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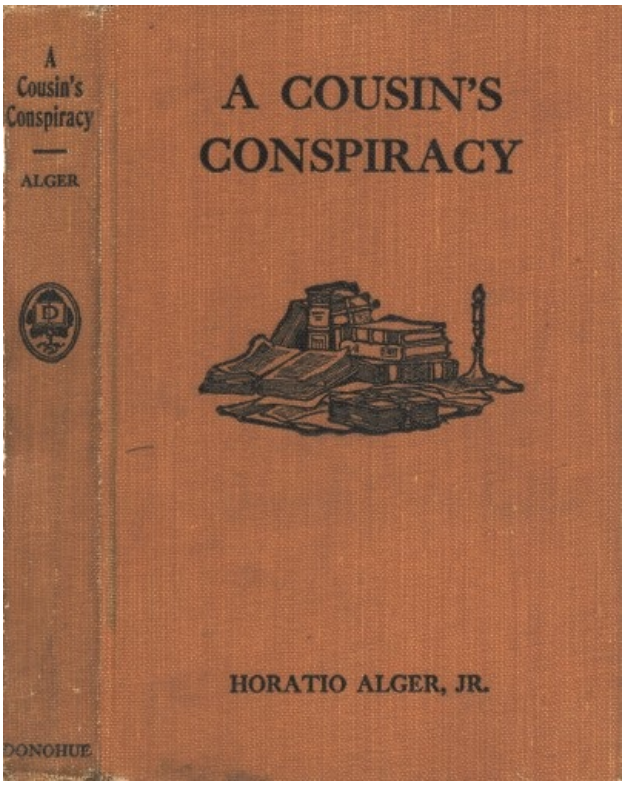

A COUSIN'S CONSPIRACY

"Saving the Indian boy from drowning." (Page 102)

A COUSIN'S CONSPIRACY

OR
A BOY'S STRUGGLE FOR AN INHERITANCE

BY
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"HERBERT CARTER'S LEGACY," "YOUNG SALESMAN,"
"PAUL THE PEDDLER," "PHIL THE FIDDLER"

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A COUSIN'S CONSPIRACY

CHAPTER I

IN A LONELY CABIN

On the edge of a prairie, in western Iowa, thirty years ago, stood a cabin, covering quite a little ground, but only one story high. It was humble enough, but not more so than the early homes of

some who have become great.

The furniture was limited to articles of prime necessity. There was a stove, a table, three chairs, a row of shelves containing a few articles of crockery and tinware, and a bed in the far corner of the room, on which rested a man with ragged gray beard and hair, a face long and thin, and coal-black eyes.

It was evident he was sick unto death. His parchment-colored skin was wrinkled; from time to time he coughed so violently as to rack his slight frame, and his hand, thin and wrinkled, as it rested on the quilt that covered him, shook as with palsy.

It was hard to tell how old the man was. He looked over seventy, but there were indications that he had aged prematurely.

There was one other person in the room whose appearance contrasted strongly with that of the old man—a boy of sixteen, with brown hair, ruddy cheeks, hazel eyes, an attractive yet firm and resolute face, and an appearance of manliness and self-reliance. He was well dressed, and would have passed muster upon the streets of a city.

“How do you feel, Uncle Peter?” he asked as he stood by the bedside.

“I shall never feel better, Ernest,” said the old man in a hollow voice.

“Don’t say that, uncle,” said Ernest in a tone of concern.

There seemed little to connect him in his strong, attractive boyhood with the frail old man, but they had lived together for five years, and habit was powerful.

“Yes, Ernest, I shall never rise from this bed.”

“Isn’t there anything I can get for you, uncle?”

“Is there—is there anything left in the bottle?” asked Peter wistfully.

Ernest walked to the shelf that held the dishes, and took from a corner a large black bottle. It seemed light, and might be empty. He turned the contents into a glass, but there was only a tablespoonful of whisky.

“It is almost all gone, Uncle Peter; will you have this much?”

“Yes,” answered the old man tremulously.

Ernest lifted the invalid into a sitting posture, and put the glass to his mouth.

He drained it, and gave a sigh of satisfaction.

“It is good,” he said briefly.

“I wish there were more.”

“It goes to the right spot. It puts strength into me.”

“Shall I go to the village and buy more?”

“I—I don’t know——”

“I can get back very soon.”

“Very well; go, like a good boy.”

“I shall have to trouble you for some money, Uncle Peter.”

“Go to the trunk. You will find some.”

There was a small hair trunk in another corner. Ernest knew that this was meant, and he lifted the lid.

There was a small wooden box at the left-hand side. Opening this, Ernest saw three five-dollar gold pieces.

“There are but three gold pieces, uncle,” he announced, looking toward the bed.

“Take one of them, Ernest.”

“I wonder if that is all the money he has left?” thought Ernest.

He rose and went to the door.

“I won’t be gone long, uncle,” he said. He followed a path which led from the door in an easterly direction to the village. It was over a mile away, and consisted of a few scattering houses, a blacksmith’s shop and a store.

It was to the store that Ernest bent his steps. It was a one-story structure, as were most of the buildings in the village. There was a sign over the door which read:

JOE MARKS,
GROCERIES AND FAMILY SUPPLIES.

Joe stood behind the counter; there were two other men in the store, one tall, gaunt, of the average Western type, with a broad-brimmed soft felt hat on his head and the costume of a hunter; he looked rough, but honest and reliable, that was more than could be said of the other. He may best be described as a tramp, a man who looked averse to labor of any kind, a man without a settled business or home, who cared less for food than drink, and whose mottled face indicated frequent potations of whisky.

Ernest looked at this man as he entered. He didn't remember to have met him before, nor was there anything to attract him in his appearance.

"How are you, Ernest?" said Joe Marks cordially. "How's Uncle Peter?"

"He's pretty bad, Joe. He thinks he's going to die."

"Not so bad as that, surely?"

"Yes, I guess he's right. He's very weak."

"Well, he's a good age. How old is he?"

"I don't know. He never told me."

"He's well on to seventy, I'm thinking. But what can I do for you?"

"You may fill this bottle; Uncle Peter is weak, he thinks it will put new life in him." 8

"So it will, Ernest; there's nothing like good whisky to make an old man strong, or a young man, for that matter."

It is easy to see that Joe did not believe in total abstinence.

"I don't drink myself!" said Ernest, replying to the last part of Joe's remark.

"There's nothing like whisky," remarked the tramp in a hoarse voice.

"You've drunk your share, I'm thinking," said Luke Robbins, the tall hunter.

"Not yet," returned the tramp. "I haven't had my share yet. There's lots of people that has drunk more'n me."

"Why haven't you drunk your share? You hadn't no objections, I reckon?"

"I hadn't the money," said the tramp sadly. "I've never had much money. I ain't lucky."

"If you had more money, you might not be living now. You'd have drunk yourself to death."

"If I ever do commit suicide, that's the way I'd like to die," said the tramp.

Joe filled the bottle from a keg behind the counter and handed it to Ernest. The aroma of the whisky was diffused about the store, and the tramp sniffed it eagerly. It stimulated his desire to indulge his craving for drink. As Ernest, with the bottle in his hand, prepared to leave, the tramp addressed him.

"Say, young feller, ain't you goin' to shout?"

"What do you mean?"

"Ain't you goin' to treat me and this gentleman?" indicating Luke Robbins.

"No," answered Ernest shortly. "I don't buy it as drink, but as medicine."

"I need medicine," urged the tramp, with a smile.

"I don't," said the hunter. "Don't you bother about us, my boy. If we want whisky we can buy it ourselves."

"I can't," whined the tramp. "If I had as much money as you"—for he had noticed that Ernest had changed a gold piece—"I'd be happy, but I'm out of luck." 9

Ernest paid no attention to his words, but left the store and struck the path homeward.

"What's that boy?" asked the tramp.

"It's Ernest Ray."

"Where'd he get that gold?"

"He lives with his uncle, a mile from the village."

"Is his uncle rich?"

"Folks think so. They call him a miser."

"Is he goin' to die?"

"That's what the boy says."

"And the boy'll get all his money?"

"It's likely."

"I'd like to be his guardian."

Joe and Luke Robbins laughed.

"You'd make a pretty guardian," said Luke.

CHAPTER II

UNCLE PETER'S REVELATION

Ernest went direct to his home, for he knew his uncle would be waiting for him.

The old man's eyes were closed, but he opened them when Ernest entered.

"Was I gone long?" asked the boy.

"I don't know. I think I fell asleep."

"Shall I give you some of the drink?"

"Yes."

He drank a small amount, and it seemed to brighten him up. "You look better, Uncle Peter. You may live some time."

Peter shook his head.

"No, boy," he replied; "my time has come to die. I know it. I would like to live for your sake. You will miss me when I am gone, Ernest?"

"Yes, uncle, I shall miss you very much."

The old man seemed gratified. Ernest was the only one he cared for in all the world.

"I don't care so much about dying, but I am anxious for you. I wish I had money to leave you, Ernest, but I haven't much."

"I am young and strong. I can get along."

"I hope so. You will go away from here?"

"Yes, uncle. I don't think I shall care to stay here after you are gone."

"You will need money to take you away."

"There is a little more in the trunk."

"But only a little. It is not quite all I have. I have a hundred dollars in gold laid away for you."

Ernest looked surprised.

"I must tell you where it is while I still have life. Do you remember the oak tree on the little knoll half a mile away?"

"Yes, I know it."

"Dig under that tree five feet in a westerly direction. There is a wooden box about a foot below the surface. There's nothing to mark the spot, for it was buried a year since, and the grass has grown over it. After I am gone go there and get the money, but don't let anyone see you. It will be best to go at night. There are evil-disposed men who would rob you of it. I am sorry it is so little, Ernest."

"But it seems to me a good deal."

"To a boy it may seem so. Once I thought I might have a good deal more to leave you. Go to the trunk and search till you find a paper folded in an envelope with your name."

Ernest went to the trunk. He found the envelope readily, and held it up.

"Is that it, uncle?"

"Yes. Put it in your pocket, and read it after I am gone. Then be guided by circumstances. It may amount to something hereafter."

"Very well, uncle."

"I have told you, Ernest, that I do not expect to live long. I have a feeling that twenty-four hours from now I shall be gone."

"Oh, no, uncle, not so soon!" exclaimed Ernest in a shocked tone.

"Yes, I think so. If you have any questions to ask me while I yet have life, ask, for it is your right."

"Yes, Uncle Peter, I have long wished to know something about myself. Have I any relatives except you?"

"I am not your relative," answered the old man slowly.

"Are you not my uncle?" he asked.

"No; there is no tie of blood between us."

"Then how does it happen that we have lived together so many years?"

"I was a servant in your father's family. When your father died the care of you devolved upon me."

"Where was I born?"

"In a large town in the western part of New York State. Your grandfather was a man of wealth, but your father incurred his displeasure by his marriage to a poor but highly educated and refined girl. A cousin of your father took advantage of this and succeeded in alienating father and son. The estate that should have descended to your father was left to the cousin."

“Is he still living?”

“Yes.”

“But my father died?”

“Yes; he had a fever which quickly carried him off when you were five years of age.”

“Was he very poor?”

“No; he inherited a few thousand dollars from an aunt, and upon this he lived prudently, carrying on a small business besides. Your mother died when you were three years old, your father two years later.”

“And then you took care of me?”

“Yes.”

“And I have been a burden to you these many years!”

“No! Don’t give me too much credit. A sum of money was put into my hands to spend for you. We lived carefully, and it lasted. We have been here three years, and it has cost very little to live in that time. The hundred dollars of which I spoke to you are the last of your inheritance. You are not indebted to me for it. It is rightfully yours.” 12

“What is my uncle’s name?”

