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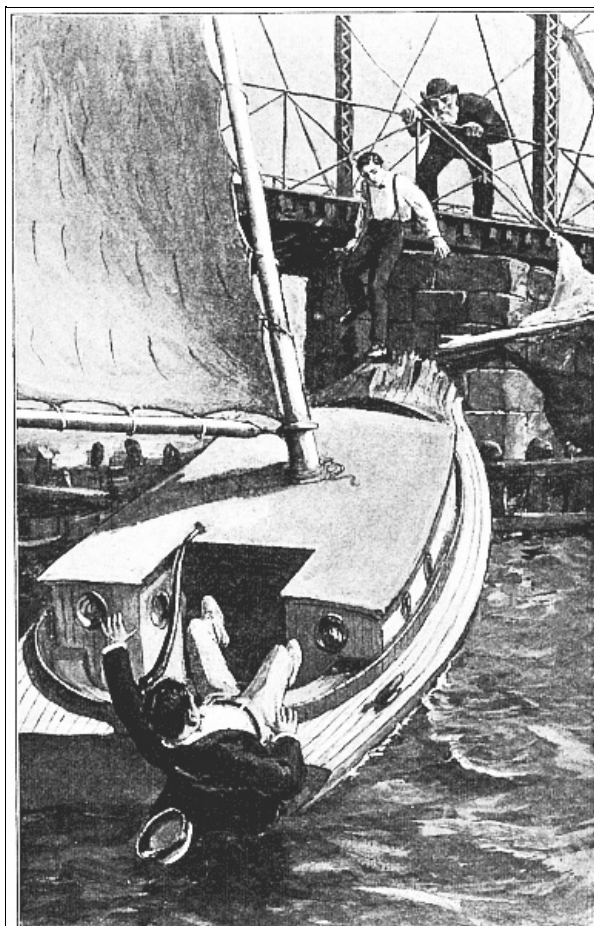
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE YOUNG BRIDGE-TENDER; OR, RALPH
NELSON'S UPWARD STRUGGLE ***

THE YOUNG BRIDGE-TENDER



"The man was thrown overboard by the accident." See [page 17](#).

THE YOUNG BRIDGE-TENDER

OR
RALPH NELSON'S UPWARD STRUGGLE

BY

ARTHUR M. WINFIELD

AUTHOR OF

"THE YOUNG BANK CLERK," "MARK DALE'S STAGE VENTURE,"
"ROVER BOYS SERIES," ETC.

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THE YOUNG BRIDGE TENDER.

CHAPTER I.

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A QUESTION OF PROPERTY.

"It's a shame, mother! The property belonged to father and the village has no right to its use without paying for it."

"I agree with you, Ralph," replied Mrs. Nelson. "But what are we to do in the matter?"

"Why don't you speak to Squire Paget? He is the president of the village board."

"I have spoken to him, but he will give me no satisfaction. He claims that the village has the right to nearly all the water front within its limits," replied Mrs. Nelson, with a sigh.

"It hasn't a right to the land father bought and paid for."

"That is what I said."

"And what did he answer to that?" questioned Ralph Nelson, with increasing interest.

"He said he doubted if your father had really bought the land. He asked me to show him the papers in the case."

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"And those you haven't got."

"No, I cannot find them. Your father placed them away, and when he died so suddenly, he said nothing about where they had been placed. I have an idea he gave them to somebody for safe keeping."

"It's a pity we haven't the papers, mother. The property on which this end of the swinging bridge rests, and the land right around it, is going to be very valuable some day; I heard Mr. Hooker say so at the post office only yesterday."

"I have no doubt of it, Ralph, when Westville becomes a city instead of a village. But that is many years off, I imagine."

"I suppose it is—the village folks are so slow to make improvements. It's a wonder they ever put up the bridge across to Eastport."

"They wouldn't have done it had it not been for Eastport capitalists, who furnished nearly all of the money."

"And now, that the bridge has been up several years, and the tolls are coming in daily, I suppose they are glad they let the structure go up."

"To be sure. Folks like to see a paying improvement."

"Well, about this property business, mother; do you think we can find those missing papers?" went on Ralph, after a pause.

"I am sure I hope so, my son. But where to start to look for them, I haven't the least idea."

"We might advertise for them."

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"Yes, we might, but I doubt if it would do any good. If any one around here had them they would give them to us without the advertising."

"They would unless they hoped to make something out of it," replied Ralph, suddenly, struck with a new idea.

"Make something, Ralph? What do you mean?"

"Perhaps the one holding the papers intends to keep them and some day claim the land as his own."

"Oh, I do not believe any one would be so dishonest," cried Mrs. Nelson.

"I do, mother. There are just as mean folks in Westville as anywhere else."

"But they would not dare to defraud us openly."

"Some folks would dare do anything for money," replied Ralph Nelson, with a decided nod of his curly head.

Ralph was the only son of his widowed mother. His father, Randolph Nelson, had been in former years a boatman on Keniscot Lake. When the swinging bridge had been built between Westville and Eastport, Mr. Nelson had been appointed bridge tender.

The old boatman had occupied his position at the bridge, taking tolls and opening the structure for passing vessels for exactly two years. Then, one blustery and rainy day he had slipped into the water, and before he could manage to save himself, had been struck by the bow of a steamboat and seriously hurt.

Mr. Nelson had been taken from the water almost immediately after being wounded, and all that could be done was done for him, but without avail. He was unconscious, and only came to himself long enough to bid his weeping wife and only child a tender farewell. Thirty-six hours after the accident he was dead, and his funeral occurred three days later.

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For a time Mrs. Nelson and Ralph were nearly prostrated by the calamity that had taken place. But stern necessity soon compelled them to put aside their grief. Although Mr. Nelson owned a small cottage close to the bridge, he had left but a small amount—less than a hundred dollars—in cash behind him. They must work to support themselves.

Ralph's father had been appointed bridge tender for a period of three years, and the son applied for the balance of his parent's term. His application was objected to by Squire Paget, who wished to put Dan Pickley, a village idler, in the place, but the bridge board overruled him, and Mrs. Nelson was appointed to fill her husband's situation—every one knowing that Ralph was to do the work.

The pay was not large—only six dollars per week—but, as the Nelsons had no rent to pay, they managed to get along quite comfortably. There was a vegetable garden attached to the cottage, and during his spare time Ralph worked in this. His mother also took in sewing, and they had now saved sixty dollars for a rainy day.

Westville and Eastport were situated on the two sides of a narrow channel which united Big Silver Lake, sometimes called Keniscot Lake, on the north with Silver Lake on the south. The upper lake was several miles long, while the lower sheet of water, which emptied into the Ramapo River at Chambersburgh, was less than half the size.

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Westville had always been a backward town, due mostly to the short-sightedness of Squire Paget, Mr. Hooker, the postmaster, and other narrow-minded leading men, who never saw fit to offer any inducements to manufacturers and others to locate there. The village consisted of half-a-dozen stores, a blacksmith shop, a tavern, and less than seventy-five houses. There was one hat factory there, but this was closed more than half the time.

Eastport, on the other hand, was booming. It had two hat factories, three planing mills, a furniture works and a foundry. There were several blocks of stores, lit up at night by electric lights, and several hundred houses. Real estate, too, was advancing rapidly.

The Nelsons had owned their cottage and the land upon which it stood for many years, but a year previous to the building of the bridge Mr. Nelson had added nearly half an acre to his ground, purchasing it very cheaply from a fellow-boatman, who had left Westville and struck out for some place in the West. This was the ground which was now in dispute. The papers in reference to it were missing, and as the sale had never been recorded, it was likely that Mrs. Nelson and Ralph would have much trouble in obtaining their rights.

CHAPTER II.

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THE SMASH AT THE BRIDGE.

During the conversation recorded above, Ralph had been at work in the dooryard of the cottage, while his mother was busy tying up the honeysuckle vines which grew over the porch. It was a bright summer day, with a stiff breeze blowing from the southwest.

"There's a sloop coming up Silver Lake, Ralph!" cried his mother, presently, as she looked across the water from the cottage porch. "I guess you will have to open the bridge."

"I haven't heard any horn," returned Ralph, as he dropped his rake and ran up to look at the craft.

"Nor I. But the boat is heading for the draw."

"Perhaps it's one of those summer-boarder pleasure parties, that don't know anything about blowing for a bridge tender," said the son, after a few seconds of silence. "I'll go down and make sure."

Ralph was as good as his word. Leaving the door, he walked rapidly along a footpath which led directly to the bridge, arriving there in less than a minute and a half.

As he walked on the bridge a carriage from Eastport, containing several ladies, came over. They paid the toll to Bob Sanderson, an old man who helped Ralph in this way during the slack hours of the day. In return for the work Sanderson was allowed an attic room and board at the Nelson cottage.

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"Sixteen cents since you went away, Ralph," said Sanderson, as he handed over the amount in

pennies. "Ain't many folks out this morning."

"There will be more toward noon, Mr. Sanderson. Travel is always light between nine and eleven."

"That's so. My! but there's a stiff breeze a-blowin', ain't there?"

"Yes. If it keeps on we'll have a regular gale by night."

"What brought you back so soon? I thought you was goin' to whitewash your side fence?"

"I came down to see if that sloop wanted to go through. It's sailing right for the draw."

"They didn't blow no horn."

"Perhaps they don't know enough for that. I declare! What's he up to now?" went on Ralph, a second later.

He had espied a single man standing in the stern of the sloop. The man had commenced to work at the mainsail, the managing of which appeared to bother him not a little.

"He don't seem to know the ropes," returned Bob Sanderson. "I guess he's tryin' to lower sail and can't."

"He is carrying too much canvas for this breeze."

"I agree with you, Ralph. But most of them chaps with sloops are a daring set. They always want to sail at racing speed."

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"He wants to go through that draw, that's certain," responded Ralph.

Going into the little house at the end of the bridge, he got out the key and the handle-bar. He unlocked the chain which held the end of the bridge in position, and then inserting the bar into the turnpost or capstan, began to walk around with it.

Slowly but surely the bridge began to swing loose from the side which connected with the permanent portion on the Eastport end and moved toward the solid foundation which was built directly in front of where the Nelson dooryard ran down to the water's edge.

It was hard work to move the bridge around, but Ralph was used to it, and he did not mind. As he walked around with the bar before him he kept his eyes on the sloop and the man sailing her.

The bridge was three-quarters open when the boy noted with some surprise that the man on the sloop had thrown over the mainsail half against the wind. Instantly the sloop began to swing around, heading full for the stone pier upon which the bridge swung.

"Why, what's the matter with him?" he cried, in dismay.

"Guess he don't know how to manage his boat," replied Bob Sanderson. "He's comin' chuck-a-block for this place!"

"Hi! hi! what are you up to?" cried Ralph, as he dropped the bar, and rushed over to the side of the bridge. "Do you want to run into the stonework?"

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"I can't manage the sail!" replied the man on the sloop. "My arm is lame, and the ropes are all twisted."

"Well, throw your tiller over, and be quick, or——"

Ralph had not time to say more, nor was the man able to profit by his advice. An extra heavy puff of wind caught the mainsail of the boat, and with a loud crash she clashed into the stone pier, bow first.

The shock was so great that the bowsprit was smashed to pieces, as was also the woodwork around it. The man, who had been standing partly on the stern sheets, was thrown overboard by the accident, and he disappeared beneath the water.

Fearful that the fellow, who was evidently a city person, might not be able to swim, Ralph leaped down from the bridge into the sloop and went to his assistance.

"Save me! save me!" called out the man, frantically, and he threw his hands up over his head.

"Catch hold of the boathook," replied Ralph, and he reached out with the article as he spoke.

The man grasped the curved iron nervously, and Ralph at once drew him to the side of the sloop.

"Now give me your hand and I will help you up."

And without waiting he caught the man by the right arm.

"Don't! don't! Take the other arm, please! That was broken less than six weeks ago."

"Oh, then give me the left," replied Ralph; and by his aid the man was soon aboard the sloop once more.

He was a fellow not over twenty-five years of age, and his clothing and general appearance [Pg 18]

indicated that he was well-to-do.

"Phew! But that was a narrow escape!" he ejaculated, as he brushed the water from his face. "I was afraid I was a goner, sure!"

"Couldn't you keep away from the stonework?" questioned Ralph, curiously.

"No. The ropes got twisted into a knot and my right arm hurt so I could only use my left hand. Besides, I am not much of a sailor."

"I seen you wasn't," put in Bob Sanderson, who did not hesitate at times to speak out bluntly. "If it hadn't been for Ralph you would have been drowned."

"I don't doubt it, for I cannot swim."

"How came you to be out in such a blow and all alone?" asked Ralph, as he began to lower the ship's sails.

"It didn't blow so when I started from Chambersburgh, and I fancied I could manage the *Magic* without half trying. But I have found out my mistake now," and the man gave a sorry little laugh. "Are you the bridge tender?"

"Yes, sir."

"And what is your name?"

"Ralph Nelson."

"Mine is Horace Kelsey. You are rather young for this position, are you not?"

"It was my father's before he died. I am serving the rest of the time for which he was appointed."

"I see. Does it pay you?"

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"I earn six dollars a week at it. That's considered pretty good here in Westville. There are many who would like to get the job."

"I came up here from New York to spend a few weeks boating and fishing," said Horace Kelsey, during a pause, in which he dried off his face and hands, and wrung the water from his coat. "This is my first day out, and it has ended rather disastrously."

"I guess your sloop can easily be repaired," replied Ralph.

"I suppose it can. Is there any one here in the village who does such work?"

"That's in my line," put in Bob Sanderson, promptly.

"Yes, Mr. Sanderson repairs boats," replied Ralph. "He will give you a good job at a reasonable price."

"Then you can go to work at once," said Horace Kelsey, turning to the old fisherman. "Do your best, and I will pay whatever it is worth."

"I will, sir."

"When can you have the work completed?"

"Not before to-morrow night. I'll have to paint the parts, you know."

"I am in no hurry. I wished to spend a day or two around Westville and Eastport before going up into Big Silver Lake."

"Then I'll take the sloop around to my boat-house right now," replied Bob Sanderson; and off he went with the craft, leaving Ralph and the newcomer on the bridge.

CHAPTER III.

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RALPH MAKES A FRIEND.

"You'll catch cold if you stand around in this wind," remarked Ralph to Horace Kelsey, "especially as you are not used to it."

"That is true," returned the young man. "I wish I had some place where I might dry myself."

"You can go over to our cottage, if you wish. Mother is at home, and she will willingly let you dry yourself at the kitchen fire. I would lend you one of my suits, but I imagine it wouldn't be large enough."

"Hardly," laughed the young man. "Do you live far from here?"

"No, sir; that is the cottage right there. See, my mother is in the garden, looking this way."

"Thanks, I'll take up with your kind offer. I am beginning to get chilled in spite of the sunshine."

Saying that he would be back later, Horace Kelsey left the bridge and took the path leading to the cottage. Ralph saw him speak to his mother, and a moment later both passed into the cottage.

It was now drawing toward noon, and the people began to cross the bridge in both directions, on their way to dinner. Each one either paid a cent or passed over a ticket, sixty-five of which could be had for fifty cents. At a quarter to one the same passengers began to go back to their work, and this was kept up for half an hour, at the end of which the young bridge tender had collected twenty-one cents and forty-three tickets.

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Several horns now began to blow from both Big Silver and Silver Lakes, showing that the boats wished to pass through the draw. The bridge, which had been closed by Ralph immediately after the rescue of Horace Kelsey, was opened for their accommodation.

While the young bridge tender was waiting for the last vessel to clear the draw the young man from New York came back from the cottage, bringing with him the lunch Mrs. Nelson usually brought herself. There was no time for dinner during the middle of the day, and so the family had their principal meal at night, when the draw was closed for the day, and Bob Sanderson went on to collect the toll.

"Your mother gave me the lunch," said Horace Kelsey, as he handed the basket to Ralph. "I told her I was coming down to see you."

"Is your clothing dry?"

"Oh, yes. She was kind enough to lend me some which had belonged to your father, and built up an extra hot fire to dry my own. She also pressed out my suit, as you can see. Your mother is a very accommodating lady."

Horace Kelsey did not add that he had paid Mrs. Nelson liberally for her kindness, for he was not one to brag in that direction. Nevertheless, Ralph heard of it later on.

In the basket were several sandwiches of cold corned beef and half-a-dozen peaches. Ralph offered one of the peaches to the young man, which he took, and both sat down to eat.

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"You will find a tavern up the main road, a two minutes' walk from here," began the youth, thinking that Horace Kelsey might wish for something more substantial in the way of food.

"Thank you, but your mother supplied me with a very good lunch while I was waiting, Ralph," returned the young man. "Don't mind me, but go ahead and enjoy your lunch."

Ralph at once set to, for he was hungry. His companion looked up the lake for a moment in silence, and then went on:

"I came down here to reward you, Ralph," he said, hesitatingly.

"Reward me? What for, Mr. Kelsey?"

"For saving my life."

"I don't think I did as much as that. Anybody could have pulled you from the water."

"They might not have been as quick as you were. I feel I owe you something for your prompt aid."

"I don't want anything, sir. I would have done as much for any one."

"I do not doubt it, and it is to your credit to say so. But I feel I ought to do something for you. Will you accept this—not as payment for what was done, for I could not pay for that in this way—but as a gift from a friend?"

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And Horace Kelsey drew from his vest pocket a new and crisp twenty-dollar bill.

"I don't see as I ought to take it," hesitated Ralph.

"But you will. Here, don't let it blow overboard," and the young man from New York thrust it into Ralph's hand, directly between a sandwich he was holding.

"Indeed I won't let it blow away. I thank you ver—hallo! you have made a big mistake."

"How?"

"This is a twenty-dollar bill."

"I see no mistake about that," and Horace Kelsey smiled quietly.

"You don't mean to say you meant to give me twenty dollars?"

"I did. It is little enough for such a service."

"It's too much. I thought it was a one-dollar bill, sir."

"I would not be mean enough to offer you only a dollar, Ralph. A man isn't pulled from a watery grave, as the poets call it, every day."

"I don't think I ought to take all this money," returned the young bridge tender slowly.

"I do, so put it into your pocket and say no more about it."

Ralph continued to argue the point, but was finally persuaded to place the bill in his private purse.

"Your mother has been telling me a little about your family affairs," went on Horace Kelsey. "It's a pity you haven't a clear title to this land about here."

"We have a clear enough title if only we can find the papers in this case," returned Ralph, promptly.

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"I understand a syndicate from Chambersburgh are thinking of locating a big shoe factory here. If they do that, Westville will have a boom."

"It would have boomed long ago if it hadn't been for Squire Paget and some others. They hold their land so high and keep the taxes on the hat factory up so, the manufacturers are scared away."

"That is true, especially when other places donate them land free and exempt them from all taxation for from five to ten years."

"Do they do that?"

"Certainly, and in many cases it pays very well, for the factories employ hundreds of hands, who receive fair wages, and that is spent in the place where it is earned."

"It's a wonder that shoe factory would come here, if such inducements are offered elsewhere," said Ralph, thoughtfully.

"I understand several men, including Squire Paget and the postmaster of this place, have received stock in the concern. I do not know much about the deal. I only heard it talked over at the hotel."

"Where are they going to locate the factory?"

"Somewhere along the water front, I believe."

"Then it will be around here!" cried Ralph. "That is our land over there," he pointed with his hand. "I wish we could prove our title to it."

"So do I, Ralph, and I wish I could help you. You haven't any idea who had the papers last?"

"No, sir."

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"Too bad. I would advertise for them, and even offer a reward for them."

"I will," returned Ralph, quickly. "I'll use this twenty dollars you have given me for that very purpose."

Horace Kelsey remained with Ralph the best part of an hour longer, and then started for a walk through the village, stating that he would call on Bob Sanderson and see how the boat repairing was progressing.

When he was out of sight, Ralph pulled the twenty-dollar bill from his purse to make sure that he had not been dreaming. But there was the money true enough. There was a grease spot on one corner of the bill, left by the butter on the sandwich, but this did no harm.

"Hallo, there, Ralph Nelson, counting your fortune!" cried a rude voice from the shore, and looking up, Ralph saw a loudly-dressed youth approaching. He hastily slipped the twenty-dollar bill into his pocket.

CHAPTER IV.

[Pg 26]

THE QUARREL ON THE BRIDGE.

The boy on the shore was Percy Paget, the squire's only son. He was a year older than Ralph, and somewhat taller and heavier. His ways were arrogant to the last degree, and in the village he had but few friends, and these only because he generally had pocket money to spend.

On several occasions Ralph had had sharp words with Percy because the latter wished to do as he pleased on the bridge, against the printed rules that were posted up. Because his parent was squire, Percy imagined he could do almost anything and it would be all right.

"I say, are you counting your fortune?" repeated Percy, throwing as much of a sneer into his tones as possible.

"Unfortunately, I haven't any fortune to count, Percy," returned the young bridge tender, good-naturedly.

"Humph! I suppose you mean that for a pun, don't you?" growled the son of the squire. "If you do, let me tell you it's a mighty poor one."

"I hadn't intended to pun, Percy."

"I didn't think so, for you haven't the brains. Didn't I see you counting some money just now?"

[Pg 27]

"I was looking at a bank bill."

"That you got on the bridge, I suppose?"

"No; it was a bill of my own."

"Oh, I thought you had to use all the money you made here."

"I have to use the most of it. My pay isn't any too large, as you know."

"Yes, but I guess you make enough besides," returned Percy, suggestively.

"What do you mean?"

"You've got plenty of chance on the bridge, with so many odd pennies coming in."

"Do you mean to insinuate I steal the toll money?" demanded Ralph, angered at the insinuation.

"I didn't say so," sneered the other, more suggestively than ever.

"But you meant it."

"Well, what if I did?"

"It's mean of you, Percy Paget! I never stole a cent in my life!"

"It's easy enough for you to say so."

"And it's true. You must think that every one is a thief just because somebody was caught stealing tarts out of the bakery."

Ralph was angry, or he would not have spoken as he did. As Percy had been discovered taking tarts and cakes from the counters of a pastry shop in Eastport only a few weeks before, and as he had been threatened with arrest for so doing, the squire's son reddened at once.

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"See here, Ralph Nelson, don't you dare to talk to me like that!" he stormed.

"I have more grounds to talk than you, Percy Paget!"

"No, you haven't, you low upstart!"

"Hold on, Percy, I am no upstart!"

"Yes, you are. What was your father? Only a poor boatman on the lakes."

"He was a hard-working man, and an honest one," returned Ralph, warmly.

"Oh, of course, and you were all next door to beggars until my father took pity on him, and gave him the job on the bridge."

"It was the committee, and not your father, who gave him the situation."

"Well, it was the same thing, for the committee have to do as my father says."

"I doubt it."

"I don't care for your opinion! I know one thing. They ought to have somebody else to mind the bridge, and perhaps they will have before long."

"Why, what do you mean?" asked Ralph, in quick alarm.

"Ha! ha! I thought that would wake you up."

"Is somebody trying to undermine me?"

"You'll hear of it soon enough, never fear."

And with this parting shot, which was not without its effect, Percy started to cross the bridge.

"Hold on!" cried Ralph.

"What do you want now?"

"The toll money."

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"I'm only going to the Eastport end of the bridge. I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

"That makes no difference. Every one who crosses the bridge has to pay toll."

"But I'm coming right back."

"I don't care if you return as soon as you strike the last plank. You have got to pay, or you can't cross," returned Ralph, firmly.

"I won't pay a cent!" blustered Percy, angrily.

"Then you can't cross."

"And who will stop me, I'd like to know?"

"I will."

"You can't do it."

"Perhaps I can. Anyway, if you don't pay I'll try. You know the rules just as well as I do."

"There ain't any fellow in Westville can stop me from going where I please!" howled the squire's son, and once more he started to walk on.

With a quick movement, Ralph stepped in front of the aristocratic bully.

"Not another step, until you pay the toll!" he exclaimed, his eyes flashing their determination.

"Out of my way, you upstart!" roared Percy.

And, raising his fist, he aimed a heavy blow at Ralph's face.

The young bridge tender caught the blow on the arm, and the next moment had Percy jammed up against the iron railing to one side.

"Now, you either pay your way or go back just as quick as you can!" he said, firmly. "I want no more trouble with you." [Pg 30]

"Let go of me!"

"Not until you promise to do one thing or the other."

"I'm not going to pay!" fumed Percy.

"Then you can't cross; that's settled."

"We'll see! Take that! and that!"

Percy began to strike out wildly. Ralph warded off most of the blows, and then upset the aristocratic bully on his back and came down on top of him. They rolled over together, and at length Percy set up a howl of pain.

"Oh, my shoulder! You have twisted it out of place!"

"Have you had enough?" demanded Ralph.

"Yes! yes!"

"Will you pay the toll?"

"I don't want to go over now."

"All right, then, you can go back to shore."

Ralph arose to his feet, and the aristocratic bully slowly followed. Several persons were coming across the bridge now, and the young bridge tender ran to collect their tolls, leaving his late antagonist to brush off his sadly-soiled clothes.

"I'll fix you for this!" cried Percy, after the passengers had passed out of hearing. "We'll see if the village will allow a ruffian like you to tend bridge much longer."

And off he stalked, with his face full of dark and bitter hatred.

Ralph looked after him anxiously. Would Percy's threat amount to anything? It would be a real calamity to lose his situation on the bridge. [Pg 31]

Then Ralph started to brush off his own clothes. While he was doing so he felt in his pocket to see if his twenty dollars was still safe. The bill was gone!

With great eagerness he began a search for the missing banknote. It was all to no purpose, the money could not be found.

CHAPTER V.

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A HUNT FOR THE MISSING BILL.

Ralph was deeply chagrined to think that the twenty-dollar bill could not be found. He had calculated that with it he might advertise for the missing papers, and even offer a small reward.

He was loath to give up the search, and after his first hasty hunt, went over every foot of the plank walk of the bridge, and even under it.

"It must have slipped from my pocket, and the wind must have blown it into the water," he thought, bitterly. "That was a pretty dear quarrel, especially as it was not in the least of my making."

Thinking he might possibly find the bill floating on the water, the young bridge tender sprang into his rowboat, the *Martha*, which was tied up to the ironwork under the bridge, and pulled around the stonework and some distance down into Silver Lake.

He found nothing, and inside of ten minutes had to go back to his post of duty and collect toll from several people who were coming over from Eastport.

"I'm out twenty dollars, and that's all there is to it," he muttered to himself. "It's too bad. Why can't Percy Paget stay away and mind his own business?"

The remainder of the afternoon passed quietly, saving for the mild excitement of the working folks going and coming after factory hours, and at dark Bob Sanderson came on duty. [Pg 33]

"The sloop is gettin' on finely," said the old fellow, in response to Ralph's inquiry. "The woodwork is about done, and I'll paint her first thing in the morning."

"You want to make a first-class job of it, Mr. Sanderson. I know Mr. Kelsey will pay the price."

"I'm a-going to, Ralph. What did he give you for hauling him from the water?"

"Twenty dollars."

"Shoo! He must be rich."

"I imagine he is."

"What are you going to do with the money?"

"Nothing; I've lost it."

"Lost it?"

"Yes."

And Ralph related the particulars of his encounter with Percy Paget, and how the money had disappeared during the fracas.

"It's a tarnal shame, Ralph! Thet air dude ain't worth your twenty-dollar bill nohow!"

"I am sorry he came here. I hope he stays away hereafter."

"I wouldn't take none of his talk," grumbled Bob Sanderson, with a shake of his grizzled head. "I reckon what he said about gettin' you into trouble is all nonsense." [Pg 34]

"I hope it is, for I couldn't afford to lose my place here."

"Squire Paget isn't so powerful as his son thinks. There are lots of folks in this village gettin' tired of his domineerin' ways."

"I know he is not as powerful now as he was, but still he is squire, and that counts."

"Why don't you go on another hunt for the bill? Maybe it has floated away down the lake."

"I will go out. It will do no harm," said Ralph.

And neither did it do any good, for a half-hour's search on the lake and along the shore brought nothing of interest to light. The young bridge tender tied his boat up at the foot of the garden, and walked up to the cottage.

Mrs. Nelson had the evening meal all prepared, and the two at once sat down.

"You sent a very profitable visitor to the cottage this morning, Ralph," began his mother, as she poured the tea while he cut up the meat.

"You mean Mr. Kelsey?"

"Yes. He came here to get dry, and told me how you had rescued him from the lake. He said you had acted very bravely."

"It was not much to do. But why do you say he was a profitable visitor, mother? Did he pay you anything for what you did?"

"Yes, he paid me two dollars. I didn't want a cent, but he insisted on it." [Pg 35]

"Then he is certainly rich, mother, for he gave me twenty dollars in addition."

"Why, Ralph!"

"But, hold on, mother, don't be too pleased. I have already lost the money, so his generosity will do me no good."

And Ralph told his mother the story, just as he had told it to old Bob Sanderson, their boarder.

"That Paget boy is a bad egg, I am afraid," said Mrs. Nelson, with a grave look on her face. "I am sorry you got into trouble with him."

"So am I, but it couldn't be helped. The bridge rules say that no person is to cross without paying toll. Percy knows the rules, too."

"I understand he has caused the squire a lot of trouble, but for all that, he is his father's pet."

"It's strange, if Percy gives him so much trouble."

"Well, the two are alone in the world, and that may make a difference. Have we not been drawn closer together since your father died?"

"That is true, mother, but I try to do right, and—"

"You do what is right, Ralph. As much as I love you, I would not stand by you were you to do a deliberate wrong."

"I don't believe Percy will do much," said Ralph, after a long pause. "I was sticking up for the rules, and that is what I am put there to do."

After the supper dishes were cleared away, Mrs. Nelson put on her bonnet and took a basket to do a little trading at one of the stores, leaving Ralph to take care of the cottage while she was gone.

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"I'll go along and carry the things for you, if you wish," said her son.

"I am going to get a few things, Ralph, which will not be heavy, and I wish to see Mr. Dicks about the calico he sold me which is not as good as he represented. You may stay home and read."

"I'll study my school books, mother. I want to master commercial arithmetic if I can. Maybe one of these days I can become a bookkeeper in one of the Eastport factories."

"I trust so, my son, that or something even better. I would not wish you to remain a bridge tender all your life."

A moment later Mrs. Nelson was on her way to the village center. Ralph lit the sitting-room lamp and got out his books and his slate. Soon he had forgotten all about the exciting scenes of the day in an earnest endeavor to do a complicated example in profit and loss.

He worked out the problem, and then tackled something harder still. Not having anyone to guide him, he made numerous mistakes. But he kept on without becoming disheartened and at last the second example was solved as correctly as the first.

He was just about to begin a third, when his mother entered the cottage almost breathlessly. From the look on her face it was plain to see she had something to tell that was of great importance.

CHAPTER VI.

[Pg 37]

MRS. NELSON'S STORY.

"What is it, mother?" cried Ralph, as Mrs. Nelson placed her basket on the floor and dropped into a chair.

"Oh, Ralph! I can hardly believe it possible!" exclaimed the good woman, catching her breath.

"Believe what possible?"

"That Percy Paget would be so wicked!"

"Why, what has he done, now, mother?"

"Ralph, I believe he took your twenty-dollar bill!"

"What makes you think that?"

And in his excitement the boy shoved back his books and slate and sprang to his feet.

"From what I overheard down to Mr. Dicks' store, while I was doing my trading."

"What did you overhear?"

"His son William waited on me, and while he was doing it his father began to count the money in the drawer, and then asked who had paid in the twenty-dollar bill."

"And what did Will Dicks say?" questioned Ralph, eagerly.

"He said he had got the bill from Percy Paget."

"He did! It must be my bill."

"So I thought, and came home as quickly as I could to tell you."

"Percy has lots of spending money, but I doubt if he has twenty dollars at a time," went on Ralph, walking up and down the sitting-room in his thoughtfulness. "But to think he would turn pickpocket!"

"Maybe the money fell from your pocket during the quarrel, and he picked it up."

"It would be just as bad as stealing. He knew it was my money. He saw me put the money in my pocket when he came on the bridge."

"It would certainly seem that it was your bill."

"I'll go down and question Will Dicks about it. Or, perhaps, you did so?"

"No, I only listened to what he told his father, and then came home. If you go down, Ralph, be careful and avoid more trouble."

"If it is really my bill I am not going to stand being cheated."

