Lakeville excited some surprise and speculation. Squire Marlowe, to whom it had been mentioned by Percy, stopped Mrs. Barton in the street one day, and said: "Percy tells me that your son is away."

"Yes."

"Where is he?"

"He went to New York."

"Is he at work there?"

"No, he is travelling."

"Travelling? What do you mean?"

"Uncle Jacob has sent him off on some mission. He is at Harrisburg, I believe."

"That is very strange!" remarked the squire, arching his eyebrows. "What possible mission can Jacob have for the boy?"

"He doesn't write particulars; but his expenses are paid."

"I don't see how Jacob Marlowe, with his paltry twelve dollars a week, can make such arrangements."

"Nor I; but probably Uncle Jacob has interested his employer in Bert."

"It may be so, but I think it very unwise to send off a boy by himself. What judgment has he, or what can he do?"

"I don't very well know. He seems to enjoy the trip."

"Of course; but it will spoil him for solid work. He had better have stayed at home."

"What encouragement was there for him to stay in Lakeville? If you had not discharged him, he would be here now. If you will take him back into the factory, I will write him to that effect, and perhaps it will induce him to return."

"Ahem! I will think of it. Does he send you any money?"

"Not yet."

"Then how do you live?"

"Without calling upon you, Albert," said Mrs. Barton, with a little tinge of bitterness. "I hardly think you feel enough interest in me to care how I live."

Albert Marlowe was somewhat embarrassed, and regretted that he had asked the question. Mrs. Barton might take it into her head that he was willing to contribute to her support, and this was far from being the case.

"Women look at things from a peculiar point of view," he said. "Of course I wish you well, and for that reason regret that you are so injudicious in your management of Bert."

"I have no fear but that Bert will turn out well," rejoined Mrs. Barton proudly.

"Ahem! I hope so, though that twenty-dollar affair led me to fear that he had inherited loose ideas about honesty."

"What do you mean?" demanded Mrs. Barton, her cheeks aflame with indignation.

"I shouldn't think you would need to ask. Of course we both know why Mr. Barton is an exile, unable to return home."

"Yes, Albert Marlowe, we do know! He is an innocent man, suffering for the crime of another."

"That is what he says, is it?" sneered the squire. "That might be expected."

"Because it is true; but, Albert Marlowe, I have good hopes that his innocence may be vindicated, and the real criminal brought to light."

Her intense gaze made the squire uncomfortable. "Did she mean anything?" he asked himself.

"It is natural for you to take the most favorable view of the matter," he said; "but your hope is hardly likely to be realized. Good-morning."

Mrs. Barton looked after him, and her spirit rose in revolt against the inequalities of fortune. Here was the real criminal, as she fully believed—rich, prosperous, enjoying a high social position, while her poor husband, the scapegoat for another's offense, was an exile from home.

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The next day Squire Marlowe went to New York on business. He occasionally visited Wall Street, and now and then made an investment. He looked the embodiment of dignity and respectability, with his ample figure, fine broadcloth suit, and gold-rimmed eyeglasses, and might readily have been taken for a prosperous and wealthy city banker.

About one o'clock he entered an expensive restaurant, a stone's throw from Broadway, and taking up the bill of fare made a selection of dishes for his dinner. As he did so, he said to himself, with a comfortable smile: "When I was a common workman in a shoe shop, how little did I think that I should ever be able to sit down in a restaurant like this, and pay a dollar and a half for my dinner. Why, I didn't earn much more than that by a day's labor. Here I am surrounded by brokers, bankers, and wealthy merchants, and quite as good as they."

The thought led Squire Marlowe to look around him. What he saw almost paralyzed him with surprise. There—at a neighboring table—sat Uncle Jacob, enjoying a luxurious dinner, the cost of which the squire, with the bill of fare before him, estimated must come to a high figure.

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"Can that be Uncle Jacob?" Albert Marlowe asked himself in amazement. "How on earth can a clerk on twelve dollars a week salary afford to dine at a restaurant like this?"

As he had not yet given his order, he moved over to the table occupied by Uncle Jacob, and took a seat opposite him.

"Albert Marlowe!" exclaimed the old man, recognizing him with surprise.

"Yes, Uncle Jacob, it is I. But what on earth brings you here?"

"I should think it was pretty evident," said Jacob Marlowe with a smile, "I came in for my dinner."

"Yes, but do you usually come here?"

"Not always—perhaps half the time. I make my heartiest meal of the day at this time—unlike most New Yorkers—and like it to be a good one."

"Of course, but—how can you afford to eat here? Didn't you say that your salary was twelve dollars a week?"

"I think I said so."

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"You are spending at that rate for your dinners alone. I don't understand how you can do it."

"I am an old man, Albert. I can't live many years, and I think it sensible to get as much comfort out of life as possible for my few remaining years."

"Still—"

"I had a little money, you know, five hundred dollars, and I have managed to turn it to good account, so that I don't feel quite so cramped as when I was at Lakeville."

"The old man's been speculating!" thought Albert Marlowe, "and he has had a stroke of luck; but he's a fool to think he can live like a banker on the strength of that. Very likely his next venture will sweep away his small amount of capital. Well, if he comes to grief, he needn't apply to me. Henceforth I wash my hands of him and his affairs altogether."

"Of course it's your own lookout," he said, "but to me you seem recklessly extravagant."

"Because I come in here? Well, perhaps so. When I find I can't afford it, I'll go to a cheaper place. Have you seen Mary Barton lately?"

"Yes; she is well. By the way, what have you done with her boy?"

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"He is traveling."

"So I heard. It seems to me a very foolish proceeding. Who is paying his expenses?"

"Himself."

"Is he working, then?" asked the squire in surprise.

"Yes; he is a member of the 'Streets of Gotham' company, and is earning his living as an actor."

"What does he know about acting?" asked the squire in amazement.

"It appears that he is giving satisfaction. He sent me a paper containing a highly commendatory notice of his first appearance."

"It won't last," said Albert Marlowe, his wish being father to the thought.

When he returned to Lakeville that evening, he carried with him two pieces of news—first, that Uncle Jacob was living in luxury, and secondly, that Bert Barton was on the stage.

"If he can act, I can," said Percy jealously. "They must have been hard up for an actor when they took Bert Barton. A boy brought up in a country town. Never been to a theatre in his life before. Pooh! I dare say he appeared for one night only. The idea of Mary Barton's son acting before a regular audience, a boy who has hoed corn for farmer Wilson!"

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CHAPTER XXXII.

HIRAM FRENCH, OF CHICAGO.

From Harrisburg the dramatic company with which Bert was connected went directly to Chicago.

"We don't like to make such long jumps," said Mr. Pearson, with whom Bert had become quite friendly, "but we could secure Hooley's Theatre this week, and no other. Were you ever in Chicago?"

"No," answered Bert. "I have never traveled much. I suppose you have."

"Yes; I went out to San Francisco last year with the 'Silver King.' You will find Chicago a pleasant city."