“Stephen Ray. He lives a few miles from Elmira on the Erie Road.”

“And is he quite rich?”

“Yes; he is probably worth a quarter of a million dollars. It is money which should have gone to your father.”

“Then the wicked are sometimes prospered in this world?”

“Yes, but this world is not all.”

“Has there been any communication with my cousin in all these years?”

“Yes; two years ago I wrote to him.”

“What did you write?”

“You must forgive me, Ernest, but I saw you growing up without education, and I felt that you should have advantages which I could not give you. I wrote to your cousin, asking if he would pay your expenses in a preparatory school and afterwards at college.”

“What did he reply?”

“Go to the trunk. You will find his letter there. It is in the tray, and addressed to me.”

Ernest found it readily.

“May I read it?” he asked.

“Yes, I wish you to do so.”

It ran thus:

> Peter Brant—Sir: I have received your letter making an appeal to me in behalf of Ernest Ray, the son of my cousin. You wish me to educate him. I must decline to do so. His father very much incensed my revered uncle, and it is not right that any of his money should go to him or his heirs. The son must reap the reward of the father’s disobedience. So far as I am personally concerned, I should not object to doing something for the boy, but I am sure that my dead uncle would not approve it. Besides, I have myself a son to whom I propose to leave the estate intact. 13
>
> It is my advice that you bring up the boy Ernest to some humble employment, perhaps have him taught some trade by which he can earn an honest living. It is not at all necessary that he should receive a college education. You are living at the West. That is well. He is favorably situated for a poor boy, and will have little difficulty in earning a livelihood. I don’t care to have him associate with my boy Clarence. They are cousins, it is true, but their lots in life will be very different.
>
> I do not care to communicate with you again.
>
> Stephen Ray.

Ernest read this letter with flushed cheeks.

“I hate that man!” he said hotly, “even if he is a relative. Peter, I am sorry you ever applied to him in my behalf.”

“I would not, Ernest, if I had understood what manner of man he was.”

“I may meet him some time,” said Ernest thoughtfully.

“Would you claim relationship?”

“Never!” declared Ernest emphatically. “It was he, you say, who prejudiced my grandfather against my poor father.”

“Yes.”

“In order to secure the estate himself?”

“Undoubtedly that was his object.”

“Nothing could be meaner. I would rather live poor all my life than get property by such means.”

“If you have no more questions to ask, Ernest, I will try to sleep. I feel drowsy.”

“Do so, Uncle Peter.”

The old man closed his eyes, and soon all was silent. Ernest himself lay down on a small bed. When he awoke, hours afterward, he lit a candle and went to Peter’s bedside.

The old man lay still. With quick suspicion Ernest placed his hand on his cheek.

It was stone cold.

“He is dead!” cried Ernest, and a feeling of desolation came over him.

“I am all alone now,” he murmured.

But he was not wholly alone. There was a face glued against the window-pane—a face that he did not see. It was the tramp he had met during the day at the village store.

CHAPTER III

ROBBERY

The tramp stood with his face glued to the pane, looking in at the boy. He could not quite understand what had taken place, but gathered that the old man was dead.

“So much the better!” he said. “It will make my task easier.”

He had hoped to find both asleep, and decided to wait near the house till the boy went to bed. He had made many inquiries at the store of Joe Marks, and the answers led him to believe that old Peter had a large amount of money concealed in his cabin.

Now Tom Burns was a penniless tramp, who had wandered from Chicago on a predatory trip, to take any property he could lay his hands on. The chance that presented itself here was tempting to a man of his character.

Earlier in the evening he had reached the cabin, but thought it best to defer his work until later, for Ernest was awake and stirring about the room.

The tramp withdrew from the cabin and lay down under a tree, where he was soon fast asleep. Curiously it was the very oak tree under which Peter’s little hoard was concealed. This of course he did not know. Had he been aware that directly beneath him was a box containing a hundred dollars in gold he would have been electrified and full of joy.

Tom Burns in his long and varied career had many times slept in the open air, and he had no difficulty in falling asleep now, and when he woke it was much later than he intended. However, without delay, he made his way to the cabin, and arrived just as Ernest discovered the death of the old man whom he had supposed to be his uncle.

What time it was the tramp did not know, but as he stood with his face glued to the window-pane he heard a clock in the cabin striking the hour of three.

“Three o’clock,” he ejaculated. “Well, I did have a nap!”

The boy was awake, and he thought it best to wait a while.

“Why didn’t I get here a little sooner?” he grumbled. “Then I could have ransacked the cabin without trouble. Probably the old man has been dead some time.”

He watched to see what Ernest would do.

“He won’t be such a fool as to sit up with the corpse,” he muttered a little apprehensively. “That wouldn’t do no good.”

Apparently Ernest was of this opinion, for after carefully covering up the inanimate body he lay down again on his own bed.

He did not fall asleep immediately, for the thought that he was in the presence of death naturally affected his imagination. But gradually his eyes closed, and his full, regular breathing gave notice that he was asleep.

He had left the candle burning on the table. By the light which it afforded the tramp could watch him, and at the end of twenty minutes he felt satisfied that he could safely enter.

He lifted the window and passed into the room noiselessly. He had one eye fixed on the sleeping boy, who might suddenly awake. He had taken off his shoes and left them on the grass just under the window.

When Tom Burns found himself in the room he made his way at once to the trunk, which his watchful eye had already discovered.

“That’s where the old man keeps his gold, likely,” he muttered. “I hope it isn’t locked.”

Usually the trunk would have been fastened, but the conversation which Ernest had with old Peter so engrossed his mind as to make him less careful than usual. Tom Burns therefore had no difficulty in lifting the lid.

With eager fingers he explored the contents, and was not long in discovering the box which contained the two gold coins. 16

The discovery pleased and yet disappointed him.

“Only ten dollars!” he muttered. “There ought to have been a pile of these yellow boys. Perhaps there are more somewhere.”

Meanwhile he slipped the two coins into his vest pocket. It was not much, but it was more than he had had in his possession for months.

He continued his search, but failed to discover any more money. He felt indignant. That a miser should have but a paltry ten dollars in his trunk was very discreditable.

“He must have some more somewhere,” Burns reflected.

It occurred to him that there might be hoards hidden under the floor, or in the immediate neighborhood of the cabin. But it was night, and there would be no profit in pursuing the search now.

“To-morrow,” he reflected, “the boy will be off, making preparations for buryin’ the old man, and then I can make another visit.”

He closed the lid of the trunk, and with a general glance to see if there was anything more worth taking he rose to his feet and prepared to leave the room.

Just at this moment Ernest, who was probably dreaming of the old man, spoke in his sleep.

“Uncle Peter,” he murmured.

The tramp stood still, apprehensive that Ernest would open his eyes and detect his presence. But the boy did not speak again.

“I had better get,” muttered Burns.

He got out of the window quietly, but as the boy stirred again he hurried away without stopping to shut it.

When, a little after seven o’clock, Ernest woke up, the sun was streaming in at the open window, and the cool air entered with it.

“How came the window up?” thought Ernest, wondering. “I am sure I didn’t leave it open last night.”

There was nothing else to indicate that the cabin had been entered. But the more Ernest thought it over the more convinced he was that there had been a visitor. 17

What could have been his motive?

With sudden suspicion he went to the trunk and opened it. It was evident that things had been disturbed. His eyes sought the box that contained the gold pieces. He opened it, and found that he had been robbed.

“Who could have done it?” he asked himself.

He could not think of anyone. He was acquainted with everyone in the village, and he knew none that would be capable of theft. He never thought of the ill-looking tramp he had met in Joe Marks’s store.

Ten dollars was a considerable loss to him, for he had estimated that it would defray the expenses of old Peter’s interment. It was not so bad as it might have been, for the hundred dollars of which Peter had told him were still safe.

“When I get that I must be careful,” he said to himself.

Though his rest had been disturbed, he felt ready to get up. There was work for him to do. He must arrange for the burial of the old man with whom he had lived so long, the only friend he felt he could claim.

Ernest rose, and after dressing himself made a frugal breakfast. He looked sadly at Peter. Death was to him something new and strange, for he did not remember ever having seen a dead man before. He must get help, and with that object in view he went to the village, and sought the store of Joe Marks.

“What brings you out so early, my lad?” asked Joe.

“Matter enough, Joe. My uncle is dead.”

He still called him uncle, though he knew now that Peter was no kin to him.

“Old Peter dead!” ejaculated Marks. “When did he die?”

“Some time during the night. I wish you’d help me, for I don’t know what to do.”

“So I will, boy. We’ll stand by you, won’t we, Luke?”

This was said as Luke Robbins entered the store. 18

“To be sure we will, Ernest. We all like you.”

“Oh, I forgot to say,” continued Ernest, “the cabin was entered last night and some money taken.”

CHAPTER IV

ALONE IN THE WORLD

Joe Marks and Luke Robbins looked at each other in amazement.

“Your cabin entered!” exclaimed Joe. “What do you say to that, Luke?”

“I did not know there were any thieves round here,” answered Luke. “What was taken?”

“An old trunk was opened—I carelessly left it unlocked—and two five-dollar gold pieces were stolen out of it. At any rate, I couldn’t find them this morning.”

“Two five-dollar gold pieces?” said Joe quickly. “Then I know who took them.”

“What do you mean, Joe?” said Luke. “Out with it!”

“You know that tramp who was here yesterday, Luke?”

“Yes.”

“He came round an hour ago, and called for a glass of whisky. ‘Where is your money?’ I asked. ‘I’ve got plenty,’ he said. Then I called upon him to show it, and he pulled out a five-dollar gold piece. Of course I was surprised. ‘Where did you get it?’ I asked suspiciously. ‘Yesterday you said you had no money.’ ‘I had that,’ he answered, ‘but I didn’t want to spend it. You see it was a gift from my dyin’ mother, and I wanted to keep it for her sake.’ With that he rolled up his eyes and looked sanctimonious. Then I asked him how it happened that he was ready to spend it now.”

“What did he say?”

“He said that he was so parched with thirst that he felt obliged to do it.”

“Did you take his money?”

“No. I was short of change. You see I changed a gold piece for the boy yesterday. Besides, I wasn’t sure the piece was good, seeing who offered it.”

“Then he didn’t get his whisky?”

“No. He went away disappointed. I don’t doubt, Ernest, that the gold piece was one of yours. How did the fellow get in?”

“Through the window. I found it open when I woke up.”

“You must have slept sound.”

“I did. I slept an hour later than I generally do.”

“Was anything else taken?”

“Not that I could discover.”

“Do you mean to say that your uncle had but ten dollars?” asked Joe incredulously.

“It was all he had in the trunk.”

“I always thought him a rich man.”

“He was not,” said Ernest quietly.

“Was that all the money he had? He had the reputation of being a miser, with hoards of gold hidden in or near the cabin.”

“I know of one sum of money he had concealed, but it was not a large amount.”

“I’m glad you won’t be left penniless, lad; did he own the cabin?” said Luke.

“Nobody owned it,” said Joe Marks. “It was built years ago by a man who suddenly left it and went away, nobody knew where. It wasn’t worth much, and no one ever took the trouble to claim it. When your uncle came here he found it empty and took possession of it, and there he has lived ever since. So you’ll have some money, Ernest?”

“Only a hundred dollars.”

“What will you do? What are your plans?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t had time to think.”

“I might find a place for you in the store. We wouldn’t like to have you go away.”

“Thank you, Joe. You are very kind. But there’s no chance for me around here. I’ll take the money and go somewhere. But first I must see Uncle Peter buried. Will you help me?”