"Remember, Squire Paget is an influential man——"

"I don't believe his influence will count in this case. But I will be careful," Ralph added, to overcome his mother's anxiety.

Without further words, he put on his coat and hurried down into the village. When he reached Uriah Dicks' general store he found father and son in the act of putting up the shutters for the night.

"I would like to see you a minute, Will," Ralph said to the son.

"All right," returned Will Dicks, and, leaving his father to place the last of the shutters up, he led the way inside the store.

"I believe Percy Paget paid you a twenty-dollar bill this afternoon," began Ralph, hardly knowing how to open the conversation.

"He paid it to me just before supper time."

"Did he say anything about where he got it?"

"Why, no. Why do you ask?"

"I have my reasons, Will. Will you let me see the bill?"

"What's the trouble?" asked Will Dicks, and his father stepped into the doorway to hear what the young bridge tender might have to say.

"I would like to see the bill, that is all."

"But, can't you tell me what the trouble is?" insisted Will Dicks.

"Maybe Ralph intends to accuse Percy of obtaining it feloniously," put in Uriah Dicks, cautiously. "Speak up, boy, and let us know what's in your mind."

"I would rather not say, Mr. Dicks. I wish to look at the bill, that is all."

"Well, if you can't tell me of the trouble, I don't know as I will let you see that bill," returned Uriah, sourly.

"And what is your objection?"

"I ain't a-going to be accommodating to a boy that puts me off in the dark."

"It may save you some trouble, Mr. Dicks."

"What, me? What do you mean?" and the general storekeeper turned slightly pale.

"Just what I say! If you won't let me see the bill, I'll have to go further for my information."

"Oh, of course I ain't scared to show you this bill, Ralph," returned Uriah, hurriedly. "Say!" he burst out, excitedly. "It's a good bill, ain't it?"

"It ought to be, if it's the one I think it is," replied the young bridge tender.

Going to his desk in the rear of the store, Uriah brought out a tin box and unlocked it. From a long, flat wallet, he drew several bills.

"There's the bill Percy Paget gave to Will," he said, as he handed over the banknote.

There was but a single oil-lamp left burning in the store, and to this Ralph walked and examined the bill. There was his banknote, true enough, with the grease spot from the sandwich in one corner.

"Well, what do you make out?" questioned Uriah, with breathless interest.

"I make out that this bill belongs to me," returned Ralph, boldly.

"To you!" exclaimed both father and son, in one voice.

"Yes, sir, to me."

"But Percy gave me this bill," said Will Dicks. "He didn't steal it from you, did he?"

"I haven't anything to say about that. But it's my bill, just the same."

"You can't have the bill!" snarled Uriah, snatching it from Ralph's hand. "Why, I never heard tell of such high-handed proceedings in my life before!" he went on.

"You can keep the bill for the present, Mr. Dicks——"

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"Of course I will! Do you suppose I'm going to lose twenty dollars?"

"But you must promise me not to give it out until you hear from me again."

"I don't see what right you have to dictate to me what I should do an' what I shouldn't do——"

"I am not dictating. The bill is mine, and I intend to have it, sooner or later."

"But where do we come in?" asked Will Dicks, who was cooler than his parent.

"You will have to look to Percy Paget to make the loss good."

"If he has cheated me I'll have him locked up!" cried Uriah, drawing down his sharp face. "But you haven't proved the bill yours yet."

"I know that. All I am asking is that you keep the bill for the present, and not pay it out to any one."

"Well, I'll do that," responded Uriah, after some meditation.

"You'll hear from me again, soon," concluded Ralph, as he walked from the store.

"Well, he carries a high hand, I must say!" growled Uriah, as he put his money and the tin box away again. "I wonder what the trouble is?"

"I thought it was queer Percy had so big a bill," commented his son.

"Did you? Well, if you did, what did you want to change it for?"

"He bought half a dozen packages of cigarettes."

"Humph! Hardly any profit in 'em, and the bill likely to get us into trouble, William! You must be more careful!"

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"Percy said I could hang up the account if I didn't want to change the bill, and you said you didn't want to trust any of the young fellows."

"No more I don't. But I ain't goin' to lose twenty dollars. I'll make that Nelson boy prove it's his, or he sha'n't tech it; no, sir!"

And with a thump of his hard and skinny fist on the counter, Uriah Dicks resumed the labor of closing up his establishment for the night.

"Nelson looked as if he had it in for Percy," soliloquized Will Dicks, as he brought in the few boxes and barrels that remained outside. "I would like to know what is in the wind."

His father also wished to know. It was not long before they were enlightened.

CHAPTER VII.

[Pg 43]

PERCY'S HOME.

For a few minutes Ralph stood outside of the general store, undecided what was best to do next.

It was true that the bill in Uriah Dicks' possession was his own, yet how could he prove it, and thus get it once more into his possession?

"I'll call on Percy Paget, and see what he has to say," he thought. "Perhaps I can make him confess how he obtained the bill, and make the amount good to Mr. Dicks."

With this object in view the young bridge tender hurried through the village toward the hill, upon which the few handsome residences of the place were situated.

In the most prominent spot was located the mansion of Squire Paget, a Queen Anne structure, surrounded by a garden full of fancy shrubs and plants, which during her life had been Mrs. Paget's pride.

Passing through the gate, Ralph walked up the gravel path to the front piazza and rang the bell.

He had to wait a short time. Then a slow step was heard through the hallway, and the door was

opened by Mrs. Hanson, the squire's housekeeper.

"Good-evening," said Ralph, politely. "Is Percy at home?"

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"I don't really know," returned Mrs. Hanson. "Come in and I will find out."

She ushered Ralph into the hallway, and motioned him to a seat. Then she passed upstairs.

"I guess it will be all right, squire," Ralph heard a voice say in a nearby side room—the library. "And you are perfectly safe in making the deal."

"I trust so, Pickley," came the reply, in Squire Paget's well-known sharp tones. "It's worth the trouble, you know."

"Of course, I get pay for my trouble," went on Pickley, as he stepped to the doorway.

"I'll pay what I promised," returned the squire, and then both men stepped into the hallway.

They started back on seeing Ralph, as though they had imagined no one was around. The young bridge tender made up his mind they had not noted his ring.

"Why—ah—what brings you here, Nelson?" demanded the squire, as soon as he could recover.

"I called to see Percy, sir."

"I believe Percy is out."

Ralph's hope fell at this announcement.

"Can you tell me where I can find him, sir?" he asked.

"He is somewhere about the village, I presume. He said he would be back by nine o'clock or half-past."

Ralph glanced at the tall clock which stood at the end of the hall, and saw that it lacked but ten minutes of nine. Percy might be in in a few minutes.

"If you please, I will wait for him," he said, politely.

"Very well."

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Squire Paget moved toward the door, and opened it for Dan Pickley, his visitor.

"Good-night, Pickley," he said.

"Good-night, squire," was the reply, and then Pickley moved down the steps.

The squire watched him go out of the gate, and then closed the front door once more.

"How long have you been waiting?" he asked, rather abruptly.

"Only a minute or two, sir."

"No longer than that?" and the squire bent his searching eyes full upon Ralph's honest features.

"No, sir, Mrs. Hanson just let me in."

Squire Paget seemed relieved to hear this. His conversation with Dan Pickley had been both important and private, and he was afraid Ralph might have overheard more than he wished to become public.

"So you wish to see Percy?" he went on, after a short pause. "Is there anything special?"

"Yes, sir."

"What is it?"

"Excuse me, but I would like to speak to Percy first."

The squire drew up his lower lip and looked plainly annoyed.

"I do not allow my son to have any secrets from me, so you might as well speak out, Nelson," he observed, abruptly.

"I came to see Percy about a twenty-dollar bill which belonged to me, and which he obtained," returned Ralph, boldly.

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"A twenty-dollar bill of yours Percy obtained? Why, Nelson, what do you mean? Come into the library."

"I mean what I say, Squire Paget," said the young bridge tender, following the great man of the village into the apartment mentioned. "Percy had a twenty-dollar bill belonging to me and he passed it off on Mr. Dicks, the storekeeper."

"But he could not have known it was your bill if he spent it."

"He ought to have known it was mine, sir."

"Give me the particulars of this matter," was Squire Paget's short response.

In as few words as possible the young bridge tender told of the row on the bridge, and of what had followed. While he was speaking the squire grew excited, and paced up and down nervously. He could hardly wait for Ralph to finish.

"See here, Nelson, this is preposterous, absurd! My son is above such a thing!" he cried.

"So I hoped, sir. But I have only stated the plain facts."

"It is a tissue of falsehoods, young man! Wait till I hear Percy's side of the story. The idea! my son has enough spending money without resorting to—to such unlawful means of obtaining more."

"Well, it is my twenty-dollar bill that he gave to Mr. Dicks," said Ralph, doggedly.

"Where did you obtain the bill?"

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A gentleman gave it to me for assisting him out of the water, after his sloop had been wrecked against the stonework of the bridge."

"That is a likely story! As if twenty-dollar bills were flying around so thickly!"

"I am telling the truth, sir."

"Who is the gentleman?"

"He is from New York, and is up here on a vacation."

"I can hardly believe he gave you so much money."

"He did, and I can prove it."

"Well, be that as it may, I am certain Percy did not take your bill."

"Did you give him a twenty-dollar bill?"

"I give him all the spending money he needs," returned Squire Paget, evasively. "He has probably saved the amount and had some one change his small money for one big bill."

"He didn't have it changed into my bill—the one Mr. Dicks holds. That he got at the bridge—how, I don't know—and I am going to have it back."

"Ha! do you threaten my son!" cried Squire Paget, wrathfully.

"I am going to make him do what is right, sir. I can't afford to lose twenty dollars and say nothing."

Instantly Squire Paget flared up, and shook his fist in Ralph's face.

"If you dare to make trouble for my son I'll have you discharged as bridge tender," he fumed. "Understand that, Nelson! I am not going to have Percy's fair name ruined."

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At that moment, before Ralph could reply, a key was heard to turn in the front door, and a second later the squire's son strode into the house.

CHAPTER VIII.

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SQUIRE PAGET MAKES A MOVE.

Percy Paget had not expected to see Ralph, and he was very much disconcerted when brought thus unexpectedly face to face with the young bridge tender.

"Why—er—you here?" he stammered, as he flung aside his hat.

"He has been telling a fine string of falsehoods against you, my son!" put in the squire, ere Ralph could speak.

"And what has he been saying?" demanded the aristocratic bully, coolly. "Has he been telling you how I had to polish him off for insulting me?"

"No; he tells me that you stole a twenty-dollar bill from him!"

Percy was about to burst out into violent language, that would have astonished even his indulgent parent, but suddenly he changed his mind and allowed an injured look to cross his face.

"I hope, father, you don't believe any such outrageous story about me," he said, plaintively.

"Of course I don't," returned the squire, promptly. "I know my son will not steal."

"Ralph is mad because I gave him a good thrashing," went on the only son.

"I imagine the boot is on the other foot," put in Ralph. "It is Percy who got the worst of the encounter."

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"He says you refused to pay the toll," went on Squire Paget.

"I only refused after he had called me all sorts of names," retorted the only son. "I was going over to Eastport, but after I had to teach him a lesson, I concluded to remain on this side."

"You are not telling the truth!" cried Ralph, indignantly. "It was you who insulted me, and I gave you a good deal less than you deserved in the shape of a whipping for doing it."

"Stop! stop!" stormed the squire. "I will have no quarrel in my house! Nelson, don't you know it is all wrong to fight on the bridge?"

"I didn't fight. I stopped your son when he refused to pay toll, that was all."

"I do not believe it."

"Believe it or not, it's true. But I came here for another purpose than to speak of the quarrel, as you know. I want Percy to make good the twenty dollars which belonged to me."

"I ain't got your twenty dollars—never had them!" blustered the aristocratic bully. "If you say I have, I'll pitch you out of the house!"

"Gently, Percy—"

"I don't care, father. It makes me mad to have this upstart speak to me in this fashion!"

"I know it does, but control yourself, my son. We will find a way to punish him at another time."

"Can't you have him discharged? He ain't fit to be the tender of the bridge; he's so insulting!"

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"Perhaps," returned the squire, a sudden idea flashing across his mind.

It would assist his schemes wonderfully to have Ralph Nelson discharged.

"You had my twenty-dollar bill, and you paid it over to Mr. Dicks," said Ralph. "You can't deny it."

At these words Percy staggered back, for the unexpected shot had struck home.

"Who—who says I paid the bill over to Mr. Dicks?"

"Will Dicks himself. You bought cigarettes, and gave him the bill to change."

"I gave him a twenty-dollar bill, but it wasn't yours."

"It was, and I can prove it."

"How?"

"By a grease spot in one corner, made by the butter on a sandwich I had."

"Is that all?" sneered Percy.

"I think that's enough."

"Well, hardly. I guess there are a good many bills with grease spots on them floating around."

For the moment Ralph was nonplussed. The aristocratic bully saw it and went on:

"You are afraid you are going to lose your place, and you want to get me and my father in your power, so we can help you keep it. But it won't work, will it, father?"

"Hardly, my son. We are not to be browbeaten in this style," remarked Squire Paget, pompously.

"Then you do not intend to make good the amount?" asked Ralph, shortly, disgusted at the way in which the squire stood up for Percy.

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"I shall not give you twenty dollars when I don't owe it to you," said Percy.

"Will you tell me where you got that twenty-dollar bill?"

"I got it in Chambersburgh last week. A man asked me to change it for him and I did so."

Percy had thought out this falsehood before, and now he uttered it with the greatest of ease.

"I believe my son speaks the truth," added Squire Paget. "You had better be going and hunt for your money elsewhere."

"I don't believe he ever had twenty dollars, excepting he saved it out of the toll money," sneered Percy, and he walked from the room.

Burning with indignation, but unable to help himself toward obtaining his rights, Ralph arose and without another word left the squire's mansion. It was too late to attempt to do more that night, and after some hesitation he went home.

Squire Paget watched him leave the garden, and then locked the front door and went back to the library.

"Ralph Nelson is getting too important, in his own estimation," he mused. "I thought he was a mere youngster who could be twisted around one's finger, but I was mistaken. I must get him out of his situation and compel him to leave Westville, if possible. I can't do much while he is around here."

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Squire Paget sat for half an hour in his easy chair thinking over his plans. Then he went to bed.

After breakfast he started out to pay a visit to Benjamin Hooker, the village postmaster. Hooker, Dicks and the squire were close friends, and they constituted a majority of the village board, which controlled the bridge and other local matters.

"Well, squire, what brings you around this morning so early?" questioned the postmaster, for it was an hour before regular mail time.

"I come to see you about committee matters," returned Squire Paget. "I have got to report against Ralph Nelson, our bridge tender."

"What's he been a-doing, squire?"

"He insulted and assaulted my only son yesterday in a most outrageous fashion, without provocation."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed the postmaster. "I thought Nelson was quite a gentlemanly boy."

"I never did, Benjamin, never! He is nothing but a young tough."

"It's too bad."

"He isn't fit to have on the bridge any longer, and I move we give him a week's notice," went on the squire. "We don't want passengers on the bridge insulted on their way over."

"That's so, squire. But what caused the row?"

"Nothing at all, excepting that Nelson has taken a dislike to my son. And he is such a wicked boy, too, Benjamin. Why, when he heard that my son was going to proceed against him, what do you suppose he did?"

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"What did he do?" questioned the postmaster, eagerly.

"Actually accused my son of stealing twenty dollars from him."

"Gracious!"

"Isn't that enough to provoke a saint, Benjamin? Do you wonder I wish to take him in hand?"

"Not at all, squire; not at all."

"And you will vote to remove him, won't you?"

"Certainly—if you wish it," replied Benjamin Hooker, who was under obligation to the squire, for money loaned. "But we can't remove him without another vote in the board."

"I know that. Come with me to Uriah Dicks', and I'll tell him about the matter. Uriah will stand by us, I know, in a case like this."

As there would be nothing to do in the office for at least half an hour, the postmaster readily consented to accompany the squire, leaving the place in charge of the clerk.

Five minutes later the two stepped into Uriah Dicks' general store. They found the old man talking earnestly to Ralph and a stranger, who was none other than Horace Kelsey.

CHAPTER IX.

[Pg 55]

AT THE GENERAL STORE.

Both Squire Paget and the postmaster were surprised to see Ralph in conversation with Uriah Dicks and the young gentleman who was a stranger to them.

The squire had expected to hold a quiet talk with the keeper of the general store, and he was much disappointed to learn that this was to be denied to him.

However, he put on a bold front, and approached Uriah without hesitation, just as the latter looked up.

"Why, here is Squire Paget now!" exclaimed Uriah Dicks. "Squire, you are just the man I want to see!"

"I can say the same for you," returned the squire, with a sharp glance at Ralph.

"I got a twenty-dollar bill from your son yesterday, and it looks like it was going to make trouble for me," went on the storekeeper.

"It has already made enough trouble for me," retorted the squire, pointedly.

"Squire Paget, this is Mr. Kelsey, the gentleman that gave me the twenty-dollar bill," put in Ralph.

"Humph! He might have given you a twenty-dollar bill, but this is not the one," growled the squire.

"I believe it is, sir," said Horace Kelsey.

"You do?"

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"Yes, sir. It is, as you see, a new one, issued by the First National Bank of Chambersburgh. That is the bank at which I drew it."

"It's all rot!" roared the squire. "My son Percy received that bill, and in Chambersburgh, too!" he added, suddenly. "He said so last night."

Again Ralph's hopes fell. He had felt almost certain that his city friend would be able to prove the property, but now this supposed proof amounted to little or nothing.

"But that grease spot——" he began.

"A story invented by yourself," interrupted Squire Paget. "It is more than likely that the grease spot was on the bill when my son received it."

"Did your son receive the bill at the bank?" questioned Horace Kelsey.

"I don't know—I suppose he did," stammered the squire.

There was an awkward pause. Uriah Dicks drummed uneasily upon the counter, where lay the bill in dispute.

"One thing is certain," said Uriah. "I took the bill in good faith, and I ain't a-goin' to lose on it, mind that."

"You shan't lose on it, Uriah," replied the squire. "My son gave it to you, and it was his bill. You keep it, and I'll take young Nelson in hand. He has concocted this story for a purpose."

"A purpose, eh?" queried the storekeeper.

"Exactly. He knows that he is in danger of losing his situation, and it is his endeavor to get me and my son in his power, so we will influence others to help him keep him in his place."

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"I don't see what I have done to lose the job on the bridge," said Ralph, his cheeks growing red.

"I thought he was doin' well enough," put in Uriah.

"He is a regular rough!" burst out the squire, with a fine appearance of wrath. "He insulted my son on the bridge and knocked him down. And he insults every one he dares!"

"That is a gross untruth, Squire Paget!" burst out Ralph. "I insult nobody——"

"He's a very impulsive youth," put in Postmaster Hooker, thinking it time to bolster up the squire's remarks. "He is, I am afraid, too hot-headed to have on the bridge, not to say anything about this attempt to—ahem!—cast an unworthy reflection on the fair name of our squire's son."

And the postmaster looked as important as possible as he spoke.

Uriah Dicks caught the drift of the talk and looked perplexed, not knowing exactly upon which side to cast his opinion.

But he soon made up his mind. Ralph was a poor boy, with little or no influence, while the squire was rich and powerful.

"I don't know but what you are right, gentlemen," he said. "He certainly talked putty sharp-like about Percy last night."

"I shall make him suffer for that, never fear," said the squire, pointedly. "He shall not insult my son with impunity!"

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Ralph was about to speak, but Horace Kelsey checked him.

"It will do you no good to talk," he said, in a low tone. "They are against you, and we can prove nothing. Better drop the matter, at least until something more in your favor turns up."

"But I am certain the bill is mine——"

"So am I, but it is one thing to know it and quite another to prove it."

"Hadn't you ought to be on the bridge now?" asked Uriah, sourly.

"Bob Sanderson is tending for me."

"Who give him that right?" asked Squire Paget.

"Certainly not the town committee."

"Mr. Foley said I might have him help me during slack hours," returned the young bridge tender, mentioning the name of another of the committeemen.

"He ain't got no power," put in Uriah. "It wasn't never put to a vote."

"I must have some help."

"A young man that was really willing to work wouldn't need no help," grumbled the miserly storekeeper. "It is only on account of laziness you need help."

"That's so," added the postmaster, willing to "pile it on" when there was such a good chance. "Better get back to work at once!"

"I will," replied Ralph, and, not wishing to lose his job on the spot, he left the store, followed by Horace Kelsey. [Pg 59]

"It's a shame the way they treat you!" burst out the young man, as the two walked toward the bridge. "I don't really see how they can do it."

"I suppose they will discharge me now," returned Ralph, bitterly. "And all because I claim a bill that I am positive is my own!"

"If they discharge you, I would make that Percy Paget prove where he got the bill. If he cannot prove it, that will be one point in your favor."

The two walked down to the bridge, and here the young man from the city left Ralph, and went off with Bob Sanderson to see how the repairs to the sloop were coming on.

Ralph was in no happy frame of mind when left alone. He had tried only to assert his rights, but the future looked black in consequence.

Presently his mother came down from the cottage to talk matters over with him. She knew her son had gone off with Horace Kelsey to Uriah Dicks' store.

"The squire is certainly very unreasonable," she said, after Ralph had told his story. "Every one around Westville knows that Percy is arrogant to the last degree."

"That is so, mother, but, to the squire, Percy is perfection. I do not see how he can be so blind."

"If you lose your position on the bridge, Ralph, what in the world will we do? Times are so hard in Westville."

"I'll have to look for work in Eastport or Chambersburgh, I suppose," returned the son. "But I haven't lost the job yet," he added, as cheerfully as he could. [Pg 60]

"But if Uriah Dicks and the postmaster and the squire are against you, they can put you out. There are only five in the committee, and three are a majority."

Ralph was about to reply, but several passengers had to be waited on, and he went on to collect the tolls. Then a whistle sounded from up Big Silver Lake, notifying him that a steamboat wished to pass through the draw, and the opening and closing of the bridge took ten minutes or more.

"If I were only bookkeeper enough to strike a job in one of the factories, I wouldn't care whether I lost the place here or not," said Ralph, when he was again at leisure. "This is a lazy sort of a job, and I would much prefer office work."

"That is true, my son, but one must be thankful to get work of any kind now," returned Mrs. Nelson.

"Oh, I know that, and I am not grumbling, mother, but the—what's that?"

Ralph broke off suddenly. A crash of glass, coming from the neighborhood of the cottage, sounded in their ears. The first crash was followed by half-a-dozen others in rapid succession.

"What in the world can that mean?" cried Mrs. Nelson, and, without waiting, she ran from the bridge.

Ralph looked up and down to see if any one was coming across, and, sighting none, followed.

On a run it did not take long to reach the little home by the side path. As they neared it, Ralph pointed excitedly to the sitting-room windows. [Pg 61]

"Look, mother," he cried, in deep indignation. "Some vandal has broken nearly every pane of glass in the house!"

"Perhaps there are thieves around!" returned Mrs. Nelson, quickly.

"No, they wouldn't break glass needlessly. This was done out of pure meanness."

They hurried around to the door and into the cottage. Alas! a single glance around was enough. Fully half the panes of glass in the cottage were smashed, and on the floors of the various rooms lay a dozen stones as big as a man's hand.

"I know who did this!" ejaculated Ralph, in high anger. "Percy Paget, and no one else!"

"Would he dare?" faltered Mrs. Nelson.

"Yes; and it is just in line with his sneak-like character. I am going to see if I can find him."

Ralph dashed out of the cottage as rapidly as he had entered it. He made a strict search about the grounds, up the road, and in the wood on the other side. But it was of no avail; the person

who had committed the contemptible act had disappeared.

CHAPTER X.

[Pg 62]

RALPH IS GIVEN NOTICE.

Had it not been for his duties on the bridge, Ralph would have continued his search still farther. But already several persons had passed over and dropped their pennies on the counter of the little office, and now a horn was blowing from the deck of the little schooner sailing up Silver Lake.

So telling his mother that he would be back as soon as possible, he hurried to the bridge. Half-a-dozen boats wished to go through the draw, including a string of canal boats, and it was nearly noon before he could leave the spot.

Then Bob Sanderson came around the cove in the sloop *Magic*. Beside him sat Horace Kelsey. The repairs to the *Magic* were now completed, and the little craft was practically as good as new.

"Hallo, Bob, come up here and tend for me, will you?" shouted Ralph, as soon as he caught sight of the old man.

"All right, Ralph! What's up?"

"I must go home," returned the young bridge tender, and when the sloop was tied up near by, he told the two occupants of what had occurred.

"I never heard the like!" burst out Bob Sanderson. "If it was really that Paget boy, he ought to have a whip across his back!"

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Horace Kelsey accompanied Ralph to the cottage to see the extent of the damage done. The young man from New York was also of the opinion that the guilty party ought to be brought to swift justice.

"But no one saw Percy, and we cannot prove anything," said Mrs. Nelson.

"Perhaps we can," said Ralph. "I'm going to hunt him up, if that is possible."

Horace Kelsey did not feel able to remain longer at Westville, and so he left when Ralph did. Before he went, however, he insisted on presenting Ralph with another twenty-dollar bill, to replace the one lost.

"Here is my card," he said, on leaving. "If you ever come to New York, drop in and see me."

"Thank you; I shall be very much pleased to," replied Ralph.

He noted that Horace Kelsey was in the insurance business, with an office on Broadway, and then he placed the address carefully away in a drawer of the old-fashioned desk in the sitting-room.

"Who knows, but if I am discharged here I may some day go to New York," thought the young bridge tender.

After taking another look about the cottage and through the wood, Ralph started up the road leading to the center of the village. Presently he came across a young man named Edgar Steiner, who was one of Percy Paget's intimate friends.

"Steiner, do you know where Percy Paget is?" he asked.

"Percy has gone to Silver Cove," returned Steiner.

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"When did he go?"

"Went early this morning. He drove down to see about a dog he is going to buy from a sport who lives there."

Silver Cove was several miles below Westville, and the road to the place would not have brought the aristocratic bully near the cottage by the bridge.

"You are sure he went?"

"Yes. I saw him drive off. He wanted me to go along, but I couldn't very well. Do you wish to see him?"

"Yes."

"I understand you and he had some trouble yesterday."

"We did have some trouble yesterday. But I want to see him about something else now."

Steiner stared at Ralph. Then, thinking he had spent enough time on such a poor lad as the bridge tender, he turned away and walked off, whistling a merry concert-hall air.

Ralph stood still, undecided what to do next. If Percy had really gone to Silver Cove, somebody else must be guilty of breaking the cottage windows. But who? Ralph could not remember of having any other enemy.

While the boy was deliberating he saw three men coming toward him. They were the squire, the postmaster, and Uriah Dicks.

"Why ain't you at the bridge?" asked Uriah, sourly.

"We have had trouble at the cottage, sir," replied Ralph. "Some vandal has broken nearly all of our windows."

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"It's a wonder you do not blame it on my son Percy!" sneered the squire.

"I do blame it on him," retorted Ralph. "He is the only enemy who would do such a thing."

"More of the scheme to get my son into trouble. You see how it is, gentlemen; he is a thorough young rascal!" exclaimed the squire.

"It's awful!" murmured Postmaster Hooker. "It's a good thing we intend to act on this matter, squire."

"Yes, we can't let it rest another minute," returned Squire Paget.

And on the three men passed, leaving Ralph more bitter in heart than ever.

The young bridge tender returned to work, sending Bob Sanderson to the cottage with instructions to buy what glass was needed, and put it in, taking the money out of the twenty-dollar bill Horace Kelsey had given him that morning.

The afternoon slipped by quietly, and at sundown Sanderson came back to relieve Ralph as usual.

"The glass is all in, and here is the change," said he, and handed over sixteen dollars and a half. "Had to pay three dollars and a half for glass, tacks, and putty."

"But your pay, Mr. Sanderson——"

"That's all right, Ralph; I won't ask none on this job, exceptin' you catch the chap as did it, and make him pony up, as the sayin' goes."

"You are very kind. I doubt if I am able to do anything in the matter," returned Ralph, hopelessly.

He had hardly reached home, when a knock was heard on the cottage door. They opened it to admit Squire Paget's hired man.

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"A letter for Ralph Nelson," the man said, and handed it over. "I don't think there is any answer," he added, and bowed his way out.

"It must be from the squire," cried Mrs. Nelson. "Perhaps he has relented of his harsh treatment ——"

"Not he!" exclaimed Ralph. "It isn't in him."

The boy broke the seal of the letter, and drew out the document, which read as follows:

MRS. RANDOLPH NELSON:—Owing to circumstances of which you are as well aware as ourselves, we shall not require your services or those of your son as bridge tender for Westville after the week ending July 19.

THE WESTVILLE TOWNSHIP COMMITTEE,
Per Hon. Thomas Paget, Chairman.

"What is it, Ralph?" asked his mother, anxiously.

"Just as I thought, mother. My services as bridge tender will not be required after this week," returned Ralph, bitterly.

"Let me see the letter." Mrs. Nelson took and read the epistle. "It is too bad!"

"It's an outrage, mother, that's what it is! And all on account of that aristocratic sneak, Percy Paget!"

"Do not call harsh names, Ralph!"

"I can't help it, mother; he is a sneak, and worse. He brought on the row, took that money, and I am certain he broke our windows into the bargain!"

Mrs. Nelson did not reply. She thought in silence for a moment, and the look of anxiety on her face deepened.

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"What shall we do when you are out of work, Ralph?"

"I must try to obtain another job, mother."

"But if you are not successful?"

"Let us not anticipate, mother. I am sure to strike something. In the meantime we will have a little money to fall back on—the balance of that twenty-dollar bill, for instance."

"Yes, and we will have the other money we have saved," added Mrs. Nelson. "But I would not like to touch that if it could be helped."

"We won't touch it. I'll find work before my week's wages and the sixteen dollars and a half are gone. The one pity is we'll feel too poor just now to advertise for those missing papers, and offer any reward for their return."

"That is so," and Mrs. Nelson gave a long sigh.

Perhaps she saw the many disappointments in store for her son when he should seek employment elsewhere.

CHAPTER XI.

[Pg 68]

THE RUNAWAY.

By the next morning Ralph felt better. He was able to take the matter of his discharge philosophically, and he was even hopeful that the next week would see him in a better situation than he now occupied.

He went at his duties with a willing spirit, resolved that there should be no cause for complaint during his last days on the bridge. Only one thing made him feel bad, and that was that he could not prove that Percy and not himself had been to blame for the row.

But Ralph soon learned that many of the village folks who used the bridge daily sided with him. Some of these were very outspoken in their opinion of the committee's actions.

"Under the squire's thumb, all of 'em!" said Bart Haycock, the village blacksmith. "We ought to have a new committee, and maybe we will have at the coming election."

But all this talk did not help Ralph. He had received notice, and in three days his duties on the bridge would come to an end. And the change would also hurt Bob Sanderson, who would now have either to pay for his board or go elsewhere.

"Who is to take your place?" asked Sanderson, when he came to relieve Ralph in the evening.

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"I don't know, Mr. Sanderson," returned the young bridge tender. "But I hope, whoever it is, he keeps you as helper."

"Well, that depends," returned the old man. "I wouldn't care to work for everybody, say Dan Pickley, for instance."

"Do you think Dan Pickley is after the job?" questioned Ralph, quickly.

"He was after it before, and he ain't doing much now."

"I imagine Squire Paget will give him the position if he wishes it," mused Ralph. "He and the squire are quite thick."

"That's because Dan is willing to do any work the squire wishes done," responded Bob Sanderson. "That fellow will do anything for pay."

That evening Ralph and his mother had a talk, in which it was decided that old Bob Sanderson should be allowed to remain at the cottage at the nominal amount of a dollar per week for board, until he managed to obtain another situation, or until jobs in his line became more numerous.

When Sanderson was told of this he was very grateful. As he had no other boarding-place in view, he gladly accepted the offer, and promised that the widow and her son should lose nothing by their kindness.

On the following morning Ralph was collecting toll, when a man approached the bridge, and began to watch proceedings. The man was Dan Pickley.

"What brings you, Pickley?" asked Ralph, after the latter had been watching him for some time.

"Came down to get the run of things," returned Pickley.

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"Then you are to have the job after I leave?"

"Reckon I am. The squire said as much."

"The squire and you are rather thick," remarked the young bridge tender, coolly.

"Oh, I don't know," returned the man, uneasily. "He knows a good hand to hire when he wants him."