"Are the hotels dear?"

"No; only moderate in price. The theatrical people get a discount, you know."

"I think I should rather live in a boarding house."

"That will be cheaper. I don't mind going with you to keep you company."

"Do you know of any good house?"

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"I know a very comfortable boarding-house on Monroe Street, kept by Mrs. Shelby, a widow lady. My sister once boarded there, when visiting Chicago."

"That will suit me, I think. Would you mind going 'round with me?"

"I'll take you there, with pleasure."

The two, on arriving in Chicago, went at once to Monroe Street, and called at the boarding-house.

"I am glad to see you, Mr. Pearson," said the widow cordially. "Is your sister with you?"

"Not this time."

"Are you going to play here?"

"Yes; I shall appear at Hooley's Theatre all next week."

"Is that young gentleman your brother?"

"No, he is one of our actors, Mr. Bert Barton."

"He looks young for an actor," said the landlady, surprised.

"I appeared on the stage when I was only twelve. But we have come on business, Mrs. Shelby. Have you a vacant room?"

"Yes; I had one vacated yesterday."

"Suppose Mr. Barton and myself take it for a week?"

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"I shall be glad to have you. I can't afford to have my rooms remain vacant."

"What will be your terms?"

"Six dollars each, including board."

"Is that satisfactory, Bert?" asked Pearson.

"Quite so, Mr. Pearson."

"Then we will take possession. I hope it is almost time for a meal, Mrs. Shelby. I am almost famished."

"You will only have to wait an hour. I will show you to your rooms, and then I must be excused, as my presence is required downstairs."

The room shown by the landlady was of fair size and neatly furnished. Bert looked about him in satisfaction.

"I would rather be here than at a hotel," he said.

"So would I, as long as I have a companion," returned Mr. Pearson. "Besides, I shall be saving from four to five dollars a week. I ought to pay more than half of it, as I am receiving a considerably higher salary than you."

"No, Mr. Pearson, I prefer to pay my share. But for you I should be paying more at a hotel."

Bert felt a little diffidence in appearing before a Chicago audience. He had, to be sure, been favorably received in Harrisburg, but he had an idea that in a larger city it would be more difficult to achieve success. The first night undeceived him. He received a liberal share of applause, and was called before the curtain.

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"I congratulate you, Bert," said Mr. Pearson. "You seem to have made yourself solid with the audience."

"I am glad that I give satisfaction," returned Bert. "It will encourage me to do better."

"You had better adopt the profession of an actor," continued his friend.

Bert shook his head.

"I prefer to enter a business of some kind," he said. "Though I have succeeded in one part, I am not sure that I should succeed in others."

Bert was about leaving the theatre that night when the call boy brought him a card.

"There is a gentleman at the door would like to see you," he said.

Bert glanced at the card, and found it bore the name of

HIRAM FRENCH.

It was a name he had never before heard, and when he reached the door he looked inquiringly at the middle-aged gentleman who stood before him.

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"You are young Barton?" said the visitor.

"Yes; that is my name."

"Are you the son of John Barton, who once worked in the shoe factory of Weeks Brothers?"

"Yes, sir," answered Bert, coloring, for he knew that the stranger must be aware that his father was resting under a criminal charge.

"I thought I could not be mistaken. You look as your father did at your age."

"Then you knew my father as a boy?" said Bert, eagerly.

"I was a schoolmate of his. Later on I was employed in the same factory with him—that of Weeks Brothers."

"Did you know under what circumstances he left the factory?" asked Bert, with some embarrassment.

"Yes, I knew all about it. But I want you to come home and pass the night at my house, and we will talk over that and other matters."

"Thank you, sir. I will give notice to a friend who rooms with me."

Bert found Mr. Pearson, and informed him that he would absent himself for one night from Mrs. Shelby's boarding-house. Then he returned to Mr. French.

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"I live on Indiana Avenue," explained the latter. "We shall find a car at the corner of State and Madison Streets."

As they walked to the car, Bert's new friend asked: "How long have you been on the stage, Mr. Barton?"

"Only two weeks."

"You don't mean that that comprises your whole experience."

"Yes. I stepped in at Harrisburg to supply the place of a young actor who was taken sick."

"You act as if you had been trained to it. But how came you to be at Harrisburg? That is not your home?"

"No. As you were my father's friend, I will tell you what brought me out there."

Bert briefly related the story that is already known to the reader. Hiram French listened with great attention.

"I remember Ralph Harding," he said. "He was not popular among his shopmates, especially after his agency in throwing suspicion upon your father."

"Was it generally thought that my father was guilty?" asked Bert.

"No; while circumstances were strong against him, no one could believe that a man whose reputation for integrity was as high as your father's would be guilty of stealing. But the good will of his associates could not help him."

"Did you know Mr. Marlowe?"

"Albert Marlowe? Yes."

"Was he well liked?"

"Not by me. He was far from being as highly respected as your father."

"Yet he has prospered. He is the owner of a factory in Lakeville, and is considered worth thirty thousand dollars."

"I am surprised to hear it. When I knew him he was always in debt."

"If he really took the bonds charged upon my father, that would account for his start in business."

"Exactly so. Now that I think of it, two or three days after the theft, I saw him and Ralph Harding walking together, apparently engaged in earnest conversation. They evidently had a good understanding with each other. I believe you are on the right track, and I heartily hope you will succeed in making your father's innocence evident to the world. John Barton was my favorite friend, and I hope some day to see him in Chicago."

"Are you in business here, Mr. French?"

"Yes; I am in the old line. Like Albert Marlowe, I am the owner of a large shoe factory, and I am worth, I should say, considerably more money."

Hiram French occupied a handsome house on Indiana Avenue, furnished with taste, and was, as his style of living showed, in easy circumstances. He introduced Bert to his wife and daughter, who seemed at once drawn to the young actor. When he left the house the next morning after breakfast he was urgently invited to call again during his stay, and partially promised to do so. But he was in haste to reach Peoria, for there it was he hoped to find a witness that would vindicate his father's name and fame.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A LATE ARRIVAL AT MRS. BARTON'S COTTAGE.

One evening, about eight o'clock, Mrs. Barton was sewing in her little sitting-room when an unusual feeling of loneliness overcame her. Circumstances had separated her from her husband, and her only son was hundreds of miles away.

"Why," she asked herself, "can I not fare as well as other wives and mothers? I am a wife, yet I cannot enjoy my husband's society. Fortunately I am not likely long to be separated from Bert. If he only succeeds in his mission, and comes home able to vindicate the fame of his father, and restore him to me, I shall be perfectly happy."

She felt unusually restless, and found it difficult to keep on with her work.

"I feel as if something were going to happen. I hope no misfortune is impending over me."

She had hardly spoken when the door bell rang.

"It is some neighbor come to make a call," she thought. "I am glad of it, for I am not in the mood for work."