“To be sure we will. Was he your only relation?”

“He was not my relation at all.”

“Why, you have always called him uncle.”

“I supposed him to be my uncle, but yesterday he told me that he was only a servant in my father’s family, and that on my father’s death he was placed in charge of me.”

“I reckon that’s so. You didn’t favor the old man at all. You look as if you came from better stock.”

“All the same I shall miss him,” said Ernest sadly. “He was a good friend to me.”

“Did he tell you whether you had any kin?”

“Yes; I have a cousin of my father’s living in New York State. He is a rich man. He inherited the property that ought to have gone to my father.”

“How did that happen?”

“He prejudiced my grandfather against my father, and so the estate was willed to him.”

“The mean scoundrel!” exclaimed Luke indignantly. “I’d like to have him in my hands for a few minutes; I’d give him a lesson.”

“I should pity him if ever you got hold of him, Luke,” said Joe Marks. “But we must consider what we can do for the boy.”

“I wish we could get hold of that thief of a tramp!”

“Probably we shall. He’ll find his way back here sooner or later.”

But the burial of Peter Brant was the first consideration. No undertaker was called, for in that small settlement one would not have been supported. The ceremonies of death were few and simple. A wooden box was put together, and Peter was placed in it, dressed as he was at the time of his death. There was an itinerant minister who preached in the village once in four weeks, but he was away now, and so there could be no religious ceremony beyond reading a chapter from the New Testament. Joe Marks, who had received a decent education, officiated as reader. Then the interment took place. In the forenoon of the second day Peter’s body was laid away, and Ernest was left practically alone in the world.

Meanwhile some account must be given of Tom Burns, the tramp.

When he found it impossible to obtain whisky with the gold he had stolen he felt very despondent. His craving became intolerable. He felt that he had been decidedly ill used. What was the use of money unless it could be converted into what his soul desired? But there was no way of changing the coin except at the store of Joe Marks. To ask any of the villagers would only have excited suspicion. Besides, the tramp felt sure that Ernest would soon discover that he had been robbed. He would naturally be suspected, especially as Joe Marks had knowledge of a gold piece being in his possession.

There was a small settlement about five miles off called Daneboro. It was probably the nearest place where he could get a glass of whisky. He must walk there. It was not a pleasant prospect, for the tramp was lazy and not fond of walking. Still, it seemed to be a necessity, and when he left the store of Joe Marks he set out for Daneboro.

Thirst was not the only trouble with Tom Burns. He had not eaten anything for about twenty-four hours, and his neglected stomach rebelled. He tightened a girdle about his waist and walked on. He had perhaps gone two miles when he came to a cabin. A woman stood in the doorway.

“My good lady,” said Tom, putting on a pitiful expression, “I am a very unfortunate man.”

“Are you?” said the woman, scanning him critically. “You look like a tramp.”

“I do, madam, yet I was once a thriving merchant.”

“You don’t look like it.”

“I don’t; I acknowledge it.”

“How did you lose your property, if you ever had any?”

“By signin’ notes for my brother. It swept off all my possessions.”

“Then I pity you. That’s the way my man lost five hundred dollars, nearly all he had. What can I do for you?”

“Madam, I am hungry—very hungry.”

“Set right down on the settee, and I’ll give you what’s left of our breakfast.”

Tom Burns obeyed with alacrity.

A plate of cold bacon, a cold potato and some corn bread were placed before him, and he ate them voraciously. There had been times in his life when he would have turned up his nose at such fare, but not now.

“My good lady,” he said, “you have saved my life.”

“Well, you must ’a’ been hungry,” said the woman. “A man that’ll eat cold vittles, especially cold potato, ain’t shammin’.”

“I wish I had money to offer you——”

“Oh, never mind that; you’re welcome. Can I do anything more for you?”

“I feel sick, and sometimes, though I am a temperance man, I take whisky for my health, if you had just a sup——”

“Well, we haven’t any, and if we had I wouldn’t give you any.”

“You misjudge me, madam. You must not think I am a drinker.”

“It’s no matter what I think. You can’t get any whisky here.”

At Daneboro Tom fared better. He changed his gold piece, drank a pint of whisky, and the next day retraced his steps to old Peter’s cabin. He felt satisfied that somewhere near the cabin there was treasure concealed.

CHAPTER V

BURNS RETURNS

When Peter Brant was laid away under a tree not far from the cabin where he had ended his days Ernest felt that he was at liberty to begin the new life that lay before him. Despite the natural sadness which he felt at parting with his old friend, he looked forward not without pleasant anticipations to the future and what it might have in store for him.

Oak Forks had few attractions for him. He had a literary taste, but could not get books. Peter Brant had about a dozen volumes, none of which he had read himself, but Ernest had read them over and over again. None of the neighbors owned any books. Occasionally a newspaper found its way into the settlement, and this, when it came into Ernest’s hands, was read, advertisements and all.

How, then, was his time passed? Partly in hunting, partly in fishing—for there was a small river two miles away—but one could not fish or hunt all the time. He had often felt a vague yearning to go to Chicago or New York, or anywhere where there would be a broader field and large opportunities, and he had broached the subject to Peter.

“I can’t afford to go, Ernest,” the old man would reply. “I must live on the little I have, for I am too old to work.”

“But I am young. I can work,” the boy would answer.

“A boy like you couldn’t earn much. Wait till I am dead, and then you can go where you like.”

This would always close the discussion, for Ernest did not like to consider such a possibility. Peter represented his world, for he had no one to cling to except the man whom he supposed to be his uncle.

Now, however, the time had come when he could go forth and enter upon a career. Accordingly he declined Joe Marks’ offer to take him into the store. He understood very well that it was only meant in kindness, and that he was not really needed.

“You don’t need me, Joe,” he said. “You are very kind, but there must be real work for me somewhere.”

“Well, my lad, I won’t stand in your way, but I’ve known you a long time, and I shall hate to lose sight of you.”

“I’ll came back some day, Joe—that is if I am prosperous and can.”

“If you are not prosperous, if you fall sick and need a home and a friend, come back then. Don’t forget your old friend Joe Marks.”

“I won’t, Joe,” said Ernest heartily.

“You’ve got another friend here, Ernest,” added Luke Robbins. “I’m a poor man, and my friendship isn’t worth much, but you have it, all the same.”

Ernest grasped the hands of both. He felt that each was a friend worth having.

“You may be sure that I won’t forget either of you,” he said.

“When do you expect to go, Ernest, and where?” asked Joe Marks.

“I shall get away to-morrow, I think, but where I shall go I can’t tell yet.”

“Do you need any money?”

“No; my uncle left me some.”

Ernest had not yet secured the gold, but he knew exactly where it was, and now that all his business was ended he felt that it was time to possess himself of it. Accordingly, he took a spade from the house, and bent his steps in the direction of the old oak tree.

He went alone, for he thought it best not to take anyone into his confidence.

Arrived at the tree, Ernest measured off five feet in the direction mentioned by Peter and began to dig. It did not take him long to reach the box, for it was only a foot beneath the surface of the ground. 25

It proved to be a cigar box, for Peter was fond of smoking, though he usually smoked a pipe. Ernest lifted the lid, and saw a small roll inclosed in brown wrapping paper, which on being removed revealed twenty five-dollar gold pieces. He regarded them with satisfaction, for they afforded him the means of leaving Oak Forks and going into the great world which he had such a curiosity to enter.

Hidden behind a tree only a few feet away was Tom Burns, the tramp and vagabond.

He had come from Daneboro, and was prowling round the neighborhood searching for old Peter's hidden treasure. He had deliberated as to whether the cabin or the fields was the more likely place to have been selected. He had nothing in particular to guide him. He did not, however, venture to approach the house just yet, as it would probably be occupied by Ernest.

"I wish I knowed where the old man hid his boodle," muttered Tom. "I can't dig all over."

In fact, digging was not in Tom's line. It was too much like work, and if there was anything to which Tom was bitterly opposed it was work of any kind.

"The boy must know. Likely the old man told him," he finally concluded. "I'll watch the boy."

He therefore lost no time in prowling around the cabin, with the especial object of watching Ernest's movements. He was especially favored, as he thought, when from a distance he saw Ernest leaving the cabin with the spade in his hand.

The tramp's heart was filled with joy.

"He is going to dig for the treasure," he said. "I'll keep him in sight."

Tom Burns had no difficulty in doing this, for Ernest bent his steps in his direction.

"I hope he won't discover me," thought Burns; "at any rate not till I find out where he's going to dig."

All things seemed to favor the tramp. Ernest stopped when he came to the oak tree, and it was evident that this was the spot of which he was in search. 26

"Why, that's where I was lyin' the other night!" thought Burns. "If I had only knowed! Why, the gold was right under me all the time."

He watched with eagerness while Ernest was digging. He no longer doubted that this was the place where the gold was hidden. Ernest could have no other object in digging in this place.

"I wonder how much there is," thought Burns. "There ought to be as much as a thousand dollars. Perhaps there's two or three. But even if there is only a thousand it will set me on my feet. I'll soon get out of this neighborhood. I'll go to Chicago or New York, and I'll live in clover. I'll make up for lost time."

When Ernest found the roll of coins, and taking them out put them in his pocket, he was not disappointed, for he knew what to expect, but Tom Burns was in dismay.

"Only a hundred dollars!" he thought. "What's a hundred dollars? The old man ought to be ashamed of himself!"

However, one thing was certain. A hundred dollars was better than nothing. It would take him to Chicago and enable him to live in comfort for a while. Besides, he might multiply it many times at the gaming table, for Tom Burns had been a gambler in his day. He certainly did not propose to disdain the sum which fortune had placed in his way because it was so small.

Ernest put the gold pieces in his pocket and turned to go back to the cabin, when a voice reached him.

"Look here, boy, I'll trouble you to hand over that money!"

27

CHAPTER VI

A FRIEND IN NEED

Ernest turned and regarded the tramp in amazement.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"I want that money you just dug up," replied Tom Burns boldly.

Instantly Ernest comprehended his danger. He was a stout boy, but the tramp was a large man, weighing probably fifty pounds more than himself. The boy felt that in strength he was no match for the thief who confronted him.

Yet he could not bear the thought of allowing himself to be robbed. Left penniless, how could he carry out the plans which he had in view? He tried to gain time.

“Do you want to rob me?” he asked.

“I have just as much right to that money as you,” said the tramp.

“How do you make that out?”

“The man who put it there owed me money.”

“Do you think I am a fool, to believe that ridiculous story?”

“You’d better be careful how you talk!” said Burns, menacingly.

“Then all I can say is that you have told a falsehood. You are the man, I suppose, who entered our cabin at night and stole money out of a trunk.”

“I don’t know anything about your trunk!” said Burns. “But I have no time to talk; I want that money!”

Ernest looked about him, hoping to see some one to whom he could appeal for help, but no one appeared in sight. Next he looked at the tramp, to note if he were armed. To his relief, Burns did not appear to have any weapon with him.

“I won’t give up the money to a thief!” he said boldly. 28

As he spoke he turned and ran as fast as he was able.

Winged with fear of losing his gold, Ernest flew rather than ran, not heeding the direction he was taking. The tramp accepted the challenge and put forth his utmost speed in the hope of overtaking him.

“You’ll pay for this, boy!” he growled.

But Ernest did not mean to be caught. Being a fast runner for a boy of his size, he bade fair to outdistance his pursuer. But directly in his path was an excavation of considerable size and depth. Ernest paused on the brink to consider whether to descend the sloping sides or to go round it. The delay was fatal. The tramp saw his advantage, and pushing forward seized him by the collar.