"It was you who were at the squire's house when I called, a few nights ago."

"Yes; I had an errand for him."

As he uttered the last words, Dan Pickley looked at Ralph closely. He was wondering if the boy had overheard much of the conversation which had passed between Squire Paget and himself that night in the library.

Pickley sat down on the end of the bridge, and began to count the folks as they passed over. Ralph saw that he was keeping track of the toll, but said nothing.

"Let me help you turn the bridge," said Pickley when a horn sounded for the draw to be opened.

"No, thank you; I can do it alone," replied Ralph.

"Don't you want me to take hold?"

"It is not needed. You will get enough of the work after I leave."

"You don't want to be a bit sociable," growled Pickley, and he turned away, but still kept on counting the passengers as they crossed.

"I suppose he wants to make sure that I am not going to cheat the bridge board out of its cash," mused Ralph, somewhat bitterly. "No doubt Squire Paget fancies that, now I have my walking-papers, I will steal every penny I can!"

During his odd moments Ralph threw several fishing-lines over, and the catching of a mess of fish served to occupy his thoughts to a considerable extent.

Pickley watched him fish for a while, but did not offer to resume the conversation. But he kept a close tally of every cent taken in as toll.

At noon Bob Sanderson brought over Ralph's lunch.

"Well, I'm lucky anyway," he said. "I've got a job at building hot-bed frames for Mr. Ford that will give me steady work for nigh onto three weeks at good pay."

"I am glad to hear it," replied Ralph, with a smile. "Three weeks is a long time, and something is sure to turn up in the meantime."

"I'm glad you have a job, too," put in Pickley, "for I am going to have Andy Wilson help me."

"Then you've got the job?" said Sanderson.

"Yes, I go on as soon as Ralph quits."

While the young bridge tender was eating his lunch a steamboat whistle sounded, and he had to leave it to open the draw. The steamboat passed through, and then he noticed another boat coming down the lake, although some distance off.

As there were just then no passengers wishing passage over the bridge, Ralph decided to leave the draw open for a few minutes, until the boat had time to go through.

He sat down to finish his lunch. He had just raised a bit of home-made berry pie to his mouth, when a clatter on the Westville turnpike startled him.

"My gracious! a runaway!" cried old Bob Sanderson.

Ralph leaped to his feet, and saw that his old helper was right. There, tearing along the road that led from the village center was an elegant team of black horses, attached to a large open carriage. [Pg 71]

"It's Mrs. Carrington's team!" cried Pickley. "And blame me if the old lady and her daughter ain't in the carriage!"

"The team is coming this way!" put in Bob Sanderson. "I wonder if we can't stop them?"

"Not much!" roared Pickley. "Get out of the way, or you'll be knocked down and killed!"

Sanderson was too old a man to attempt to subdue the fiery steeds, and he quickly followed Pickley out of harm's way.

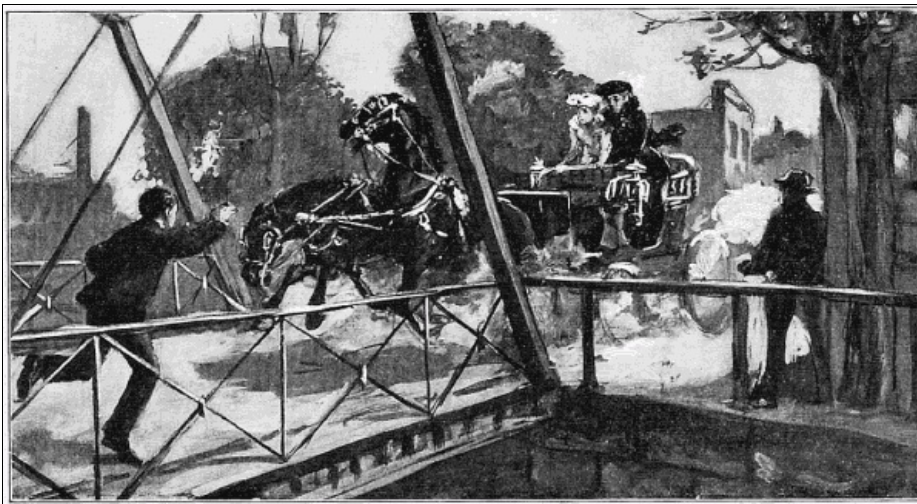
In the meantime Ralph stood undecided as to what to do. Should he run forward, and try to bring the horses to a standstill before the bridge was reached?

"It won't do," he muttered, half-aloud. "I might miss them, and then——"

He thought no further, but with a bound, sprang to the capstan bar, and with might and main strove to swing the heavy bridge around into place, thus closing the draw.

It was hard work, and the sweat poured from his face and down his chin. But he kept at it, noting at each turn how close the steeds and the elegant turnout were drawing.

At last, with a shock and a quiver, the draw-bridge reached its resting piers. As it did so Ralph gave the bar and capstan a jerk from the hole in which it worked. He threw it aside, just as the front hoofs of the runaways struck the long planking at the end of the bridge. [Pg 72]



"Coming on at breakneck speed." See [page 72](#).

"Help! help!" came in a female voice from the carriage, and the young bridge tender saw that both Mrs. Carrington and her daughter were preparing to leap out. [Pg 73]

"Don't jump!" he screamed, and then made a dash for the horses' heads.

The fact that they had struck the bridge caused the team to slacken their pace a bit. Taking advantage of this, Ralph caught them by both bridles. They lifted him off his feet, but he clung fast, and by the time the Eastport side was reached the team was conquered.

"Hold them, hold them, please!" cried Mrs. Carrington, who, by the way, was one of the richest residents of Westville. "I will get out."

"They are all right now," returned Ralph. "But I will hold them, if you wish."

And he did so while the lady and her daughter alighted.

"Oh, how thankful I am to you," said the lady.

"And I, too," added her daughter, with a grateful glance that caused Ralph to blush. "Oh, mamma," she went on, "I wonder what became of Mr. Paget?"

"It's hard to tell," returned Mrs. Carrington, coldly.

"Mr. Paget!" cried Ralph. "Do you mean Percy Paget?"

"Yes," replied Julia Carrington.

"Was he with you?"

"He was," answered Mrs. Carrington. "But at the first signs of danger he sprang out of the carriage and left us to our fate!"

CHAPTER XII.

[Pg 74]

RALPH'S REWARD.

Ralph was much surprised to learn that Percy Paget had been in the carriage.

"Was he hurt when he sprang out?" he asked of Mrs. Carrington.

"I am sure I do not know," returned the lady.

"I don't think so," put in her daughter, a beautiful miss of sixteen. "He landed in the middle of a blackberry bush when he sprang from the front seat."

"Then he was driving?"

"Yes, and it was his fault that the team ran away," returned Mrs. Carrington. "I told him that they were very spirited, but in order to make them do their best, as he thought, he used the whip upon them."

"Such a team as that don't need the whip much," put in old Bob Sanderson, who had come up during the conversation, followed by Dan Pickley. "They're too high-minded."

"That is just it," said the lady.

"It was gritty of Ralph to shut the bridge and stop 'em for you," went on the old man.

"Indeed it was!" cried Julia Carrington. "I shall never forget your bravery," she went on to Ralph. "You have done what many a man would be afraid to undertake."

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"So he has," put in her mother. "You are Ralph Nelson, the bridge tender, I believe."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I used to know your father fairly well. You have taken his place since he died."

"Yes, ma'am—up to the end of this week. Then Mr. Pickley takes it," and Ralph pointed to the fellow he had mentioned.

"And what are you going to do?"

"I don't know yet. I am going to look for work somewhere."

"I trust you find something suitable."

"I'll take anything that pays fair wages."

"And how is it you are going to leave here?" went on the lady, curiously.

"I got into a row with Percy Paget, and his father is chairman of the village board, and he sided with his son."

"I see." Mrs. Carrington bit her lip. "Well, we must be going, Julia," she said to her daughter. "I shall not forget you for your bravery, Ralph Nelson."

"Thank you, ma'am; I only did what was my duty."

"It is more than that. I shall not forget you, remember."

The lady re-entered her carriage, and Ralph assisted the daughter to a seat beside her.

In a moment more they continued on their way, leaving Ralph, Sanderson and Pickley to gaze after them.

"My, but they're swell!" was Pickley's comment. "I wish I was in your shoes, Ralph."

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"She won't forget you, that's certain," said Sanderson. "She'll reward you handsomely, see if she don't, Ralph."

"They don't seem to care much about Percy Paget's condition," returned the boy, by way of changing the subject.

"Well, who would—under the circumstances!" exclaimed the old man, in deep disgust.

"Perhaps they don't give him the credit he deserves," said Pickley, thinking he must say something in favor of the squire's son.

Ralph and Sanderson had their own opinion of Percy, and they did not care to argue with Pickley on the subject. The young bridge tender went back to his work, and Sanderson shuffled off to go at an odd job of boat-mending. Pickley sat down to count the tolls as before.

Three minutes later Percy Paget came into sight. His hands and face were scratched and his clothing torn.

"See anything of a runaway?" he cried, as he came up to Pickley.

"Yes; the team was stopped right here," replied the man.

"Who stopped 'em?"

"Ralph Nelson."

"You don't mean it?" gasped the young aristocrat.

"Yes, I do."

"Was he hurt?"

"Not a bit."

"I don't see how he could do it," grumbled Percy. "That team was going like mad."

"So it was. Ralph not only stopped the team, but before that he worked like lightning to close the draw so that they wouldn't go overboard."

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"Humph!" mused Percy. "He must have done it in hopes of a reward. Most likely he knew who was in the carriage."

"He did."

"What did Mrs. Carrington give him?"

"Nothing. But she said she would not forget him."

"She'll send him five dollars, or something like that, I guess. Did she—she say anything about me?" went on Percy, hesitatingly.

"She said you leaped from the carriage as soon as the team started."

"That isn't so," replied the aristocratic bully, glibly. "I didn't jump at all."

"You didn't."

"No, I was pitched out. I stood up to get a better hold on the reins, and just then the carriage lurched, and out I went."

"Oh, well, then, that's different," replied Dan Pickley, who did not think it to his advantage to question the veracity of Percy's explanation. "Mrs. Carrington seemed to think you had jumped out because you were scared."

"And did her daughter seem to think so, too?" asked Percy, his anxiety increasing.

"I don't know but what she did. You had better hunt them up and explain matters."

"I will. I suppose the reason they didn't come back for me is because they were in a hurry to get to Eastport and see Mr. Carrington before he went off to Chambersburgh."

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"They didn't say what they were in a hurry about," returned Dan Pickley.

Percy saw that Ralph was now approaching, and not wishing, for various reasons, to encounter the young bridge tender while in such a woe-begone condition, he turned on his heel and walked back toward Westville.

Ralph could not help but laugh at the discomfiture of the young bully. He had overheard a good part of the conversation, and he was satisfied that Percy was, for once at least, more than "taken down."

On the other hand, Percy was greatly chagrined to learn that Ralph had played the part of the hero. His face drew dark, and his eyes flashed their bitter hatred.

"It's too bad, that low upstart to stop the team!" he muttered to himself. "I wonder if Julia Carrington spoke to him? Most likely she did, and now he'll look at her as a special friend! It's a great shame! I'll have to teach him his place if he tries to get too intimate with her!"

All of which went to prove that Percy's hopes in the direction of Julia were more than of the ordinary kind.

Percy would have been more bitter than ever could he have witnessed the scene in the Nelson cottage that evening, shortly after eight o'clock.

Five minutes before that time Ralph was sitting in the kitchen, telling his mother of the stirring event of the day, to which the fond parent listened with keen interest.

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The son had just finished when there came a timid knock at the front door.

"Somebody's knocking, Ralph," said Mrs. Nelson. "Go and light the sitting-room lamp and see who it is."

Ralph lit the lamp, and then opened the door. Before him stood Mrs. Carrington and her daughter.

"Good-evening, Ralph; you did not expect to see me quite so soon, I imagine," said Mrs. Carrington, with a smile, as she stepped in.

"Well, no," stammered the youth. "Won't you have a chair?" and he pushed a seat forward for the lady and another for her daughter.

"Thank you, yes," returned Mrs. Carrington. "Is this Mrs. Nelson?" she went on, as Ralph's mother appeared.

"Yes, madam," said the widow. "Pray, make yourself comfortable. Perhaps you would prefer a rocker?"

"No, we won't stay but a minute. Has Ralph told you of his bravery this noon?"

"He said he stopped your runaway team."

"He did nobly, and my daughter and I have come to offer him a slight reward for his gallant deed."

"I was not looking for a reward," put in Ralph.

"But you deserve one, Ralph, and I trust you will accept what we have brought. Julia!"

"Yes, mamma. Here it is," and from beneath her dress folds Julia Carrington produced a small morocco-covered box. "Allow me to present this, Ralph Nelson, with the compliments of my mother and myself," she said, turning to the young bridge tender.

She held out the box.

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"Thank you, but I—I really didn't expect anything," stammered Ralph, as he took the offering.

"Open it, and let us see the kind gift Mrs. Carrington and her daughter have made," said his mother.

There was a catch on one side of the small box. Ralph pressed upon this, and up flew the lid, revealing to his astonished and pleased gaze a small but neatly engraved gold watch, with chain and charm attached.

"A gold watch!" cried Ralph.

"And chain and all!" added Mrs. Nelson.

"Really, I—I can't accept this!" and Ralph blushed furiously. "I—I——"

"Oh, yes, you can," laughed Julia Carrington. "It is not as much as we think you ought to have, but ——"

"It is more, Miss Carrington."

"Do you like it, Ralph?" questioned the older lady.

"Very much indeed. I have always wanted a good watch. I have been using father's old one, but that is about worn out, and can't be made to run with much regularity."

CHAPTER XIII.

[Pg 81]

ON BIG SILVER LAKE.

The Carringtons remained at the Nelson cottage much longer than they originally intended. It was ten o'clock when Ralph lit the way to where their carriage was standing, in charge of a colored coachman. During the visit the rich folks asked Mrs. Nelson and Ralph much about themselves. Julia Carrington proved herself a very nice young lady, and when she went away Ralph and his new acquaintances were warm friends.

"They are not stuck up a bit, mother," said the young bridge tender, as he returned to the cottage after seeing them off.

"No, they are very kind-hearted as well as rich," returned Mrs. Nelson. "Would Westville had more of such."

"What a difference between such folks and the Pagets and the Steiners. Why, Mrs. Steiner and her daughter Maud wouldn't look at us if they stumbled over us on the street, and neither would Mrs. Paget when she was alive."

"Well, we must remember that we do not belong to fashionable society, Ralph. We belong to the poorer classes."

"So we do, but that doesn't make it right for some folks to look at us as if we were the dust under their feet. I shall not forget the Carringtons' kind ways, nor the beautiful present they made me," and Ralph fell to examining the gold watch and chain anew.

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It was truly a valuable gift, and the boy was more than delighted. He resolved to wear it only when he needed a time-piece or when he was "dressed up." It was too good to have about his old clothes constantly.

Ralph's remaining time as bridge tender went swiftly by, and on the day set by the committee he was paid off by Squire Paget, and Dan Pickley was duly installed in his place.

"What are you going to do now?" asked the squire, as he handed over Ralph's salary.

"I don't know yet," returned the boy.

"Guess you'll find it rather hard to find work around Westville."

"I don't know. I haven't had any chance of looking around."

"Well, I'm sorry for you," went on Squire Paget, hypocritically. "I don't like to see any one out of work."

"Really! It was yourself got me out of the job!" retorted Ralph.

"No, it wasn't, Nelson; it was your own hasty temper. If you hadn't attacked Percy—but let that pass——"

"Percy was in the wrong—I shall always say so——" interrupted Ralph.

"There you go!" snarled the squire. "I was going to offer you a situation on one of my canal boats, but I shan't do it now. You don't deserve it."

"I do not want any situation from you," replied the boy, with a sudden show of spirit. "I would rather find my own employment."

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"Going to be pig-headed, eh?"

"You can call it what you please. You did not treat me fairly, and I guess I can get along without

your aid."

And without another word Ralph pocketed his pay, and walked off.

"A regular young tartar!" mused the squire, as he gazed after him. "He won't be easy to manage; that's certain. Too bad I couldn't get him on the canal boat. I must find some way of getting him out of Westville—and his mother, too. I can't do much while they are around."

Ralph had been paid off at the squire's office in the village, and now he made his way to Uriah Dicks' store, to settle up the family account.

"How much do we owe you, Mr. Dicks?" he asked, as he walked up to Uriah, who was poring over a very dirty ledger.

"Oh, so it's you, Ralph!" exclaimed the storekeeper. "Been up to the squire's yet?"

"Yes."

"Did you get your pay?"

"Yes."

"And now you want to settle up?"

"Yes," replied Ralph, for a third time.

"I hope you ain't a-goin' to quit tradin' with me!" cried Uriah, in some alarm.

"We are, Mr. Dicks. What can you expect, after the way you have treated me?"

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"I—I couldn't help votin' in the committee with the squire and Ben Hooker," returned the storekeeper, lamely. "They said it was a clear case against you."

"And therefore you wouldn't give me a chance to clear myself," said Ralph, bitterly. "How much is the bill?"

"Three dollars and nineteen cents. I'll call it three dollars if you'll keep on buying here," went on Uriah, desperately.

It made his heart fairly ache to see trade going to one of the rival stores.

"I prefer to settle in full," rejoined the boy, coolly. "Take the three dollars and nineteen cents out of this five-dollar bill."

With an inward groan, Uriah took out the amount, handed back the change, and crossed the account from the book.

"Got anything to do?" he asked, a sudden idea flashing through his head.

"Not yet."

"I might take you on here—I need a boy."

"And what would you pay?" questioned Ralph, although he knew about what to expect from the miserly man he was addressing.

"Well, I'd be willin' to pay a big boy like you two dollars and a half a week. I wouldn't pay a small boy so much."

"Thank you, but I wouldn't work for that, even if I cared to work for you, Mr. Dicks. Two dollars and a half wouldn't run our house."

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"I would let you have your groceries at cost," said Uriah, as an extra inducement.

The truth was, many of his customers had upbraided him for aiding in the discharge of Ralph as bridge tender, and he wished to set himself right with these folks.

"I do not care to work for you, sir. I think I can get work I will like better and which will pay more elsewhere."

The storekeeper's face fell, and he closed the dirty ledger with a slam.

"All right, Ralph, suit yourself. But if you starve to death, don't lay it at my door, mind that!"

"No fear of my starving," returned the boy, lightly, and he left the store.

Uriah watched him from behind the dirty windows of his place. He heaved a big sigh as he saw Ralph enter the opposition store just across the way, and groaned aloud when the youth came out with half-a-dozen packages under his arm, and started for home.

"I guess I put my foot into it when I sided with the squire," he meditated. "But it had to be done. Anyway, the squire's trade is bigger than the Nelsons', so I'm better off than I might be," and, thus consoling himself, he went back to his accounts.

To Uriah Dicks all such matters were questions of dollars and cents, not of justice.

When Ralph arrived home, he told his mother of the storekeeper's offer.

"Do you think I did wrong in refusing?" he asked.

"No, Ralph; I would have done the same."

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"I fancy I can strike a job that will pay better—anyway, I am going to try."

Sunday of the week passed quietly enough, and on Monday morning Ralph brushed up his every-day clothes, took along the lunch his mother put up for him, and left the cottage to try his luck among the stores and factories in Eastport.

"Don't be alarmed if I am not home until night, mother," he said. "I may strike a situation in which they wish me at once."

"All right, Ralph," she returned. "Good luck to you."

But Ralph did not get to Eastport that day. As he was crossing the bridge a young man on a small sailboat hailed him. It was Roy Parkhurst, a fellow Ralph knew well.

"Hallo, Ralph!" he called out. "The job on the bridge and you have parted company, I am told."

"Yes, Roy."

"Doing anything to-day?"

"No, I was just bound for Eastport to look for work."

"Then you are just the fellow I am looking for," said Parkhurst.

"What for?"

"I want to sail down to Martinton and have this boat taken back here. If you'll undertake the job I'll give you a dollar."

"I'll go you," returned Ralph promptly. "I can put off looking for another situation until to-morrow."

"Then jump in."

Parkhurst ran his boat close to the bridge, and Ralph sprang down on one of the seats. Soon the two were moving down Silver Lake at all the speed the little craft commanded.

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It was a splendid day, with a stiff breeze blowing, and by noon Martinton was reached. Then, giving Ralph directions as to where the boat was to be left in Westville, Roy Parkhurst quit the boat, and, having eaten the lunch, the boy started on the return, never dreaming of the excitement in store for him.

CHAPTER XIV.

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A STORMY TIME.

Like his father before him, Ralph had always liked the water. He was perfectly familiar with the handling of all manner of small craft, and, had it paid, would have liked nothing better than to follow a life on the lakes.

But situations on the water which brought in a fair remuneration were scarce in the vicinity of Westville, and so the boy did not attempt a search for employment in that direction.

The half-day's job before him suited him exactly, and, after leaving Martinton, he settled back with his hand on the tiller and his eyes on the sails in great satisfaction.

"I wouldn't mind owning a boat like this," he thought, as the swift little craft cut along through the water. "Perhaps I might do very well taking out pleasure parties during the summer."

Inside of half an hour Martinton was left far behind. Then Ralph noted that the fair sky was gradually becoming overcast.

"I wonder if we are going to have a blow," he soliloquized. "It more than half looks like it."

About quarter of an hour later the breeze died out utterly. This was a bad sign, and the boy prudently lowered the jib and took a couple of reefs in the mainsail.

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Presently came a low rumble of thunder from the southeast, and the sky grew darker and darker. There was no longer any doubt that a severe thunderstorm, preceded possibly by a squall, was close at hand.

Unwilling to take any risks in a boat not his own, Ralph lowered the mainsail entirely. Hardly had he done so when a fierce wind swept up the lake—a wind that presently raised itself almost to a hurricane.

The lightning began to flash all around him, followed by crash after crash of thunder. The water was churned up in great violence, and he was compelled to crouch low in the craft lest he be

swept overboard and drowned.

Driven by the wind, the boat moved across the lake, until Ralph grew fearful that she would be driven up on the rocks and made a complete wreck. At the risk of losing some canvas, he let out the mainsail a bit and steered from the shore.

The rain came down by the bucketful, and it did not take much to soak him to the skin. There was no way of protecting himself; he must take it as it came. Fortunately it was warm, so he did not suffer so much as he might otherwise have done.

A half-hour passed, and Ralph was just congratulating himself that the worst was over, when a cry came out of the gloom to his left.

He strained his eyes in the direction, and after a few moments caught sight of an immense hay barge bearing down upon him. The hay barge had been towed by a steam tug, but the rope had parted, and the barge was now drifting at the mercy of the wind and current.

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There was a man on the hay barge, thoroughly frightened, and it was he who was crying for assistance.

"Hullo, there! What's the matter?" cried Ralph, as he steered clear of the moving mass, for the hay barge was loaded to the water's edge.

"Help me!" cried the man. "I am all alone on this barge."

"Where is the tug?"

"I don't know. I fancy she struck on a rock, for we lost our reckoning, and ran too close to shore."

"I don't see how I can help you," returned Ralph. "My boat won't budge that big barge."

"Then take me on board, will you?" returned the man, with a shiver. "I ain't used to being out in the wind and rain."

"Yes, I'll take you in. Wait till I run up behind."

As best he could, Ralph swung his own craft around, and came up under the stern of the hay barge. The man ran from the side, and lowered himself onto the bow seat.

"There! I'm all right now," he said, as he stumbled back to Ralph's side. "What a beastly storm!" he went on.

"It is. What are you going to do about the barge?"

"I don't care what becomes of her," growled the man. "I was only a passenger on the tug, and went on the barge for fun. Let the captain pick her up as best he can."

"But you want to find the tug, don't you?" asked Ralph, in some surprise.

"Not if you will put me ashore. Where are you bound?"

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"Westville."

"That will suit me first rate. Take me there, and I'll pay you the passage money instead of the tug captain."

"I'll take you there without pay," said Ralph.

At that moment a steam whistle sounded close at hand, and presently they beheld the steam tug, with the captain on the forward deck, gazing anxiously ahead.

"There she is!" cried the man Ralph had picked up.

"We'll call to the captain, and let him know where his hay barge is," replied Ralph.

He accordingly hailed those on the steam tug. Soon the craft was close beside him.

"Your barge is off in that direction," said Ralph, pointing with his hand.

"And I am here, captain, and going to stay here," put in Ralph's passenger. "No more hay barges for me."

"Don't you want to come on the tug?"

"No."

"All right then, suit yourself."

And the next moment the steam tug shot out of sight, in the direction in which the hay barge was drifting.

The storm now let up a bit, and Ralph was able to take a good look at the fellow beside him. He was a tall, strong-looking chap, with sharp black eyes, and a heavy head of dark hair. He wore a long mustache, and there was a slight scar directly in the center of his forehead.

"What's your name, youngster?" he asked, presently, as Ralph let out the mainsail.

Ralph told him.

"Mine is Dock Brady. I am a surveyor from Utica. Do you follow this sort of thing for a living?"

"No, sir."

"Just out for pleasure, eh?"

"Hardly that; I am returning the boat to Westville for a friend."

"Oh, I see." Dock Brady mused for a moment. "Westville is quite a place, I believe," he went on.

"Not so very large, sir."

"Larger than Silver Cove, though?"

"Oh, yes—twice as large."

"Quite a few summer boarders, eh?"

"Back of the village, yes. There are no folks stopping in the village itself."

"No, but that helps to liven up things, of course—buying stuff and mailing letters."

He paused again.

"Yes, they have to come there for goods, and that makes the stores do very well. And the post office is a lively enough place at mail times."

"Always is, when there are summer boarders around." The man laughed lightly. "Can I help you with the boat?" he went on, changing the subject.

"You can hold the tiller while I hoist the jib," said Ralph. "The storm is over, I guess."

The jib was unfurled and the mainsail let out full, and once again the little craft went bounding on her way.

Ralph did not take to his passenger's appearance, and said very little during the remainder of the trip. The man also relapsed into silence, as if resolving some scheme in his mind.

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Before sundown Westville was reached. At the bridge the man got off, and tossed Ralph a silver dollar. In a moment more he was out of sight.

Little did Ralph imagine under what exciting circumstances he and Dock Brady were to meet again.

CHAPTER XV.

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LOOKING FOR WORK.

Mrs. Nelson was surprised to see Ralph come in almost soaked to the skin from the rain.

"Why, Ralph, why didn't you go under shelter!" she cried.

"Because I couldn't get under," he laughed, and then he explained that he had been on the lake instead of over to Eastport.

"And I've earned two dollars by the operation," he added.

"I am thankful you escaped injury by the storm," she shuddered. "It must have been fearful out on the water."

"It was pretty rough, I admit," he said. "But it is over now, and no harm done."

"You had better change your clothes before you sit down to eat."

"I will," said Ralph, and went upstairs for that purpose.

When he came down again he found the evening meal on the table, and, being hungry, he ate his full share.

Mother and son spent a quiet evening at home, and retired early. In the morning Ralph was up before sunrise, putting things in order around the house.

By eight o'clock he was on his way to Eastport. As he was crossing the bridge, Dan Pickley stopped him.

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"Ain't you got an extra key to the bridge lock?" he asked. "I want one for myself and one for Andy Wilson, who is going to help me."

"There is but one key," returned Ralph. "I always left that in a safe place in the office, and whoever was here used it."

"Then you ain't got a duplicate?"

"No, I tell you."

"Oh, all right," responded Dan Pickley, and he pursed his lips. He was about to say more, but suddenly changed his mind.

Somewhat perplexed by Pickley's strange manner, the boy continued on his way, and a few minutes later found himself in the thriving town for which he had been bound.

Ralph had no definite place in view. But he knew that the best thing to do was to seek employment systematically. He resolved to walk to the extreme end of the town and apply at every store and factory that presented itself.

"Then, if there is any vacancy at all, I am bound to locate it," he said to himself.

His first visit was paid to a large shoe factory, located directly by the lakeside.

"I am looking for a place," he began to the foreman, when that individual waved him away and pointed to a sign over the door, which the boy had not seen, and which read:

"No More Hands Wanted."

"Excuse me, but I did not see the sign," said Ralph, politely, and walked off.

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After this came another shoe factory, at which the boy fared no better; indeed, he fared worse, for the foreman, a burly Irishman, ordered him out very rudely.

"They don't believe in being very civil," thought Ralph. "However, one must expect some hard knocks in this world."

At a planing-mill the boy fell in with a young man whom he knew quite well. The young man's name was Harry Ford, and he treated Ralph kindly.

"Very sorry, Ralph, but there is no opening," he said. "Only last week we discharged two young fellows because we could not keep them going. Orders are rather slack."

"Then there is nothing at all open?"

Harry Ford shook his head.

"I'll ask the boss if he'll take you on, but I am certain it will do no good."

The owner of the mill came in just then, and he was appealed to. He at once said he could not possibly take on a new hand.

"If an opening occurs I'll keep you in mind," said Harry Ford, and with this promise Ralph had to be content.

After leaving the planing-mill, the boy came to several stores. At the first and second no help of any kind was needed. At the third they wanted a boy to distribute circulars.

"The job will last for a week," said the storekeeper, "for I want the circulars distributed in every place in Eastport, Westville, and all the summer boarding-houses and hotels in the neighborhood."

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"And how much are you willing to pay?" asked Ralph.

"I'll give you four dollars for the week if you do the work properly. I won't have any circulars wasted."

Ralph hesitated. Four dollars was not much, but it was better than nothing.

"I am looking for a steady place," he said. "But if I can't find it, I'll take the job," he said.

"I want the circulars to go out as soon as possible. They advertise my summer sporting goods, and the season is now pretty well advanced."

"Will you keep the place open for me until this evening?"

"What is your name?"

"Ralph Nelson. I used to be the bridge tender."

"Oh, yes, I thought I had seen you before. All right, Nelson; I'll wait until six o'clock to hear from you."

"Thank you, Mr. Dunham. I'll let you know one way or the other by that time," said Ralph.

When the boy left the store he found it was already noon. He had a lunch with him, and, strolling down to the water's edge, he sat on a little dock and ate it.

He had just about finished when a rowboat came into view. There was a single occupant at the oars. It was Percy Paget.

"Hallo, there! what are you doing here?" cried the young bully, as he ran up to the dock and leaped ashore.

"Taking it easy," returned Ralph, coolly.

"Indeed!" said Percy, sarcastically. "Plenty of time for that now, I suppose."

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"Yes, I have more time on my hands than I care to have, Percy."

"Don't call me Percy! I am not an intimate of yours, Ralph Nelson!"

"All right; just as you please."

"If you had treated me like a gentleman on the bridge you wouldn't be out of a job now," went on the fashionable bully.

"We won't talk about that," returned Ralph, sharply.

And then, to see how late it was, he drew out his new watch and consulted it.

"Where did you get that watch?" questioned Percy, on catching sight of the golden time-piece.

"It was made a present to me," replied Ralph, and he smiled at the young aristocrat's evident wonder.

"A present to you?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"A couple of days ago."

"For your faithful work on the bridge, I suppose," sneered the rich youth.

"Partly for that, and partly for something else."

"Who gave it to you?"

"A rich lady and her daughter."

"You are talking in riddles, Ralph Nelson," cried Percy, more than half angry at Ralph's short replies.

"Well, then, since you are so curious, let me tell you that the watch, chain, and charm were presented to me by Miss Julia Carrington and her mother. Now are you satisfied?"

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The shot told. Percy colored to the roots of his reddish hair, and drew down the corners of his mouth.

"Do you mean to tell me that Julia Carrington really gave you that as a present?" he ejaculated.

"Yes."

"Because you stopped their team for them?"

"Yes. They were very thankful to me for what they called my bravery."

"Humph! Anybody could have done as much. That team wasn't much to stop."

"It's a pity you didn't stop them then. You were in the carriage, I understand."

"I was thrown out, or there wouldn't have been any trouble," growled Percy.

"They said you sprang out as soon as you imagined there was danger."

"It isn't so. I'll bet you asked them for the watch—or for some reward," went on the young aristocrat, maliciously.

"Not by a good deal; it is not my style, Percy Paget."

"Humph! A low upstart like you——"

"Stop right there!" cried Ralph.

"I won't! You are——"

"If you don't stop I'll pitch you into the lake!"