She rose and opened the door. She started back in surprise when in her visitors she recognized Uncle Jacob, and leaning upon his arm the husband of whom she had just been thinking.

"May we come in?" asked Uncle Jacob, cheerily.

"Surely, but—has anything happened?"

"Only this; that your husband is sick and has come here to be nursed back to health by my advice."

"But—is it safe?"

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"I think so. The fact is, Bert has made an important discovery, and is likely to make more. We are in a fair way to prove your husband's innocence, and put the guilt where it belongs."

"And where does it belong?"

"The man who stole the bonds, we have every reason to believe, is Albert Marlowe."

"I do not wish to get him into trouble, but if it is necessary in order to vindicate my husband's reputation, I will not object."

"Albert Marlowe has been a cruel enemy to you and your family," said Jacob Marlowe, sternly. "He is entitled to no consideration. The past ten years cannot be recalled; but I think that we shall be able to provide a brighter future for yourself and Mr. Barton. The first thing to do is to get him well."

"What is the matter with you, John?" asked Mrs. Barton, now for the first time noting with alarm her husband's pale face.

"The doctor says my system is run down, and that I need time to recuperate. I was living in a boarding-house in Montreal, and the prospect of being sick there was too much for me. I wanted my wife to take care of me, and, taking the first train to New York, I consulted Uncle Jacob as to whether it would be safe. In the light of Bert's discoveries he told me to take the risk. So here I am. May I stay?"

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"Do you need to ask that?" said Mrs. Barton, with an affectionate glance at her husband. "There is no place where you have a better right to be."

Then, as she thought of her scanty means, a momentary look of anxiety overspread her face lest she should not be able to provide him with the medicines and nourishing food that he required. Uncle Jacob, who was a keen observer, read her thoughts, and reassured her by saying: "Mr. Barton is provided with what money may be required for at least a month, and after that time I think some more can be found."

"But, Uncle Jacob, I cannot consent to impose upon your liberality any further. You have but a small sum of money yourself. What would happen to you if you should fall sick?"

"I think I should follow your husband's example, and come here to be nursed back to health," replied Uncle Jacob.

"What am I to say to the neighbors, for they will be sure to inquire?"

"Say that you are taking care of a sick gentleman from New York."

"It will not do to give his real name?"

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"No; call me Mr. Robinson, as you did on my former visit," said Mr. Barton.

"Now that this matter is arranged, can you take care of us both to-night?" asked Uncle Jacob.

"Yes, there is Bert's room."

"Then I will trespass upon your hospitality for one night."

"Can't you stay longer, Uncle Jacob?"

"No, I must get back to business. I must not run any risk of losing my situation, you know."

"To be sure not," said Mrs. Barton, earnestly. "Do you like your employer, Uncle Jacob?"

"I have no reason to complain of him," answered the old man, with a smile. "He lets me do about as I please."

"You were very lucky in getting in with him."

"As you say, I am in good luck. But I think I ought to get higher pay."

"It seems to me twelve dollars a week is a very good salary," said Mrs. Barton, soberly. "You could save something out of that if you were not so generous."

"I must think seriously of that, Mary. If I get mean and close-fisted, you mustn't be surprised. It will be only because I follow your advice."

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"You can never become mean or close-fisted, Uncle Jacob. It isn't in your nature to be either. But I hope you will be reasonably economical, and not give away so much money to others."

"You are a good little woman, Mary," said Uncle Jacob, feelingly. "If you are ever blessed with means, you will do just as you advise me not to do. Don't be worried about me, Mary. God loves a cheerful giver, you know, and whatever I give to you is cheerfully given."

An hour was spent in conversation, and then, as Mr. Barton showed fatigue, he and Uncle Jacob retired to bed, and Mrs. Barton mixed some flour so as to be able to give her guests warm biscuits in the morning, for she remembered that her husband had been very fond of them in former years.

The next morning after breakfast Uncle Jacob took his departure.

"I leave you in good hands, John," he said to Mr. Barton. "Now, get well as fast as you can."

"There is one thing that will make me well," said Barton, "and that is, vindication from the false charge that has darkened my life and destroyed my happiness during the last ten years."

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"That is coming, and coming soon," said Uncle Jacob. "Only be patient a little while. Bert has already made a discovery that makes it clear who is the real criminal."

"I hope he will never suffer as I have done," said the sick man.

"You have a more Christian spirit than I, John. I think it only right that he should suffer for the wrong he has done you. Well, good-by. Let me hear from you, and if Bert makes any further progress in his mission, I will apprise you and Mary."

Uncle Jacob left the village without being seen by Albert Marlowe or Percy, who alone were likely to recognize him. But it leaked out that Mrs. Barton had a boarder, Percy being the first to hear of it.

"What do you think, papa?" he said one day. "Bert Barton's mother has taken a boarder from the city."

"A boarder from the city?" repeated Squire Marlowe, surprised.

"Yes."

"What brought him to Lakeville?"

"I don't know. I can tell you who brought him here."

"Who, then?"

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"Uncle Jacob."

"Has he been here, then?"

"Yes; he came in the evening and went back the next morning."

"I wonder he did not call upon us," said the squire thoughtfully.

"It's no great loss if he didn't," returned Percy, pertly. "He would probably want to borrow money."

"No; he appears to be doing very well in the city; that is, for him. But what could induce a gentleman from the city to come here to Lakeville to board in a humble cottage?"

"I hear he is in poor health," said Percy.

"Have you seen him? Do you know what his appearance is?"

"Yes. I saw him sitting at Mrs. Barton's window. He is of dark complexion, and has dark hair. Then he seemed to have a high forehead."

Squire Marlowe started in surprise.

"Dark complexion, dark hair, a high forehead! Is it possible that it can be——"

"Who, father?" asked Percy, curiously.

"Never mind, my son. Some one whom I used to know answers to that description."

As Percy went out, Albert Marlowe said to himself: "If it should be he, what shall I do about it? It is not for my interest that he should remain in Lakeville. I might denounce him to the authorities, but I would warn him first. Then, if he still lingers, he must take the consequences."

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CHAPTER XXXIV.

BERT INTERVIEWS HARDING'S SISTER.

The next week Bert found himself in Peoria. His heart beat with excitement, for here he hoped he would attain the object he had in view.

The first day he was occupied in obtaining a boarding place, and in matters connected with the play. He understood his duty to his employers, and, eager as he was to seek out Ralph Harding, he waited till he could do so without intrenching upon their time.

After considerable inquiry he found himself standing in front of a neat-looking frame house of two stories in a quiet street. The plate on the front door bore the name

CLIFTON.

Bert rang the bell.

The door was opened by a girl about twelve years of age.

"Is Mrs. Clifton at home?" asked Bert.

"Yes, sir. Won't you walk in?"

She led the way into a tiny parlor, so small that the owner would have found it difficult to give a fashionable party, or indeed any party at all.

"Sit down here," said the young girl, pointing to a rocking-chair, "and I will call ma."