“I’ve caught you!” he cried triumphantly. “Now give me the money!”

There was a brief struggle, but a boy, even a strong boy, was no match for a man taller and heavier than himself. The gold pieces were snatched from him, and the tramp, releasing his hold, was about to make off in triumph when he found himself seized in turn.

“Why, you contemptible thief!” exclaimed Luke Robbins—for it was he whose opportune coming had saved Ernest from being plundered. “Are you trying to rob the boy?”

He seized the tramp by the collar, forced him to give up the gold he had just snatched from Ernest and flung him on his back.

The tramp’s surprise deepened to dismay when, looking up, he saw the stalwart hunter with stern face looking down upon him.

“It was my money,” he whined.

“Your money, you owdacious liar! Don’t tell me that or I’ll treat you worse!”

“But it was. I had hidden it under a tree. I came along just as the boy dug it up. I told him to give it to me, for it was mine, but he wouldn’t, and then I chased him.”

“What’s the truth of the matter, Ernest?” asked Luke. 29

“It was money that Peter Brant had hidden away. He told me on his death-bed where to look for it.”

“I thought it was Peter’s.”

“I had just dug it up and put it in my pocket when this man came along. He ordered me to give it to him.”

“Did he say he hid it there?”

“No. He said that Peter owed him money, and he wanted it.”

“You appear to be a very ingenious liar,” remarked Luke, turning to the tramp. “Which of these stories do you want me to believe?”

“I hid it there!” said the tramp doggedly.

“Then why did you tell the boy that Peter owed you money?”

“Because I didn’t think he would believe that I hid it.”

“You are right there. He don’t believe it, nor do I. One thing more—were you the man that broke into his cabin and stole two gold pieces from his trunk?”

“No. I don’t know anything about it.”

“Of course you would deny it. All the same I have no doubt that you were the man.”

“If I had done it he would have seen me.”

“That won’t go down. He was asleep. Ernest, what shall I do with this fellow? Shall I shoot him?”

and Luke Robbins pulled out a revolver, which he handled in a significant way.

“Don’t shoot! Spare my life, Mr. Robbins!” cried the tramp in great alarm.

“Humph! I don’t see the good. Your life is of no value to the world.”

“Let him go, Luke,” said Ernest, “but tell him to clear out of this neighborhood.”

“It is treating him too well. Still, I will do as you say. Hark, you fellow, what is your name?”

“Tom Burns.”

“You are a disgrace to the name of Burns. If I spare your life will you leave this neighborhood and never come back?”

“Yes—yes!” answered the tramp earnestly.

“You’d better keep that promise. If I ever catch sight of you again I’ll shoot without asking you any questions! Now get!”

Tom Burns got up and started away with celerity. He thought it wise to put as great a distance as possible between himself and the tall and stalwart hunter.

“I’ll scare him a little,” said Luke.

He fired after the fugitive, taking care not to hit him, however. Tom Burns heard the bullet whistling by his head, and with a cry of terror increased his speed till he reached a place where he felt secure.

“That is a terrible man!” he panted. “He’d as soon take my life as not. I won’t get in his way again if I can help it.”

“Well, Ernest, where do you want to go? What are your plans?”

“I don’t know,” answered Ernest gravely. “I am not sure that I have any plans. I feel upset completely.”

“Sit down here and I’ll talk to you.”

The two sat down together.

“Now, how much money have you got?”

“A hundred dollars.”

“It isn’t much. Is that all that your uncle left?”

“I think so. He said nothing about having more.”

“It isn’t much to begin the world with. I wish for your sake, boy, that I had some to give you, but I never knew how to get together money.”

“I guess it will do, Luke. I have health and strength. I think I can make my way.”

“But you have no trade.”

“Have you?”

“No, Ernest. You’ve got me there. I am only a hunter, but I don’t make much of a living. I don’t recommend you to follow in my steps.”

“One thing is certain, Luke. I must get away from here. There is nothing I can do in Oak Forks.”

“Where do you want to go, lad?”

“I don’t know. I might go eastward to Chicago or New York, or I might go West to California. Have you ever been to either place, Luke?”

“No, lad, but if I had my choice I’d go westward. I’ve heard fine stories of California. I think I should like to see that land.”

“Why don’t you go?”

“Stop a minute! Let me think!”

The hunter assumed a thoughtful look. He remained silent for five minutes. Then he said, as if to himself: “Why not?”

Ernest still kept silence, but his eyes were fixed upon the face of the hunter.

Finally Luke looked up.

“How do you want to go, lad?” he asked. “Do you want to go over the railroad, or are you in for a tramp over the mountains and plains?”

“That depends on whether I am to go alone or not. If I go alone I shall prefer to go by rail.”

“Are you in for a long tramp with me?” asked Luke, his face glowing with new-born enthusiasm.

“I will go anywhere with you, Luke.”

“Then it is agreed. We will start to-morrow.”

CHAPTER VII

ON THE ROAD

Nothing could have pleased Ernest better than to travel with Luke Robbins. He felt that he should be safe with the sturdy hunter, who was strong, resolute and reliable.

True he was not a man who had succeeded as man reckons success. He had lived comfortably, but it had never occurred to him to lay up money, nor indeed had he had any opportunity to do so. He mentioned this as an objection to the trip which he had himself proposed.

“My lad,” he said, “I am afraid I can’t go with you after all.”

“Why not, Luke?” 32

“Because you’re rich compared with me.”

“I have but a hundred dollars.”

“And I—well, lad, I’m ashamed to say so, but I have only fifteen.”

“We’ll share and share alike, Luke.”

“No, lad. Luke Robbins is too proud to live upon a boy. I reckon I’d better stay at home.”

“But I want you to go and take care of me, Luke. How can I travel alone?”

Luke brightened up.

“That puts a different face on it, Ernest. If you think you need me, I’ll go.”

“I do need you.”

“Then go I will, but one thing is understood: I won’t take any of your money.”

“There won’t be any trouble on that score.”

So the two prepared for their trip. Ernest, with Luke’s help, purchased an outfit, and on the morning of the third day the two started out together, neither having a very definite idea where they were going except that their course was westward.

Luke knew very little of the States and Territories that lay between Oak Forks and the Pacific Coast. Ernest, whose education was decidedly superior to his companion’s, was able to give him some information. So they plodded on, enjoying the unconventional life and the scenery on the way.

They were in no hurry. They stopped to hunt and fish, and when the weather was unfavorable they stayed at some wayside cabin. When the nights were fine they camped out under the open canopy of heaven.

Part of their way led through woods and over prairies, but here and there they came to a village. There was little occasion to spend money, but they were compelled to use some.

One day, some weeks from the time when they started, Luke turned to Ernest with a sober face.

“Ernest,” he said, “I think you’ll have to leave me at the next poorhouse.” 33

“Why, Luke?”

“Because my money is nearly all gone. I started with fifteen dollars. Now I have but one.”

“But I have plenty left.”

“That doesn’t help me.”

“I want to share it with you, Luke.”

“Don’t you remember what I said when we set out, lad?”

“What was it?”

“That I would not touch a dollar of your money.”

“Then do you mean to leave me alone, Luke?” pleaded Ernest reproachfully.

“You are a boy and I am a man. I’m forty years old, Ernest. Is it right that I should live on a boy less than half my age?”

Ernest looked at him in perplexity.

“Is there no way of getting more money?” he asked.

“If we were in California now and at the mines, I might make shift to fill my purse; but there are no mines hereabouts.”

“Let us keep on and something may turn up.”

When this conversation took place they were approaching Emmonsville, a thriving town in Nebraska. As they walked through the principal street, it was clear that something had happened which had created general excitement. Groups of people were talking earnestly, and their faces wore a perturbed and anxious look.

“What’s the matter?” asked Luke, addressing a well-to-do appearing man.

“Haven’t you heard of the bank robbery over at Lee’s Falls?”

“No.”

“Two men fully armed rode up to the door, and, dismounting, entered the bank. One stepped up to the window of the paying teller, and covering him with his revolver, demanded five thousand dollars. At the same time the other stood in the doorway, also with a loaded revolver.”

“Why didn’t the teller shoot him down?” asked Luke.

“My friend, bank officers are not provided with loaded revolvers when on duty. Besides, the ruffian had the drop on him.” 34

“Well?” asked Luke.

“What could the teller do? Life is more than money, and he had no alternative. The fellow got the money.”

“Did he get away with it?”

“Yes; they both mounted their horses and rode off, no one daring to interfere. Each held his revolver in readiness to shoot the first man that barred his way.”

“Where did you say this happened?”

“At Lee’s Falls.”

“Is it near at hand?”

“It is fifteen miles away.”

“But why should that robbery create excitement here?”

“Because we have a bank here, and we are expecting a visit from the same parties.”

“Who are they?”

“They are supposed to be the Fox brothers, two of the most notorious criminals in the West. Numberless stories are told of their bold robberies, both from individuals and from banks.”

“How long have these fellows been preying upon the community?”

“We have heard of them hereabouts for three years. It is said they came from Missouri.”

“Is there no one brave enough or bold enough to interfere with them?”

“More than one has tried it, but no one has succeeded. Twice they were captured, but in each case they broke jail before it was time for the trial.”

“It seems to me you haven’t many men of spirit in Nebraska.”

“Perhaps you think you would be a match for them,” said the citizen in a sarcastic tone.

Luke Robbins smiled, and handled his revolver in a significant way.

“If you think you can kill or capture them, stranger, there’s a chance to make a good sum of money.”

“How is that?” 35

“A thousand dollars is offered for either of them, dead or alive.”

“A thousand dollars!” repeated Luke, his face glowing with excitement. “Is that straight?”

“It will be paid cheerfully. You can bet on that.”

“Who offers it?”

“The governor of the State.”

Luke Robbins became thoughtful and remained silent.

“Did you hear that, lad?” he asked, when he and Ernest were alone.

“Yes, Luke.”

“A thousand dollars would do us a great deal of good.”

“That is true, Luke, but it would be as much as your life is worth to hunt the rascals.”

“Don’t try to make a coward of me, Ernest.”

“I couldn’t do that, Luke. I only want you to be prudent.”

“Listen, lad. I want that thousand dollars and I’m going to make a try for it. Come along with me.”

“Where are you going?”

“To the bank. I’m going to have a talk with the officers and then I’ll decide what to do.”

CHAPTER VIII

LUKE JOINS THE FRIENDS

At the Emmonsville bank they were on their guard. The expectation of a visit from the Fox brothers caused anxiety and apprehension. The evil reputation of these men and their desperate character made them formidable.

When Luke Robbins entered the place he was regarded with suspicion. His hunting costume was not unlike that of a bandit. But the fact that he had a young companion tended to disarm suspicion. No one could suspect Ernest of complicity with outlaws, and the Fox brothers had never been known to carry a boy with them.

Luke was unused to banks. So far as he knew he had never entered one before. He looked around him in uncertainty, and finally approached the window of the receiving teller.

“Are you the boss of this institution?” he asked.

The teller smiled.

“No,” he said. “Perhaps you want to see the president?”

“I guess he’s the man.”

“If you will give me a hint of the nature of your business I will speak to him.”

“I hear you’re expectin’ a visit from the Fox brothers.”

“Have you anything to do with them?” asked the teller with some suspicion.

“I want to have something to do with them,” returned Luke.

“I don’t understand you.”

“Then I’ll tell you what I mean. I hear there’s a big reward out for their capture.”

“A thousand dollars.”

“I want that thousand dollars, and I want it bad.”

“I shall be very glad if you become entitled to it. Anyone who will rid the State of either of these notorious outlaws will richly deserve it.”