"You can't do it, Ralph Nelson. You are nothing but a miserable beggar, not fit for decent folks to associate with. If I had my say——"

Percy got no further. With doubled-up fists Ralph advanced upon him. The rich young bully saw his danger, and, in sudden alarm for his personal safety, began to retreat.

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He did not notice where he was going, and his heel struck upon a board which stuck up above the rest of the flooring of the dock. He tripped backward, and went with a splash into the lake.

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CHAPTER XVI.

PERCY HEARS SOMETHING.

Ralph was not much alarmed when Percy Paget went over and disappeared beneath the waters of the lake. He knew the young aristocrat could swim. Moreover, the end of the rowboat was within easy reach.

Percy let out one yell, and then went under. The yell was not one of fright over his safety, but over the thought that all of his elegant clothing would be wet through and through.

He made a great splashing when he came up, and soon grasped the gunwale of his boat.

"You rascal!" he spluttered. "Just wait till I settle with you!"

"It's your own fault that you went overboard," retorted Ralph. "I sincerely hope that it cures your fiery temper."

"Don't talk to me!"

"All right, I won't," and without another word Ralph walked off, leaving Percy to get out of his predicament as best he could.

The young aristocrat was fearfully angry when he at last drew himself out of the lake. His hat had floated off, and he was compelled to row away from shore for it. By the time he came back Ralph had disappeared.

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"I'll fix him for that!" muttered the young bully, hotly. "I'll fix him, see if I don't!"

It made Percy doubly angry to think that Ralph had been so richly rewarded for stopping the runaway team. Percy thought a good deal of Julia Carrington, and he fondly hoped that the young and beautiful girl regarded him with equal favor. He would have been disagreeably surprised had he known the exact truth.

Percy had rowed over to Eastport, intending to call at Mr. Dunham's sporting goods store for a new fishing-rod with which to go fishing up the lake. But now he was out of the humor for this, and, instead of landing again, he turned back toward Westville.

It was a bright, sunshiny day, and by spreading out his coat on the seats, he soon had it fairly dry. He also pressed the water from his cap and from his vest and trousers as best he could.

"Yes, sir, I'll get square with him, just as sure as my name is Percy Paget," he muttered over and over to himself.

Percy was just about to tie up at one of the little wharves some distance above the bridge, when he espied two young ladies walking along the shore. They were Julia Carrington and her intimate friend, Carrie Baker.

"Good-morning!" cried Percy, raising his cap with what he imagined was a decidedly graceful flourish.

"Good-morning, Mr. Paget," returned Carrie Baker, coldly, while Julia Carrington merely bowed.

"I trust you are quite over the excitement of a couple of mornings ago," went on the rich young man, to Julia.

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"Oh, yes," she returned, shortly.

"I guess I got the worst of that," went on Percy. "I got pitched out in double-quick order, didn't I?"

"Indeed! I fancied you jumped out," rejoined Julia, stiffly.

"What! do you suppose I would jump, and leave you and your mother to your fate?" demanded the young aristocrat, in well-assumed surprise. "Oh, no, Julia! You ought to know me better than that."

"I know you well enough, Mr. Paget," returned the girl. "Good-morning," and she touched her companion on the arm to go.

"Hold on, please!" urged Percy. "It's a splendid morning on the lake. Won't you go out for a row?"

"Thank you, I don't care to."

"Oh, yes, both of you come," urged the young bully.

"No rowing for me," put in Carrie Baker. "You might get a fright and tumble overboard, and leave us to our fate," she added, mischievously. Her friend had told her all the particulars of the incident on the road.

Percy could not help but feel the cut, thick-headed as he was. He tried to frame some fitting reply, but could not, and so rowed away, feeling in a worse humor than ever.

"It's all the fault of that Ralph Nelson," he said to himself. "He has set Julia against me. I'll fix

him, see if I don't!"

In the meantime Ralph had resumed his search for employment throughout Eastport. He could not help thinking of the ludicrous picture Percy had presented while floundering in the water, and he laughed several times over the recollection. [Pg 104]

Ralph visited three stores and two factories without the first signs of a situation. Then he came to a place where all sorts of novelties relating to the stationery trade were turned out.

"I can't give you a job in the factory," said the superintendent, "but I might start you on the road."

"On the road?"

"Yes, to sell to small dealers. You could take several satchels and a trunk, and go from village to village. There is a good bit of money to be made in that way. But you would have to leave a deposit on the goods you took out."

"And supposing I did not sell them?"

"You can return what remains unsold at the end of each trip."

"How much of a deposit would you require?"

"The wholesale price of the goods taken out—say about fifty dollars up."

"And how about the cost of getting around?"

"Well, I allow a dollar a day to experienced agents for expenses. But a green hand would have to pay his own way. I have to protect myself in that way, or otherwise some loafers would just start out to get the dollar, without doing anything for it."

"I suppose that is so," returned Ralph, thoughtfully. "I will think over the matter, and perhaps I'll come back later on."

"All right. I can lend you an outfit, on security, so if you do not make a go of the business you will not be out of pocket a great deal." [Pg 105]

"Thank you," returned the boy.

It was now half-past four, and the list of factories was about exhausted. Three more stores remained. Ralph visited them in quick succession, only to receive the old answer—no new help wanted.

"I'll go back to Mr. Dunham's, and tell him I'll go to work distributing those circulars in the morning," said Ralph to himself. "And after that job is done, if nothing more definite turns up, I'll try peddling those goods to the small stationery and general stores."

He hurried back to the store where sporting goods were sold. As he entered he saw Dock Brady at the back counter.

Brady was busy buying some powder, and did not at first see him. But on turning he nodded pleasantly.

"I wonder what he wants with powder?" thought Ralph. "I did not know surveyors used it."

But then it crossed his mind that perhaps the man used it for firearms when surveying in wild parts of the country, and he did not give the matter a second thought. He waited until Dock Brady had paid for his purchase and left, and then told the storekeeper of his decision.

"All right, Nelson," said Mr. Dunham. "You can go to work at seven o'clock to-morrow morning. Let me see, you live in Westville, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Some of the circulars are to go there, and also back to Hopeville. Supposing you take them with you now, and start out distributing them from your home, instead of coming here? It will save time." [Pg 106]

To this Ralph readily agreed, and, after some few instructions concerning the work to be done, quitted the store with a big package of the circulars under his arm.

Although he had struck no regular employment, he was not as disappointed as he might have been. There was a week's work to do, and then the peddling to try, and that was something.

"I knew it would be difficult to obtain an opening," said Mrs. Nelson, on hearing his story. "Times are hard, and you can be thankful that you have even a little."

"I am thankful, mother," replied Ralph.

"In distributing the circulars you may be able to hear of some opening," she went on. "Although you must not waste Mr. Dunham's time in hunting it up."

"If I waste any time I will make it up to him. I believe in working on the square, no matter what I do," rejoined Ralph, flatly.

"That is right, my son; treat every person with whom you have dealings honestly, and you are

bound to succeed in life."

During the evening Ralph told his mother of Percy Paget's mishap at the dock. She shook her head sadly.

"He is a headstrong boy, and I am sorry he comes so often in your path," she said. "He will be more down on you now than ever."

"I shall watch out for him," returned Ralph. "He shall not cause me more trouble, if I can help it."

CHAPTER XVII.

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A MIDNIGHT CRIME.

On the following morning, bright and early, Ralph started out to distribute Mr. Dunham's circulars. He carried the bulk of them in a canvas bag over his shoulder, and took his lunch with him, in case he was not near home during the noon hour.

After leaving a circular at each of a dozen cottages, he came to the stores.

"Hallo, in a new business, eh?" remarked Uriah Dicks as he placed one of the bills on the latter's front counter.

"Yes, sir."

"I guess that don't pay much," sniffed Uriah.

"It pays better than nothing," laughed Ralph.

"You might better have come here to work for me."

"That is a matter of opinion, Mr. Dicks."

"No, it hain't; it's the truth," grumbled the storekeeper. "How long is that makeshift job goin' to last?"

"A week."

"Exactly! an' then you'll be out again."

"Perhaps something else will turn up in the meantime."

"'Tain't likely. A job in the store would be more respectable than carting around sech trash, which everybody sticks in the fire soon as they get 'em."

The truth was that Uriah was hard pressed for help, his son having gone away on a business trip to Chambersburgh and New York. He had tried to get a boy in vain, all of those in the village knowing his mean ways too well to undertake to work for him.

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"This is honest work, and that's enough for me," said Ralph. "I am not ashamed of it."

"Well, suit yourself. Only I won't hold my offer to you open long," warned Uriah.

"Don't hold it open at all, if you can get any one else," said Ralph, and, fearing he was wasting his employer's time, he hurried off to the next place.

"Seems he don't care for a steady place, nohow!" growled Uriah, sourly. "Some boys don't know what's good for them!"

Ralph visited all of the stores, and even left a number of the circulars in the post office, tying them up on a string where the people coming in for letters might tear one off. Mr. Dunham had told him to do this and had given him a special package for that purpose.

While he was at work the clerk in the office, Henry Bott, came out to see what he was doing.

A little talk ensued regarding the circulars. It appeared that Mr. Hooker did not approve of circulars about the place.

"But you leave them there," said Henry Bott, "and I won't take them down unless he especially orders it."

Ralph was about to leave the post office when he brushed against a man who had just come in. The man was Dock Brady.

The boy was about to say something about meeting once more, but Brady gave him no chance. As soon as he saw he was recognized he turned on his heel and walked away again.

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"He acts mighty queer," thought the boy. "What can make him wish to avoid me?"

Ralph wondered if he would meet Percy on the hill among the fashionable houses. But he saw nothing of the aristocratic bully, although he even left a circular on the Pagets' front piazza.

By noon the boy had gone through the entire town. Then, after taking lunch, he started on foot for Hopeville, a mile away.

The road was uphill, leading directly from the lake shore. But soon Ralph was overtaken by a man in a farm wagon. It was some one he knew fairly well and the man asked him up on the seat.

"Thank you, Mr. Gillup, I wouldn't mind riding, as it is warm," said Ralph.

"Going to Hopeville with them bills?" asked Mr. Gillup, a farmer.

"Yes."

"Got into a new business since you left the bridge."

"For a time. It won't last long."

"It is a pity they took the bridge job from you. I jest told Ben Hooker, the postmaster, so."

"They acted as they thought best, I presume."

"I understand Squire Paget was at the bottom of it. He appears to be very much down on you."

"It's on account of his son Percy. He wouldn't do the right thing, and we had a row."

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"Can't tell me nuthin' about that boy! Didn't I catch him stealin' my choicest pears last summer? If he comes around my place again, I'll fill him full of shot, see if I don't!"

"You had better not, Mr. Gillup! The squire will have you arrested. He won't let any one do the first thing against Percy."

"I ain't afeared of him, Ralph. If he comes around, he'll get the shot, sure pop. But I ain't calkerlatin' he'll come, because I give him warnin', and he's too precious scared o' his hide."

"I can't understand how the squire can put up with Percy's ways," said Ralph, after a pause. "He seems to ride right over his father."

"Squire Paget will rue it one of these days," returned Mr. Gillup, with a grave shake of his head. "Boys as is allowed their own way like that never amount to much."

The conversation helped to pass the time, and almost before they knew it, Hopeville was reached. Ralph thanked the farmer and left the wagon.

After leaving a bill in every store and house in the village, Ralph walked around to the various summer boarding-places. This took time, and ere he had finished it was dark.

"There! I imagine that is one fair day's work done," he said, at last, as he reached his final handful of bills. "I've covered a good many miles since I left home this morning."

He was fortunate enough to catch a ride back with a man who was carting a load of garden truck down to the lake for shipment, and he entered the cottage just as the clock was striking seven.

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"Done for the day, and glad of it, mother!" he cried.

"You are not used to tramping around, Ralph," she returned, as she kissed him.

"That's a fact. I don't believe I would make a very good tramp, anyway," he went on.

"I trust you will never be reduced to that," she shuddered.

"No, I'm going to be something better than a tramp."

"Where have you been?" asked Mrs. Nelson.

Sitting down, Ralph told the story of his day's work. Like the true mother she was, Mrs. Nelson was thoroughly interested in all he had to say.

"To-morrow I shall go to Silver Cove and Rickson's Corners," he said. "And the day after to the hotels up at the head of the lake."

"I shouldn't think it would pay Mr. Dunham to advertise in this way."

"I think it will. Up at Hopeville I met a gentleman who read the circular eagerly. He said he had been hunting for a store where he might buy some toys and games for his children, and he is going to visit Mr. Dunham's place to-morrow. Half-a-dozen good customers would pay for the bills and for the distributing, too."

"If Mr. Dunham gets such an increase in trade, perhaps he will give you a place in the store," suggested Mrs. Nelson.

"That's so. I'll speak to him about it."

During the evening meal, Ralph noticed that his mother did not appear to be very well, and presently he asked her about it.

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"I have a pain in my side, Ralph," she said. "But I imagine it will get better by morning."

The two retired early. Ralph, worn out by his day's travels, soon fell asleep.

It was nearly two o'clock in the morning when Mrs. Nelson called him.

"It is too bad, Ralph," she said. "But I cannot stand it any longer."

"What is it, mother, the pain in your side?" he asked, springing up.

"Yes. It is growing worse, and I must have something for it."

"Shall I go for Dr. Foley?"

"You may go to his house. Tell him what is the trouble, and ask him to give you a plaster or some liniment for it."

"I will. You are not afraid to stay alone while I am gone?"

"Oh, no, only hurry as fast as you can."

"I will," replied Ralph, quickly.

In a few minutes he was in his clothes and on the way. Dr. Foley lived on the other side of the village, and the boy ran in the direction as rapidly as he could.

Ralph had to pass the building in which the post office was located. He was within a hundred feet of the place when suddenly a muffled explosion reached his ears.

"Hallo, what's that?" he cried to himself, and stopped short.

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At first no sound followed the explosion. Then came hasty footsteps, and in the semi-darkness of the early morning he saw two men and a boy run from the post office building and hurry in the direction of the lake.

It was too dark to distinguish more than the forms of the persons and note that they each carried a satchel. In a few seconds they were out of sight.

"Something is wrong," thought Ralph. "What had I best do?"

Half a minute later several men rushed out on the street and toward the post office building. Ralph mingled with the crowd. It was not long before the truth of the matter was revealed. The post office safe had been blown open and robbed.

CHAPTER XVIII.

[Pg 114]

ABOUT A POCKET-KNIFE.

Ralph was as much interested as any one else in the fact that the Westville post office had been robbed. He mingled with the crowd in his eagerness to learn the particulars.

But, being a boy, he was pushed aside by the men, and no attention was paid to the story he had to tell about the two men and the boy he had seen running away.

Then the thought of his mother suffering at home rushed into Ralph's mind. What would she think of his long absence?

"Robbery or no robbery, I must go to the doctor's, and get back home as fast as I can," he said to himself.

And five minutes after the excitement began he was once more on his way to Dr. Foley's residence.

When he reached the physician's place it was several minutes before he could arouse the doctor and make him understand what was wanted. Then it took ten minutes more for the doctor to fix up a plaster and some medicine.

Ralph had lost so much time that, although he wished to learn more of the robbery, he decided to go home by a short cut across the fields instead of by the village streets.

He set out on a run through the darkness. He knew the path well, and did not mind the rough places which had to be crossed or the spots where the bushes grew thickly.

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When he reached the little woods just in front of the house he fancied he heard a footstep near at hand. He stopped short, wondering what it could be.

"There can't be any animals about," he thought. "Perhaps it's Luke Jackson's dog—he comes about here occasionally."

He heard the steps again, coming from toward the cottage. Then, before he could locate them closely, they ceased altogether.

"Tige! Tige!" he called, for that was the name of the dog to which he had referred.

No answer came back, nor did any dog put in an appearance. Ralph waited a few seconds longer,

and then made straight for the house.

He found his mother sitting in the kitchen, nursing her pain as best she could.

"You have been quite long, Ralph," she said. "Or else it is my pain makes the time seem longer."

"I lost a little time at the post office, mother."

"At the post office! Why, what were you doing there at this time of night?"

"The safe has been blown open and robbed. It happened just as I came along."

"You don't say! Did you learn the particulars?"

"I did not wait for that. There was a crowd gathering, and everybody was as excited as could be. But I think I saw the robbers."

"You did?"

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"I saw two men and a boy running, and each had a satchel."

"That was certainly suspicious," returned Mrs. Nelson. She was in too much pain to say more just then, and set about making use of the things Ralph had brought from the doctor's. Fortunately, these did her much good, and inside of half an hour she was considerably better.

"I thought I heard you coming a quarter of an hour before you did," remarked Mrs. Nelson, presently. "I certainly heard somebody walking in the dooryard."

Ralph was interested at once.

"I heard footsteps, too," he said. "Somebody must have been prowling about. Who could it have been?"

"Perhaps the post office robbers," suggested Mrs. Nelson, somewhat nervously.

"I don't see what they would be doing about here," rejoined Ralph, seriously.

"Did they come in this direction?"

"They came down the main street, yes."

Mrs. Nelson sighed deeply. She did not like the idea of any one prowling about her home after dark.

"I am going to take a look around again," said Ralph, noticing her uneasiness. "Perhaps it was a sneak-thief who has stolen the ax or the saw from the woodshed."

Ralph walked outside. It was now growing lighter in the east, for it was after four o'clock in the morning. He looked about the woodshed and the cottage, but everything appeared to be all right. Certainly nothing had been stolen.

The boy was about to return to the kitchen, when he heard several men coming down the road from the village. He halted in the dooryard to see who they were. [Pg 117]

"There is somebody now!" one of the men exclaimed, and Ralph recognized Uriah Dick's voice.

"It is Ralph Nelson himself," replied Bart Haycock, the blacksmith, who was one of the party.

"Hallo, there, Nelson!" called out the third man. It was Jack Rodman, the district constable.

"Hallo, Rodman!" returned the boy, as he ran down to the gate. "Are you after the post office robbers?"

"I guess we are that," put in Uriah Dicks. "An' we ain't far from one of 'em!"

"Hush!" put in Jack Rodman, hastily. "Wait till I have a talk with the boy."

"It ain't no use for to talk," insisted Uriah. "There's the evidence plain enough."

"There may be a mistake," suggested Bart Haycock. "I cannot believe Ralph would do anything wrong."

"Why, what—what do you mean?" stammered the boy, hardly catching the drift of their talk.

"Is this your knife, Ralph?" asked the constable, producing a buck-handle pocketknife.

"Why, yes, it is," returned Ralph, promptly. "Where did you get it?" he went on, in surprise, for he had thought the blade safe in his own pocket.

"Jess where you dropped it a couple of hours ago," returned Uriah Dicks, eagerly. "In the post office."

"The post office? I haven't been in the post office since yesterday."

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"What are you doing out so early in the morning?" asked the constable.

"My mother is sick, and I have been over to Dr. Foley's for medicine for her."

"And you weren't near the post office?"

"Oh, yes, I was only a few hundred feet away when the explosion took place."

"There, didn't I say I saw him in the crowd?" exclaimed Uriah, eagerly.

"What were you doing in the crowd?"

"I wanted to see what was up."

"You didn't stay very long," said the constable, dryly.

"I couldn't. Mother was waiting for me."

"You are quite sure you weren't in the post office just before the explosion occurred?"

"Why, of course I wasn't in the place! What are you driving at?"

"We found the pocketknife in the building—found it not ten feet from the wrecked safe. It had been used, evidently, for ripping open some sealed packages."

"My knife!" ejaculated Ralph.

"Exactly, Ralph," put in Bart Haycock. "But don't think I believe you guilty, my boy," he went on, feelingly.

"Guilty of what?"

"Robbin' the post office!" cried Uriah Dicks. "He is guilty to my way of thinkin'!"

"Robbing the post office!" ejaculated Ralph.

"That's it, Ralph," said the constable, seriously. "It has been discovered that there were two men and a boy, and they think you were the boy."

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"Me!" Ralph could hardly believe his ears. "Oh, Rodman, you don't mean it?"

"He does mean it!" said Uriah, sharply. "Wasn't your knife found there?"

"I must have dropped the knife in the office yesterday when I was hanging up Mr. Dunham's circulars."

"Did you use the knife then?" asked Bart Haycock.

Ralph thought for a moment.

"Yes, I did. The cord was too long, and I remember taking out my knife and cutting it."

"That wouldn't put the knife inside the postmaster's office," said Uriah.

Ralph looked at the knife again. It was really his—with his name carved on the handle. There was no disputing that point.

"I can't understand it," he said. "But I can give you my word of honor that I was not inside the building to-night."

"I guess Benjamin Hooker ain't taking your word for it," grumbled Uriah Dicks. "He is responsible to the Government, an' he's goin' to find out who robbed him, that's what he's goin' to do!"

"You had better come with me," said Jack Rodman. "You can tell your story to Mr. Hooker and to Squire Paget."

"Better make a search around here first," suggested Uriah. "The men that helped do the robbin' may be hiding here. Bart and I can hold Ralph so he don't run away."

CHAPTER XIX.

[Pg 120]

ABOUT THE ROBBERY.

If Ralph had been astonished before, he was doubly so now. He looked from one to another of the men in amazement.

"Do you really think I am one of the thieves?" he gasped.

"It's mighty suspicious," responded Jack Rodman. "You were seen in the neighborhood of the post office to-night, and then this knife business is a clew."

"I don't think Ralph will run away," said Bart Haycock. "I myself think he is innocent."

"Thank you for those words," said the boy. "I am innocent."

"Then you have no objections to our making a search about here," said the constable.

"Not any objection whatever," said Ralph, promptly. "Search where you please."

"I'll help you," said Uriah to the constable.

"Hadn't you better hold me tight?" suggested Ralph, with a sarcasm which was entirely lost on the miserly storekeeper.

"Well, I dunno," hesitated Uriah.

"I will see to it that he doesn't run away," said the blacksmith. "This makes me sick, Ralph," he added, in a low tone. "I know you are as innocent as a babe. That post office was robbed by professionals." [Pg 121]

The constable and Uriah knocked on the cottage door and Mrs. Nelson let them in. She was greatly surprised when Jack Rodman declared his errand.

"Ralph is indeed innocent!" she exclaimed. "You may search the premises all you please."

The constable and Uriah took a lamp, and the search began. Every nook and corner of the cottage was gone over, but nothing that looked like what had been taken—money and registered letters—came to light.

"I hope you are satisfied now," said Mrs. Nelson, in a tone of half-triumph. "Ralph hasn't a grain of dishonesty in him."

"Let's take a look outside," suggested Uriah. "Maybe he knew better than to bring it in the house."

So outside he and the constable went. They looked around under the stoops and around the woodshed.

"Not a thing," murmured Jack Rodman.

Uriah did not reply to this. His sharp eyes had caught sight of a leather bag, half-concealed under a clump of raspberry bushes. He ran forward and dragged the bag out.

"Look here!" he cried. "What did I tell you?"

"A leather valise, true enough!" exclaimed the constable. "But it may be one belonging to the family."

"Would they leave a good valise out under them bushes?" growled Uriah. "Not much!"

"I shouldn't think they would."

"And, besides, this looks like the one Benjamin Hooker kept in the post office for his trips to the Chambersburgh Bank." [Pg 122]

The constable began to examine the bag. Soon he ran across a tag inside, upon which was printed in ink:

Property of Benjamin Hooker,
Postmaster, Westville.

"That settles it," he said, in a harder tone than he had before employed.

"I guess it looks black enough against Ralph Nelson now," said Uriah.

"So it does."

"I positively know nothing of that bag," cried Ralph, when confronted with it. "I never saw it before."

"You will have to go with me," returned Jack Rodman.

"Do you place me under arrest?" ejaculated Ralph.

"Hardly that. But you must go with me to the post office. There we will see what Mr. Hooker has to say. It is his affair—and the Government's."

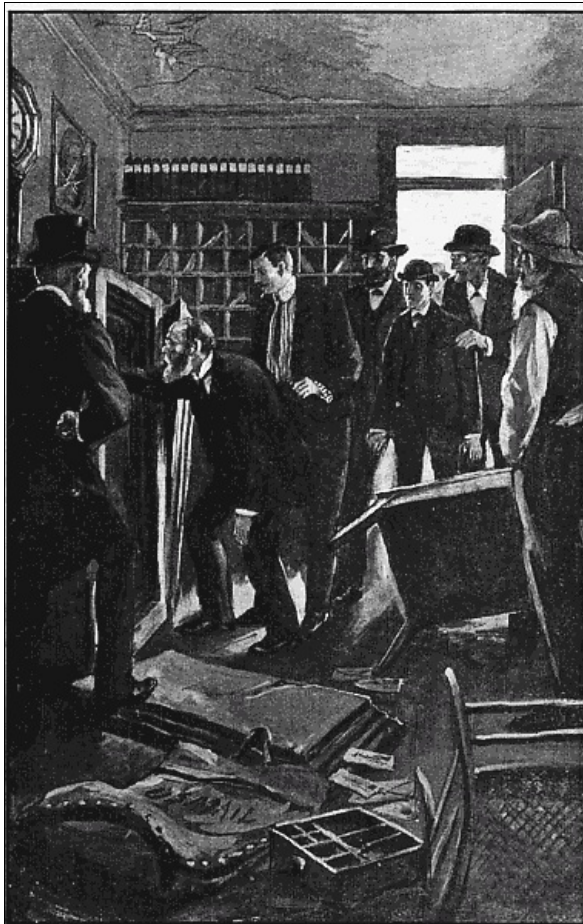
"Oh, Ralph!" cried Mrs. Nelson, in alarm. "They think you are really one of the robbers!"

"I know it, mother. But I am not, and I do not see how they can hold me."

"You won't go along?" asked Uriah, quickly.

"Oh, yes, I will. I am not afraid of the consequences."

It was now drawing toward daylight, and after completing his hastily-made toilet, Ralph accompanied the constable and the others to the Westville post office.



"Here they found all in confusion." See [page 122.](#)

Here they found all in confusion. The safe doors had been blown open with gunpowder, and the explosion had damaged the entire office. The plaster from the ceiling had come down, and this lay over a mass of letters, papers and wrecked furniture.

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In the midst of the mass was the postmaster and his clerk, Henry Bott, doing what they could to straighten matters out and ascertain the exact loss sustained.

Squire Paget was also present. He seemed particularly anxious about the registered letters which had been ready for the morning mail, and groaned aloud when he heard that all of them had disappeared.

"Not one of them left?" he asked, of Henry Bott. "You don't see anything of the one I addressed to New York?"

"No, squire; all have disappeared together," replied the clerk.

"Too bad! That letter was worth a small fortune to me."

"What did it contain?" asked the clerk.

The squire did not answer, but walked away in deep perplexity.

There was an additional excitement when Ralph was brought in by Jack Rodman. Soon it became whispered about that the boy was one of the robbers.

"Who is it?" questioned several.

"Easy to see that. It's Ralph Nelson."

"Say, is he really guilty, do you think?"

"That's what Uriah Dicks says."

"Rather guess Uriah is mistaken."

"And that's what I think. Uriah is down on the boy."

"That's so. Ralph is honest enough."

"Eddy Harmes saw Ralph around the post office."

"Maybe he is mistaken."

"Eddy is willing to swear to it."

"Yes, I saw him," said Eddy Harmes, a teamster.

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"Eddy was driving over to the Eastport market for garden truck."

"Randolph Newell saw him, too," put in another in the crowd. "Saw him not over five minutes after the explosion."

And so the talk ran on, while Ralph was taken inside of the building, there to be examined by Postmaster Hooker and Squire Paget.

The squire grew pale when he heard what Jack Rodman had to say.

"Didn't you find any—any registered letters?" he asked of the constable.

"Only found the valise, sir."

"But that's enough," put in Uriah Dicks. "That and the knife clew."

"Seems to me you are mighty anxious to have the boy found guilty," cried Bart Haycock, angrily. "What makes you so down on the boy?"

"He is down on me because we have stopped trading with him, and because I won't work for him for starvation wages," retorted Ralph. "He is a mean skinflint, and half the village knows it."

"Wha—what!" spluttered Uriah. "This—to me?"

"Yes, to you," cried Ralph, boldly. "Now, don't say any more or it may be the worse for you. I don't see why folks shouldn't believe you were one of the men who robbed the post office."

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"Well, I never!" gasped Uriah. "Ain't he thoroughly bad, though? Next thing he'll be settin' my barn on fire."

"Unless you do it yourself for the insurance," put in a voice in the rear of the crowd, and then there was a laugh that made Uriah furious.

But he knew that many could tell things to his disadvantage should they choose to speak, so he sneaked out of sight without making any reply to his tormentors.

No time was lost by the postmaster and Squire Paget in listening to what Jack Rodman had to say. Then Mr. Hooker turned to Ralph.

"Nelson, what have you to say in answer to this?"

"Simply that I am innocent, Mr. Hooker. I believe that there was a boy mixed up in this affair, but that boy was not myself."

Then Ralph was called on to tell his story, which he did in a straightforward manner. After this he was severely cross-questioned.

"I can't understand about that valise and knife," mused Benjamin Hooker. "If you left the knife in the outer office, how did it get inside?"

"That I cannot answer, sir. Perhaps somebody saw it outside and carried it in."

"There was nobody in the office yesterday except Henry Bott and myself."

"Well, I cannot explain it. But, as I said before, I am innocent."

CHAPTER XX.

[Pg 126]

OUT ON BAIL.

"Did you get a look at the faces of the men and the boy you say you saw?" asked the postmaster, after a pause.

"No, sir. I saw them, but it was too dark to distinguish faces."

"And you say each carried a handbag?"

"Yes, sir."

"Can you prove that you were not around the post office at the time of the explosion?"

"I cannot, sir. I was just coming from home to go to Dr. Foley's, for my mother, who was taken sick during the night."

"And you went to Dr. Foley's afterward?"

"Yes, sir. He will tell you the same thing."

"What of the valise found in your back doorward?"

"I know nothing of it, excepting that both my mother and I fancied we heard somebody around the house just a short while before the constable and the others came."

Postmaster Hooker turned to Squire Paget.

"What do you think of this, squire?" he asked.

"Very queer," responded the squire, briefly. "I think you had better have him held until we can investigate further. Remember, we have not heard from the other parties who went out yet."

"Yes, we'll have to hold you, Nelson," said Mr. Hooker. "It's too bad, if you are innocent, but it can't be helped." [Pg 127]

"Do you mean to say you will lock me up?" exclaimed Ralph, in horror.

"We'll have to—for a while—unless you can furnish satisfactory bail."

"How much bail do you wish?" asked the boy, faintly.

A consultation was held between the postmaster and Squire Paget, and finally bail was fixed at three hundred dollars.

"That will hold him tight enough," whispered the squire. "No one will go bail to that amount for him."

But Squire Paget was mistaken. While Ralph was being taken to the village lockup, a gentleman stepped up. In him Ralph recognized Mr. Leander Carrington, Julia Carrington's father.

"I will go that boy's bail," said the rich man.

"You, Carrington!" cried the squire, in some astonishment.

"Yes."

"You are running a mighty big risk," sniffed the squire.

"I reckon I can stand it," laughed Leander Carrington. "I do not believe the boy is guilty."

"I do."

"Besides, he did my wife and daughter a service that I shall ever remember," went on Mr. Carrington, warmly. "He stopped my team when your son let them run away from him."

The squire did not relish this remark, and he turned away with some saying on his lips to the effect that if a man wanted to make a fool of himself, why, it was a free country. [Pg 128]

"You are very kind, Mr. Carrington," said Ralph to the gentleman. "I did not expect this."

"It's all right. I don't expect you'll run away."

"You can rest assured that I will not."

"So I won't be anything out of pocket. And let me thank you personally for what you did for my wife and daughter. I just heard of it, as I have been away."

The party walked over to Squire Paget's office and here the necessary papers were made out and signed. The squire wished to put off the question of bail until more news should come in, but he had once fixed the amount, and Mr. Carrington would not let him go back on his word.

It was nearly nine o'clock when Ralph returned home and told his mother of all that had happened. A dozen men were out hunting for the robbers, but no news concerning them had yet come in.

"It was kind of Mr. Carrington to go your bail," said Mrs. Nelson.

"It was, indeed, mother. Now, I only hope they catch the robbers. Then I will easily be able to clear myself."

Breakfast was on the table, and the two sat down. While they ate Ralph revolved the question of the robbers in his mind, and set to thinking of one who might have accomplished it.