Bert took a seat, and was startled a minute later by a hoarse voice saying, with much energy, "Get out, you tramp!"

He looked around the room in angry amazement, but could see no one.

Directly afterward he heard a discordant laugh, and, guided by the sound, looked up to see that it proceeded from a green parrot in a cage above his head.

Bert smiled. It was impossible for him to be angry with a parrot, however impolite the bird might be.

Just then a lady entered the room—a lady of middle size and middle age, plain in feature, but not unpleasant to look upon.

"Did you wish to see me, sir?" she asked.

"Are you the sister of Ralph Harding?" asked Bert.

The woman's face changed instantly.

"Yes," she answered eagerly. "Do you bring me any news of him? He is not in trouble, is he?"

It was Bert's turn to be surprised.

"I thought he was staying with you," he said.

"Not now."

"But he has been here. He came here from Harrisburg, didn't he?"

"Yes, and he was here till three weeks ago. Then he came home from the shop where he was at work and told me he was going away."

"Did he tell you where he was going?" asked Bert, eagerly.

"He said he should go to Chicago first, but I have not heard from him since he went away."

Ralph Harding then was in Chicago. If Bert had only known that, he would have remained there and prosecuted the search in the Lake City. Yet what chance would he have of finding a man whom he had never seen and would not know by sight in so large and populous a place?

His face showed the keenness of his disappointment, and Mrs. Clifton was led to inquire:

"Did you wish to see my brother on business of importance?"

"Of importance to me, yes."

"Is it," she asked with hesitation, "likely to get Ralph into trouble?"

"No, madam. On the contrary, if I find him it will be of advantage to him."

"Then I hope you may find him. But I am afraid it will be difficult. Ralph is very restless. We tried all we could to keep him here, but it was of no use. He had a good place, and, though I say it myself, a good home, where he enjoyed every comfort, but all that didn't prevent him leaving us to go among strangers," she concluded, with a sigh.

"I only just came from Chicago. I wish I had known that he was there."

"Did you come to Peoria expressly to see my brother?" asked Mrs. Clifton, showing some curiosity.

"Not entirely. I am connected with the theatrical company. We play the 'Streets of Gotham.'"

"Are you an actor, and so young," asked Mrs. Clifton, in surprise.

"I take a small part in the play," answered Bert, modestly. "Allow me to place two admission tickets at your disposal."

"Oh ma, can I go with you?" asked the young girl who had opened the front door.

"Perhaps so, Belle."

"Have you any picture of your brother which you could show me?" asked Bert, returning to the object of his visit. 247

"Fortunately, Ralph had some photographs taken while he was here. But for me he would not have done so, but I insisted, and paid for them myself. Belle, go and get one of the pictures of your Uncle Ralph."

The little girl left the room, and soon returned with a photograph.

"You can have that, if you like," said Mrs. Clifton. "I got a dozen, and Ralph did not feel enough interest to keep one for himself, so I have plenty. I suppose it isn't anything extra, but it look like Ralph."

Bert was eagerly scanning the picture which Ralph Harding's sister had given him.

The face was long, the nose aquiline, the cheeks hollow, and the expression was that of a man who was dissatisfied with life. There were side whiskers of scanty growth, and there was a scrubby mustache of yellowish hue. It was a front view, and both ears were visible. They were of extraordinary size and stood out prominently from the head.

"I think I shall know Ralph Harding if I see him," thought Bert.

"I am very much obliged to you for the picture," said Bert. "With it to help me I hope I may find your brother." 248

"If you do," returned Mrs. Clifton, "will you write to me and let me know, Mr.—?"

"Barton. You will see my name on the playbill—Bert Barton. Yes, I will write to you in that case."

"There is one question I would like to ask you, Mr. Barton. You say you have never met my brother?"

"No."

"Then how did you learn that he had a sister in Peoria, and how did you know that that sister was myself."

"I was staying at his old boarding-house in Harrisburg. He left behind a box of papers, and among those papers was a letter from you, urging him to come to Peoria."

"I remember that letter."

"It was that letter—excuse my reading it—that led me to come to Peoria in search of Mr. Harding."

"I am glad you came, for I have some hope through you of inducing Ralph to return. You see, Mr. Barton, there are only two of us. I had not seen him for five years, and now that he has left us, five years more may roll by before we meet again. I think Ralph would be better with us. He is not a cheerful man. Sometimes I think he is burdened with a secret which is preying upon him. I am sure he would be better off with us than among strangers." 249

"I agree with you, Mrs. Clifton. You may rest assured that, should I be fortunate enough to find your brother, I will do all I can to induce him to return to you when our business is concluded. This may require him to go East, but afterward he will be free to go where he pleases. The secret you refer to may relate to the business upon which I wished to see him."

As Bert rose to go Mrs. Clifton took his hand, and said, earnestly: "I wish you success, I am sure. I feel better for your visit."

The information which Bert had received made him desirous of going back to Chicago as soon as possible and making every effort to find Ralph Harding. But there was one embarrassment. He did not like to leave the company till they were able to find a substitute. In New York this would have been easy, but here in Peoria there would be a great difficulty.

But he was unexpectedly relieved from this perplexity.

On Friday morning Mr. Pearson, who had just come from the manager's room, said to him, "I have news for you, Bert."

"What is it, Mr. Pearson?"

"Bob Hazleton has just arrived, and wants to take his old place. But, of course, that would not be fair to you."

"Tell the manager to take him back," said Bert eagerly. "I have some important business calling me to Chicago, and I shall be glad to resign."

"You are sure you won't be disappointed?"

"Very sure. I have been wondering how I could resign without embarrassing the company."

"We shall be very sorry to lose you, but if that is the way you feel, Bob is in luck."

Bert played that evening in the presence of his predecessor in the role, and on Saturday took the morning train for Chicago.

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CHAPTER XXXV.

SUCCESS COMES STRANGELY.

On his return to Chicago, Bert went back to Mrs. Shelby's boarding-house, and was cordially received. His board bill was but six dollars a week, and he took care not to spend any money unnecessarily for outside expenses.

About the middle of the week he received a letter from Uncle Jacob, to whom he had telegraphed his movements.

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This is an extract therefrom:

"You will be surprised to learn that your father is sick at Lakeville, under your mother's care. I don't think his trouble is physical so much as mental. If, by your help, his reputation is vindicated, and he is relieved from suspicion, I am sure he will soon be himself again.

"There is some risk, no doubt, in the step he has taken. He might be denounced and arrested, if information were given to the authorities. But a long time has elapsed since the charge was made, and no one in Lakeville was cognizant of the circumstances except Albert Marlowe, and, though he may learn that the city boarder at your house is your father, I cannot believe he would be so base as to give a hint to the authorities. If he should, the letter of Ralph Harding's which you forwarded will throw suspicion upon him. I am anxious, however, to have you find the man himself, as his oral testimony will avail more than any letters. You may assure him, if found, that he will be liberally dealt with, if he helps clear your father.