“That’s the business I came about. Now can I see the president, if that’s what you call him?”

“Wait a minute and I will find out.”

The teller went to an inner room and returned with a stout, gray-headed man of about fifty.

He looked curiously at Luke through the window. Then, as if reassured, he smiled.

“I understand you want to see me,” he said.

“Yes.”

“About the Fox brothers?”

“You’re right there, squire.”

“Go to the last door and I will admit you.”

Luke Robbins did as directed, and soon found himself in the office of the president of the bank.

“You are anxious to secure the reward offered for the capture of these outlaws, I believe.”

“That’s straight.”

“Why do you come to me, then?”

“Because a man told me you expected a visit from them.”

“That is not quite exact. I don’t expect a visit, but I am afraid they may take it into their heads to call here.”

“Suppose they do.”

A shade of anxiety appeared upon the face of the president.

“We should try to foil their plans,” he answered.

“Wouldn’t you like to have me on hand when they come?”

The president looked over Luke Robbins carefully. He was impressed by his bold, resolute air and muscular figure. Evidently he would be a dangerous man to meet.

“You are a strong, resolute fellow, I judge,” he said thoughtfully.

“Try me and see.”

“You would not be afraid to meet these villains single-handed?”

“I never saw the man yet I was afraid to meet.”

“So far, so good, but it is not so much strength that is needed as quickness. A weak man is more than a match for a strong one if he gets the drop on him.”

“That’s so, but I reckon it’ll take a right smart man to get the drop on me.”

“What have you to propose? I suppose you have formed some plan.”

“I would like to stay round the bank and be on the watch for these fellows.”

“Remain here and I will consult with the cashier.”

Five minutes later the president rejoined his visitor.

“I have no objection to securing your services,” he said, “if it can be done without exciting suspicion. In your present dress your mission would at once be guessed, and the outlaws would be on their guard. Have you any objection to changing your appearance?” 38

“Not a particle. All I want is to get a lick at them outlaws.”

“Then I think we shall have to make you a little less formidable. Have you any objections to becoming a Quaker?”

Luke Robbins laughed.

“What, one of those broad-brimmed fellows?” he said.

“Yes.”

“Will I look the part?”

“Dress will accomplish a good deal. I will tell you what put the idea into my head. We used to employ as janitor an old Quaker—a good, honest, reliable man. He was about your build. A year since he died, but we have hanging up in my office the suit he was accustomed to wear. Put it on, and it will make a complete change in your appearance. Your face will hardly correspond to your dress, but those who see the garb won’t look any further.”

“That’s all right, boss. I don’t care how you dress me up, but what will I do?”

“I think it will be well for you to keep near the bank, watching carefully all who approach. You never saw the Fox brothers, I presume?”

“I never had that pleasure.”

“Most people don’t regard it as a pleasure. I will give you some description of them which may help you to identify them. One is a tall man, very nearly as tall as yourself; the other is at least three inches shorter. Both have dark hair which they wear long. They have a swaggering walk and look their real characters.”

“I don’t think it’ll be hard to spot them. They generally ride on horseback, don’t they?”

“Generally, but not always. They rode into Lee’s Falls and up to the bank entrance on horseback. Perhaps for that reason they may appear in different guise here.”

“You haven’t any pictures of them, have you?”

The president laughed. 39

“No one was ever bold enough to invite them into a photographer’s to have their pictures taken,” he said.

“I see. Well, I think I shall know them.”

“Perhaps not. They often adopt disguises.”

“They won’t come as Quakers?”

“That is hardly likely. I can give you one help. However they may be dressed their eyes will betray them. They have flashing black ones, and sharp, aquiline noses.”

“I’ll know them,” said Luke confidently.

“I observe that you have a boy with you?”

“Yes.”

“Is he your son?”

“No; I wish he were. I’d be proud to have such a son as that.”

“Perhaps we can use him. The bank messenger—a young man—is sick, and he can take his place temporarily.”

“Is there any pay for such work?”

“Yes, but it is small. We will give him ten dollars a week. Of course he must be honest and trustworthy.”

“I’ll stake my life on that boy, boss,” said Luke warmly.

“His appearance is in his favor. Will you call him?”

Ernest was waiting in the doorway. He was anxious to learn the result of Luke’s interview with the president of the bank.

“The boss wants to see you,” announced Luke.

“All right. What luck are you meeting with, Luke?”

“Good. I’ve hired out to the bank as a Quaker detective.”

Ernest stared at his companion in astonishment. He thought it was a joke.

When he came into the presence of the president the latter said: “I understand from your friend here that you would like employment?”

“I should,” answered Ernest promptly.

“The post of bank messenger is temporarily vacant. Would you like it?”

“Yes, sir, if you think I can fill it.”

“You are rather young for the place, but I think you will fill it satisfactorily. We will instruct you in the duties.”

“Very well, sir; I accept it with thanks.”

“Of course it is necessary that you should be honest and reliable. But upon those points I have no doubts. Your face speaks for you.”

“Thank you, sir. When do you wish me to begin my duties?”

“To-morrow. I suppose you are not provided with a boarding place. You can get settled to-day and report at the bank to-morrow morning at nine.”

“Wait here a minute, Ernest,” said Luke. “I will join you at once.”

When Luke emerged from the president’s room he was attired in the Quaker costume of his predecessor. Ernest stared at him for a moment, then burst into a loud laugh.

“Why does thee laugh?” asked Luke mildly.

This sent Ernest into a second convulsion.

“Do I look like a man of peace?” asked Luke.

“Yes; will you live up to the character?”

“Until I see the Fox brothers.”

CHAPTER IX

AN ARMED ESCORT

Luke Robbins entered at once upon his duties as janitor of the Emmonsville bank.

He was provided with a broom, and in the morning swept the bank. Sometimes he washed the windows; at other times he sat on a bench in the rear of the bank, ready for any call upon his services.

Several days passed, and though Luke kept a sharp lookout for the Fox brothers he did not catch a glimpse of anyone who resembled them.

Then one morning Luke went to the bank as usual and put on his Quaker garb.

About eleven o’clock an elderly man appeared, and presented a check for five hundred dollars. The money was paid him, and then he lingered a moment, ill at ease.

“I don’t like to have so much money about me,” he said in a tone that betrayed anxiety.

“No doubt you will find plenty who would be willing to relieve you of it,” rejoined the paying teller, with a smile.

“That’s what I am afraid of. They do say that the Fox brothers have been seen not far away.”

“Is it absolutely necessary that you should have the money in your possession? You could leave it in the bank, or most of it.”

“I shall want to use some of it to-morrow, and I live ten miles away—in Claremont.”

“How are you going back?”

“I have a buggy outside.”

“The road to Claremont is rather lonely, I believe.”

“Yes.”

“Why don’t you get some one to go with you?”

“I don’t know anyone I could get.”

“I can find you a companion, but he would want to be paid.”

“I’ll pay him if he’ll see me through all right.”

“I have the very man for you. Here, Luke!”

Luke Robbins heard the call and approached.

The farmer looked at him doubtfully.

“A Quaker?” he said in a disappointed tone.

“He is no more a Quaker than you are. He is a detective, and very anxious to meet either of the Fox brothers.”

The farmer brightened up.

“He’s the man I’m after, then.”

A bargain was struck between Luke and Ezekiel Mason whereby the farmer promised to pay him five dollars to accompany him home and remain overnight at the farmhouse until he had disposed of the money in the way he intended.

Luke was glad to accept the proposal. It promised variety and possibly adventure. The farmer climbed into the buggy and the Quaker detective, following, took a seat by his side.

After they had driven some time they reached a part of the road where for a clear mile in advance there was not a house or building of any kind to be seen.

“This is the place I was most afraid of,” said the farmer.

“Yes, it seems to be lonely. I wish one of the Fox brothers would happen along.”

“Why?” asked the farmer in a tone of alarm.

“Because I’d like to tackle him.”

“Why are you so anxious to tackle him? I cannot understand.”

“Then I’ll tell you, my honest friend. There is a reward of a thousand dollars offered for the capture of one of these famous outlaws, dead or alive.”

Ezekiel Mason shrugged his shoulders.

“I’d rather earn the money some other way!” he said.

“You are only a peaceful farmer, while I am a fighting Quaker,” responded Luke.

As he spoke he looked up the road, and his glance fell upon a short, compactly built man in a gray suit, who was walking toward them. He seemed a quiet, commonplace person, but there was something about him that attracted Luke’s attention.

“Do you know that man?” he asked abruptly.

“No,” answered Mason after a rapid glance.

“Are the Fox brothers tall men?” asked Luke.

“One only.”

“The other?”

“Is about the size of the man who is approaching.”

Luke did not reply, but examined still more critically the advancing pedestrian.

“If this should be one of the Foxes——” he began.

“Do you think it is?” asked the farmer in a terrified tone.

“I can’t tell. If it proves to be, do exactly as I tell you.”

“Yes,” replied the farmer, now thoroughly alarmed.

By this time the newcomer was but twenty feet distant. Though his appearance and dress were commonplace, his eyes, as they could see, were dark and glittering.

He made a halt.

“Friends,” he said, “can you oblige me with the time?”

The farmer was about to produce his big old-fashioned silver watch when Luke nudged him sharply.

“Leave him to me,” he whispered in a tone audible only to the farmer.

“Thee has asked the wrong party,” he said. “We don’t carry watches.”

The pedestrian regarded him with contempt. Whoever he might be he looked upon a Quaker as a mild, inoffensive person, hardly deserving the name of man.

“I didn’t speak to you,” he said scornfully.

The pedestrian’s next move was a bold one.

“I am tired,” he said. “Give me a ride.”

“Will thee excuse us?” said the Quaker meekly.

“Oh, shut up!” cried the assumed pedestrian. “Quakers should be seen and not heard.”

Then to the farmer: “I am tired. Let me into your carriage.”

“There is no room,” said the farmer nervously.

“Then tell the Quaker to get out and I will take his place.”

Ezekiel Mason was by no means a brave man and he did not know what to say to this impudent proposal.

He looked appealingly at Luke.

“I will accommodate the gentleman,” said the latter meekly. With the words he rose from his seat and jumped to the ground.

“Shall I assist thee?” he asked the stranger in a mild voice.

“No; I am quite capable of getting into the carriage without help.”

The stranger did not immediately get into the buggy.

“I don’t care to ride, after all,” he said coolly. “Just hand me your money, you old clodhopper.”

The worst had come. The new arrival was evidently one of the Fox brothers, after all.

“Indeed I have no money,” said the terrified farmer.

This was true, for he had put the wallet containing the five hundred dollars into the hands of Luke.

“You lie! You have just come from the Emmonsville bank, where you drew a large amount.”

At this proof of knowledge on the part of the outlaw the farmer was almost paralyzed. It appeared to him that the robber must be supernaturally gifted.

“I haven’t got it now,” he said.

“You lie!” cried the outlaw sternly. “Come down here and give up the money or I’ll shoot you.”

“You can search me,” said Mason desperately.

“Come down then.”

“Thee is very unkind,” observed Luke.

“Shut up. It is none of your business.”

“Thee had better come down and let the man search thee,” said Luke to the farmer.

CHAPTER X

FOX ASTONISHED

Ezekiel Mason had been waiting for a hint from Luke, in whom he recognized a master spirit. His only hope was in his companion.

“Art thee Mr. Fox?” asked Luke in a tone of mild inquiry.

“I’ll let you know who I am,” was the swaggering reply.

Though he was but one man opposed to two he had no fears. The farmer was evidently cowed and terrified, while the Quaker seemed, though large, to be peaceable and harmless. 45

But in his judgment of Luke the outlaw was very much at fault. When threatening the farmer he had covered him with his revolver, but as he was preparing to leave the buggy he carelessly lowered it. Luke, who was aching to attack him, noticed this.