"By Christopher Columbus!" he cried, suddenly, leaping from his chair in his intense excitement. "He did it, I'll bet a million dollars!" [Pg 129]

"Why, Ralph, what's the matter?" exclaimed Mrs. Nelson, half-believing her son had suddenly gone crazy.

"I know one of the men who robbed the post office, mother—at least, I think I do," he added, cooling down somewhat.

"And who is it?"

"Dock Brady."

"Dock Brady? I never heard of him before."

"He is the man I rescued from the hay barge during the storm."

"Oh, I remember now. But what makes you think he is one of the men?"

"Because I remember he asked me something about the post office while we were out sailing. Then I saw him sneaking about the place when I was putting up circulars there. And that is not all. I saw him buying powder at Mr. Dunham's store."

"That certainly looks suspicious," returned Mrs. Nelson. "It's a pity you didn't think to tell Mr. Hooker of this."

"I was too excited to remember it. I'll go off right after breakfast and let him know."

Ralph was as good as his word. Half an hour later the postmaster was in possession of all the facts. Then a call was made upon Mr. Dunham, who stated that he remembered Dock Brady very well.

It was thought by the constable and the postmaster that Ralph was right, and an extra party was organized to hunt for Dock Brady. [Pg 130]

The information was gained before nightfall that Brady and a man named Gaston had been stopping at a second-rate hotel in Eastport for two days. They had settled their bills the evening before and left, stating that they were going to Chambersburgh on the night boat.

On the following morning the captain of the night boat was seen, and he emphatically denied that he had had any such passengers as Dock Brady and Gaston. He had had only seven men on board, and all of these had been known to him.

"I guess Ralph Nelson tells the truth," said Jack Rodman. "Those men did the job, and now the old Harry only knows where they have gone to."

"But the boy?" said Squire Paget. "Who was the boy that helped them if it wasn't Ralph Nelson?"

"I give it up, squire," said the constable; and so did many others.

There being nothing else to do, Ralph went back to his work of distributing circulars for Mr. Dunham. He spent three days at this, and was then called upon to stand an investigation before the United States postal authorities.

This investigation lasted one whole day, and every one who was interested in the case was present.

Ralph answered all questions clearly and truthfully, and told all he knew concerning Dock Brady.

Whether the Government detectives found any more clews at the post office was not made public, but the next day Ralph was informed that his bail was withdrawn, and that he was absolutely free. [Pg 131]

The reader can well imagine his joy, and also the joy of his mother, who shed tears when the news was brought to her.

"Thank Heaven for it, Ralph!" she said, as she kissed him. "Oh, what a relief now it is all over."

"But it is not over," he said, sturdily. "I want to find out the secret of that valise, and how my pocketknife got into the office, and I shall not rest until I have found out."

Although the boy and his fond parent did not know it, this remark was overheard by a detective who had been sent to the Nelson homestead to spy upon the boy. He at once left the place and informed his superior that the lad was innocent, and to watch further in that direction would be merely a waste of time.

But although the majority of the people in Westville and vicinity believed Ralph innocent, there were some who thought him guilty, and among these was Squire Paget.

And thinking him guilty, the squire was much worried.

"I'd give a good deal to know if that registered letter fell into his hands," he said to himself, one night, as he sat in his library. "Perhaps he got it and is waiting for this affair to blow over before he makes it public."

And then he groaned aloud, and began to pace up and down nervously. It was plain to see that he was more put out than he had been for years. [Pg 132]

"I'll pay the Nelsons a visit to-night," he said, at last. "I'll face the boy and his mother alone, and see what they have to say. I am not going to stand this suspense any longer."

And sneaking out of the house without Percy or the housekeeper becoming aware of it, he set off on a swift walk for the little cottage by the lakeside.

CHAPTER XXI.

SQUIRE PAGET'S VISIT.

It was not a very long walk from Squire Paget's elegant mansion on the hill to the humble cottage

occupied by Mrs. Nelson and Ralph, but the squire made it longer by taking numerous back roads. It was easy to imagine that he wished to be seen by no outsider in making his proposed visit.

It was nearly eight o'clock when he came within sight of the cottage. He saw that the lamp was lit in the sitting-room, and near it sat the widow, reading the latest copy of the county weekly newspaper. Ralph was nowhere in sight.

"The boy must be upstairs," thought the squire. "Most likely he is dressing to go out for the evening," he went on, thinking of his own son's ways. Percy rarely spent an evening at home.

The squire entered the garden by a side gate, and, hurrying to the front door, knocked sharply.

The loud summons startled Mrs. Nelson, and made her break off abruptly in her reading. With the lamp in her hand, she opened the door to see who her late visitor was.

"Good-evening, Mrs. Nelson," said the squire, stiffly.

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"Why, good-evening, squire," she returned, in great surprise.

Never before had the great man condescended to visit her humble abode.

"I called on a little matter of business," he added, rather awkwardly, for he had expected an invitation to enter.

"Indeed! Won't you come in, then?"

"I will."

The squire stepped in, and after closing the door the widow led the way into the parlor. She placed the lamp down, and offered the squire the easiest chair in the room. He threw himself into it with a loud *ahem*, and dropped his silk hat on a stand near by.

"You came on a little matter of business, you say?" she began, hesitatingly, as he remained silent for a minute.

"Yes, I did." He cleared his throat again. "Mrs. Nelson, where is your son Ralph?"

"He has gone to the store on an errand for me. He will be back shortly."

"Mrs. Nelson, do you know that that boy is going to get both himself and you into a good deal of trouble?" went on the great man, pompously.

"Oh, I hope not, squire," she cried, in alarm.

"If he keeps on, he will end in State prison!"

"Why, what has he done now?"

"I do not refer to any new action on his part. I refer to this post office affair."

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Mrs. Nelson breathed easier. For the moment she had feared some new difficulty between Ralph and Percy.

"I thought that matter had passed," she said.

"Passed! I rather imagine not, madam!"

"I mean so far as my son is concerned. They had him up for examination, and he was honorably discharged."

"That committee of post office officials didn't know its business," growled Squire Paget, wrathfully. "It was worse than a lot of old hens getting together."

"That may be your opinion, squire. It is not the opinion of all the folks, however."

"Madam, your son had something to do with that robbery!" ejaculated the great man, springing to his feet. "He cannot fool me, no matter how much he fools the other Westville people."

"Ralph had absolutely nothing to do with it!" returned the widow, warmly. "You might as well say your own son was implicated."

"Nonsense! Does Ralph deny that he was seen on the streets of Westville that night?"

"He went to Dr. Foley's for me. I was sick."

"Was he not seen right in front of the post office directly after the explosion?"

"He had to pass the post office to get to Dr. Foley's."

"Of course," sneered Squire Paget. "But if he was innocent, why did he not remain in the crowd instead of leaving in such a hurry inside of a minute or two?"

"He was afraid I might get worse. Had I not been sick, he would have remained, without a doubt." [Pg 136]

"You don't look very sick now, madam," with another sneer.

"No, thanks to the plaster and the medicine Dr. Foley gave Ralph, I have quite recovered again."

"Humph!" sniffed the great man, and drew up his lips.

"You do not believe that I was sick, do you?"

"It was a very accommodating sickness, to my mind."

"Why, what do you mean, squire?"

"It gave your son a good excuse to be abroad at that time of the night when all honest folks are in bed."

"Squire, your words are nothing less than insult!" cried Mrs. Nelson, stung deeply by his insinuation.

"I am only dealing in facts, madam. I called here to-night to help you keep clear from trouble."

"You are not helping me now," she replied, cuttingly.

At that moment a merry whistle was heard outside, and a light step ascended the back stoop.

"There is Ralph; I will let him in," said Mrs. Nelson, and she left the parlor.

"Squire Paget is here," she said to the boy as he entered the kitchen and deposited a basketful of groceries on the table.

"Squire Paget! What does he want?"

"Come in and see," rejoined Mrs. Nelson, and she led the way into the best room.

"Good-evening, sir," said Ralph, respectfully, but with no degree of warmth.

"We have been waiting for you, young man," said the squire, without returning the salutation.

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"What is it you want of me?"

"He came about that post office affair," put in Mrs. Nelson. "He declares that you are one of the guilty parties."

Instantly Ralph's eyes flashed dangerously. He felt under no obligations to the squire, rich as he was, to swallow any insult.

"So you think I am guilty?" he said, as calmly as he could.

"Yes, I do," returned the great man, bluntly.

"What makes you think so?"

"Because you were around the post office," said Mrs. Nelson. "He even insinuates that my sickness was not real, but was put on so that you might have an excuse for being out at that time of night."

Again Ralph's eyes flashed. It was bad enough to have insults heaped upon his own head, but when they touched his mother—

"Squire Paget, you are no gentleman!" he burst out. "You haven't the least spark of a gentleman in your whole composition!"

"Wha—what—" stammered the village dignitary.

"Oh, Ralph—" began his mother.

"Hush, mother, I will handle him as he deserves. Let me alone."

"You young rascal! What do you mean?" burst out the squire, in a rage.

"I mean just what I say. You may be rich and influential, but you can't come here and insult my mother, understand that!"

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"Why—why, you young vagabond—" spluttered the squire.

For the moment he could not find words to express himself.

"I am no vagabond, Squire Paget, not half as much a one as your son, who drinks, smokes cigarettes, and keeps company with all sorts of questionable village sports."

"Stop! stop!" roared the great man. "How dare you speak to me in this fashion?"

"How dare you insult my mother? If I had an outside witness, I would prosecute you for libel."

The squire winced. This was an attack he had never once dreamed of. He had thought to bulldoze the widow and her son, but he was getting decidedly the worse of the encounter.

"I know what I am talking about," he began, lamely, but Ralph cut him short.

"So do I know what I am talking about, Squire Paget. You are down on us for some reason; I have not yet found out what, but I will some day; and you are doing your best to make endless trouble

for us. But I am not going to stand it. We are poor, but we have our rights as well as the rich."

"You rascal! I'll——"

"I want you to stop calling me a rascal and a vagabond. I might as well call you a wooden-head, a shyster lawyer, and a lot more."

"Oh, Ralph!" pleaded Mrs. Nelson.

"No, mother, he shall not come here to worry and insult you. I will give him fair warning now. If he does it again I'll pitch him out of the house." [Pg 139]

"You—you," spluttered the squire.

He was so mad he could get no further.

"There is the front door," went on the boy, walking forward and opening it. "The best thing you can do is to get on the other side of it just as quick as you can."

The squire was livid. He wanted to say something awful, something that would crush the fearless lad before him—but the words would not come. He caught up his silk hat and waved it fiercely in the face of Ralph and his mother.

"You'll rue this, both of you! Mark my words!" he fairly hissed, and the next moment he had disappeared into the darkness of the night.

CHAPTER XXII.

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RALPH'S NEW SITUATION.

After the squire had vanished Ralph closed the front door and locked it. He returned to the sitting-room to find his mother pale and trembling. Unable to stand, the poor woman had sunk back on the lounge.

"Oh, Ralph!" was all she could say just then.

"Don't look so scared, mother," he replied, soothingly. "He has gone now."

"Oh, my boy, how could you?" she went on, half in reproach, and yet secretly admiring his courage.

"I wouldn't have done it had he not cast a slur on your fair name, mother. I might have stood what he said against me, but I'll never allow any one to say one word against you, never."

And the look he gave her out of his honest eyes showed that he meant what he said.

"But the squire! What will he do now?"

"I don't care what he does. We haven't done wrong, so what can he do?"

"He is influential."

"So is Mr. Carrington, and Bart Haycock, and a half-dozen others that are our friends."

"He evidently feels certain that you had something to with the post office robbery."

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"He is down on us, mother, just as I told him. I wish I knew why," and Ralph grew more calm and more thoughtful as he spoke.

"He was not that way when your father was alive. Your father and he were quite friendly."

"I guess that was only because father did lots of work for him and always accepted the squire's price. He is very miserly, you know, outside of the allowance he makes Percy."

"I cannot imagine what brought him here to-night. I fancied the post office matter was past, so far as you were concerned."

"So did I. I'll tell you what keeps it in the squire's mind," went on Ralph, suddenly. "He lost a valuable registered letter that was in the mail. I heard Henry Bott speak of it."

"One that was coming to him?"

"No, one that he had sent out. It was to go in the morning mail. Henry Bott said the squire wouldn't have lost the letter for a small mint of money."

"What did it contain?"

"He said the squire wouldn't say. It was addressed to some party in New York, I believe."

"It is strange the squire wouldn't mention the contents of the letter. The authorities ought to know if they are to trace it."

"So I should think. But Squire Paget said it was strictly private."

"Maybe he imagines you have his letter," mused Mrs. Nelson. "I suppose I am foolish for thinking so, but I fancied he had something on his mind when he first began to speak of the robbery." [Pg 142]

"You may be right, mother. That would explain why he was so persistent in getting after me."

"You have not seen Percy?"

"No. I understood from Dan Pickley that he had gone to Chambersburgh for a few days on a visit."

"Then the squire cannot be influenced by what his son can say."

"No; this is solely his own doings," returned Ralph.

They talked the matter over at some length, but could arrive at no satisfactory conclusion regarding Squire Paget's bitter enmity. Time must solve the mystery for them.

Ralph had been out distributing circulars for Mr. Dunham. On the following morning he went across the lake to put in his last day at the work.

He had thought the matter over, and finding the sporting goods dealer at leisure, asked him if there was any opening in the store.

"I am sorry to say there is not, Ralph," said Mr. Dunham.

"I am willing to do anything, both in the place and out, if you can only employ me steadily."

"I know that, Ralph. But the truth of the matter is, my brother has asked me to take his son in, just for his board and clothing, and I have consented. I couldn't do less."

"I suppose not, sir."

"If there is an opening, I will let you know. I like you, and I am well satisfied with the way in which you are putting out the hand-bills." [Pg 143]

"You do not know of anybody that needs help?"

The storekeeper thought a moment.

"I do not," he said.

Ralph then told him of the offer he had had to sell novelties on the road to stationery dealers.

"I would not advise you to go into that, Ralph. It is only those who have had considerable experience in the line that make even a fair living by it. The likelihood is that you would make little or nothing for a month or two, perhaps the first year. Get a regular job if you can, at certain wages."

"That is my idea, sir. I must do something."

"I am sorry I cannot help you at present."

In a few minutes more Ralph was on his way to Glen Arbor, as a fishing resort a mile above Eastport was called. He was to put in half a day there, and the balance of the time around Eastport itself. That done, the entire territory for five miles about Mr. Dunham's store would be billed.

Ralph set out in a very thoughtful frame of mind. He was wondering what the following week would bring forth. Would he strike other work, or be forced to remain idle?

Ralph knew a number of fishermen at Glen Arbor, who let out boats to the summer tourists, and while he was among them he met one, Bill Franchard, who gave him some information that was a delightful surprise. [Pg 144]

"Hallo, Ralph Nelson," sang out Franchard, on seeing him. "What brings you here?"

"I'm distributing circulars, Bill," returned the boy. "How is the boating season?"

"Very good just now; better than I expected."

"You haven't got an opening for me?" asked Ralph, quickly.

"Why, ain't you working?"

"This job ends to-day."

"Well, I dunno." Franchard scratched his head. "I do need somebody most every day for the *Minnie*. I take out the *Ariel*, and Bob the *Washington*, and very often I can't let the *Minnie* go out—not when they want a skipper for the sloop."

"I would like the job," replied Ralph, promptly.

"Tell you what I'll do, Ralph. I'll give you a dollar and a half a day for your services every day I can use you, and that will be at least four or five days a week, even if it ain't the whole six."

"I'll take the job, and thank you," said the boy, reflecting that even four days' work would bring in six dollars, as much as he had before earned, while a full week's work would mean nine dollars.

"All right. I know I can trust you with the sloop, even if she is kind of mulish at times."

"She needs constant watching, that's all. When can I come on?"

"Most likely Monday morning. There was a man coming to see me about her this morning. If he— here he comes now."

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Franchard referred to a well dressed gentleman who was walking toward the dock, accompanied by a young gentleman and a young lady.

The gentleman, whose name was Larkins, entered into conversation with Franchard, and then turned to Ralph.

"Do you think you can sail that sloop all right, my lad?"

"I know that I can, sir," returned Ralph, confidently.

"He knows small boats as well as I do, sir," put in Franchard. "His father was a boatman before him, and he used to row when he was only five years old."

"Then I will take the *Minnie* for Monday and Tuesday, sure, and possibly for Wednesday, too," said Mr. Larkins, and the bargain was settled on the spot.

"What time do you wish me on hand?" asked Ralph.

"We will be ready to go out about ten o'clock," was the reply, after the young lady and the young gentleman had been consulted.

"Now you see I couldn't have made that bargain if you hadn't turned up," said Franchard to Ralph, after the party had gone. "I'll be in pocket and so will you."

"And that will be a job that will suit me," laughed Ralph. "For once I am in luck."

He spent a few more minutes with Franchard, in completing arrangements, and then hurried off to make up the time he had lost in the distribution of the circulars.

CHAPTER XXIII.

[Pg 146]

STRANGE PASSENGERS.

Mrs. Nelson was glad to hear that Ralph had procured employment at Glen Arbor. She knew her son understood boats thoroughly, so she was not alarmed over the prospects, even though he had had such a thrilling experience at the time of Dock Brady's rescue.

"It will bring us in money steadily, mother," Ralph said, "and that is what we need."

"I do not know what I would do without you, Ralph," she returned, fondly. "You have been the supporter of the family since your poor father was taken away."

"I've been thinking, mother," went on the son, after a spell of silence. "I have a great mind to use fifteen dollars of that money I have in advertising for those missing property papers."

"Do you think it will do any good?"

"It won't do any harm. I hate to put out the money, but I guess we can stand it now. The boating season will last for two months and more yet."

"Yes, Ralph, and we can save all you earn over six dollars a week. Of course the money is yours ___"

"No more mine than my dear mother's," he interrupted. "I think we ought to save what we can."

"It is best, so that we shall not have to touch what is in the bank should you not strike another situation at once after the boating season closes."

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"But you are willing I should advertise, are you not, mother?"

"Oh, yes, Ralph. We must obtain the papers, if possible. If there is really a boom in Westville real estate this lake shore property ought to become valuable."

"I thought of putting an advertisement in the *County Record*, and also one in the *Chambersburgh Leader*. Those are the principal papers read around here."

"That is so, Ralph, but do you know their rates?"

"I will write and find out."

On Monday night, after a pleasant day on the lake with Mr. Larkins and his young friends, Ralph sat down and wrote the letters. Two days later the replies came back. He found the advertising

rates of both journals quite moderate, and at once sent each an advertisement, to appear in the Lost and Found column several issues.

Mr. Larkins liked the sailing and fishing so well, as well as the efforts of the young skipper to please him and his party, that he hired the sloop for both Wednesday and Thursday additional. Ralph took them up and down Big Silver Lake several times, and also through the draw and down Silver Lake.

On the latter trip Ralph saw Percy Paget, who sat on the bridge, talking earnestly to Dan Pickley. The young aristocrat stared hard at Ralph.

"In a new business, eh?" he sneered, as the sloop ran through the draw.

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Ralph paid no attention to him, and soon they were too far away from the bridge for Percy to attempt to say more.

"Who is that young man?" asked Mr. Larkins, with a considerable show of interest.

"That is Percy Paget, the son of the village squire," returned Ralph.

"A friend of yours?"

"No sir," and there was a decided ring in the boy's tones. "If anything, he is my worst enemy."

"I imagine he is not a very nice youth," went on the gentleman.

"He is not, sir. He is very overbearing, and will do anything, no matter how mean, if he can't have his own way."

"I believe you, Ralph. I met him once before, at a hotel back of Westville, with a chum of his, and he was telling how he was going to get square with somebody who had done something he did not like."

"Did he say what he was going to do?" asked Ralph, with not a little curiosity.

"He said something about smashing some glass."

"He did!" Ralph was all attention now. "And did he mention any names, sir?"

"I did not hear the whole talk. I believe he spoke of scaring the widow to death."

"I thought so!" returned Ralph, bitterly.

"Why, Ralph, do you know anything of this affair?"

"Indeed I do, sir. The widow he spoke of was my mother. Less than two weeks ago he smashed nearly every pane of glass in our cottage!"

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"Really, is it possible!" ejaculated Mr. Larkins. "He must be a thoroughly bad boy."

"He is, sir.

"Did you suspect him?"

"I did. But I had no proofs, and he is rich, while we are poor."

"That doesn't make it right to smash windows," said the young lady, Mr. Larkins' niece.

"I know it, but it makes it harder for one to obtain justice, especially as in this case, when the boy's father is squire."

"I suppose that is so," said Mr. Larkins. "What was the trouble?"

"It's rather a long story, sir, but I'll tell it if you care to listen."

All were more than willing, and Ralph related his trials as the boat sped on its way. He had three close listeners.

"It's too bad!" cried the young lady. "Uncle Will, cannot you help Mr. Nelson recover damages from the Paget boy?"

"I don't know but what I can. Still, my evidence may not be sufficient to prove him guilty."

"I won't bother you to do it," said Ralph. "The glass is in again and paid for, so let it rest. But if he ever tries to do us harm again I'll tell him what I know."

"Do so, and I will give you my address, in case you need my testimony," returned Ralph's patron.

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On Friday Ralph was idle, so far as boating was concerned, but he put in a full day in the vegetable garden attached to the cottage, and, as the place needed attention on account of the many weeds, the day was far from lost. On Saturday he went out with several gentlemen, and they liked his treatment so well that they gave him a dollar extra, which, with what Mr. Larkins had given him and his regular wages, made his income for the week nine dollars and a half.

"That's not bad, is it, mother?" he said, as he placed the money in his parent's lap.

"It is very good, indeed, Ralph," she replied. "At this rate you will be getting rich."

"Hardly," he laughed. "But we will be able to save more than we expected."

On that day the boy procured both of the papers in which they had advertised. There was the notice Ralph had written and so unaccustomed were they to seeing their name in print that they read each notice over several times.

The papers circulated through the district, so many saw the advertisement. They asked both Ralph and his mother numerous questions, to which the two answered briefly but politely. They did not wish to say much until the missing papers were brought to light.

Squire Paget also saw the notice. At first he was both surprised and perplexed. Then a shrewd, cunning look came over his face.

"It's that boy's scheme," he muttered to himself. "Oh, but he is sharp, no doubt of that. Of course, he'll soon obtain the papers, and then——" he gave a long sigh. "My plan to make a fortune will fall to pieces!"

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All day Sunday, when he ought to have been at church, the squire remained in his library scheming and plotting. That night he left on the evening boat for Chambersburgh.

"I'll find somebody to help me get rid of them," he said. "It's the only way."

On Monday Ralph took out a party of young ladies and gentlemen. He got in at seven o'clock and found two rather rough-looking men awaiting his arrival.

"We understand that boat isn't hired for to-morrow," said one of them. "I suppose we can get her, can't we?"

"Yes, sir, if you pay the price."

"You are Ralph Nelson?"

"Yes, sir."

"I heard you was trustworthy. You can be on hand here at eight o'clock to-morrow morning to take me and my friend out," went on the man.

"Yes, sir. Do you want any bait for fishing, sir?"

"No. We'll go for a sail, and possibly for a little hunting up on the island."

"All right, sir. I'll be ready for you."

The men walked off toward a neighboring saloon. Ralph did not much fancy their looks. He made up his mind that he would not have a very agreeable day with them.

But he was on hand promptly in the morning, and after telling Franchard of the engagement, took aboard the two men, who appeared each with a shotgun and a game-bag.

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"Sail to the upper end of the lake, toward the big islands," said the spokesman, and Ralph steered in the direction, never dreaming of what that eventful trip was to bring forth.

CHAPTER XXIV.

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RALPH'S ROUGH EXPERIENCE.

"It's a fine day for sport," remarked Ralph to his two new passengers, as the sloop skimmed along up Keniscot Lake.

"Yes," returned the elder of the two men, whose name was Martin. "It couldn't be better."

"You don't want to try fishing?" suggested the boy, for he knew that a good catch could be had with but little trouble.

"No," put in the younger man, called Toglet. "We want to get up among the islands."

"Very well, sir, I'll have you up there just as fast as the breeze will take us."

There was a slight pause after this, during which both of the men examined their shotguns and other things which they carried.

"You live around here, I suppose?" remarked Martin, at length, looking at Ralph sharply with his coal-black eyes.

"Yes, sir, I live at Westville."

"Lived there long?"

"All my life."

"Then you must know the folks there pretty well?"

"I know nearly everybody, sir."

"Any rich folks live in the town?"

"I don't know what you would call rich," laughed the young boatman. "There are no millionaires, but there are several people quite well-to-do."

"Who are they?"

"There is Mr. Carrington, and the Widow Pennover for two, and then Squire Paget is pretty well fixed, I imagine."

"Squire Paget, eh? Is he the squire of the place?"

"Yes, sir."

"Rules it pretty well, I suppose, if he's rich," and Martin laughed in a style that had little of reality in it.

"I don't know what you mean by that," returned Ralph, in perplexity. "He is squire, that is all. He owns quite a deal of property and he lives on the rent money."

"Pretty nice town," put in Toglet. "I wouldn't mind owning a place there myself. Do you own a place?" he went on, with assumed indifference, while he listened eagerly for the reply.

"Yes, we own a small place close to the Eastport bridge."

"Oh, yes. That's a valuable spot."

"We own more of the land, from the bridge up, but we can't prove our right to it," added Ralph.

"That's too bad." Toglet and Martin exchanged glances. "What seems to be the trouble?" went on the former.

"The papers my father had are missing, and we can do nothing without them."

"You do not know what has become of the papers?"

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"No, sir. We are advertising for them, but so far we have not received any information concerning them."

"But can't you get duplicates from the former owners of the ground?"

"No, sir. The former owners are all dead, and the property fell into my father's hands in a roundabout way. You see, when he got it the land was worth but very little, and no great care was taken of the papers in consequence."

Toglet nodded, as though to indicate he understood. Then, while Ralph was busy starting the sloop on another tack, Toglet leaned over and whispered to his companion:

"That's the bottom of it, Sam."

"I shouldn't wonder," returned Martin, in an equally low tone.

Ralph heard the whisper, but paid no attention to it, thinking the men were discussing something not meant for his ears. He turned over on the new tack, and once more the sloop went along on her course, throwing up the fine spray over the bow.

"We'll be able to get home faster than we are now sailing," remarked Ralph. "We'll have a good wind all the way."

"Unless it dies out," returned Martin, and there was just a trace of nervousness in his tone.

"It won't die out," replied the young boatman, confidently, as he cast his eyes about the sky. "This breeze is good until some time after dark."

"When will we be able to reach the islands?" asked Toglet.

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Ralph looked at watch.

"It is now quarter to ten. We'll reach the lowest of them by eleven o'clock, and the big ones quarter of an hour or so later."

On and on up the lake sped the sloop. The villages on the shores had been left far behind, and now nothing but trees and bushes appeared upon either bank.

"Rather lonely," observed Martin, as he gazed eagerly about. "Not a house in sight."

"No, sir; there is no settlement within a mile and a half of here," returned Ralph.

"Are there any settlements near the islands?"

"No, sir."

"I understand there are a number of great cliffs and ravines about the islands," observed Martin. "I would like to see them."

"I will show you all there are," said Ralph.

At the time he had named they reached several small islands and passed them. Then two of larger proportions appeared in sight.

One of the latter was quite flat, while the other was rocky and mountainous.

"There is the best island for hunting," said Ralph. "We call it Three Top Island, because there are three tops to the mountain on it. Shall we land now?"

"Yes," replied Toglet, after an exchange of glances with Martin.

Ralph at once lowered the jib and took a reef in the mainsail. Then the tiller was thrown over, and in two minutes more they ran into a tiny cove and came to anchor close beside a grassy bank, fringed with meadow brush. [Pg 157]

"Of course you will go with us," said Martin, as he sprang out.

"If you wish," replied Ralph. "Otherwise, I can remain here until your return."

"No; come along, by all means," put in Toglet. "We want you to show us the points of interest, you know—those high cliffs and the big ravines."

"All right, sir. Just wait till I make everything secure."

Ralph at once set to work, and inside of five minutes he was ready to accompany the two men. He had found them quite agreeable on the trip and never for an instant did he dream of the foul plot that they were expecting to carry out.

Ralph offered to carry the game-bags, but this offer was declined. So, with nothing in his hands but a thin stick he had picked up on the bank, he led the way away from the sloop and up among the rocks that formed the base of the mountain of which the island was composed.

"It's the best kind of a place for the work," whispered Martin to Toglet, as they trudged on behind Ralph. "Not a soul will guess the truth after the deed is done."

"Don't let the boy suspect, or he will be on his guard," was the low reply. "He looks as if he could show fight if he wished."

"We'll take him unawares, and then——"

"There's a good shot!" cried Ralph, pointing to a number of wild water fowls, which just then arose from a hollow close by. [Pg 158]

He fully expected one or the other of the men to take hasty aim and fire, but neither did so.

"We'll wait for something better," said Martin.

"We'll take a look around before we begin to waste our powder," put in Toglet.

In truth, neither of them had come to do any shooting. They were afraid that a shot might attract attention should other sportsmen be in the vicinity.

Ralph was rather disappointed. Had he had a gun he could easily have brought down one or more of the fowls. He considered it a most excellent chance lost—a chance that might not occur again that day.

Still it was not his place to pass any remark concerning the decision of his two passengers, so he remained silent, and plodded along over the rocks and through the brush, until, half an hour later, he came out on a grassy plateau overlooking a magnificent stretch of water.

"Here we are at the top of one end of the mountain," he said. "You can see a good many miles from here."

"That's so," said Martin. "What is below at the base of this cliff?"

"Rocks and water," returned Toglet, as he peered over. "It must be a hundred feet to the bottom."

"It is more than that," replied Ralph.

Martin and Toglet exchanged glances, and both nodded. This was as good a place as any for the accomplishment of their purpose. [Pg 159]

"Hallo! what's that?" suddenly cried Martin, pointing across the lake.

Ralph looked in the direction, stepping close to the edge of the cliff as he did so.

"I don't see anything unusual——" he began.

He got no further. The two men pushed up against him roughly, and before he could save himself he was hurled into space. A second later he disappeared from the sight of the two men.

"He's gone!" cried Martin. "Easily done, eh, Tom?"

"It was, Sam. Let us look to make sure he went down."

They peered over the edge of the cliff. Nothing was to be seen of Ralph.

"There's his cap down on the rocks by the water," said Toglet. "He has gone clean out of sight. Come on away; the job is finished."

And without another word, these two villains in crime hurried from the spot down to the other side of the island, where the sloop had been left.

CHAPTER XXV.

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SQUIRE PAGET'S NEWS.

Martin and Toglet were very white when they reached the sloop, and the younger man trembled from head to foot.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Martin, with a forced laugh, as they got on board.

"No—nothing," stammered Toglet.

"You've got a bad case of the shakes."

"Well, to tell the truth, that's the worst job I ever tackled, although I've accomplished many that were tough enough."

"Humph! you'll get over that feeling when you are as old as I am," replied Martin, heartlessly. "What's the boy to us?"

"Oh, I ain't squealing. Only he looked so innocent——"

"Bah! don't give me any more of that stuff. Here, have something to brace you up."

Martin pulled a black flask from his pocket and thrust it forward. Toglet drank copiously, as if to drown out the memory of what had occurred. Martin followed with an equally liberal dose.

"It was done easier than I at first imagined it would be," said the latter. "Had he suspected the least thing we would have had a nasty struggle with him."

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The anchor was hoisted and the sails set, and in a few minutes the sloop had left the island and was on her way down the lake.

"We won't go near Glen Arbor," said Martin. "Let them find out about the affair in the natural way. If we report it we may get ourselves into trouble."

"But the squire——" began Toglet.

"That's none of our affair. We'll land near Westville, and watch our chance to report."

It was about four o'clock when the two rascals beached the sloop in an out-of-the-way spot just north of the village in which Ralph lived. No one had seen their coming, and as quickly as they could they left the craft and then sent her adrift.

Both of the men had worn wigs, and these they now cast aside, altering their appearance slightly. Their guns and game-bags were hidden behind a pile of decayed logs and then they sneaked through the woods toward the hill at the extremity of Westville.

They waited about Squire Paget's house for nearly an hour and at last saw that gentleman come out and start up the country road which led away from the village center.