"I don't know how you may be situated as to money, and I therefore send you an order for fifty dollars. Present it to Clement Green, of No. 13½ La Salle Street, and he will cash it. He is not a banker, but an insurance agent, with whom I am well acquainted. I am glad to hear that you have left the stage, as it will permit you to devote your entire time to hunting up Ralph Harding."

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On account of the income from his dramatic engagement, Bert had spent but little of his uncle's money for the last three weeks. However, he thought it best to cash the order at once, as he might have unforeseen expenses. He accordingly made his way to the office on La Salle Street to which he had been directed, and presented his order to Mr. Green in person.

"How is my old friend Mr. Marlowe?" asked that gentleman, courteously.

"He was very well when I left New York," answered Bert.

"I knew him in California. In fact, we both worked together in the same mine. Try to persuade him to come out to Chicago. I should be delighted to entertain him. Are you a relative of his?"

"Yes, sir; he is my great uncle."

"Shall you stay long in Chicago?"

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"I am not sure. It will depend on my business."

"You are young to be intrusted with a business matter."

"Yes, sir; but there was no one else to undertake it."

"How will you have the money?"

"In tens and fives."

"Very well. Let me advise you to divide your money and not carry it all in your pocket-book. You know, of course, that in a city like this there are pickpockets and designing persons who would be glad to rob you."

"Thank you for the suggestion. I will follow your advice." Bert borrowed an envelope, and put all his money, except about ten dollars in small bills, in the inside pocket of his vest. This was wise, for he had fifty dollars besides the sum which he had just been paid. It proved to be a prudent

precaution.

Outside the office a young man of rather flashy appearance had noticed Bert, and, following him in on some pretext that would avert suspicion, had seen that Mr. Green was paying him money. He went out quickly, and waited till Bert emerged into the street. He then quickened his steps, and overtook him.

"Good-morning, young man," he said.

"Good-morning," returned Bert, eyeing the stranger with some curiosity.

"You must excuse the liberty I have taken in addressing you, but if you will favor me with a few minutes' conversation, I think I can make it worth your while."

"Very well. I am ready to hear what you have to say."

"By the way, are you staying at a hotel?"

"No; I am boarding on Monroe Street."

"Is it a good boarding-house?"

"Excellent."

"I am looking for one, and if you will allow me, I will walk round with you, and see what it is like."

Bert knew that Mrs. Shelby had a room which she was anxious to let, and he readily agreed to introduce the stranger.

"I am staying at a hotel just now," explained his companion, "but I prefer a boarding-house as more home-like. Are you a stranger in the city?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where from?"

"From New York."

"I am from San Francisco. I have only been here a week."

They conversed upon indifferent topics till they reached Mrs. Shelby's.

"I will go up and take a look at your room first, if you don't mind. That will give me an idea of the accommodations."

"Very well, sir."

Bert led the way to his own room, and both entered.

"Very neat, on my word!" said the stranger. "Now I will allude to the little matter of business—and then you can introduce me to your landlady."

"Just as you please, sir."

"It is briefly this: Do you see this watch?"

He took out a showy gold watch, and held it up before Bert.

"I find myself unexpectedly short of funds, owing to the failure of a remittance to come to hand, and I am going to offer you this watch at a bargain. You have none, I see."

"No, and I have no money to spare to buy one."

"Wait till I offer you an inducement. This watch cost me a hundred dollars. I have had it only six months. I offer it to you for twenty-five."

"I presume that is a good offer; but I have no money of my own that I can use for the purpose of buying a watch."

"My young friend, it will pay you to borrow, for you can double your money on the watch. Any one will give you fifty for it."

"Then why do you offer it to me for twenty-five?" asked Bert shrewdly.

"Because I can't wait to hunt up a customer."

"I cannot buy it."

"Then I will make you another offer. Lend me ten dollars on it, and I will redeem it in three days, and give you five dollars for the accommodation."

Bert hesitated. It seemed an easy way of earning five dollars.

"If I don't redeem it, you have the watch itself for security for a ridiculously small sum. Of course I shan't give you the chance, if I can help it. I expect funds from San Francisco to-morrow."

"I think I shall have to decline," Bert said, after a pause; "but your offer seems a good one, and I have no doubt you will easily get accommodated elsewhere."

Bert was not prepared for the next movement.

The stranger rose from his seat, drew a sponge from his pocket, and quickly applied it to Bert's nostrils. He felt his head swimming and consciousness departing.

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"Aha," thought the stranger. "My prudent young friend will advance money this time without security."

He hastily thrust his hand into Bert's pocket, drew out his pocket-book, and, without stopping to open it or examine its contents, sprang to the door, with the intention of making his escape.

But another boarder chanced to be passing through the entry at the moment. A quick glance revealed to him Bert unconscious on a chair, and the pocket-book in the hand of the man who was leaving the room. He took in the situation at once.

"Give me that pocket-book," he said sternly. The other looked undecided.

"Give it to me, or I will hold you and summon help. If you surrender it, I will let you go scot free."

The thief muttered an execration, but did not dare to refuse.

The boarder entered the room and set himself to reviving Bert.

"Where am I?" asked Bert, languidly.

"You are all right now," was the reply.

Bert looked up in the face of his visitor, and started in great excitement.

"Tell me, quick," he said, "are you not Ralph Harding?"

"Yes," answered the other in great surprise. "Who are you that recognizes me?"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

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RALPH HARDING IS FOUND.

Bert was still partly under the influence of chloroform; but the sight of Ralph Harding, whom he recognized from the photograph which had been given him, roused him from his stupefaction.

Harding repeated his question.

"Who are you?" he asked, "and how do you know me?"

"I am Bert Barton."

"What? not the son of John Barton?" exclaimed Harding, drawing back with a troubled look.

"Yes," answered Bert, gravely; "I am the son of John Barton, and I have been in search of you for several weeks."

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"You have been in search of me? Why did you want to see me?"

"I want you to clear my father of the false charge which was brought against him ten years ago," answered Bert, firmly.

"I don't understand what you mean," stammered Harding, who had sunk back into a chair and was eyeing Bert with a troubled look.

"Oh, yes, you do, Mr. Harding. It was you who gave the information that one of the stolen bonds was in my father's overcoat pocket."

"It was true," said Harding doggedly.

"Where were the rest?" asked Bert, pointedly.

"How should I know? Your father had them secreted somewhere, I suppose."

"You know better than that. My father was innocent. He knew nothing of the bonds. An enemy plotted to get him into trouble."

"Do you charge me with being that enemy?" demanded Harding.

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"You had something to do with it, but you were the instrument of another."

"How do you know that?" admitted Harding, incautiously.

"Shall I tell you the name of that other?"

"Yes."

"It is Albert Marlowe."

Ralph Harding started in surprise.

"Does he admit it?" he asked, after a pause.

"No; he does not know that it is suspected. I want you to back me up in the demand that he clear my father from suspicion."