While Fox, for it was one of the notorious brothers, was standing in careless security, the Quaker sprang upon him like a panther upon his prey. He knocked the revolver from his hand, with one powerful blow felled him to the ground, and placed his foot upon his prostrate form.

Never, perhaps, in a career crowded with exciting adventures had the outlaw been so thoroughly surprised.

“What the mischief does this mean?” he ejaculated, struggling to rise.

“It means that thee has mistaken thy man,” answered Luke coolly.

“Let me go or I’ll kill you!” shrieked the outlaw fiercely.

“If you try to get up I’ll put a bullet through your head,” replied Luke, pointing at him with his own revolver.

In his excitement he had dropped his Quaker speech, and this the outlaw noted.

“Are you a Quaker?” he asked abruptly.

“No more than you are,” answered Luke. “Farmer, bring out the rope.”

Ezekiel Mason from the bottom of the buggy produced a long and stout piece of clothes-line.

“What do you mean to do?” inquired the outlaw uneasily.

“You will see soon enough. No, don’t try to get up, as you value your life. Now tie him, Mason, while I keep him covered with the revolver.”

“We’ve had enough of this,” said the outlaw sullenly. “Let me go and I’ll do you no harm.”

“I don’t mean that you shall, my honest friend.” 46

“But if you persist in this outrage I swear that you will be a dead man within thirty days.”

“Be careful how you talk or you may be a dead man within thirty minutes,” answered Luke.

While the outlaw was covered by Luke’s revolver Farmer Mason, though his tremulous hands showed that he was nervous, managed to tie him securely. Fox began to understand the sort of

man with whom he was dealing and remained silent, but his brain was busy trying to devise some method of escape.

At length the dangerous prisoner was securely tied.

“What shall we do with him?” asked Ezekiel.

“Where’s the nearest prison?”

“At Crampton.”

“How far away?”

“Twelve miles.”

“In what direction?”

“It is four miles beyond Claremont,” answered the farmer.

“Where you live?”

“Yes.”

“Then we will go there first.”

“But how shall we carry—this gentleman?” asked the farmer, who could not get over a feeling of deference for the celebrated outlaw.

“We’ll put him into the back part of the buggy.”

By the united efforts of both the outlaw, like a trussed fowl, was deposited bodily in the rear of the carriage, where he lay in a most uncomfortable position, jolted and shaken whenever the road was rough or uneven.

“You’ll repent this outrage,” he said fiercely.

“Doesn’t thee like it?” asked Luke, relapsing into his Quaker dialect.

“Curse you and your Quaker lingo!” retorted Fox, his black eyes sparkling vindictively.

“It wouldn’t do thee any harm to turn Quaker thyself,” suggested Luke.

“I’ll be bruised to death before the ride is over,” growled the outlaw.

“There is one way of saving you the discomfort of the ride.”

“What is that?”

“I might shoot you through the head. As the reward is the same whether I deliver you alive or dead I have a great mind to do it.”

The outlaw was made still more uncomfortable by these words. He had wholly misunderstood Luke at first, and the revelation of his real character had impressed him not only with respect but fear. He did not know of what this pseudo Quaker might be capable. He longed in some way to get out of his power. Force was impracticable, and he resolved to resort to finesse.

“Look here, my friend,” he began.

“So you regard me as a friend? Thank you, Brother Fox; I won’t forget it.”

“Oh, bother your nonsense! I suppose you are after the thousand dollars offered for my apprehension.”

“You have guessed right the first time. I am not a rich man, and I don’t mind telling you that a thousand dollars will be particularly acceptable just about now.”

“So I suppose. You don’t feel particularly unfriendly to me?”

“Oh, no. I might under different circumstances come to love you like a brother.”

“Or join my band?”

“Well, no; I draw the line there. As a Quaker I could not consistently join a band of robbers.”

“Who are you?” asked Fox abruptly. “You weren’t raised around here.”

“No.”

“Where, then?”

“I came from Iowa.”

“What is your name?”

“My friend, I haven’t any visiting cards with me. You can think of me as the Quaker detective.”

“Then I will come to business. You want a thousand dollars?”

“You are correct there.”

“Then I will show you a way to get it.”

“I know one way already.”

“You mean by delivering me up?”

“Yes.”

“That would not suit me. Let me go and I will give you a thousand dollars.”

“Have you got it with you?”

“No, but I can arrange to give it to you within a week. You see,” added the outlaw dryly, “I have been prosperous in my business and can spare that sum in return for giving me my liberty.”

“I am afraid, friend Fox, that my chance of securing the money in that way would be slender.”

“I am a man of my word. What I promise, I will do.”

“If you have so much money, why did you want to take the five hundred dollars of my friend here?”

“It was all in the way of business. Well, what do you say?”

“That I won’t trust you. If I should take your thousand dollars for releasing you I should be as bad as you are.”

“Very well; drive on then,” said the outlaw sullenly.

In less than an hour Ezekiel Mason’s home was reached. When they drove into the yard it made quite a sensation. Mrs. Mason and the hired man stood with mouths agape.

“Who have you got there, Ezekiel?” asked his wife.

“One of the Fox brothers!” answered the farmer in an important tone. “Me and my friend here took him.”

Luke smiled and so did the prisoner, uncomfortable though he was.

“It would have taken a dozen like that fool to have captured me,” he said in a low voice, but only Luke heard him.

CHAPTER XI

UNDER WATCH AND WARD

THE farmhouse was built after the model of many similar houses in New England. It was of two stories, with the front door in the center and a room on each side. Over the two stories was an unfurnished attic.

“Have you a secure place to keep our friend here?” asked Luke.

The farmer paused before he answered.

“I might put him in the attic,” he said.

But here his wife interfered.

“I couldn’t sleep if he were in the house,” she said.

“Why not?” asked Luke. “You see he is securely bound and will be as helpless as a child. Will you show me the attic?”

“Follow me,” said the farmer.

They went up two flights of stairs and found themselves in a long room, the whole width of the house. Through the center rose the chimney. The sloping roof was not plastered. The only furniture consisted of a cot bedstead and a chair.

“Is the attic occupied by any of the family?” asked Luke.

“Not generally. When I hire an extra hand at harvest time he sleeps there.”

“But at present there is no one occupying it?”

“No.”

“Then I suggest that the bed will prove a good resting place for our friend below. I have no doubt he has often found himself in lodgings less comfortable.”

“But,” said Mrs. Mason nervously, “if he should get free during the night he might murder us all in our beds.”

“There is little chance of that. When your husband bound him he did a good job. I wouldn’t undertake to get free myself if I were bound as securely.”

“That’s so!” said the farmer, pleased with the compliment. “He can’t get away nohow.”

Over in the corner there were a couple of horse blankets which seemed to offer a comfortable resting-place. Luke Robbins eyed them thoughtfully.

“I have an idea,” he said. “Let the outlaw lie there and one of us can occupy the bed. Then he won’t be able to try any of his tricks.”

“I would rather not sleep there,” observed the farmer nervously. “I couldn’t sleep in the same room with one of the Fox brothers.”

“Then if you couldn’t sleep there you are just the man we want. You will always be on the watch

and can frustrate any attempt to escape."

"No, no," said Ezekiel Mason hurriedly. "Kate could not close her eyes if she thought I were alone with John Fox."

"No," answered Mrs. Mason with a shudder, "I won't let Ezekiel sleep in the same room with that bold, bad man."

"I wouldn't be afraid myself," said the farmer, trying to keep up his reputation for courage, "but I don't want my wife to be anxious."

Luke Robbins smiled, for he understood very well the timidity of his host. "Then," he said, "as I have no wife to be anxious about me, perhaps I had better sleep here."

"Yes, that will be much better," rejoined the relieved farmer. "You are a brave man. Mr. Fox won't get the better of you."

"Not if I can help it," said Luke. "Will that suit you, Mrs. Mason?"

"Why don't you take him on to the jail at once?" asked the woman. "I shall feel worried if he spends the night in this house."

"I hear that he has escaped from jail no less than three times. If he should do so to-night he would at once come here and perhaps bring some of his band with him. He knows there is a good sum of money in the house."

"I shall be glad when it is paid out," said the farmer's wife.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Mason. I have promised your husband that no harm should come to him, and that the money should be secure and I will keep my word."

"So you did," said Ezekiel, brightening up, "and I will pay you what I agreed if you keep your promise."

"Friend Mason," responded Luke, "I am playing for higher stakes than five dollars. All depends on my keeping this outlaw secure. I mean to do it."

Having settled matters they went downstairs again, where they found their prisoner waiting impatiently for their reappearance.

"Well," he said, "have you decided to let me go?"

"I am sorry to disappoint you, my friend," answered Luke, "but I don't see my way clear to do so."

"I promised you a thousand dollars if you would release me."

"Yes, but I haven't any confidence in that promise."

"You need not fear. In three days I would bring or send the money to you here."

"Couldn't you oblige me with a check on the bank where you keep your money?" asked Luke smiling.

"I keep my money in several banks," returned the outlaw.

"Where, for instance?"

"I had some in the bank at Lee's Falls, but I drew it out the other day."

"So I heard. Have you any money in the Emmonsville bank?"

"Yes, but I am not quite ready to take it yet. I can give you an order on the bank if that will suit."

"Thank you; I doubt if the order would be honored."

"All this talk amounts to nothing," said Fox impatiently. "I tell you that if you release me I will bring or send you the money."

"And how soon would you want it back again?"

"Whenever I saw my way clear to taking it," said the outlaw boldly.

"I like that talk. It looks square. I'll think over your offer, friend Fox, and let you know in the morning what I decide to do."

The outlaw frowned. He evidently did not like the prospect of remaining in captivity overnight.

"What are you going to do with me to-night?" he asked.

"We have a comfortable place provided," answered Luke. "Mr. Mason, if you will give your assistance, we will show our guest where we propose to put him."

"Unbind me and I will save you the trouble."

"No doubt; but there are some objections to that."

The outlaw was lifted from the wagon and carried upstairs to the attic. His ankles as well as his wrists were securely tied, so that he was unable to walk.

"Friend Fox," said Luke politely, "there is a bed and there is a shakedown," pointing to the blankets on the floor. "You can take your choice. I hope you will like your hotel."

"I shall like it better if it provides refreshments," replied Fox. "I am famished."

"I am sure Mrs. Mason will furnish you with a meal. I will speak to her."

The outlaw seated himself on the bed and the cord about his wrists was loosened so that he might be able to eat. This might have been regarded as dangerous, as affording him an opportunity to escape, but for two reasons. In a chair opposite sat Luke Robbins with a revolver in his hand, watching his prisoner sharply.

“If you make any attempt to escape,” he said quietly, “I shall shoot. Now you understand and will be guided accordingly.”

In spite of his unpleasant situation the outlaw could not help admiring the coolness and resolution of his guard.

“You would make a capital accession to my band,” he remarked.

“If that is meant for a compliment,” said Luke dryly, “I thank you.”

“You had better think it over. Join my band and I will make it worth your while.”

He fixed his eyes earnestly upon his captor to see whether he had made any impression upon him.

“When I start on any road,” he said, “I like to know where it is coming out.”

“Well, this road will lead to wealth.”

“I don’t read it that way.”

“How then?”

“It will more likely lead to a violent death—or the gallows.”

“I have been on that path for ten years and I am alive and——”

“A prisoner.”

“Yes, at present; but I can tell you this, my Quaker friend, that the tree has not yet grown that will furnish a gallows for John Fox.”