Presently the squire came to an old, disused cottage, which years previous had been used as a road tavern. Here he halted, and the two men at once joined him.

"It's done, squire," said Martin.

"Hush! not here," cried Paget, in a scared voice. "Come inside."

He took from his pocket a key and with it unlocked the cottage door. The two men passed inside, and the squire of Westville immediately followed.

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"Take a look about before you say anything," he said. "We must not be overheard."

Martin's lip curled, but he did as requested, and Toglet did the same. Not a soul but themselves was anywhere in sight.

"We're all right, squire," said Martin. "So we'll get to business without delay."

"Exactly, exactly! And did you—is he—is he gone?" asked Squire Paget, breathing hard.

"Yes, he's gone," returned Martin, boldly. "He went over the top of the big cliff, and that is the end of him."

"You are sure it was the right boy?"

"Yes, he said his name was Ralph Nelson," put in Toglet.

"You saw him go—go down all right?" asked the squire, hesitatingly. "There was no failure—"

"Not a bit of it," said Martin. "He went over into the rocks below and into the water. He gave one scream, and that was all," he added, dramatically.

The squire shuddered. It must really be true. Ralph Nelson was dead!

"Very good," he said, in a hoarse voice. "Here is the hundred dollars each I promised you. You shall have the other five hundred when—the body is found."

"All right, but you'll have to do the finding," said Martin. "It's at the bottom of the big cliff on the west side of Three Top Island. His cap is among the rocks close by."

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"And his boat—"

"We sent that adrift. If we are traced up we want to shield ourselves by saying we went off hunting and when we got back could find nothing of him and the boat, and had to get a stranger to take us ashore."

"Ah, I see. Very good."

"Now we want to be going. We'll look for you in Chambersburgh inside of a week. Don't fail us if you value your secret."

"I will be on hand."

"You ought to pay us more than five hundred," put in Toglet. "You are going to make a pile out of this."

"How do you know anything about what I am going to make?" asked the squire, in great surprise.

"The boy told us about his property and the papers that were missing."

"I know nothing of that."

"Humph! We can put two and two together. You'll make a fortune out of that land, no doubt."

"I know nothing of that land you mention."

"Maybe you don't."

"And I haven't his missing papers," went on Squire Paget, and for once he spoke the truth.

"Then what's your aim in getting him out of the way?"

"That is my affair."

"Of course it is," broke in Martin. "But you might make it a bit more than five hundred."

"I am poor, gentlemen. I had to do what has been done to keep me from ruin."

Both of the rascals laughed at his words, but they could get nothing more out of the squire, and a few minutes later, after a little more conversation concerning poor Ralph, they separated. The two villains who had pushed the boy over the cliff went back for their guns and game-bags, and then set out for a town at the north of the lake.

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Squire Paget watched them out of sight, and then hurried back to his mansion. Somehow, he did not feel safe until he had locked himself in his library.

"At last the boy is out of the way," he murmured, to himself, as he sank into an easy-chair. "It was accomplished much easier than I imagined it would be, thanks to my intimate knowledge of the character of that rascal Martin, and Toglet, his tool. Now what is to be done next? It will not do to get the widow out of the way—that would excite suspicion. I had better wait and watch her closely. Maybe she'll be unable to hold her cottage with her son no longer at hand to earn enough to keep them, and she'll be forced to sell out at a low figure, and then—by Jove!" he exclaimed, suddenly. "That's a grand idea! It's a wonder I didn't think of it before!"

The new idea made the squire walk up and down the library rapidly. He was a great schemer and could evolve a whole transaction, no matter how intricate, much more rapidly than most men.

"I'll do it!" he said, to himself. "I'll offer her a good price for the cottage and the land, and when the papers are drawn up for her signature, I'll take good care that all the other land is included in the plot mentioned. I can make the papers so confusing that she won't know the difference, and she'll sign them without knowing their real contents. Glorious!"

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Then came a knock on the door.

"Dinner is ready, sir," said the housekeeper.

"Very well; I will be there in a few minutes," he returned.

Then he gazed out of the window thoughtfully.

"But what if those papers should turn up? I must watch out for them, and get the land in my name before that occurs—if it ever does occur. What a fool I was to trust them in the mails to have them certified to by that old woman in New York!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

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ON THE ISLAND.

Meanwhile, what of poor Ralph? Was it true that he had been dashed to his death over the high cliff?

Happily, it was not true. Yet, for a long while after he was pushed over, the boy knew nothing of what had happened.

He went down and down, clutching vainly at rocks and bushes as he passed. Then his head struck a stone and he was knocked senseless.

How long he remained in this state he did not know. When he came to all was dark around him and silent.

Putting his hand to his face he found it covered with blood. There was a large bruise on his left temple, and his head ached as it never had before.

"Where am I?" was his first thought. "What has hap— Oh!"

With something akin to a shock he remembered the truth—how he had stood on the edge of the cliff, and how Martin and Toglet had bumped up against him and shoved him over.

"I believe they did it on purpose," he thought. "The villains! What was their object?"

By the darkness Ralph knew it was night, but what time of night he could not tell. Luckily, he had not worn his new watch. The old one was battered, and had stopped.

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Presently the bruised and bewildered boy was able to take note of his surroundings, and then he shuddered to think how narrowly he had escaped death.

He had caught in a small tree which grew half way down the side of the cliff, and his head struck on a stone resting between two of the limbs of the tree. Below him was a dark space many feet in depth, above him was a projecting wall of the cliff which hid the top from view.

What to do he did not know. He wished to get either to the top or the bottom of the wall as soon as possible, but he did not dare make the effort in his feeble condition and without the aid of daylight.

"I must remain here until dawn," he concluded. "I can do nothing until I can see my way."

To prevent himself from falling should he grow faint or doze off, he tied himself to the limbs of the tree with several bits of cord he happened to have in his pocket.

Hour after hour went by, and he sat there, alternately nursing his wounds and clutching his aching head, and wondering why the two men had treated him so cruelly. Never once did he suspect that they were the hirelings of Squire Paget.

"They did not rob me," he said to himself, after he had searched his pockets and found his money and other valuables safe. "And yet I am positive that it was not an accident."

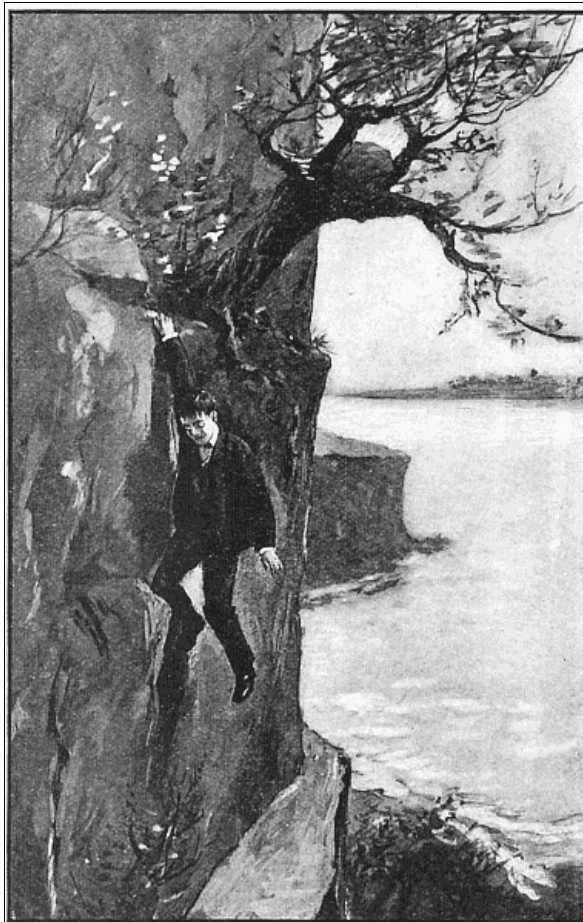
At last the morning dawned. With the first rays of light Ralph looked about for some manner of releasing himself from his perilous position.

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To climb up to the top of the cliff was impossible. There was nothing but the bare rocks to clutch, and they would afford no hold worth considering.

Therefore, he must go down; but such a course was nearly as hazardous.

With great care he lowered himself to the cleft from which the tree that had saved his life sprung. Having gained this, he scrambled down along a fringe of brush. Then it was necessary to drop a distance of ten feet, and crawl on hands and knees around a sharp corner to where a slope of dirt led to the bottom. On the dirt he slipped, and he could not stop himself until he had rolled into a clump of bushes directly at the base of the cliff.



"It was necessary to drop a distance of ten feet." See [page 168](#).

Still more bruised, he picked himself up with a thankful feeling. At last he was free from the danger which had hung over him so grimly. He breathed a long sigh of relief.

Water was at his feet and his first task was to bathe his face and hands. Then he bound his handkerchief over his bruised temple. He looked about for his cap, and was not long in finding it.

"I suppose those fellows have left the island, and if so they have doubtless taken the sloop," he thought, dismally. "I'll make certain, though, and be on my guard while I am doing it."

He walked slowly and painfully to the cove where the boat had been left, but, as we already know, it was gone.

"They have taken themselves off and left me behind for dead," Ralph said to himself. "Well, thank fortune, I am alive!" [Pg 169]

The boy was in a sad situation. He was without food and with no means of communication with the mainland on either side of the lake.

"I must see if I can't signal some passing boat," he thought. "It is impossible to swim to the shore, especially now when I feel as weak as a rag."

Ralph had just struck out for the opposite side of the island, that upon which all of the regular lake boats passed, when the report of a gun reached his ears.

It came from some distance to the north, and was soon followed by several other shots.

He wondered if it could be Martin and Toglet, or some sportsmen. Determined to find out, he set out as rapidly as he could in the direction of the sound.

After passing through a patch of woods and over a hill of rough stones, he came to a thicket of blueberry bushes. As he entered it there came another shot, not a hundred feet away.

In a moment more the boy espied a sportsman, dressed in a regular hunting garb.

"Hallo, there!" he called out.

"Hallo, boy!" returned the man, cheerily. "Out hunting, like myself?"

"No, sir," replied Ralph. "Yes, I am, too," he added, with a faint smile—"I am hunting for help."

"Help?" The sportsman put down his gun. "Why, what's the matter with your head?" [Pg 170]

"I've had a bad tumble. Two men pushed me over the cliff on the other side of the island."

"The dickens you say! Pushed you over?"

"Yes, sir."

"What for? Did they rob you?"

"No, sir."

"Oh, then it was an accident, perhaps?"

"I don't think so. I don't see how it could have been accidental."

"Well, you arouse my curiosity. Tell me your story—or, you said you wanted help. What can I do for you?"

"If you have a boat you can put me ashore. The two men took my boat."

"Then they robbed you after all."

"But they didn't go through my pockets," returned Ralph.

Sitting down on a soft knoll of grass, the boy told his story to Carter Franklin, for such was the sportsman's name. The latter listened with interest.

"Certainly an odd occurrence, to say the least, my young friend. What could have been the object of the two villains?"

"I cannot say, sir."

"It is impossible to imagine they wished to murder you merely for your boat."

"That is true, sir."

"Depend upon it, they were up to something more. It may be that they were hired to do the deed."

Ralph started.

"That may be!" he cried.

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"Have you any great enemies?"

"I have enemies, but none so bad as to wish to take my life," returned Ralph, and he thought he told the truth.

"Humph! Well, it's strange. I suppose you would like to be set ashore as soon as possible?"

"Yes, sir."

"You say you came from Glen Arbor? I have only a rowboat at hand——"

"You can land me anywhere," interrupted Ralph. "I can easily tramp it or catch a ride back to where I belong."

"Very well; follow me."

The boy followed the sportsman down the hill to the shore. Here lay a trim-looking boat with a pair of oars on the seats. Both at once sprang in. Ralph was about to take up the blades, but the man stopped him.

"You are too broke up to row," he said. "Sit down and take it easy."

"You are very kind, sir."

"Don't mention it. I only trust you are able to catch those rascals and bring them to justice."

The main shore was soon gained, at a point about six miles above Glen Arbor, and Ralph sprang out. He thanked Carter Franklin again for his kindness, and then started off for home, thinking soon to be able to tell his mother and his friends his strange tale and start out a party to search for his assailants. He did not know that he was destined to have many strange adventures ere he should reach Westville again.

CHAPTER XXVII.

[Pg 172]

THE MEETING IN THE WOODS.

Ralph was so sore and stiff from his fall that he walked very slowly toward Westville. It seemed to him that he ached in every joint, and it was not long before he sought a soft grassy bank upon which to rest.

"If only somebody would come along with a wagon," he thought, as he gazed up and down the rather rough woodland road. "I would willingly pay a half-dollar for a lift, as much as I need my money."

The boy was much exercised over his mother. He knew that she would be greatly worried over his prolonged absence. Never before had he remained away from home over night.

No wagon or any other vehicle appeared, and Ralph was forced to resume his journey on foot, dragging his tired and bruised body along as best he could.

Presently he came to a tiny stream that flowed into Big Silver Lake. Here he stopped again, not only to rest, but also to bathe his temples and obtain a drink, for the water was both pure and cold.

He could not help but think of the strange manner in which he had been attacked. What had been the purpose of Martin and Toglet?

"If I did not know better, I would be almost forced to believe it was accidental," he thought. "But in that case they would have come to my assistance, instead of taking the sloop and hurrying off with her."

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It was so comfortable a spot at the brook that Ralph rested there longer than he had originally intended. But at last he arose and moved on, thankful that he had accomplished at least one-third of the distance home.

The road now left the vicinity of the lake and led up into the woods and across several deep ravines. It also crossed the railroad track, for there was a spur of the main line which came down to Glen Arbor—this spur being the only railroad in the vicinity.

Ralph had just crossed the tracks, when happening to glance toward an old shed in the vicinity, he saw something which filled him with astonishment. Emerging from the place were two men, and they were Martin and Toglet!

At first the boy could scarcely credit his senses. But a second look convinced him that he was not mistaken. They were his two assailants, true enough.

Ralph stood still, not knowing whether to advance or retreat. Before he could decide the point, Martin and Toglet, who had spent the night in the shanty after leaving Squire Paget, discovered him.

Toglet gave a cry of terror, thinking he was looking upon a ghost. Martin also uttered a yell, but it was more of astonishment than aught else.

"Look! look!" shrieked Toglet.

And he pointed with his long finger.

"It's the boy, as I'm a sinner!" burst out Martin.

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"It's his ghost! Oh, why did I——"

"Shut up! It's the boy, I tell you! He must have escaped in some miraculous manner. See, his forehead is bound up," went on Martin.

"But how could he escape?" asked Toglet, faintly.

"That is more than I can answer. But there he is, and all our work was for nothing," growled Martin.

"Never mind; we've got the two hundred," began his younger companion.

"But we haven't the five hundred additional," grumbled Martin. "Let us go after him."

Martin strode forward, and shaking in every limb, Toglet followed.

Each of the rascals carried his gun, and as they advanced upon him, Ralph thought it best to retreat. There was no telling what they would do. For all he knew, they might try to finish their dastardly work.

"Hi! hi! stop!" called out Martin, as he began to run.

"What do you want?" called back Ralph.

"I want to talk to you. What are you afraid of?"

"You know perfectly well," returned Ralph.

"Ain't you going to stop?"

"Not just now. Come up to the railroad station and do the talking."

"Don't you do it," put in Toglet, in alarm. "He'll have us arrested."

"Stop where you are, or it will be the worse for you," went on Martin.

He raised his gun and pointed it at Ralph's head.

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Fearful that the villain would shoot him, Ralph left the road and dodged behind a clump of trees.

There was no longer the slightest doubt in the boy's mind concerning the two men. They had meant to take his life, and they were still disposed to carry out their intention.

"He has gone into the woods," cried Toglet. "Why not let him go?"

"You fool! If he gets away he'll have the officers of the law on our track in no time!" ejaculated Martin. "We must catch him by all means!"

He sprang on ahead, and was soon making after the boy as rapidly as his long legs would carry him.

Ralph heard him coming, and once more he moved away. He left the patch of wood, and a second later came out on the railroad tracks.

As he did so, he heard a locomotive whistle, and a locomotive rolled past, followed by a long line of empty freight cars.

"Now I'll catch him!" cried Martin to Toglet. "He can't cross the tracks while the cars are passing."

He rushed toward Ralph, who did not know which way to turn. Up the track a big cut in the rocks blocked his way, and down was a deep ravine.

Just then, for some reason apparent to the engineer, the long train slackened its speed for a moment. A freight car came to a halt directly in front of Ralph, the big side doors wide open.

Hardly giving the matter a second thought, the boy sprang up into the car, intending to let himself out on the other side. [Pg 176]

But before he could accomplish his purpose the train gave a jerk, and in a second more was on its way on a down grade at such a rate of speed that to leap off would have been highly dangerous.

Ralph was exhausted by his run, and when the car started off he could hardly stand. He clutched at the side and staggered to one end, and then sank down in a heap in the corner. The excitement had been too much for him in his weak state, and he had fainted.

When he came to his senses all was dark around him. A strange whirr sounded in his ears, coming from the car wheels, and telling him that the car was still in motion.

He arose to his feet, and then made the discovery that although it was dark in the car, it was daylight outside. The reason was plain—both of the doors on either side had been closed during the time that he had been lying in the corner.

Feeling his way along the side of the empty car he at length reached one of the doors only to find it locked. He crossed over to the other side to find a similar condition of affairs. He was a prisoner in the freight car and riding he knew not where.

"Well, this is too bad!" he murmured to himself, as, too weak to stand longer, he sank down on the floor. "I wonder how long I have been riding?"

This was a question just then impossible to answer, but he made up his mind that he had been riding for some little time, possibly half an hour or more. [Pg 177]

There was satisfaction, however, in the thought that he had escaped from Martin and Toglet. It was not likely that they had been able to board the train, even if inclined to do so, which was decidedly doubtful.

A half-hour went by, and still the car rattled on, up grade and down, without once slacking its speed.

"I'd like to know if we're not going to stop pretty soon," Ralph murmured to himself.

He was getting thirsty, and knew it would not be long before he would need both food and drink.

Getting up once more he began to kick upon one of the doors with the heel of his shoe. He kicked as loudly and as long as he could, but no one came to answer his summons.

At the end of another hour Ralph began to grow alarmed. The train had stopped once, but kicking on the door and shouting had brought no one to his aid. It looked as if he must remain in the car until the journey's end.

"We must be miles away from Westville by this time," he thought. "I would like to know where we are going, east, west, north, or south? Perhaps they'll land me in some out-of-the-way place that I never even heard of before."

Another hour passed, and Ralph began to grow sleepy. He laid down, and, making a pillow of some loose hay in the bottom of the car, began to take it easy. In ten minutes more he was sound asleep. [Pg 178]

His awakening was a rude one. Somebody touched him in the side with the toe of a boot, and the light of a smoky lantern was flashed into his face.

"Get out of here, you tramp!" cried a rough voice. "Get out of here at once, before I turn you over to the police!"

"Who—what——" stammered Ralph, rising to his feet.

But before he could say more he was jerked backward and sent flying out-of the car into the darkness.

"Now get out of the freight yard," said the man who had ejected him so forcibly. "Skip, do you hear?"

And he raised a stick he carried so threateningly that Ralph was glad to retreat.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

[Pg 179]

RALPH IN THE CITY.

Hardly knowing what to make of such rough and unexpected treatment, Ralph staggered toward a large gateway close at hand. He passed through and found himself on a narrow and dirty street, at the upper end of which were a number of tenement houses and saloons.

"Where in the world am I?" he murmured to himself, as he passed his hand over his forehead, from which the bandage had slipped. "What place can this be?"

The cool night air braced the boy up, and soon he felt stronger. But he was very thirsty, and was willing enough to stop at a nearby street fountain for a drink.

He heard a distant bell strike twice, and he knew it must be two o'clock in the morning. His involuntary ride had lasted over ten or twelve hours at least—the length depending upon the time spent in the freight yard before disturbed by the night watchman.

The street was practically deserted, saving for several men who were staggering along under the influence of liquor. All the stores were closed.

"I must find some place to stay for the rest of the night, no matter what place I am in," thought Ralph, and he walked on for a dozen blocks or more, looking for a hotel or lodging-house.

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At last he came to a place that was still partly open. Over the doorway was the sign in gold letters:

ROYAL CROWN HOTEL,
Beds, 25 Cents per Night.

"Certainly not a very expensive place," thought Ralph, and he peered inside to where a sleepy clerk sat dozing in a chair beside the desk.

Entering, he aroused the clerk, and asked if he could obtain accommodations.

"Certainly," was the prompt reply. "Single room, one dollar; two beds, seventy-five cents; six beds, a quarter. Which will you have?"

"Any place will do for me, so long as it's clean," returned the boy, who was not inclined to be wasteful of his limited capital. The total amount in his pockets was not over six dollars, part of which belonged to the boatman for whom he worked.

"All our beds are clean," said the clerk, sharply. "Pay in advance, please."

Ralph brought out a quarter and passed it over.

"Can I get a bite to eat anywhere before I go to bed?" he asked.

"There's an all-night lunchroom on the corner above."

"Thank you. I'll get something, for I have had no supper. I came in on a train and went to sleep. I don't even know what place this is," Ralph went on.

"Don't, eh? This is Jersey City."

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Jersey City! Could it be possible! Then he had indeed taken a long trip.

Ralph knew that Jersey City lay just across the river from New York. A short ride would take him into the great metropolis. Despite the fact that he wished himself safe at home, the thought of seeing New York filled him with pleasure.

"I must send word to mother that I am safe and tell her all of what has happened, and then spend a day or two in New York before I go back," he said to himself. "I may not get the chance of seeing the city again for a long time."

Ralph found the all-night lunchroom without much trouble, and entering, he sat down at one of the numerous tables. He was a well-read boy, and therefore did not appear as "green" as he might otherwise have done.

A waiter soon came to serve him.

"What will you have?" he asked.

"What have you got?"

"All kinds of dairy dishes, tea, coffee, and oysters."

"I'll take an oyster stew."

"Anything else?"

"I guess not."

The stew was soon brought. It was a fairly good one, and the hungry boy ate it with a great relish, consuming all of the crackers that went with it.

While he was eating, a short, stout man, with his arm done up in a sling, entered the place, and after gazing around sharply, came and sat down close to Ralph.

"How is the stew, pretty good?" he asked.

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"I think so," returned the boy.

"All right, then. Waiter, an oyster stew."

While he was eating his stew the man began to converse with Ralph. He said his name was Jackson Walters, and that he had just come into the city from Toledo, Ohio.

"And I feel mighty strange," he added. "Do you know the city pretty well?"

"Not at all. I just got in myself," said Ralph.

"Indeed! Then we are in the same boat. Stopping with friends or at a hotel?"

"I am going to stop at a hotel over night."

This reply seemed to please Jackson Walters, and he drew up closer, hurrying to finish his stew at the same time.

"Good enough. Perhaps we can stop together. I feel rather lonely here," he said.

"I am afraid my hotel wouldn't be good enough for you," replied Ralph, honestly. "I didn't want to waste my money, and so chose a cheap place."

"Well, I want something cheap, too," said Jackson Walters. He was more pleased than ever over the idea that Ralph had money even if he did not care to spend it.

"Where is the hotel?"

"Just down the street a step. I will show you if you wish it."

"Let us take a room together," suggested Jackson Walters, as they left the restaurant. "I hate to go in among perfect strangers, don't you?"

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"Yes, but it couldn't be helped. I took a quarter bed, and there are six in a room."

"Humph! six! That's too many. How much do they want for a room for two?"

"Seventy-five cents each."

"Then I'll tell you what I'll do—I'll pay the dollar if you'll pay the fifty cents. Those rooms with six beds in are vile."

Ralph hesitated a moment, and then said he was agreeable. He, too, did not imagine, after some reflection, that the bed for a quarter of a dollar could be very good.

They soon reached the hotel, and Jackson Walters explained the new arrangement to the clerk. Ralph paid over another twenty-five cents, and his new friend the dollar, and then a boy was called to conduct them to room No. 96, on the third floor.

"Call me at half-past seven," said Jackson Walters. "I don't know when you want to get up," he said to Ralph.

"That will suit me, sir," was the boy's reply.

He usually arose at an earlier hour, but thought he deserved a longer rest, considering what he had passed through.

The boy led them up two flights of narrow stairs, and showed them the room, at the same time lighting the gas. He had brought a pitcher of water with him, and placing this on the washstand, he left, closing the door behind him.

The room was plainly but neatly furnished, and although the bed was scratched and old-fashioned, it was clean. It did not take Ralph long to undress and get under the covers.

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"Do you sleep with a light?" asked Jackson Walters. "I never do."

"Nor I."

So the gas was put out, and a moment later Ralph's companion retired also. In a few minutes he began to breathe heavily, as though in the soundest of slumbers.

But this was all sham. He was far from being asleep, as the sequel soon showed.

Ten minutes later Ralph fell asleep, to dream of home and all that had been left behind.

In a few minutes after this, Jackson Walters crawled from the bed, and began to don his clothing silently, but in great haste. He put on his stockings, but he placed his shoes in his coat pockets.

This done, he took up Ralph's clothing from where it lay on a chair. With a dexterity worthy of a better cause, he went through the pockets, searching for everything of value.

His nefarious task was soon accomplished. Ralph slept on unconscious, and did not awaken when Jackson Walters opened the door and glided out.

The thief was soon below. The clerk dozed away in the office, and in his stocking feet the man had no difficulty in passing out of the building without being noticed.

Once on the pavement he slipped on his shoes.

"Not much of a haul, but a good deal better than nothing," he chuckled to himself, and disappeared down the street which led toward the ferries.

CHAPTER XXIX.

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PENILESS.

It was daylight when Ralph awakened from what had been an unusually sound sleep. He sat up and rubbed his eyes, wondering for the moment where he was. Then the recollection of what had occurred flashed over his mind. He looked beside him, and saw that Jackson Walters had gone.

"He must have dressed and left me to sleep it out," he thought. "I wonder what time—hallo! what does that mean?"

Ralph had espied his clothing in a heap on the floor, most of the pockets inside out. With a strange fear he leaped from the bed and made a hasty examination. It was only too true—he had been robbed.

"That fellow was nothing but a sharper!" he ejaculated to himself. "What a fool I was to be taken in by his smooth tongue! He took me for a greeny from the country, and he was right."

Ralph did not know enough to ring for the proprietor of the hotel and acquaint him with the facts in the case. He scrambled into his clothing as best he could, and washed and brushed up all in a minute.

When he reached the office he found a new man at the desk.

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"I have been robbed," he said.

"Robbed!" cried the clerk. "By whom?"

"A man who occupied the same room that I did," replied the boy.

He told what he knew, to which the clerk listened with interest. But the hotel clerk saw that Ralph was green, so he took no responsibility upon his own shoulders. He said he would notify the police, but it was likely nothing would be heard of Jackson Walters.

The matter was talked over for half an hour, and then Ralph left the place to see if he could trace up the thief. He walked around until noon, without any success.

"This is the worst yet," he muttered to himself, as he at last came to a halt down near one of the ferries. "Here I am in the city without a cent in my pocket. What in the world shall I do?"

Had Ralph been in New York he would have made an effort to hunt up Horace Kelsey, the gentleman he had assisted while he was acting as bridge tender. The gentleman had told him to call whenever he was in the city, and he had no doubt but what he could raise a loan when he stated how he was situated.

At length he decided to go back to the hotel and see if anything had been heard of Jackson Walters. He went back, only to be disappointed.

But the visit was productive of some good. Hearing that he had a friend in New York, the hotel keeper gave him a quarter of a dollar with which to get over the ferry and pay other expenses while hunting him up.

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Ralph was soon back to the river, and in company with a great stream of people, he purchased a ferry ticket and went aboard one of the boats.

The trip on such a craft was a novelty, and he was sorry it did not last longer. Yet when the boat touched on the other side he was one of the first ashore.

Ralph was now in the great city of New York, and the country boy could not help but stare about him at the bustle and apparent confusion on all sides. By a miracle he managed to cross Wall street in safety, and then, learning that Broadway lay several blocks beyond, he followed the

crowd in that direction.

"It's a big place, and no mistake," he said to himself. "My gracious, what tall buildings, and how they are crowded together!"

At last Broadway was reached, that greatest of all metropolitan thoroughfares. It was the most wonderful of all sights to Ralph, so many cars, and wagons, and trucks, not to mention people. He stood on the corner so long that at last a policeman came up and told him to move on.

Ralph was sorry he could not remember Horace Kelsey's number. The insurance agent's card was at home, and the boy had not troubled himself to commit the address to memory. He knew it was on Broadway, and that was all.

"I suppose I might inquire at some of the insurance offices," he thought, at length. "I'll step into the next one I run across."

It was not long before he came to such a place as he was looking for. He entered and made known his wants to the clerk, who advanced to ascertain his wishes. [Pg 188]

"Horace Kelsey?" said the clerk. "Don't know the man."

"He is an insurance agent," went on Ralph.

"Good many insurance agents in New York. You might look in the directory. There is one on that stand over by the window."

"Thank you, I'll try it," replied the boy.

He soon found the list of men in the insurance business. Running down the column of K's, he came across the name Kelsey, Horace, insurance broker, with his office address and also his home address, up-town.

Making a mental note of both, Ralph hurried out. A policeman directed him to the tall office building in which his friend had rooms, and he was soon on his way thither.

Arriving at the building, the boy took his first ride in an elevator. It must be confessed that the lift moved so fast and the sensation was so unusual that it made him somewhat sick. When he got out at the right floor he felt as if he was walking on air for a few seconds.

He found Horace Kelsey's office handsomely fitted up. There were several young gentlemen clerks and two young lady typewriters. Evidently business was in a prosperous condition.

Ralph was disappointed to find that the gentleman himself was not visible.

"I came to see Mr. Kelsey," he said, to the clerk who greeted him.

"Mr. Kelsey is out, sir. What can we do for you?"

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"I will wait until Mr. Kelsey comes in, please. My business is with him personally."

"I'm afraid you'll have to wait a long time," smiled the clerk. "Mr. Kelsey is out of the city."

Ralph's heart sank at this announcement. He had felt sure that assistance was close at hand.

"When do you expect him to return?"

"I can hardly say, perhaps to-day, perhaps to-morrow or the day after. It depends on when he finishes up the business on hand."

Ralph heaved a sigh. The clerk saw that he was greatly disappointed.

"Can't you come in to-morrow and see if he has returned?" he asked.

"I guess so," faltered the boy. "But I expected sure to meet him to-day," he went on.

"Very sorry."

"I will come in again before you close, if you don't mind."

"Not at all; come whenever you please. We are open until five o'clock here."

Ralph left his name and then quitted the offices. He did not bother taking the elevator down, but used the winding stairs instead.

He had reached the second floor, and was about to start down for the street when he caught sight of a man standing on the stone steps below. The man was Jackson Walters.

"The rascal!" muttered Ralph, to himself. "How fortunate to catch sight of him!"

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He sprang down the steps two at a time. Walters heard him coming, and looked around. But before he could attempt to move away, Ralph had him tightly by the arm.

"So I've caught you, have I?" he said, bluntly. "Why—er—really—you have the advantage of me," stammered Jackson Walters, coldly.

"I guess I have, and it's a good thing, too," returned Ralph.

"I—er—don't know you."

"What!" ejaculated the boy, in amazement.

"I say I don't know you. Isn't that plain enough?"

"Well, I know you plain enough. You are the man who roomed with me last night and robbed me."

"Pon my word, I never saw you before. This is some extraordinary mistake."

"No mistake about it," returned Ralph, doggedly. He was not to be buncombed by the oily manner of the thief.

"Let go of my arm, boy!"

"I will not. You are the thief, and you must return what you stole from me," said Ralph.

He spoke rather loudly, and a crowd began to collect about the two. In a few seconds a policeman hurried up to ascertain the cause of the trouble.

CHAPTER XXX.

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THE SHARPER IS OUTWITTED.

"What's the matter here?" exclaimed the policeman, as he pushed his way forward.

"This man is a thief," replied Ralph.

"The boy is mistaken," burst out Jackson Walters, in assumed indignation.

"No, I am not mistaken," said Ralph. "He slept in the same room with me in a hotel in Jersey City last night, and he went through my pockets and got out before I woke up."

"A likely story!" ejaculated the sharper. "I live in Englewood, New Jersey, and I was home last night, as usual."

The policeman looked perplexed. Ralph's earnest manner had impressed him, and yet Jackson Walters looked honest enough.