"He will never do it. How could he, without criminating himself?"

"Whatever be the result, my father's character must be cleared."

"Tell me, is your father still living?" asked Ralph Harding, earnestly.

"Yes, he is."

"Have you seen him?"

"Yes. Poor father, he has suffered much. He has been separated from my mother and myself these many years, and has not dared to show himself at his old home, or among his old friends, because he was liable to be arrested on the old charge." 261

Ralph was looking down upon the floor, and his features were working convulsively. Bert guessed what was passing through his mind, and paused to give him time.

He looked up after a while, and asked: "What would you have me do?"

"Testify to what you know. It will clear my father, and he can come home once more."

"But it will condemn Albert Marlowe."

"Why not let it? He is the guilty man. Have you so much reason to like Albert Marlowe that you will not do this act of justice?"

"No!" Ralph Harding burst out, and his face wore an expression of resentment. "He has used me like a dog. It was through me that he became a rich man, and in return he has treated me with contempt and indifference. If I dared——"

"You would expose him?"

"Yes, I would. It is of no use to deny what you have said. Your father is an innocent man. The bonds were stolen by Albert Marlowe." 262

Bert looked triumphant. He had wrung the truth from the accomplice of Squire Marlowe.

"How did you find me?" asked Harding, abruptly. "How did you know I was in Chicago?"

"I was told so by your sister."

"Have you been in Peoria, then?" asked Harding, in great surprise.

"Yes; I was there last week."

"But how did you find out that I had a sister?"

"At Harrisburg. You left a letter from your sister at your boarding-house there, which gave me the clew I wanted."

"And how did you trace me to Harrisburg?"

Bert explained.

"And you defrayed your own expenses? I thought you and your mother were left in poverty."

"So we were; but an uncle of my mother's recently returned from California, and it is he who has supplied me with the funds needed for my journey." 263

"Then he is wealthy?"

"I don't think so. He is employed in New York on a small salary, but he is liberal with the little he has. He has set his heart on clearing my father's reputation. It is he who sent me on my present mission."

"Does your father think that Albert Marlowe is the real thief?"

"He does. In fact, he is firmly convinced of it. Now, Mr. Harding, I have told you why I wanted to find you. You have as much as told me I am right in my suspicion. You are partly responsible for my poor father's undeserved sufferings. But for you he would never have been charged with the crime. Is it not so?"

"I admit it," Ralph Harding answered, slowly.

"Will you tell me who put the bond into my father's pocket?"

"I did."

"And who prompted you to do it?"

"It was the man you suspected—Albert Marlowe."

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"It was the proceeds of his theft that enabled him to start in business, was it not?"

"You are right."

"I have one more question to ask. Will you accompany me to New York and testify to this, if needful?"

"But what will happen to me?" asked Harding, troubled.

"My uncle bade me promise you that we will do our utmost to prevent your coming to harm. As to Albert Marlowe, we shall demand a confession from him, or we shall have him arrested, and the whole matter investigated."

Ralph Harding paused for a brief space, and then said: "What are your plans if I agree to help you?"

"To start for New York to-night," answered Bert, promptly. "In New York I will take you to Uncle Jacob's office, and we will decide what to do next."

Harding hesitated a moment, then said: "I believe you will keep your promise, and I will put myself in your hands. I always liked your father better than Albert Marlowe, who is a very selfish man, and he has not kept his promise to me. I have reproached myself more than once for consenting to help Marlowe in his plot. It has never been out of my mind. I have been restless, unable to settle down anywhere, and have suffered punishment myself, though not as severe as has fallen upon your father. When I have made reparation, as I now have a chance to do, I shall be more contented in mind."

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"Can you be ready to take the evening train with me?"

"Yes."

"Where are you living?"

"In this house."

"Then we can remain together. I have not thanked you yet for coming to my help, and saving my money."

"I am glad to have helped the son. It will help offset the injury I have done the father."

Bert, accompanied by Ralph Harding, took the evening train for New York. Their arrival was timely, for reasons which will be shown in a later chapter.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

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ALBERT MARLOWE MEETS HIS VICTIM.

Like most wrong-doers, Albert Marlowe had never ceased to entertain an apprehension that his connections with the bond theft would some time be made public. Yet, as the years rolled by, and he became rich and prosperous, his fears abated somewhat, and he felt no qualms of conscience, though he knew that an innocent man was suffering exile for his sake. When he thought of John Barton it was with dislike. For nothing is truer than the saying that we dislike those whom we have injured. He did not know whether Barton was alive or dead, but hoped that he was dead, as this would make him absolutely safe.

When he learned from Percy that Mrs. Barton had a male boarder, his fears instantly suggested that it might be John Barton. The description given by Percy tallied with his recollections of the victim of his wicked plot. His fears and suspicions were instantly aroused. Why was John Barton here? He was under the ban of the law, liable to be re-arrested, yet he ran that risk. What object had he in view? That he sought the care of his wife because he was ill did not seem a sufficient motive. Evidently it behooved him to find out, first, whether Mrs. Barton's boarder was really her husband; and, secondly, if such should be the case, to warn him to leave Lakeville. It gave the squire an uncomfortable feeling to have his victim so near at hand.

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First, to find out who the boarder was. Albert Marlowe got into the habit of walking two or three times a day past the cottage of Mrs. Barton, in the hope of seeing the mysterious stranger. He did this for several days, but did not succeed in his object. The reason was that Mr. Barton was confined by weakness first to the bed, and then to the lounge in the little sitting-room.

But on the fifth day Squire Marlowe was in luck. The mysterious boarder was walking to and fro in the front yard attached to the cottage. When he saw Albert Marlowe he turned away, and was

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about to re-enter the house. The squire did not need this corroboration of his suspicion, for he had already recognized Barton, though the two had not met for ten years.

He set his face firmly; his expression became hard and dogged.

"That man must leave Lakeville!" he said to himself.

Without hesitation he opened the gate and entered the yard.

Meanwhile John Barton, seeing that he was recognized, came to a halt, and, turning around, faced the man who had been his bitter enemy. He showed no signs of fear, for what had happened was only what he had anticipated.

Squire Marlowe came up and stood at his side.

"You are John Barton," he said. "Do not attempt to deny it!"

"I do not propose to deny it to you—Albert Marlowe," answered Barton, calmly.

"You are here under an assumed name. I was told that Mrs. Barton's boarder was named Robinson." 269

"I am passing under that name. You know why."

"Yes, I do know why. You are under the ban of the law. You are afraid of being arrested and brought to trial a second time."

"I know there is danger of it, and of course I shrink from it."

"Then why do you come here? Are you mad?"

"After ten years I wished to see my wife once more. I am a sick man. I came to her to be nursed back to health."

"Take care, or when you leave here it will be for a less desirable boarding-place!" said the squire, in a menacing tone.

"You mean the prison?"

"Yes; that is what I mean."