“Perhaps so, but I don’t feel sure of it.”

The outlaw’s predicament did not appear to interfere with his appetite. When he had completed his meal Luke called the farmer and requested him to tie his wrists again.

“You can do it better than I,” he said. “Besides, I shall need to stand guard.”

CHAPTER XII

JOHN FOX FINDS A KNIFE

The outlaw was left for several hours alone in the attic of the farmer’s house. He felt far from comfortable, and he experienced great mortification at the thought that he had been captured by a Quaker.

“I shall never hold up my head again—that is,” he added after a pause, “unless I circumvent him and get away.”

Fox dragged himself to the window and looked out.

“If only my brother knew where I was,” he reflected, “he would soon turn the tables on those clodhoppers.”

But, as he knew, his brother was twenty miles away on a different expedition.

John Fox was a man of expedients. In his long career as an outlaw he had more than once been “in a hole,” but he had never failed by some means to extricate himself.

It was not for some time that he bethought himself of a knife that he had in his pocket. If he could get it out he would be able to cut the ropes that bound him and escape, if he were not interfered with.

He looked out of the window again and saw Luke Robbins and the farmer walking up the road.

“They think I am safe,” soliloquized Fox, “but perhaps they may find themselves mistaken.”

He reflected with satisfaction that there was no one in the house but Mrs. Mason and himself. Yet as matters stood he was helpless even against her.

As it was uncertain how long his two jailers would be absent, it behooved him to escape as soon as possible. There was a difficulty in the way, as his hands were securely tied together at the wrist, and he could not thrust them into his pocket and obtain the knife. But possibly by rolling over he might manage to make it slip out. It seemed the only possible way to accomplish his object, so he at once set to work. Rolling over and over, he at length found himself in such a position that the knife—a large jackknife—slipped from the gaping mouth of the pocket.

“Ha, that is the first step toward success!” he cried triumphantly.

Next he must pick up the knife and open it. This was easier than the first step. His hands were tied at the wrist, but his fingers were free. It seemed a simple thing to open the knife, but it took him some time. At last, however, he succeeded.

“That is the second step toward liberty,” he said in a jubilant tone. 55

The next thing was to cut the cord that bound his wrists. That was difficult. In fact it took him longer than both the first steps together. It chanced that the knife had not been sharpened for a long time. Then the cord was stout and thick, and even had his hands been free it would have taken him some time to cut it.

“If they should come back it would be maddening,” he reflected, and as the thought came to him he looked out of the window. But nowhere were the two men visible.

“They are fools! They don’t know me!” said the outlaw.

He resumed his efforts to cut the cord. After twenty minutes the last strand parted, and with a feeling of relief John Fox stretched out his hands, free once more.

His feet were tied, but with his hands at liberty there was little difficulty in cutting the rope that tied them.

In less than five minutes the outlaw rose to his feet a free man.

He smiled—a smile of exultation and triumph.

“My Quaker friend will be surprised to find me gone. He will understand John Fox a little better. He will have to wait a little longer for his thousand dollars.”

John Fox was himself again, but for the first time in ten years, except when he was the temporary tenant of a jail, he was unarmed.

“What has that fellow done with my revolver?” he asked himself. “If it is anywhere in the house I won’t go off without it.”

Half an hour earlier he would have been content with his liberty. Now he wanted his revolver, and his thoughts recurred to the money which the farmer had drawn that morning from the bank. It was five hundred dollars, as Luke had rather incautiously let out.

John Fox was not without hopes of securing both. The coast was clear, and only Mrs. Mason was left in the house. He might terrify her, and so secure what he had set his heart upon. But there was no time to be lost, as Luke and the farmer might return any minute. 56

The outlaw went downstairs, stepping as lightly as he could.

On the lower floor Mrs. Mason was in the kitchen preparing the evening meal. She had at first been reluctant to remain alone in the house with the outlaw, but Luke had reassured her by the statement that he was securely bound and could not get away.

She turned from the stove at the sound of a foot-fall. There was the notorious outlaw standing in the doorway with an ironical smile upon his face.

The terrified woman sank back into a chair and regarded John Fox with a scared look.

“You here!” she exclaimed.

“Yes, Mrs. Mason, it is I.”

“How did you get free? My husband told me that you were bound.”

“So I was, and I will do your husband the justice to say that he understands his business. I had trouble to break loose.”

“However could you have done it?” asked the amazed woman.

“I won’t go into details, for there isn’t time. Now listen to me and obey my commands. Your Quaker friend took my revolver away. I want you to get it and give it to me.”

“Indeed I can’t do it, sir, for I don’t know where it is.” Mrs. Mason’s tone was a terrified one.

“That won’t do,” said John Fox sternly. “It is somewhere in the house. Look for it.”

“Indeed, sir, you are mistaken. I am sure that Mr.—the Quaker gentleman has taken it with him.”

“I don’t believe anything of the kind. He had no doubt a revolver of his own, and would not care to carry two.”

“You may be right, sir, but I don’t know where it is.”

“Is there any revolver in the house?” he demanded impatiently. “I should prefer my own, but I will take any.”

“I will look, sir, if you wish me to.”

“Wait a minute. There is something else I must have. Where is that five hundred dollars your husband drew from the bank?” 57

“I don’t know.”

“Tell the truth, or it will be the worse for you!”

“I am ready to tell the truth, but I don’t know.”

“Where does your husband usually keep any money he may have in the house?”

“In the desk in the next room.”

“Probably he has put the money there. Is the desk locked?”

“Yes.”

“Have you the key?”

“Here it is, sir,” and Mrs. Mason meekly passed him a small-sized key.

“Good! I see you are growing sensible. Now come with me.”

Together they entered the room and Mrs. Mason pointed to the desk.

It was an ordinary upright desk. John Fox opened it with the key. The desk opened, the outlaw began at once to search eagerly for the money.

There was a multiplicity of small drawers, which he opened eagerly, but he found no cash except four silver half dollars and some smaller silver.

“It isn’t here!” he said in a tone of sullen disappointment, turning a baffled look upon the farmer’s wife.

“No, sir, I didn’t think it was there.”

“Where do you think it is? Do you think your husband has it with him?”

“No, sir.”

“Where then can it be? Surely you must have some suspicion. Don’t dare to trifle with me.”

“Indeed I wouldn’t, sir. I think the Quaker gentleman has it.”

“Curse him!” exclaimed the outlaw angrily. “Have you any other money in the house?”

“No, sir.”

“I have a great mind to kill you!” said Fox, with a look of ferocity.

The terrified woman uttered a scream of dismay that excited the fierce outlaw still more. He sprang toward her and seized her by the throat.

CHAPTER XIII

JUST IN TIME

John Fox had been so occupied with his terrified victim that he quite forgot the possibility of his two captors returning.

It so happened that both were approaching the house when they heard Mrs. Mason’s cry of terror.

“What’s that?” exclaimed the farmer in alarm.

“I believe that scoundrel has got loose,” answered Luke.

He quickened his pace and entered the house just in time to become a witness of the outlaw’s brutality.

It was no time to hesitate or parley. He sprang upon the robber, dashed him to the ground and put his foot upon his breast.

“What deviltry are you up to, you wretch?” he demanded. Then turning to Mrs. Mason he asked, “Why did he attack you?”

“He wanted my husband’s money—and a revolver,” answered the trembling woman.

“I have a great mind to give him the contents of the revolver!” said Luke sternly.

John Fox was not a coward, but as he looked up at the stern face of the Quaker detective he quailed, almost for the first time in his life. He tried to rise, but the heavy foot of Luke Robbins was on his breast.

“Let me up!” he growled.

“You don’t deserve to get up! You shall lie there forever for your cowardice in attacking a woman!”

“I would rather it had been you!” said John Fox bitterly.

“You are safe in attacking a woman,” said the detective in scornful sarcasm.

The outlaw was stung by his assailant’s scorn.

“I have attacked many better men than you,” he replied, “and some have not lived to tell the tale!”

“So you own up to being a murderer? I am ready to believe you. I have a great mind to shoot

you where you lie!” and Luke pointed his revolver at the prostrate outlaw.

“That would be the act of a coward,” said John Fox, hastily, his cheek turning pale.

“Not exactly that, for I have mastered you in a fair fight, but there is one thing that holds back my hand. Do you know what it is?”

“Well?”

“I should cheat the gallows of its due. Here, farmer!”

Ezekiel Mason, pale and trembling, was standing on the threshold.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Go and get another rope.”

The farmer left the house, and going to an outhouse returned with a stout clothes-line.

“Tie him again while I hold him,” was Luke’s command. “Tie him as securely as before—more so, if possible. How did you get loose?”

“Find out for yourself!” said the outlaw sullenly.

“I mean to, and I don’t intend that you shall escape a second time.”

Meanwhile John Fox was execrating his folly in not escaping when he had the chance. If he had not waited for the revolver and money he might by this time have been out of danger.

Yet he was not without hope. He still had the knife in his pocket. It was ready for use and he meant to use it.

No doubt he would be taken back to the attic. If Luke Robbins should be his companion, all the better. After cutting his bonds the knife might end the life of the man who had inflicted such humiliation upon him.

He did not speak, but his eyes betrayed him. There was such a revengeful gleam in them that Luke read their meaning without trouble.

“If I am ever at the mercy of that ruffian,” he thought, “I wouldn’t give much for my chance of keeping a whole skin.”

When the outlaw lay securely bound Luke summoned the farmer.

“Watch him for five minutes, Mr. Mason,” he said. “I am going to the attic to learn if I can how he got loose.”

Ezekiel Mason looked uncomfortable, but did not object. He was half afraid of John Fox even in his helpless condition.

“Have you a revolver?”

“Yes.”

“Then take it out, and if he makes an effort to escape shoot him without a moment’s hesitation.”

It gratified the outlaw to see how much afraid of him the farmer was, even in his helpless condition. But he could not flatter himself that he had inspired any terror in Luke Robbins. Against his will he was compelled to pay tribute to the resolute courage of the Quaker detective. As he met the gaze of the farmer he smiled to himself sardonically.

“You’ve got the advantage of me,” he said. “I am bound and helpless, while you are free and are armed. Still you are afraid of me.”

“Why should I be?” asked Mason, but his tone was not firm.

“Yes, why should you be? I’ll tell you. If ever I have you where I am now I’ll give you fifteen minutes to say your prayers.”

“Oh, what a terrible man!” said Mrs. Mason with a shudder. “You wouldn’t kill him?”

“Yes, I would. But there is one way of escape.”

“What is that?”

“Loose these bonds and let me go before your Quaker friend comes down and your life will be safe, and your wife’s.”

Ezekiel Mason shook his head feebly.

“I don’t dare to do it,” he said.

“Do as you please, but the time will come when you will be sorry that you refused. What are you afraid of? You are armed, while I have no weapon.”

“I am afraid of Luke.”

“You needn’t be. He would find fault with you, but that would be all.”

Ezekiel Mason was weak, but not weak enough to yield to the persuasions of his prisoner. Besides, he knew that Luke would come down from the attic directly.

In fact, he was already close at hand. He brought in his hand the cut fragments of the cord with which the outlaw had originally been bound.

“This tells the story,” he said, holding up the rope so that the farmer and his wife could see it. “This rope has been cut. The man has a knife.”

John Fox darted a malignant look at him, but said nothing.

“You are smart, John Fox,” Luke went on, “smarter than I thought. Where is your knife?”

John Fox did not reply.

Luke Robbins knelt down and thrust his hand unceremoniously into the outlaw’s pocket.

He drew out the knife which had done him so much service.

“This will be safer with me than with you,” he said.