"You are sure that you are not mistaken in your man?" he asked, of Ralph.

"I am positive, sir."

"He is mistaken," blustered the sharper. "I am an honest man. My name is William G. Harrow, and I am in the crockery business over in Park Place."

"Well, the best you two can do is to come with me," said the policeman.

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"Where to?"

"To the police station. You can tell your story there."

"I am willing," returned Ralph, promptly.

"It is an outrage," cried Jackson Walters. "A respectable citizen like myself to be dragged to the station house——"

"You won't be dragged, you can walk," interrupted the policeman, with fine sarcasm.

The fact that Ralph was willing to go while the other was not, had impressed him greatly in the lad's favor.

"It's all the same. This boy is a young gamester. He wanted to frighten me into paying him money. It's a pure case of blackmail."

"If it is, the boy will be sent up for it," replied the policeman, sharply. "Just come with me, both of you."

"I won't go!" cried Jackson Walters, and before he could be stopped he sprang away, and started to cross Broadway.

Like a flash Ralph was after him. The boy was fearful the sharper would get away and the money be lost once more. Before Jackson Walters reached the car tracks Ralph had him by the arm.

"Let go of me!" howled the sharper.

"Not much! I want my money!" replied the boy, stubbornly.

"There, take your confounded money, then!" cried the sharper, and snatching several dollar bills from his vest pocket he flung them in the street.

The sight of the bills relieved Ralph greatly. He stooped to pick them up, and as he did so, Jackson Walters darted across the street, the policeman at his heels. [Pg 193]

With the bills in his hand, Ralph got out of the way of the trucks and wagons as soon as he could. He ran to the sidewalk, and counted the money. There were eleven dollars. In his haste, Jackson Walters had thrown him five dollars more than the amount originally taken.

Ralph now found himself in a new crowd of people. The policeman and the sharper had entirely disappeared.

Thinking to find the pair, the boy crossed Broadway and hunted around, up and down and into several of the side streets. But it was useless, the two had disappeared.

"Well, I am not the loser," thought Ralph, with considerable satisfaction. "I'm the gainer, and if Jackson Walters wants his money let him apply to me for it."

The fact that he now had his money safe once more gave Ralph not a little satisfaction. He was no longer worried over the fact that he might not see Horace Kelsey before nightfall.

It was now noon, and Ralph felt hungry. He walked along until he came to a clean-looking restaurant, which he entered, and called for the regular dinner, at thirty cents. He ate all that was placed before him, with keen relish.

While at the table he reflected upon his situation, and came to the conclusion that his duty was to write to his mother, telling her of all that had happened. He would also ask her to see Bill Franchard and pay him the money due for boat hire, and tell him all, so that he might start on a search for his missing boat.

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"Then I'll wait till I see Mr. Kelsey and get his advice as to what to do next," he thought. "Perhaps he'll see through his mystery, even if I do not."

Close to the restaurant Ralph found a stationery store, at which he purchased a sheet of paper and an envelope.

"Will you kindly allow me to write a letter here?" he asked.

"Certainly," replied the clerk. "You will find pen and ink at the desk in the rear."

It took Ralph some little time to compose his letter—he had so much to say—and when he had finished, the sheet was crowded from the first page to the last. He sent his love to his mother, and told her to address him at the general post office.

Ralph's next move was to take his letter to the post office and stamp and mail it. This took nearly half an hour, but the boy enjoyed the trip to the big Government building, and was astonished to note on what a large scale the metropolitan post-office business was conducted.

"This beats the Westville post office all to bits," he murmured to himself. "Mr. Hooker would cut a mighty small figure here, no matter how important he is at home."

The letter mailed, Ralph felt better. It would relieve his mother of much anxiety, and clear up the mystery concerning his strange disappearance.

"Shine yer shoes, boss?"

It was the inquiry of a ragged bootblack standing just outside of the post office building.

"What's that?" asked Ralph.

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"Shine yer shoes? Make 'em look like a lookin'-glass, boss."

Ralph glanced down at his shoes, and saw that they were decidedly in need of brushing up.

"What do you charge?" he asked.

"Five fer a regular, an' ten fer an oil finish."

"I cannot afford more than five. Go ahead and do the best you can for that."

"All right, boss, I'll give yer a good one."

The boy dropped on his knees in an angle of the building, and put out his little box before him. In a second he was hard at work with a well-worn whiskbroom, brushing the dirt from the bottom of Ralph's trousers.

"How do you like shining shoes?" questioned Ralph, curiously.

"Don't like it, boss," was the truthful reply. "No, sir. But a feller has got ter do somethin' fer a livin'—or starve."

"And you can't get anything else to do?"

"Nixy. I've tried a hundred times, but it wasn't no go—all the stores and shops is so crowded."

"That is too bad."

"Maybe you kin give me a job?" went on the bootblack, suddenly, and he turned his blue eyes up in expectancy.

"Hardly," laughed Ralph. "I am looking for work myself."

"Dat's too bad. Do yer belong in New York?"

"No; I just arrived this morning."

"Ain't yer got no pull?"

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"Pull? What do you mean?"

"No friend ter give yer a lift?"

"I have a friend, yes."

"Is he rich?"

"Yes."

"Den it's all right. But if yer didn't have no pull I would advise yer to go back home. A feller widout a pull in New York can't do nuthin' nohow," and the bootblack gave an extra dash with his brush to emphasize his remarks.

"I haven't been able to see my friend yet. He is out of town."

"Say, maybe yer kin put in a word fer me."

"What is your name?"

"Mickety."

"Mickety? Mickety what?"

"Me udder name is Powers, but da all calls me just Mickety."

"And where do you live, Mickety?"

"Over in Cherry street, wid me old gran'mudder. She can't work, an' I have ter keep t'ings goin'."

"You have to support her, you mean?"

"Dat's it. She's most blind, Gran'ma Sal is."

"It's a good deal on your shoulders," said Ralph, and his respect for the dirty little chap before him increased.

"Dat's why I want ter strike anudder job."

"Well, if I hear of any opening, I'll let you know. Where can I see you?"

"I'm around here most all day, boss, an' t'ank yer fer sayin' you'll look out fer me."

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The shoes were now blacked, and Mickety arose to his feet. Ralph brought out a quarter and handed it over.

"Keep it all, Mickety," he said. "I am sorry I can't spare more just now."

"Gee! A quarter! Yer a liberal gent, so yer are! T'ank yer, sir!"

"You are quite welcome," returned Ralph, and he walked off.

He was destined to meet the bootblack again, and under circumstances full of the gravest peril.

CHAPTER XXXI.

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ON THE BOWERY.

After leaving the bootblack Ralph hardly knew what to do with himself. It was barely three o'clock, and he fancied it still too early to visit Horace Kelsey's office again.

He concluded to walk around and see the sights, and accordingly strolled up Broadway past the City Hall Park, and continued on up until Fourteenth street was reached.

This great thoroughfare, with its immense stores, interested him greatly. He spent fully half an hour in looking into the show-windows.

"What a lot of money must be invested in business here," he thought. "How I would like to be a merchant on such a scale. A person who had never been here would not imagine it was so grand!"

When a neighboring clock showed the hour of four the boy thought it time to return to the insurance agent's office. He was soon on his way downtown.

At the entrance to the office, a policeman tapped him on the shoulder. It was the one he had met earlier in the day.

"Hallo, young fellow," he said. "Did you get your money back?"

"Yes, I got my money, and a trifle more," returned Ralph. "Did you catch the man?"

"No, the rascal gave me the slip. So you got more than your money, eh?"

"I got five dollars more. But he has my pocketknife and a silver temperance badge. He can have his money when he gives me my things back."

"I reckon you'll have to call it square," laughed the policeman. "He was a slick one."

"He was, sir."

"You are a stranger in the city, I take it," went on the policeman, with a glance at Ralph's country clothes.

"Yes."

"You want to have your eyes open in the future, or you'll be robbed again before long.

"If you sleep in a room with others, pin your money fast inside of your shirt. Then they can't get it without waking you up."

"Thank you, I'll remember that."

"I shall watch out for that sharper, and nab him the first chance I get."

"That's right; he ought to be arrested."

"The trouble will be that there will be no one to make a complaint," went on the policeman.

"I'll make a complaint if I am still in the city," said Ralph.

"But where will I find you?"

"Ask for me at Mr. Kelsey's office in this building."

"Oh! All right," said the guardian of the peace, and then he and the boy separated.

In a minute more Ralph was back in the offices upstairs.

"Sorry, but Mr. Kelsey has not returned," said the clerk. "Better come in to-morrow about ten o'clock."

"Thank you, I will," replied Ralph.

He went downstairs much disappointed.

"I'll have to find some sort of a sleeping-place for to-night," he thought. "And it must be a cheap one, for if Mr. Kelsey doesn't come back in a day or two I will have to go home without seeing him, and I want to save the carfare to do it. No more riding in empty freight cars for me!" and he laughed to himself, as he remembered his experience in that line.

Ralph had often heard of the Battery, as the lower end of the city is called, and he determined to pay it a brief visit before nightfall should set in.

From a passer-by he learned that Broadway ran directly down there, and on he walked against the great tide of humanity which was now setting in toward up-town.

It was not long before he reached the little park back of Castle Garden and the emigrant offices, and here he sat down on a bench to take a look at the bay, and also at the various types of people that were moving about in all directions.

It was dark when Ralph moved off. During his stay he had heard two young men speak of the Bowery, and the many odd sights to be seen there, especially during the evening.

"I have nothing to do between now and bedtime," he thought. "I'll take a stroll up the Bowery, and take in all that is to be seen. In such a place as New York it will be easy enough to find a cheap hotel when I want to retire."

So leaving the Battery, he traveled up to Park Row, and continued along until the Bowery was reached.

The Bowery, even at this early hour in the evening, was alive with people. Many of the men and women were of very questionable character, but Ralph did not know this. He walked along, staring at everything to be seen.

Presently he came to a clothing establishment, in front of which were hung a number of suits marked at very low figures. He stopped to examine them, and hardly had he done so when an outside salesman, or "puller-in," as he is called, approached him.

"Nice suits, eh?" he said, pleasantly, as he placed his hand on Ralph's arm.

"They look so," returned the boy.

"Come in and try one on."

"No, thank you; not to-night."

"Won't cost you anything; come on," persisted the fellow.

"I don't care to buy to-night."

"That's all right; just try 'em on, and see how nice they look on you."

"Thank you, but I won't bother you," and Ralph attempted to walk away.

The "puller-in" was not going to lose him thus easily, however. Trade had been bad with him for the day, and he felt he must sell something or his position with the owner of the establishment would be at stake. [Pg 202]

"It's no trouble to show goods, my dear sir; walk right in," he said, and, instead of letting Ralph go, pushed him toward the open store doors.

"But I don't want to buy," insisted Ralph, who began to fancy he was not being treated just right.

"Didn't ask you to buy, my dear sir. Isaac just show this young gentleman some of those beautiful all-wool suits for nine and ten dollars."

A greasy old Jew at once came forward, rubbing his hands.

"Chust sthep back here," he said, smiling broadly. "I vill show you der greatest pargains in New York."

"But I don't care to bu——" began Ralph again, but the Jew cut him short.

"Ve got dese suits at a great pargain," he said. "Da vos made originally to sell at twenty dollars. So efery von vot buys von of dem suits saves ten or elefen dollars on der burchase brice."

He hurried Ralph back to the rear of the store, and in a trice had at hand half a dozen suits, more or less faded, and of exceedingly doubtful material.

"Chust try on der coat and vest," he said. "Here, Rachel, hold der young gentleman's coat an' vest till I fit him to perfection," he went on to his wife, who had come up.

"Oh, Isaac, it vos a shame to sold dem peautiful allvool suits for twelfe dollars!" she cried, in assumed dismay. [Pg 203]

"I vos sold dem for nine and ten dollars," returned Isaac.

"Vot, you reduced dem again?" she cried, in well-assumed horror.

"Yah, I vos got to haf der monish."

"It vos der greatest pargain sale in der vorld!" cried the woman. "You ought to buy two suits vile it lasts," she went on to Ralph.

In the meantime her husband was trying to make Ralph take off his coat and vest. He at length succeeded, and in a trice had part of one of the store suits on his back.

"Ach! vot an elegant fit!" he cried, in deep admiration. "Chust like it vos made to order!"

"Peautiful! peautiful!" joined in his wife.

"Vill you try on der bants?" asked the Jew.

"No," returned Ralph, decidedly.

"You had better. Da might not fit chust so vell as der coat."

"But I do not want to buy," cried Ralph, desperately.

"Vat?" screamed the old Jew. "And dot suit fits so elegantly!"

"Of course he takes dot suit," put in his wife. "Vot more you vonts, hey?"

"I didn't want to buy from the start," returned Ralph. "Give me my coat and vest."

And taking off the store coat and vest, he flung them on a counter. [Pg 204]

"You dinks I vos a fool!" shrieked the old Jew. "Vot you try dem clothes on for, hey? Dot suit chust fits you—it's chust vot you vonts. I wraps dem up and you bays for dem and say noddings more! I vos here to sell goots—not to be fooled mit!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

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NEW EMPLOYMENT.

Had Ralph been more familiar with the ways of the city, and particularly with the ways of such merchants as the one with whom he now had to deal, he would have known that the Jew's anger

was only put on in order to intimidate him into purchasing a suit he did not want.

The Bowery is full of such shops as I have described, and despite the many protests that have been made, "pullers-in" and their associates continue to flourish. In more than three-quarters of the cases where passers-by are enticed into stores they are forced into buying, no matter how hard they protest against the outrage.

But although he was ignorant of the real facts of the matter, one thing was clear to Ralph. He did not want to buy, and he was not going to be forced into doing so.

"I did not come in to fool," he said, stoutly. "Your man outside insisted that I should come in and try on the things, although I told him I did not wish to buy."

"Dot's all right—I wrap der suit up and you bay for dem."

"Not much!" and Ralph's temper began to rise. "Give me my coat and vest!"

He made a dash for the articles, but before he could secure them the Jew's wife had whisked them out of his reach.

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"You can't vos fool Isaac," she screamed. "You bay for der suit, and den you gits dem pack—not before."

"I'll have them back now!" exclaimed Ralph, his eyes flashing dangerously. "Give them to me!"

The woman ran behind the counter, but he made after her. He caught hold of the coat and vest, and despite her resistance, twisted them from her grasp. In a second he had them on once more.

"Hellup! hellup!" screamed the woman.

"Don't you touch mine wife!" howled the old Jew.

"Samuel, come in here and hellup your fadder and mudder!"

The "puller-in" had been watching proceedings from outside of the store, and now he came running in. He was a big, muscular fellow, and not above acting roughly when the occasion demanded.

"See here, what do you mean by striking my mother?" he cried out, boldly. "Do you want to get yourself locked up?"

Instead of replying to this speech, Ralph backed toward the rear of the clothing establishment. He had no desire to enter into a fight on the premises. Now he had his clothing, he wished to get out as quickly as possible.

"Sthop! sthop!" screamed the old Jew. "Vere vos you going?"

Still Ralph returned no reply. The way to the front was blocked. But a rear door, leading to a small yard, was open, and toward this he ran.

"He's goin' out of der pack!" cried the woman. "Sthop him, Isaac!"

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"Run, Samuel!" shrieked Isaac, and the son darted forward, but too late to stop Ralph in making his exit.

Ralph found the yard both small and exceedingly dirty. Beyond was another yard, and, looking over the fence, the boy saw an open hallway leading to a street.

Without hesitation, for Samuel was close at his heels, Ralph vaulted over the fence. Before the young Jew could follow, he was inside of the hallway. A minute later he was in the next street, and running through the crowd toward the end of the block. He did not cease his rapid pace until the neighborhood was left a good distance behind.

"Well, that's the most trying experience I've had yet," he murmured to himself, as he at last dropped into a slow walk to catch his breath. "Those people are not thieves, but they are next door to it."

Ralph was so disgusted with the Bowery—which, in reality, has many nice places of business in it—that he left the street at the next corner.

At nine o'clock he found himself in the vicinity of the Brooklyn Bridge. Here he came across a cheap but neat-looking hotel. He entered and engaged a room for himself alone on the top floor for fifty cents, and soon after retired and slept soundly until morning.

The boy was on the streets again long before the time appointed for his next call at Horace Kelsey's offices. Having nothing to do, he mounted to the bridge, and took a walk across to Brooklyn and return. This gave him a splendid view of both cities, and afforded him a means of enjoyment until it was time to make the call.

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He had brushed himself up to the last degree, and invested in another shine for his shoes, and a clean collar and tie, so now, even if his clothing was rather worn and torn in one or two places, he nevertheless looked quite respectable.

"He is in," said the clerk, when Ralph entered the offices, and the next moment Horace Kelsey came forward and shook him by the hand.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," said the insurance agent. "Step into my private office," and he led the way, showed Ralph to a seat, and closed the door. "My clerk told me of your calling yesterday."

"This is a totally unexpected trip, Mr. Kelsey," returned Ralph, by way of apologizing for his appearance. "When I started, I had no idea I would end up in New York."

"Indeed!" and the gentleman looked his curiosity.

"I've got rather a long story to tell," went on Ralph.

"Yes? Then let me hear it at once. I will be at leisure for the next hour."

It was rather awkward for Ralph to start, but it was not long before he was deep in the recital of his adventures and the great wrong that had been done to him. Horace Kelsey listened with scarcely a word of comment until he finished.

"Well, Ralph, if I did not know you to be an honest boy, I would not believe it," he exclaimed, at last.

"I can hardly believe it myself, Mr. Kelsey. Why did those two men attack me?"

"It is a great mystery. Had you not met them after the fall over the bluff I would be inclined to say that that fall must have been accidental. But, as it is, it was premeditated, beyond a doubt. And you are certain that you never met the men before?"

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"I am."

"They could not have been the ones that robbed the post office, and got angry because you put the authorities on their track?"

"No sir; I don't believe they had anything to do with that affair."

"It couldn't be that Percy Paget set them up to it?"

"I don't believe he would go as far as that—not when our quarrel was no worse than it was."

"I believe you there. Yet there must be some reason," insisted Horace Kelsey. "Men do not attempt to take life for the mere fun of it."

"I believe you there, sir."

"The thing is—what could they profit by if you were out of the way?"

"I don't know."

"Could they claim that property, the papers of which are missing?"

"No sir; the property belongs to my mother—at least I think it does."

"Your father might have willed it to you."

"In that case my mother would have told me of it."

"You should have gone back to Westville at once and made a search. Your mother will be worried over your absence."

"I have already written to her, telling her all. I don't see the use of going back just now. Those men have most likely skipped out."

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"That is true."

"And now I had come to New York, I thought I would take a look around before I went back. I may not get the chance again. Besides, I only had a job on the lakes running the pleasure sloop, and I would like to strike something better if it's to be had."

"I see," Horace Kelsey smiled. "Well, I promised to do what I could, and I won't disappoint you. I will give you employment here in my office unless you can strike something better."

"Thank you. I would prefer to work for you."

"I need another clerk for a new line of work, and I fancy you would just suit. But you would have to remain in New York. How would your mother like that?"

"She would miss me, sir, but if the job paid I could send for her to come on, and rent the place in Westville."

"Then you can consider yourself engaged whenever you are ready to come to work. And, by the way," Horace Kelsey went on, hurriedly, as there came a knock on the door, "there is a gentleman I must see on business. Come in at one o'clock again, will you?"

"Yes, sir," replied Ralph, and not to detain the gentleman longer, he bowed himself out, well pleased over the sudden turn his fortunes had taken.

Could the boy have seen what was at that time occurring at Westville, he would not have been so contented, but would instead have taken the first train homeward.

SQUIRE PAGET'S MOVE.

Let us leave Ralph for a short time and go back to Westville and see what was occurring at that place during his absence. Of course, when the boy did not return in the evening from his trip up Big Silver Lake, Mrs. Nelson was much worried over his absence. She took supper alone, after waiting until eight o'clock for him to make his appearance, and then took a walk down to the bridge where her son was in the habit of tying up.

"Have you seen anything of Ralph?" she asked of Dan Pickley, who sat in the office, counting his tolls for the day.

"No," he returned, shortly, and went on with his counting.

Not wishing to disturb him, the widow said no more. She strained her eyes to see through the gathering darkness, but not a boat that could be the right one appeared in sight.

After waiting nearly an hour she returned to the cottage. She sat up until twelve o'clock, watching and waiting, and went to bed.

"If something had happened they would let me know," she said to herself. "He must have taken out some party and been detained. He will surely come back by to-morrow noon."

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But the morrow came, and the morning passed slowly by without any one coming near the distressed woman.

After dinner she could bear the suspense no longer. Dressing up and putting on her bonnet, she started out to walk to Glen Arbor.

On the way she met one of the neighbors who was driving and offered her a seat in his wagon. She accepted the offer gladly, for she was not accustomed to walking a long distance.

"It ain't often you go to Glen Arbor, I reckon," said the neighbor, a farmer named Wilkins.

"No," she replied, "I am going to see what has become of Ralph."

"Ralph! What's the matter with him? Run away?"

"I hope not, Mr. Wilkins. But he did not return last night from a trip on the lake, and I am worried."

"Maybe he couldn't get back because he went too far and the wind died out."

"There was a good breeze all night."

"That's so, widow. Well, I hope you find Ralph all right."

"So do I," returned Mrs. Nelson.

She knew very well where Bill Franchard's boat-house was, and after leaving Mr. Wilkins, walked hither quickly. Luckily, she found Franchard on shore, mending one of his boats.

"Where is Ralph, Mr. Franchard?" she asked, hurriedly.

"That's just what I'd like to know, Mrs. Nelson," replied the boatman. "He ain't showed up since he went off yesterday morning."

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"Did you expect him to stay out so long?"

"No, I didn't. I was looking for him in last evening."

"Who did he take out?"

"Two gentlemen, I believe. He made the engagement himself. I don't know who they were."

"Have you any idea where he can be?"

"They sailed up the lake, so Jack Harper says. Maybe they might be puttin' in the time around the islands. Sometimes these sportsmen don't care to come home at dark, but want the fun of camping out over night."

This last remark afforded Mrs. Nelson some relief. If the supposition was correct, Ralph might be perfectly safe.

"I hope he comes back soon," she said. "Would you mind if I stay around the boat-house for a while?"

"Why, no, Mrs. Nelson; make yourself at home," returned Franchard, heartily. "We ain't got very good accommodations here, but such as they are you are welcome to."

The widow sat down and watched the boatman mending his craft. Thus an hour passed. Then came a hail from the water.

"Ahoj there, Franchard!"

The boatman looked up and saw a young fellow in a rowboat.

"Hullo, Evans!" he called back.

"Say, one of your boats is ashore over to Mack's meadow," went on the youth in the rowboat.

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"One of my boats! Which one?"

"The *Minnie*. I saw her as I came past, and I thought I'd tell you about her. She isn't tied up there."

"My gracious! what can it mean?" cried Mrs. Nelson. "That was the boat Ralph had, wasn't it?"

"It was," returned Franchard. "Jump in this rowboat, Mrs. Nelson, and we'll go over to the meadow and take a look at the boat."

He ran for a pair of oars, and soon the two were on the water. Mack's meadow was less than half a mile away, and Franchard, who was an expert rower, soon pulled the boat to it.

"There is the *Minnie*, sure enough!" he exclaimed, as they rounded a little point.

And he pointed to where the sloop lay half-hidden in the water and high meadow grass.

"Is—is any one on board?" asked Mrs. Nelson, in a trembling tone.

"Not a soul."

"Oh, Mr. Franchard, what do you suppose has happened?" she burst out.

"I can't say, ma'am. Wait till I go on board and take a look around."

Franchard was soon on the sloop. Everything appeared to be in order, although there were the marks of muddy feet on the flooring and on the seats. Martin and Toglet had taken good care that no clew that should lead to their identity should be left behind.

"Do you see anything belonging to Ralph?" asked Mrs. Nelson.

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"Not a thing."

"Do you suppose he left the boat here?"

The boatman shook his head slowly.

"I wish I could say yes, Mrs. Nelson," he said. "But I don't think so. It's all wet around here, and there would be no sense in it when there are so many dry landing places nearby. Most likely he landed somewhere else and the boat drifted away from him."

The widow gave a start.

"Oh, might they not have landed on one of the islands and the sloop got away from them?" she cried.

"By creation! that may be it!" ejaculated Bill Franchard. "I never thought of it before."

"I wish we could find out. I'm greatly worried. Something tells me that Ralph is not safe—that something has happened to him."

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Mrs. Nelson. I'll take the *Ariel* and sail up to the islands and take a look around."

"Will you go this afternoon?"

"If you wish it, yes."

"I do, very much."

"Then I won't waste another minute. Maybe you would like to go along?"

"I would," returned Mrs. Nelson, impelled by a fear she could not banish.

Franchard lost no time in towing the sloop back to the boat-house. Ten minutes later he and the widow were sailing up the lake as fast as the wind would carry them.

It was well on toward evening when the islands were reached.

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"I'll give them a call if they are anywhere about," said Franchard, and he yelled many times at the top of his lungs.

No reply came back, and after sailing around for some time they came to anchor beside Three Top Island.

"If they landed anywhere, they landed here," said the boatman. "So as long as we are in the vicinity we may as well take a look around."

As luck would have it they had reached shore close to the bottom of the cliff. As they leaped on the rocks, Mrs. Nelson gave a start.

"What is it?" cried her companion, quickly.

"Oh, Mr. Franchard, look!" screamed the poor woman. "It is Ralph's fishing towel, and it has blood upon it!"

And as she spoke, she held up the object.

"You are sure it is his?"

"I am positive. Oh, I am sure something dreadful has happened."

"Perhaps not, Mrs. Nelson. Let us hope for the best, and search further."

Mrs. Nelson heaved a long sigh. Her heart was heavy within her breast.

The two searched around until nightfall, but nothing more was found.

At last they returned to Glen Arbor, and after another inquiry there for Ralph, the poor widow made her way back slowly to her home.

She was all but prostrated, and all that night paced the rooms, watching and waiting in vain for her son's return.

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The news of Ralph's disappearance spread, and several parties went out to hunt for him. Strange to say, one of the parties contained Squire Paget.

The squire went up to the islands in a private boat of his own. He remained there probably half an hour. Then he returned and called at the Nelson cottage.

"It is too bad, Mrs. Nelson," he said. "But I have, I am afraid, very bad news for you."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

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THE SQUIRE IN HOT WATER.

As the reader well knows, there was no love lost between Squire Paget and the Nelsons. The squire had not treated Ralph and his mother fairly, and they were inclined to look upon him with considerable distrust.

Yet when the squire entered the cottage with the announcement that he had bad news to convey, the widow forgot all the past and began to question him eagerly.

"You have bad news?" she faltered.

"I am sorry to say I have," he returned, in a hypocritical tone of sympathy.

"And what is it?" she went on, her breast heaving violently.

"Pray, calm yourself, madam."

"I cannot wait, squire. You have news of Ralph! The poor boy has been—has been——"

She could get no further.

"His body has not yet been found, Mrs. Nelson."

"Then he is dead!" she shrieked, and fell forward in a swoon.

Fortunately a neighbor arrived just at this moment, and this good woman, aided by the squire, soon revived the widow. At the end of ten minutes she sat up in a chair, her face as white as a sheet.

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"Tell me—tell me all," she gasped out.

"There is not much to tell, unfortunately," returned the squire, smoothly. "I was up to the islands in company with others, and I found strong evidence that made me believe that Ralph fell over the cliff."

"Then he was killed!" burst out the neighbor.

"Most likely, Mrs. Corcoran. The cliff is more than a hundred feet high, and the rocks below are sharp."

"But his body—what of that?" asked Mrs. Corcoran, for Mrs. Nelson was unable to utter a word.

"His body must have been carried off by the current which sweeps around the island, especially during such a breeze as we had recently."

"It must be true," cried Mrs. Nelson, bursting into tears. "I found his fishing towel, and that was covered with blood. Oh, my poor Ralph!"

She went off into a fit of weeping, and in that state Squire Paget left her to the attention of Mrs.

Corcoran. He had expected to go into the details of his search, but, evidently, they were not now needed.

"I guess my plan will work all right," he said to himself, as he walked home rapidly. "It's a pity I must hurry matters so, but unless I do that valuable piece of property may slip through my fingers."

Not for one moment did the squire's conscience trouble him for what he had done. He thought only of the end to be gained—of the money he intended to make.

Of course, he imagined that Ralph was really dead. He would have been furious had he known the real truth.

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But an awakening was close at hand. It came on the following day, when the squire was at the post office.

He was standing in a corner looking over the various letters he had received when he heard Henry Bott, the clerk, address a few words to a laboring man who had come in to post a letter.

"Kind of mysterious about Ralph Nelson?" remarked the man, whose name was Fielder.

"It is," returned Bott.

"Any news of him yet?"

"None, excepting that he fell over the cliff on Three Top Island and his body was washed away."

"The widow must feel bad about it."

"Sure."

"I was going to stop at the cottage, but I must get over to Eastport."

"There's a letter just came in for Mrs. Nelson from New York," went on Bott. "I suppose I might send it to her. It might have some sort of news she might want to hear."

At these words the squire became more attentive than ever. Who knew but what the letter might refer to the missing papers that the widow had advertised for?

"Did you say you had a letter for Mrs. Nelson?" he asked, stepping to the window.

"Yes."

"I am going down to the place. I'll take it to her if you wish."

"All right, squire; here it is," returned Bott, and handed over the epistle.

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Squire Paget at once hurried from the building, and in the direction of the Nelson cottage. But once beyond the village proper he turned into a by-path.

Here he stopped to examine the letter. It was not sealed very tightly, and by breathing upon the mucilage in the back he soon managed to get it open without tearing the envelope.

It was Ralph's letter to his mother, and for the moment Squire Paget was so stunned that he was in danger of collapsing then and there. He staggered to a stone and fell upon it.

"Alive!" he muttered to himself. "Alive! and the rascals said he was dead!"

He read the letter carefully, not once, but several times. He saw how Martin and Toglet had failed twice in their efforts to take Ralph from his path forever.

"The scamps! They knew he was alive when he boarded the empty freight car! Why did they not come back and tell me! I suppose they expect to get that five hundred dollars out of me at Chambersburgh! Just wait till I see them!"

Squire Paget did not know what to do with the letter. If he destroyed it, might not the widow hear of his having a letter for her and ask him for it?

And yet if he gave her the letter, that would be the end of the plot against her—the whole cake would be dough.

Already a new plan to get Ralph out of the way was forming in his mind, based on the fact that Martin and Toglet had really tried to do as agreed. Perhaps they would make another trial, if urged on.

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"I'll fix this letter business," he said.

Among his own mail had been a circular from a New York dry-goods house, calling attention to a big midsummer bargain sale, and soliciting orders from out-of-town patrons. This circular the squire now thrust into the envelope which had contained Ralph's letter. To make the deception more complete, the squire drew out his stylographic pen and went over the address, altering the handwriting quite a little, so that it might not be recognized.

Then, stowing away the genuine letter among his own, he walked on to the Nelson cottage, where he left the bogus letter with Mrs. Corcoran, who came to the door.

"I thought I would bring it along, as it might have news," he said.

Mrs. Nelson was handed the letter. She gave it a hasty examination, and finding, to her great disappointment, that it was merely an advertisement, she threw it aside; and thus her son's communication, upon which so much depended, never reached her.

The squire found out that nothing could be done to further his plan just then, so far as the widow was concerned. So leaving the cottage, he took the evening boat for Chambersburgh.

He knew exactly where to look for Martin and Toglet, who had come down from an upper lake town by railroad. It was in a fashionable club-house, with a saloon attached, at which many of the sports of the city congregated.

He saw Martin sitting at a table playing some game of chance, and at once motioned him to come out.

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"What is it?" asked Martin, but his face showed that he was much disturbed.

"You know well enough," returned the squire, sharply. "Ralph Nelson is alive and well!"

"Never!" cried Martin, in some surprise.

"It is so, and you know it," went on the squire, coldly.

"Why, he went over the cliff——"

"And escaped."

"Escaped!"

"Yes, and you know he did, for you met after that in the woods."

"It is false!"

"No it isn't, Mr. Martin. He was too smart for you, and he got away."

"Is he in Westville?" questioned Martin, anxiously.

"No; he is in New York."

"When is he coming home?"