"No one in Lakeville knows who I am. Why should I fear?"

"I know."

"Surely you would not betray me—you, the man who worked for years at my side?"

"I cannot compromise with crime. It is my duty as a good, law-abiding citizen, to denounce you to the authorities." 270

"You—a good, law-abiding citizen!" repeated John Barton, with scornful emphasis.

Squire Marlowe started back in astonishment. The worm had turned.

"Do you mean to question it?" he demanded, sharply.

"Yes, I do."

"On what grounds?"

"Albert Marlowe," said John Barton, sternly, "one of us two is a thief, but I am not the one."

"Do you mean to insult me?" exclaimed the squire, white with anger, not unmingled with uneasy fear.

"Come in! I have something to say to you. It is better said in-doors, where no passer-by can hear it."

Mechanically Squire Marlowe followed John Barton into the little sitting-room. Mrs. Barton looked up from her rocking-chair in surprise and apprehension, and half rose.

"Stay where you are, Mary," said her husband. "I wish you to hear what I am about to say to Albert Marlowe."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

MR. BARTON DEFIES THE SQUIRE.

Squire Marlowe sat down, while John Barton, instead of quailing in his presence, eyed him with

cool indifference.

"What is the meaning of this tomfoolery?" asked Albert Marlowe, uneasily.

"You may call it what you like, but the time has come for an explanation. Albert Marlowe, you have done me a cruel wrong. It is through you that I have had my name blackened and have been forced to fly from my country."

"So you went to Canada, did you?" sneered the squire. "It's a popular resort for gentlemen of your class."

"Your words do not trouble me, for I never committed the crime with which I was charged."

"Of course not. It is wonderful how innocent you all are. But you say that I am responsible for the consequences of your crime. What do you mean by that?"

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"I mean," answered Barton, with a penetrating glance, "that the bonds were stolen by you, and that you schemed to throw the blame upon me. Is this plain?"

"Are you mad?" said the squire, angrily, "do you expect the world to believe this, or are you in a conspiracy to blackmail me?"

"The last question you can ask when I demand money from you as the price of my silence."

"Take care, John Barton! Your silly tale is the last desperate expedient of a criminal. You ought to see the folly of attacking a man in my position. For years I have been the most prominent man in Lakeville, owner of the large shoe factory that gives employment to fifty hands. It is no idle boast—and your wife will confirm my words—that I am the most influential and respected citizen of this town."

"And on what are your position and prosperity based, Albert Marlowe? Where did you obtain the capital that enabled you to start in business?"

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Squire Marlowe looked confused for a moment, but his audacity did not desert him.

"I started," he answered, "on borrowed money."

"Of whom did you borrow?"

"That is my affair," returned Marlowe, doggedly.

"You would find it hard to answer. Let me answer for you."

The squire did not speak, but waited, not without uneasiness, for Barton to answer his own question. He didn't have long to wait.

"You started your factory on the money realized from the stolen bonds."

"You will have to prove this," said Marlowe, furiously.

"Do you wish me to do so?" asked John Barton, significantly.

"This is all a scheme to clear yourself from the charge," exclaimed the squire. "Don't think I am so dull that I don't see through it. How happens it that you have waited ten years before it occurred to you to implicate me?"

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"It did not immediately occur to me; but when you started in business on a large scale, though you were no better off than myself at the time of the theft, it set me to thinking."

"I have already told you that I used borrowed money."

"You won't tell me where you borrowed it."

"Because it is my private business. John Barton, I warn you that you are making a powerful enemy. If you keep quiet and let me alone, I will not call attention to your presence in Lakeville, and for safety's sake I will not appear to know anything about you. Do you make that promise?"

"Albert Marlowe, I am an innocent man, but I am under a ban. I want to prove my innocence, and regain the right to live with my family, and hold up my head before my fellow-men. If, in doing this, attention should be drawn to you as the real criminal I cannot help it."

"So you defy me, do you?" demanded the squire.

"If what I have said is a defiance, then I defy you," answered John Barton, calmly.

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Squire Marlowe rose from his seat, his face flushed with anger.

"Be it so," he said. "You will hear from me again."

"Oh, John," exclaimed Mrs. Barton as the squire left the room, "I am afraid Albert will do you some harm."

"Then, Mary, to relieve you, let me say that I have heard through Uncle Jacob that Bert has found the missing witness, Ralph Harding, and that both are probably in New York at this moment."

On his return Squire Marlowe telegraphed from a neighboring town as follows:

"To Robert Manning, No. 71 1-2 Fulton St., Brooklyn:

"John Barton, who ten years since stole your bonds, and escaped trial, is at Lakeville, at his wife's house.

"ALBERT MARLOWE."

The last act in the drama was about to be played, and Squire Marlowe went about with a gleam in his eye as he anticipated the final downfall of the man who had dared to defy him.

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CHAPTER XXXIX.

CONCLUSION.

Bert arrived in New York in due time, accompanied by Ralph Harding. They received a cordial welcome from Uncle Jacob.

"You shall not regret your testimony in behalf of John Barton," he said to Harding. "I will see that you are protected."

"Uncle Jacob," said Bert, "I have twenty dollars left of the amount you gave me for expenses. Here it is."

"Keep it, Bert. You will need it."

"But, Uncle Jacob, I have already put you to too great expense. If you were a rich man——"

Jacob Marlowe smiled.

"I can spare the money," he said. "Don't trouble yourself on that score. You have done yourself great credit, Bert, and shown great shrewdness in your expedition in search of Mr. Harding. I am not sure that you would not make a good detective."

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"I have no ambition in that direction, Uncle Jacob. I hope to get a little better education, and then to devote myself to business."

"I think you will have an opportunity to do both, Bert."

"Do you think you can get me a place of some kind in New York? I know, of course, that I must work before I can afford to study."

"We will speak of that later. Now I have to propose that we all go down to Lakeville to meet your father and mother, and incidentally to have an interview with Albert Marlowe."

"Do you wish me to go, too?" asked Ralph Harding.

"By all means! You are the most important member of the party."

Toward noon of the next day the three reached Lakeville. Uncle Jacob and Ralph Harding secured rooms at the hotel, and then repaired to the little cottage.

We will precede them.

It was in the spirit of revenge that the squire had telegraphed to Brooklyn, and after he had done so he half regretted it. If John Barton were re-arrested, he would undoubtedly try to incriminate the squire himself, and the mere accusation would do him harm. It would be best if Barton could be frightened into making his escape, and this very act would seem like a confession of guilt.

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"Yes, that will be best," thought the squire. "Barton will never dare to come back, and we shall be spared the scandal of a trial."

He took his hat and cane, and set out for the Barton cottage.

Mrs. Barton opened the door.

"Is your husband in?" asked the squire.

"Yes."

"I would like to see him on very important business."

"I will see you," said John Barton, who had overheard the squire's words.

"Well?" he said, as Marlowe entered the sitting-room.