"Never, if I can prevent it," returned Squire Paget, earnestly. "He wrote to his mother, but I got the letter. She does not even know he is alive."

"And he is in New York?" said Martin, looking suggestively at the squire.

"He is, Martin."

"I might go down there——"

"That is what I thought."

"I can go alone. Toglet is too chicken-hearted for this business. I know he wishes he was out of it. If he hadn't been in it from the start there would have been no failure."

"Then go alone, but lose no time, for he may write more letters, and one of them may slip through my hands. Now he has disappeared, I do not wish him to be heard of again."

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"But he has a friend in New York."

"I don't care for that. I do not wish his mother to hear from him, that is the whole point."

"All right, squire. Give me time to get to the city and she'll never hear of her boy again. There will be no failure this time."

The two talked the matter over for half an hour longer, and arranged all of their plans. Then Martin took the first train for the metropolis, and Squire Paget the last boat for Westville.

CHAPTER XXXV.

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RALPH A PRISONER.

At the appointed time, Ralph called again upon Horace Kelsey, and was given instructions in regard to the work he would be called on to do.

"But you had better not start in until you hear from your mother," said the insurance agent. "She may wish you to pay a visit home before you settle down here."

Ralph thought this good advice, and he resolved to act upon it.

"I ought to get a letter by to-morrow noon or night," he said. "And I will wait that long. If I don't get word, I'll take the trip home anyway, seeing as you say you will be kind enough to wait for

me."

Kelsey then asked him what he intended to do while waiting, and learning Ralph had nothing in particular in view, he advised the boy to get a guide-book of the city and walk about, so that he might become familiar with the streets.

"The work I have for you will take you out more or less," he said. "And it is a great help if you understand how to get around."

At a nearby bookseller's Ralph purchased a guide-book for twenty-five cents. He studied it off and on the entire afternoon, walking around in the meantime. Before he retired that night at the hotel, he had taken in the city from Fourteenth street down to the Battery. [Pg 226]

"It's awful big and crooked," he thought. "But I guess I'll manage to get around, especially if I keep the guide-book on hand for reference."

His first duty in the morning, even before he had breakfast, was to go to the post office. Of course, he found no letter there for him. He inquired at the information office about the Westville mail, and ascertained that the next pouch from that place would be ready for delivery about three o'clock in the afternoon.

"I'll wait for that," he thought. "And then, if there is no word, I'll take the first train home."

To tell the truth, Ralph was growing anxious. The more he thought over the matter, the more he became convinced that he had done wrong in not returning home at once. He was willing to admit that the sight of the great metropolis had proven too much for his better judgment.

When Ralph left the post office building he did not know that he was being followed, yet such was a fact. Martin, who had got into the city but a short while before, had been watching for him, knowing that he would most likely call for mail. The man slunk out of sight when Ralph appeared, and when he went out, dogged him through the crowd like a shadow.

Ralph returned from the post office across Park Row, and from there made his way toward the East Side, as the great tenement district of New York is termed. He had not been through this section very much, and thought to make a tour along the East River. [Pg 227]

Martin followed him for a distance of eight or ten blocks. Just as Ralph was about to go past a coal yard he tapped the boy on the shoulder.

Ralph turned quickly, and was almost dumbfounded to see who it was that had accosted him.

"What, you!" he exclaimed.

"Then I am really right!" cried Martin, reaching forth and grasping his hand. "Thank heaven that you are safe!"

"Why, I don't understand," stammered Ralph.

He could not comprehend the other's manner.

"I was afraid you had been killed on the cars," went on Martin. "I am very glad to see that you escaped."

"Indeed! I thought you wished me dead," said Ralph, coldly.

"Dead! No, indeed, my young friend!"

"But you pushed me over the cliff on the island."

"That was accidental, I assure you."

"Perhaps our meeting in the woods was accidental, too," and the boy could not help sneering.

"It was all because I took charge of my poor friend Toglet," said Martin, with an anxious look in his face. "That poor, poor fellow has caused me no end of trouble."

"How?"

"Well, I presume I will have to make a clean breast of it. Toglet is more or less insane. His folks do not care to place him in an asylum, and so I offered to take care of him for a while. It was his sudden fit of insanity that caused all of the trouble." [Pg 228]

"What made you point your gun at me in the woods?" asked Ralph, who could not help but doubt Martin's story.

"I wanted you to stop so that I might have a chance to explain. I was afraid you would return home and have us arrested."

"After you pushed me over the cliff why didn't you try to find out whether I was dead or alive?"

"Please don't say I pushed you over. It was Toglet, and directly after you disappeared he turned on me and I had all I could do to keep him at bay."

"You don't look as if you had a very tough time with him," remarked Ralph, bluntly.

"Luckily, I am a strong man, and I soon overpowered him. But he then got a strange fit, and I

knew I must get him to a doctor at once. So I took the boat and left the island. If I had thought that you were still alive you may rest assured I would not have left you behind."

Ralph hardly knew what to say. He did not believe that Martin was telling the truth, plausible as the villain tried to make his story appear.

"You took him to a doctor's?" he asked.

"I did. Then he got away and disappeared in the woods. I had just found him when I saw you. That is the whole story. Why, my young friend, what reason would I have for pushing you over the cliff?"

"I don't know," returned Ralph. "That is something I have been trying to find out."

"I had none in the world. I never saw nor heard of you previous to hiring your boat, and I might have hired anybody in Glen Arbor for that matter." [Pg 229]

"How is it you are in New York now?" questioned Ralph, suddenly.

"I brought Toglet home to his folks."

"Does he belong here?"

"Yes. He lives but a few blocks from here. I will tell you what we had better do. We had better go to his home, and you can interview his folks and make sure that I have told you the truth about him. Perhaps he will even confess, if he is in a proper state of mind to do so."

Ralph hesitated. Martin spoke with so much apparent candor that he was half inclined to believe the man's story concerning Toglet's mental condition. Besides, as Martin had said, what reason could there have been for such an attack if it was not that of a madman?

"Come on, if only to please me," urged Martin. "You will find Toglet's mother a very nice old lady, and you will certainly believe her, even if you will not believe me."

"You say it is but a few blocks?"

"Not more than four. Come, I will show you the way."

Martin linked his arm in that of Ralph, and together they proceeded down the street.

Presently they came in sight of a large tenement house, although Ralph, being a country boy, did not recognize it as such.

"Here we are," said Martin. "Mrs. Toglet lives on the upper floor."

He led the way into the hallway and up the somewhat narrow and dirty stairs. [Pg 230]

They passed up two flights, and then reached a floor which was not occupied. Martin threw a quick glance around and entered an empty room, the door of which stood open.

"They are getting ready to move up-town," he said. "This neighborhood is no longer nice enough for them."

Ralph followed him into the room. Hardly had he done so, when Martin slammed the door shut and sprang upon him.

Ralph was taken so off his guard that he went flat on his back. His head struck a block of wood that lay near, and for the moment he was dazed. Before he could recover, Martin had his hands bound with a strap he took from his pocket.

"Make a sound and I'll choke you!" he cried, in a warning tone.

Then he struggled to fix a gag in Ralph's mouth. A fierce fight ensued, but finally the rascal was successful. Then he bound Ralph's legs.

The poor boy was a prisoner at last!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

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MICKETY TO THE RESCUE.

"That was easier done than I anticipated," muttered Martin, grimly, as he gazed down at his young prisoner. "Now what is best to do? It's good I remembered these rooms were empty."

He walked about the bare apartment and then paused to listen.

All was silent save for the rattle of the wagons and the shrill cries of the playing children in the street below.

"Humph! I thought I heard a footstep," he went on. "I must be getting nervous."

He left the apartment, and was gone several minutes. When he came back he raised Ralph in his

strong arms as if the boy were a small child.

"Now I am going to lock you in a closet for a few hours," he said, harshly. "Don't you dare to attempt an escape, or it will be the worse for you, mind that!"

He walked with his burden to a rear room. Here was situated, in one corner, a large kitchen pantry, now bare of even the shelving.

Into the pantry Ralph was thrust, in a sitting position. Then the door was closed and bolted on him. Presently he heard Martin leave the room and hurry downstairs.

The poor boy was dazed and bewildered by the rough treatment he had received. For some time he sat where he had been placed, not daring to move for fear his tormentor would come back and finish his evil work. [Pg 232]

"There is something behind it all," he thought, dismally. "Martin is doing this for some purpose. What can that purpose be?"

Ralph did not brood over the mystery long. As the minutes passed slowly by and Martin did not come back, the youth began to speculate on the chances of escape.

"If I could only get free of these cords I might burst open the door," he thought. "Let me see what I can do."

Ralph struggled manfully, but it availed him but little. He was no great contortionist, and his efforts resulted only in a painful laceration of his wrists and ankles. Martin had done his work well, and the bonds could not be severed without outside aid.

Five minutes more went by—to poor Ralph they seemed an age. Then the boy fancied he heard a light footstep without.

"Hullo! where are yer?" came in a clear but subdued voice, which Ralph was sure he had heard before.

The cry was repeated several times. In the meanwhile Ralph changed his position and began to kick upon the door.

"In the kitchen closet, dat's where he is!" exclaimed the voice, and the patter of bare feet came toward Ralph's prison.

A second later the bolt on the door was shot back. A flood of light came into the place and Ralph beheld the face and form of the bootblack he had become acquainted with at the entrance to the post office. [Pg 233]

"I t'ought so!" exclaimed the bootblack. "Say, he's a corker ter treat yer dis way, ain't he?"

Then he saw how Ralph was gagged and bound, and he gave a low whistle of surprise.

"Gee! What's dis, highway robbery?" he cried.

In a trice he had out his pocketknife and with it he cut Ralph's bonds. Ralph himself removed the gag.

"Thank you, Mickety!" he ejaculated, as he sprang to his feet. "You are the friend in need!"

"I seen him leadin' yer up here, an' I t'ought it was mighty queer," said the bootblack. "Wot's de game?"

"I am as much in the dark as you, Mickety. That man has tried twice before to take my life."

"Gee! yer don't say!"

"It is true."

"Maybe he wants ter git a fortune away from yer, like der villain in der play."

"There is no fortune to get away—at least none that I ever heard of. But where has he gone?"

"He went down der street. I watched him around der corner before I came up, so as ter make sure I wouldn't be collared."

"We had best get out of here before he comes back," went on Ralph, after a moment's thought. "I do not wish to meet him again," and he shuddered.

"All right, come on."

"What brought you here?" [Pg 234]

"I live across der street, an' I just come home fer me grub. I kin take yer ter our rooms if yer want ter come."

"I will tell you what I would like to do, Mickety. I would like to stay here until he comes back, and then follow him."

"Gee! dat's der ticket. Come on right over."

The bootblack led the way across the dirty and crowded street, and into an alleyway.

"Me home is back dere," he said, pointing to a rear tenement. "I don't suppose yer want ter come in, if yer goin' ter watch fer dat man."

"No, I will stay here," returned Ralph.

"I'll git a bit of grub an' den come out ag'in," said Mickety.

He ran off, leaving Ralph alone. The crowd of street children looked at the country boy, but they had seen him talking to Mickety, with whom they were well acquainted, and they did not offer to ask Ralph any questions or tease him, as they might an utter stranger.

In less than a quarter of an hour the bootblack was back, munching the last of a big doughnut.

"Ain't come yet?"

"Not yet, Mickety."

"Kin I stay an' help yer watch fer him?"

"If you wish, certainly."

"He may try to do yer ag'in, an' I kin call a cop."

"That is so. Yes, stay with me, and I will pay you for your trouble."

"Huh! don't want no pay, Mr. — Yer didn't tell me yer name."

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"Ralph Nelson."

"I ain't askin' fer no pay, Mr. Nelson. Dis sort of a job is nuthin' but fun."

"You may be of valuable assistance to me," went on Ralph. "I may have that man arrested. You can prove that he bound and gagged me, and locked me up in the closet."

"Dat's so."

"I want to find out what his object is. He may——"

Ralph broke off short and pointed across the street.

"Dat's him, true enough!" whispered Mickety, as Martin entered the tenement opposite. "Wot yer goin' ter do now?"

"Wait till he comes out."

This did not consume much time. In less than three minutes after he had entered the building, Martin came running out. He looked greatly disturbed and hurried down the street as fast as his long legs would carry him.

"Dere he goes!" exclaimed Mickety, in ill-suppressed excitement.

"Come on," returned Ralph. "He must not get out of our sight."

He started off, with the bootblack at his side. He looked at Mickety and saw that the little fellow's head was about the size of his own, and that he wore a large-brimmed soft hat.

"Let us trade hats for a while, Mickety. I can pull that down over my face."

The exchange was quickly effected. With the soft hat bent down Ralph knew he would stand a much greater chance of escaping detection at the hands of Martin than before.

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On went the man and his followers for fully a dozen blocks. Then Martin turned into a very respectable side street, and, ascending the stone steps of a large brick mansion, rang the bell.

A man came to the door and let him in. Then the door was tightly closed once more.

"Dat's de end of dis case," muttered Mickety, in a disappointed tone.

"Not a bit of it, Mickety," returned Ralph. "See if you can hunt up a policeman. In the meantime I will watch the house so that this man does not get away."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

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MARTIN IS TRAPPED.

Mickety at once went off to do as Ralph had requested. He was rather doubtful about a policeman listening to his tale, but he resolved to do his best.

In the meantime Ralph inspected the house, and wondered what sort of place it was, and what had brought Martin there. His inspection ended in disappointment, for nothing came to light.

Presently, however, a young girl came out of the basement of the house with a pitcher in her hand. She was evidently a servant girl. A milkman drove up, and from him she purchased a quart of milk.

Before she could return to the house, Ralph touched her on the arm.

"Excuse me, but I believe you live in that house," he said, pleasantly.

"I works there, sur," said the girl, in a strong Irish accent.

"Will you kindly tell me who lives there?"

"Mr. Martin Thomas, sur."

Ralph stared at this bit of information. Martin Thomas and the man he was after were most likely the same individual.

"Did he just come in?"

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"Yis, sur."

"He lives there alone, does he?"

"Oh, no, sur. There's another family occupying the house, but they are away for the summer, sur."

"Oh. I see. Thank you."

"Did you wish to see Mr. Thomas, sur?"

"Is he busy?"

"He said he was going away, sur. He's at work packing up some things, I believe."

"Then I won't bother him. It isn't likely that he would want to buy a new History of the United States, is it?"

"Indeed not!" cried the girl, in deep disgust.

She at once took Ralph for a book agent, a set of men she thoroughly despised.

"I won't bother him," said Ralph, and walked away, while the girl hurried back into the basement.

"So he is going away," thought Ralph. "I must see to it that he does not get very far."

He took up his position behind the stone steps of a house nearby, so that looking from the windows of his own residence, Martin might not see him.

While he was waiting, Ralph looked up and down the street for the bootblack, but Micky had disappeared.

"He won't leave me in the lurch, I feel certain of that," said Ralph to himself. "Yet I would feel easier if there was a policeman in sight."

Five minutes more went by, and then the front door of the house opened and Martin came out.

He was elegantly dressed and wore a silk hat. In one hand he carried a large leather valise.

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He looked up and down anxiously, and then ran down the steps to the pavement.

He started to walk down the block, and Ralph allowed him to get a hundred feet or more from the house.

Then he stepped out and confronted the man.

"Well, Mr. Martin Thomas, we meet again," he said, coolly.

Martin Thomas, for that was really the man's name, was thunderstruck.

"What—er——" he stammered.

"I say we meet again," repeated Ralph. "I guess you did not expect to see me quite so soon."

"Confound the luck!" muttered the man, biting his lips nervously.

"You did not expect me to obtain my freedom as quickly as I did."

"How did you get out?" muttered the man, savagely.

"A friend came to my assistance."

"A friend!" repeated Martin Thomas, with a start.

"Yes, a friend."

"Who?"

"Perhaps you can guess," went on Ralph, who wished to prolong the conversation as much as possible.

"I cannot."

"Make a guess."

"Somebody from Glen Arbor?"

"No."

"A city friend, perhaps?"

"Exactly."

"Well, what are you going to do now?"

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"Rather, let me ask you what you are going to do?" returned Ralph, warmly.

He was much relieved just then to see Micky across the way, with a policeman beside him.

"I?"

"Exactly. You tried your best to get me out of the way," went on Ralph, in rather a loud voice. "And now you have failed, I want to know what your next move is going to be."

"Hush, not so loud!" cried Martin Thomas in alarm. "Never mind what I am going to do."

"Will you tell me why you tried to take my life?"

"Hang it, boy, don't talk so loud!"

"Then tell me your object."

"I won't."

"You will have to."

"What's that, boy?"

"I say you will have to."

"Nonsense. Get out of my way. I am in a hurry."

Martin Thomas tried to brush past Ralph, but the boy caught him by the arm.

"Let go of me, boy, unless you want me to do something desperate. You escaped me three times, but——"

Martin Thomas broke off short, and his face turned a sickly green. He had just caught sight of the policeman and Micky, who were dodging behind him.

"Why—er——" he began.

"Dat's der feller, officer!" cried out Micky. "Didn't yer hear wot he said?"

"I did," replied the policeman.

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"Arrest this man, officer," put in Ralph. "And be careful, for he is a desperate criminal."

"This is an outrage!" cried Martin Thomas, but he was too overcome to put any courage in his words.

"I will make a complaint against the man," said Ralph, calmly. "This boy will be a witness for me, and I can get other witnesses against him if it be necessary."

"That's all I want," said the policeman. "You just come with me," he went on, to Martin Thomas.

The rascal begged, pleaded and threatened, but all to no purpose. The policeman held him on one side, while Ralph ranged up on the other, and Micky marched behind. In this order they soon reached the station-house.

Here Ralph told his whole story, and Micky related what he knew of the affair. Then the country boy sent a special messenger to Horace Kelsey.

The arrival of the rich insurance agent helped Ralph's case considerably. Martin Thomas was locked up in default of a thousand dollars' bail, pending trial for atrocious assault.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

[Pg 242]

BEGINNING OF THE END.

"It would be a great thing if you could get this Martin Thomas to confess his secret," remarked Horace Kelsey to Ralph, after the hearing was over.

"That is true," returned the boy. "But I don't see how I am going to do it. He is very stubborn."

"He won't be stubborn long. He knows the charge against him is too grave. You might intimate to him that it will go easier with him if he confesses."

"That is true, sir."

"If he is merely a tool it is nothing to you whether he is punished or not. You wish to bring the instigator of this plot against you to justice."

"Supposing I go in and have a talk with him, then?" suggested Ralph.

"We will both go in," returned Horace Kelsey.

Half an hour later they were closeted with Martin Thomas in a side room of the police station. They told the rascal of the object of their visit.

At first Martin Thomas would not listen to them but when Horace Kelsey pictured the possible future to him he grew more pliable. He began to pace up and down nervously.

"Well, supposing I own up to everything," he said, at last. "Will you drop this case against me?" [Pg 243]

"That depends on what you have to say," said Ralph, cautiously.

"Well, I can say this much: I was only hired for this work—I and Toglet."

"Who by?"

"Squire Paget, of Westville."

Had a bombshell exploded at Ralph's feet he would have been no more astonished than at this declaration.

"Do you mean to say Squire Paget hired you for this work?" he demanded.

"Yes, I do. The whole scheme was his."

"But what was his object?"

"He wanted to get you out of the way."

"But why?"

"He didn't tell me why, but I reckon it was on account of some valuable Westville property."

"It must be the property down by the lake front!" cried Ralph.

"Had he the papers for that land?" asked Horace Kelsey.

"I never thought so," returned the boy, slowly. "But he might have. He used to transact most of father's business for him years ago."

"Then you can depend upon it that he has the papers."

"But the land belongs to my mother."

"He's going to force her into selling out to him," put in Martin Thomas. "With you out of the way he felt sure, I suppose, that he could do as he pleased with your mother."

"The scamp!" ejaculated Ralph, his honest eyes flashing fire. "If you have told the truth, he shall suffer for this, mark my words!" [Pg 244]

"And, hoping you will drop this matter against me," went on the prisoner, "let me give you another pointer. You wrote to your mother the other day, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, he got that letter. Your mother never saw it."

"No wonder I haven't received any reply then!" burst out Ralph. "Did you ever hear of anything so mean?" he added, turning to his rich friend.

"Your duty at present is plain, Ralph," replied the insurance agent, pointedly. "The best you can do is to take the first train home."

"You are right."

"There is no telling, if this Squire Paget is so villainous, what he may not try to do."

"You think he will not wait?"

"It is not likely. He has shown a great haste in the whole matter."

"No. Don't wait. Go home and have him locked up," put in Martin Thomas. "I will appear against him, if you wish it."

He was willing now to do anything to save himself from a long term in prison.

"I will go home," said Ralph. "I will not lose another minute."

"Shall I go along?" asked Horace Kelsey. "You may need some one to help you in your fight

against so influential a man as Squire Paget."

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"I shall consider it a great favor," said Ralph, and he gave the insurance agent a grateful look.

They consulted a time-table, and found that they could get a train for Chambersburgh in an hour. This train would connect with the regular lake steamer that stopped at Westville.

The two questioned Martin Thomas for a few minutes longer, and got what additional information they could from him. Then they called in the jail keeper and hurried off.

"I guess Squire Paget will be surprised when we walk in on him," said Ralph, with a grim smile.

"He will be still more surprised when he learns that Martin Thomas has been arrested and that his whole plot is known," replied Horace Kelsey.

The insurance agent had several small matters to attend to. But these did not take long, and then they took an elevated train for the depot.

Fifteen minutes later, Ralph's homeward journey had begun. It was none too soon, as the sequel will show.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

[Pg 246]

A SURPRISE AT CHAMBERSBURGH.

"I believe that one reason why Squire Paget wished to get me out of the situation on the bridge was because he hoped thereby to force me to leave Westville altogether," remarked Ralph, as the train sped on its way.

"Perhaps you are right," returned Horace Kelsey. "One thing is certain, he was decidedly anxious to get you out of the way; otherwise, he would not have hired this Martin Thomas a second time."

"I never thought it of Squire Paget," murmured Ralph, thoughtfully. "Why, it is simply horrible!"

"There is no telling to what depths a man will sink for the sake of money," returned the insurance agent. "Here in the city we see it more than in the country."

"I thought Percy Paget bad enough, but he can't be a patch to his father."

"You must be careful how you go ahead, Ralph. Squire Paget may deny the whole statement made by Martin Thomas, and then you will have some trouble to prove anything against him."

"I know that."

"The best thing you can do is to call on your mother first——"

"I intend to do that. I am much worried since I know she has not received my letter."

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"She may have news to tell. Who knows but what the squire has approached her about this property question already."

"I shall look to you for advice before I make an important movement," said Ralph.

It was growing dark, and soon it became time to go to bed on the train. Horace Kelsey had procured berths, and both retired. But to tell the truth, Ralph did not sleep a wink all night.

He could not help but think of all that had happened, and speculate as to what the future held in store. Never once did he dream of the many surprises so close at hand.

Ralph was up before any one else among the passengers. It was a good hour before Horace Kelsey followed.

"Anxious, I suppose," smiled the insurance agent. "Well, I don't blame you."

"There is so much at stake," rejoined Ralph. "I feel as if a fuse had been lighted, and I was just waiting for something to explode."

"And something will explode ere long, I imagine," laughed Horace Kelsey.

It was a little after eight o'clock when the train rolled into Chambersburgh and they alighted. Both knew the place fairly well, and started at once for the steamboat landing.

Just as they turned a corner of the street they came face to face with three police officers who were escorting two men and a boy to the station-house. The men were Dock Brady and another. The boy was Percy Paget.

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"Look!" cried Ralph. "What can this mean?"

"I don't know them," returned Horace Kelsey.

"Why, that is Percy Paget!"

"Is it possible?"

"And one of those men is Dock Brady, the man who is supposed to have robbed the Westville post office."

"Really! That is interesting!"

"I'll bet a fortune they are the three that did that job!" burst out Ralph, excitedly. "There were two men and a boy, and this crowd is the same."

"Ask one of the officers," suggested Horace Kelsey. "Or, stop, I will do so."

He stepped up to the little crowd, which had come to a halt at a corner, and tapped one of the policemen on the arm.

"I wish to ask you a few private questions about your prisoners," he said, in a low tone.

"Ask him," returned the officer; and he pointed to a quiet-looking man in black a few steps away.

Horace Kelsey at once stepped up to the person indicated, Ralph beside him.

"We are interested in these prisoners," he said. "Will you tell me why they have been arrested?"

"I am not at liberty to say much just now——" began the man in black.

"Are they not the Westville post office robbers?" questioned Horace, eagerly.

"Ah! What do you know of that case?" and the quiet-looking man became interested at once. [Pg 249]

Ralph told him what he knew in a few brief, well-chosen words. The man smiled.

"You have hit it on the head," he said. "They are the guilty parties. I am a post office detective, and have just run them down."

"And is Percy Paget as guilty as the rest?"

"He was drawn into the scheme by this Brady, who is a very smart fellow. Brady also drew in the other man, who was formerly a horse dealer in this city."

"And did you obtain the money and packages that were stolen?" asked Horace Kelsey.

"We recovered nearly everything. By the way," went on the detective, "did you say your name was Ralph Nelson?"

"Yes, sir."

"I overheard this Percy Paget say how he had put a valise in your yard in order to throw suspicion on you. I knew of that valise being found. You are now cleared on that point."

"I am glad of it," replied Ralph, heartily.

"There is something else which may interest you. I do not quite understand it, because this Paget boy is one of the robbers. Among the registered letters which Dock Brady held was one sent by Squire Paget to some friend in New York. This contained several important papers relating to some property in Westville belonging to a Mrs. Martha Nelson, widow of the late Randolph Nelson——"

"My mother!" shouted Ralph. "Hurrah! the missing papers have been found!"

"Dock Brady was evidently holding them to obtain money from the squire on them," went on the man in black. "What shall we do with them? Under the law they ought to be forwarded to the party in New York." [Pg 250]

"Keep them until matters can be straightened out," said Horace Kelsey, coming to Ralph's rescue. "Listen, and I will tell you where we are going, and what my young friend intends to do."

CHAPTER XL.

[Pg 251]

THE EXPOSURE—CONCLUSION.

Let us again shift the scene to Westville, and for the last time.

Mrs. Nelson had recovered from the first effects of her severe shock attending the announcement that her son was dead, but she was still very weak and sick.

"Poor Ralph! poor Ralph!" she murmured, over and over again, as she sat by, the kitchen window, while kind-hearted Mrs. Corcoran moved about doing the simple household duties. "Oh, Mrs. Corcoran, it cannot be possible, can it?"

"There, there, try to think of something else, that's a good dear!" returned the neighbor, sympathetically. "It won't do any good to brood over the matter."

"But Ralph was my only child! And his father gone, too!" and Mrs. Nelson heaved a deep sigh, while the tears streamed down her cheeks anew.

The widow's sorrow was deep, and up to now she had not allowed herself to think of aught else. She was alone in the world, so she thought, and did not care how the future shaped itself.

Presently there was a knock on the door, and Mrs. Corcoran opened it to admit Squire Paget. The head man of the village wore a look of hypocritical sympathy upon his sharp features.

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"I was just going over the bridge to Eastport," he explained, "and thought I would drop in for a neighborly chat."

Even in this simple statement he could not put a grain of truth. He had made a special trip to the cottage, and had come solely for his own selfish ends.

Mrs. Corcoran bid him welcome, and offered him a chair.

"I trust you do not let your sorrow rest too deeply upon you, widow," he went on, to Mrs. Nelson. "We all have our trials in this world," and he gave a grunt that was meant for a deep sigh.

"How can I help it, squire?" she replied. "Ralph was all the world to me."

"So was my late wife, widow, and yet I had to give her up;" and again he gave a grunt-like sigh.

This statement did not affect Mrs. Nelson greatly. She knew that it was a fact that the squire and his late wife had quarreled continually, and that many had said he had not cared at all when death had relieved him of her companionship.

"I was wondering what you intended to do," went on the squire, after an awkward pause. "Do you intend to stay here?"

"I do not know yet, squire."

"I should think you would want to change your surroundings. Does not everything in this cottage remind you of your late husband and late son?"

"Indeed it does!" cried Mrs. Nelson. "Sometimes I cannot bear it!"

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"If I were you I would sell out and go elsewhere," suggested the squire, coming around to the subject that was on his mind. "Perhaps a little trip somewhere would do you a world of good."

"It would do her good," put in simple-minded Mrs. Corcoran, who believed the squire sincere.

"I cannot afford a trip," sighed Mrs. Nelson. "Besides—I—I—sometimes think that Ralph may come back," she faltered.

"Never, in this life, widow," returned the squire, solemnly. "Alas! the dead never return, no matter how much we love them."

"Sometimes they do, Squire Paget!" cried a young voice from the open doorway, and Ralph sprang into the room. "Mother!"

"Ralph, my son!" screamed Mrs. Nelson. "Thank Heaven for its many mercies!"

And she threw herself into Ralph's arms, while the tears of sorrow were quickly turned to tears of joy.

Squire Paget was dumbfounded. He stared at Ralph as if the boy was an apparition.

"Is it really you, Ralph?" he stammered at last.

"Sure, an' it is, Heaven bless him!" put in Mrs. Corcoran.

"And where have you been, Ralph?" cried Mrs. Nelson, when she could again speak.

"I have been in New York. You would have heard from me before had not that villain stolen the letter I sent."

"Villain, Ralph——"

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"Yes, villain, mother. Squire Paget is the blackest-hearted wretch in Westville."

"What's this, and to me!" ejaculated the squire.

"Yes, to you, Squire Paget, you mean, contemptible coward!" returned the boy, boldly. "Look at him, mother, and see him quail while I tell you of all he has done."

"I have done nothing," faltered the squire, but he looked as if he wished to sink through the floor.

"He hired two men to throw me over the cliff on Tree Top Island, and when they failed, he got one of the men to follow me to New York and try to put me out of existence there."

"Oh, Ralph, I cannot believe it!"

"It is all true, mother. Here is Mr. Kelsey, and he will tell you the same."

"This is preposterous——" began the squire, faintly, but Ralph cut him short.

"It is all true. The man who followed me to New York was Martin Thomas. He is now in jail and has confessed all."

The squire tottered as if struck a blow. He tried to speak, but the words would not come.

"And do you know why he did it?" went on Ralph. "He had the missing papers, and wished to get hold of our property here. But the missing papers we have found——"

"Found!"

The squire managed to gasp out the single word.

"Yes, found. They were in a registered letter sent by Squire Paget to some friend in New York. They were stolen by the post office thieves, who are now in custody. And, by the way, squire, shall I tell you who the thieves were? Dock Brady, a man named Cassidy, and a boy named Percy Paget."

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It was a final and telling blow. The squire fell back, pale and trembling. Ralph faced him dauntlessly, while the others stood around, holding their breath.

Squire Paget could not answer. He wanted to speak, but not a word would his tongue utter. He looked about for his silk hat, and, finding it, dashed out of the house as if a legion of demons were after him.

We will pass over the immediate scenes that followed. Mrs. Nelson could not let Ralph leave her side for the rest of the day, and Horace Kelsey undertook to follow the squire and bring him to terms.

But the exposure had been too much for Squire Paget. He disappeared that night, leaving his business affairs just as they were. It was not until a year afterward that he was heard from as living in an obscure state in a little town in Canada.

On the strength of his confession, Ralph did not appear against Martin Thomas, and the man got off with a very light sentence. Toglet took time by the forelock, and fled to the Southwest.

The post office robbers were all heavily punished, although Percy Paget, on account of his years, received a lighter sentence than his older companions.

It was not long before the papers which had been missing were turned over to Mrs. Nelson. Under Ralph's advice, the entire question of property was placed in Horace Kelsey's charge.

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The insurance agent was not long in finding out what Squire Paget had intended to do with the land along the lake front. Part of it was to be turned over to a syndicate for a factory site, and the balance was to be cut up and sold as town lots. The plan was carried out later on for Mrs. Nelson's benefit, and the sum of seventy thousand dollars was eventually realized out of the transaction.

Of course this made the widow and her son the richest people in the village. Ralph at once left off work, and took up his studies, and passed through Yale College with high honors. To-day he is the mayor of Westville, honored and loved by all who know him, and here we will leave him.

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE YOUNG BRIDGE-TENDER; OR, RALPH NELSON'S UPWARD STRUGGLE ***

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