"I have come to urge you to leave Lakeville," began the squire, abruptly. "There is no time to be lost."

"Why should I leave Lakeville?"

"You don't want to be arrested, I take it?"

"Is there any danger of it?"

"Yes; I telegraphed yesterday to Robert Manning that you were here. Officers of the law may arrive at any time."

"Why did you betray me?" asked Barton, quietly.

"Because I thought it my duty. I had no right to shield a criminal."

"Then why have you put me on my guard?"

"For your wife's sake."

"I am surprised at your consideration. You showed very little when you discharged my boy from your factory."

"That was a matter of business. But there is no time to waste in discussion. I advise you to go to the station at once. A train will leave for New York in half an hour, and you may be able to escape before the arrival of the officers."

"But I don't want to escape."

"Are you mad?" demanded the squire, impatiently. "Do you want to spend a term of years in prison?"

"Heaven forbid!"

"Then profit by my warning, and escape while there is time."

"No. If I am arrested I will stand trial."

"Have you taken leave of your senses?"

"No; I wish to prove my innocence."

"What chance have you of that?"

"The testimony of Ralph Harding——"

"What!" exclaimed Squire Marlowe, rising in great agitation. "Where is Ralph Harding?"

"Here!" was the unexpected reply, and Uncle Jacob entered the room, accompanied by Bert and Mr. Harding.

Albert Marlowe turned his gaze from one to another in ill-concealed dismay.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked, hoarsely. "Have you been hatching up a plot against me?"

"No," answered Uncle Jacob with dignity. "It is our object to relieve John Barton from the stigma upon his fair name. In doing so it may be necessary to fasten the crime upon the guilty party. Who that is, you know as well as I do."

"No one will credit the testimony of that man!" said the squire, pointing scornfully at Ralph Harding.

"Don't be too sure of that! His story is plain and straightforward, and I think it will impress the court that way."

"Albert has been urging me to escape," said John Barton. "He has set the officers on my track."

"Has he done this?" asked Uncle Jacob, sharply.

"So he says."

At this moment a knock was heard at the door, and there was a new and unexpected arrival, which produced a sensation.

It was Robert Manning, of Brooklyn.

"You telegraphed to me, Mr. Marlowe," he said. "This man, I believe, is John Barton."

"You are right, sir," responded Barton, calmly.

"I might have brought with me an officer and an order of arrest, but I have chosen instead to offer to drop all action against you if you will restore the bonds or their equivalent. I have no wish to be revenged, but I want reparation."

"As I never took your bonds, I am not the person to apply to," replied Barton.

"Then perhaps you will have the kindness to tell me who did take the bonds," said Manning, incredulously.

"I will do that," responded Ralph Harding, coming forward. "There he stands!"

"It is a lie!" interposed the squire, hoarsely.

"It is true. You hired me to put a five-hundred dollar bond into John Barton's pocket while you appropriated the remainder. It was this that enabled you to go into business for yourself in Lakeville. It was in this way that you got together your wealth."

Albert Marlowe was overwhelmed, and did not immediately reply.

"I think I remember you," said Robert Manning. "It was your testimony that weighed so heavily against Mr. Barton."

"And it has weighed heavily upon my conscience ever since. I have at last determined to tell the truth."

"What have you to say to this, Mr. Marlowe?" asked Manning pointedly.

"It is a lie," answered the squire, feebly.

"You are willing to have the matter go to trial?"

"Albert," put in Uncle Jacob, "it appears to me that you are in a bad box. Ralph Harding's testimony is sure to convict you. Will you take my advice?"

"What is it?" asked the squire, sullenly.

"Accept the offer made to John Barton under a misapprehension. Repay to Mr. Manning the value of the stolen bonds——"

"With interest attached," interposed Manning.

"And he will drop the matter. Am I right, Mr. Manning?"

"Yes, sir."

"It will amount to about double the original sum—say twelve thousand dollars."

"I can't raise so large an amount in cash."

"You are worth more?"

"Yes; but not in ready money."

"I will advance it to you, and take a bill of sale of the factory and your house," said Uncle Jacob.

All eyes were turned upon the old man in amazement.

"But where will you get the money?" gasped the squire.

"I can raise ten times that sum, if necessary."

"But I thought you were a poor man?"

"I never told you so. I said I had five hundred dollars; but I didn't add that I am worth at least two hundred thousand dollars more. That was my secret!"

"You said that you invested all your money in some mining shares that depreciated to nothing."

"I foresaw the decline, and sold out at a small loss."

"Why did you deceive us?" asked the squire, irritably.

"I wanted to test you all. When you thought me poor, you gave me my walking ticket; but Mary here," and Uncle Jacob glanced affectionately at Mrs. Barton, "gave me a warm welcome, though she thought me nearly as poor as herself. I shall not forget it. Bert also did not look down upon his old uncle, even though he had little to expect from him."

"But, Uncle Jacob," said Bert, "why, if you are so rich, do you work for twelve dollars a week?"

"It was a harmless deception, Bert," he replied. "I am at the head of the office where you think me employed, and president of one of the richest mines on the Pacific Coast."

"Mr. Marlowe," said the squire, not venturing upon the familiar name of Uncle Jacob, "instead of advancing money on my house, factory, and stock, are you willing to buy them outright?"

"At what sum do you value them?"

"Fifteen thousand dollars."

"It is a bargain," said Uncle Jacob promptly.

"You may feel disposed to run the business yourself."

"It is out of my line. I shall make a free gift of the whole to John Barton, who, I suppose, is quite capable of taking your place."

"How can I thank you?" said Mr. Barton, much moved.

"By making Mary happy. Now, Mr. Manning, if you and Albert Marlowe will call to-morrow at my

office in New York we will complete the business. John, I shall not need you; but Bert will go with me and bring you back the deeds of the property I propose to transfer to you."

That evening was a happy one in the Barton cottage, but there was vain regret and dissatisfaction at the home of Albert Marlowe. Too late they all regretted that they had received Uncle Jacob so coldly, and so forfeited, in all probability, their chances of sharing his wealth. Percy's great regret was that that Barton boy should be lifted above him.

A month later, and the changes had taken place. The Bartons moved to Squire Marlowe's handsome house, and John Barton was installed as owner and head of the shoe factory. Bert was placed at an academy, where he will remain till he has acquired a good education, and then will enter Uncle Jacob's office in the city. He bids fair to redeem the promise of his boyhood, and become an upright and manly man. Ralph Harding has been made superintendent of the factory, and enjoys the confidence of John Barton, who is happy in the society of his wife, of which he was deprived for so many years.

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Albert Marlowe, with the remainder of his money, went to Illinois, and has established a small shoe factory out there. He is a discontented and unhappy man, and his wife is peevish and discontented also. They can no longer afford the expensive establishment they maintained in Lakeville. Percy has not lost all hopes of being remembered in the will of his wealthy relative, but whether he will or not is Jacob Marlowe's Secret.

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