“Would you rob me?” demanded the outlaw.

“Yes, of anything it is not proper for you to have.”

To John Fox the disappointment was bitter. He was, if anything, more securely tied than before, and it would be quite impossible to loosen the rope or free himself without the help of the knife. His hope of getting loose during the night and killing Luke was at an end.

“Did he say anything while I was upstairs?” asked Luke.

“Yes.”

“What was it?”

“He wanted me to set him free.” 62

“Did he offer you money?”

“No, but he threatened that he would some time take my life.”

“He is a terrible man!” said Mrs. Mason, shuddering. “I shall not feel safe to-night with him in the house.”

“I don’t propose to let him stay in the house all night.”

The prisoner, the farmer and his wife looked at Luke inquiringly.

“I think, farmer,” said Luke, “you’d better harness up and we will take our friend to the jail in Crampton.”

“What, to-night?”

“Yes; the sooner he is safely disposed of the better; at any rate we will have shifted the responsibility to the authorities.”

“Yes, it will be better,” said Mrs. Mason in a tone of relief.

The buggy was made ready, and the outlaw was packed in the back part of it. Toward nightfall the warden of the prison at Crampton was startled by the arrival of the farmer and Luke bringing with them the notorious outlaw whose name was in every mouth. He hardly knew whether to be sorry or glad, for no prison yet had been secure enough to hold him.

“I will leave my name,” said Luke, “and I shall hereafter claim the reward for his capture.”

CHAPTER XIV

ERNEST HAS AN ADVENTURE

Luke Robbins remained at the farmhouse till the middle of the next day. At that hour the sum of money which Mason had withdrawn from the bank was transferred to the party for whom it was intended, and Luke’s mission was at an end.

He received from the farmer the stipulated five dollars, and started on his return to 63
Emmonsville, Ezekiel Mason driving him the greater part of the way.

Luke arrived at the bank half-an-hour before it closed and reported his success, including the capture of John Fox. He was congratulated on his success, but noticed that the officers of the bank looked grave.

“Is anything the matter?” he asked.

“Yes,” answered the cashier. “At one o’clock yesterday we sent your young friend Ernest with a thousand dollars in United States bonds to the bank at Lee’s Falls, and we have received no tidings from him.”

“What do you fear?” asked Luke hurriedly.

“We fear that he may have been captured by some of the Fox gang, and be in confinement, or else——”

“What?”

“Killed or wounded,” added the cashier.

“He could not have met John Fox, for I held him in custody.”

“There was the other brother, James, who was at large.”

“James is the tall brother?”

“Yes.”

“Then,” said Luke, “I shall have to hunt him, too. Will you grant me leave of absence?”

“Gladly. We want to recover the bonds, but we care still more for the safety of the boy.”

Indeed Ernest had become popular with the bank officials as well as with the residents of Emmonsville. The cashier spoke truly when he said that he cared more for the boy’s safety than for the recovery of the bonds.

“Can you tell me anything that will help me in my expedition?” asked Luke. “Have you any idea where the Fox gang would be likely to carry Ernest?”

“It is generally supposed that the band have a secret rendezvous somewhere within a dozen miles, but no one has been able to discover where it is.”

“And you think that Ernest would be carried there?”

“Yes, they would hardly bring themselves to kill a young boy. He would be easily overpowered by a grown man, so that there would be no excuse for murderous violence.” 64

“How did the boy go?”

“He walked.”

“But it was a long distance.”

“Yes, about ten miles. We at first thought of providing him with a saddle-horse, but there was one objection.”

“What was that?”

“He would have been more likely to be suspected of being out on some mission.”

Leaving Luke Robbins to start on his search for Ernest, we will go back to the time when the boy messenger left the bank on the day previous.

The United States bonds were inclosed in an envelope and carried in an inner pocket, which had been expressly made by an Emmonsville tailor on his first connecting himself with the bank. The pocket was unusually deep, so as to accommodate a long parcel.

This was the most important commission on which Ernest had been employed, and he was pleased with the confidence reposed in him. He did not dread the long walk, for he was a strong and active boy. Besides, he was authorized to accept a ride if one should be offered him.

He would arrive at Lee’s Falls after the bank was closed, but he was instructed to call at the residence of the cashier and leave the bonds.

Ernest had walked three miles when he met with an adventure.

On the borders of a small pond he caught sight of a small Indian boy playing. He was probably not more than three years of age. A stick he was playing with fell into the pond, and the little fellow reached over to recover it. In doing so he lost his balance and fell into the water; there was a scream and a splash, and Ernest no sooner saw the accident than he ran up, threw off his coat and vest, lest he should wet the bonds, and plunged into the pond. 65

The young bank messenger was an expert swimmer, and in an instant had seized the child and placed him out of danger. The little Indian boy clung to him instinctively, feeling safe with his young protector.

“Where do you live, little boy?” asked Ernest.

“Out yonder,” answered the child.

Ernest had not been quite sure whether he would be able to understand or speak English, but having been brought up among white people he was as familiar with English as most white boys of his age.

Ernest looked in the direction pointed out by the boy. At the distance of a hundred rods he saw a rude log-house. Smoke was curling from a chimney. Outside sat an Indian about forty years of age smoking a pipe.

He seemed busily thinking, having the grave face characteristic of the average Indian. He did not immediately notice the approach of his little son. But when they were near the Indian boy uttered a cry, pronouncing some Indian word which possibly meant “father.”

Then the red man looked up, and his grave face changed as he recognized his boy in the company of a young white stranger.

He rose hastily from his seat and advanced to meet the two who were approaching.

“What has happened?” he asked in clear and distinct English.

“Your little boy fell into the water,” explained Ernest.

“And you saved him?”

“Yes,” answered Ernest modestly. “I saw him fall and jumped in after him.”

“Was the water deep?”

“About so deep,” said Ernest, placing his hand about five feet from the ground.

“Then he would have been drowned if you had not been near?”

“Yes, if he could not swim.”

“He is too young to swim. But you are wet,” added the Indian, noticing for the first time the condition of Ernest’s clothes.

“Yes, a little.”

“Come in,” said the Indian abruptly.

He led the way into the log-cabin.

There was a stove in the center of the room, and the air was so heated as to be uncomfortable. As he led the child in a stout Indian woman came forward with a cry and took him in her arms. Her husband rapidly explained what had happened. She instantly stripped the clothes from the child and put on a dry change.

“Now,” said the Indian, turning to Ernest, “take off your wet clothes.”

Though Ernest knew that it was wise to do so, he felt bashful about removing them in presence of the woman. But his Indian host brought from a nail on which they hung a pair of buckskin breeches of his own and offered them to Ernest for temporary use.

Ernest no longer hesitated, but made the substitution.

As the Indian was four or five inches taller than himself, the legs covered his feet. He laughed as he saw how they looked, and the Indian’s serious face relaxed a little from the same cause.

“Now I will dry your clothes,” he said.

He took a chair and, hanging the wet garments over the back, placed it very near the stove. Ernest hardly liked to lose so much time, but he knew that it would not be safe to wear the trousers in their soaked condition.

“You speak English very well,” he said, turning to the Indian.

“Yes; I have spent much time with white people,” was the answer.

“Do you support yourself by hunting?” went on Ernest.

“Yes, I am a hunter, but I go with rich white people from the cities and with Englishmen who want a guide.”

“And do they pay you well?” asked Ernest, not quite sure whether he was not showing too much curiosity.

“Yes, they pay me well. I have some money in the bank.”

Then Ernest remembered having seen the Indian one day at the bank. He was told at the time that his name was John Castro, and that he had several hundred dollars on deposit.

CHAPTER XV

JOHN CASTRO

While Ernest’s clothes were drying the Indian woman was bustling about the stove. The boy did not suspect her object till she placed on the table a plate of Indian cakes hot from the oven and he was invited to partake.

It was the first time he had ever been a guest in an Indian family, and he hesitated, but saw that his refusal to partake might hurt the feelings of his new friends. He seated himself at the table, and found the cakes really very good.

When his clothes were dry he rose to go.

“Won’t you stay all night?” asked Castro.

“Thank you. I cannot spare the time. I must push on.”

“Where are you going?” asked the Indian.

“To Lee’s Falls.”

“I will go with you a short distance.”

So they set out together.

At length John Castro stopped.

“That is your way,” he said. “I wish you a pleasant journey. I will not forget what you have done for my little son. If ever you are in trouble send for John Castro.”

“I thank you.”

The Indian shook hands with him gravely and turned back toward his cabin.

All this had taken time. Ernest had no watch with him, but he estimated that the adventure had cost him two hours. However, he had saved a boy's life.

Again he had made a friend. The friend was an Indian, but Ernest was wise enough to consider that no friend, however humble, is to be despised. 68

It was clear that he would reach his destination late, and he began to wish that some carriage would overtake him in which he might ask for a ride.

But he walked two miles farther without encountering any team. At last, however, he heard the rumble of wheels, and turning round to see whether there was room in the vehicle, he saw that it was a buggy driven by a tall, thin man with dark hair, swarthy face and a long, aquiline nose.

The driver eyed Ernest sharply and brought the buggy to a standstill.

"Where are you going, boy?" he asked.

"To Lee's Falls."

"Where have you come from?"

"From Emmonsville."

"It is a long walk."

"Yes. Do you think you could give me a lift?"

"Perhaps so. Jump in."

Ernest lost no time in availing himself of the invitation.

"Where were you going in Lee's Falls?" he asked.

Ernest felt that it would be imprudent to mention that his destination was the bank, so he answered guardedly, "I am going to see the town. I may stop overnight."

"At the hotel?"

"Yes."

"It is not much of a place to see," said the driver, watching his companion curiously.

"It is larger than Emmonsville, isn't it?"

"Yes. How long have you been in Emmonsville?"

"Not long."

"Where do you live there?"

"At Mrs. Larkins'."

"Do you go to school?"

"No."

Meanwhile the horse was traveling very slowly, and it seemed to Ernest that he would go over the road quite as fast if he had continued to walk. He began to think it was his turn to ask questions. 69

"Are you going all the way to Lee's Falls?" he asked.

"I may go nearly there."

"I am very much obliged to you for giving me a lift. I was quite tired."

The driver smiled.

"Perhaps I have an object," he said.

Ernest looked an inquiry.

"The pleasure of your company," explained his companion with a smile.

"Thank you," answered Ernest.

"Now I come to look at you, I think I have seen you before," continued the driver.

"Where?"

"In Emmonsville—at the bank."

Ernest became alarmed. There was a significance in his companion's tone which excited his alarm. But he did not dare show his feelings. He remained outwardly calm, though inwardly disturbed.

"Very probably," he said; "I have been there."

His companion laughed. He was playing with the boy as a cat plays with a captive mouse. Ernest began to consider whether he could not think of some pretext for getting out of the buggy.

Suddenly the buggy stopped.

"I will get out here," said Ernest quickly.

"Not quite yet. I have not got through questioning you."

"I am in a hurry," said Ernest.

“You must wait till your hurry is over. Now tell me truly, are you not bound for the Lee’s Falls bank?”

Ernest was startled.

“You see, I know more about you than you suppose. You are the bank messenger.”

It seemed useless to deny it. The question now was, was his secret packet in danger?

“I have sometimes acted as bank messenger,” he said warily.

“And you are acting in that capacity now. What are you taking to the Lee’s Falls bank?”

Ernest turned pale. His worst fears were confirmed.

“Why do you ask?” he said.

“Because I want to know.”

“What business can it be of yours?” demanded Ernest boldly.

“Don’t be impudent, boy! Hand me the package of money.”

“I have no package of money.”

“Then you have bonds.”

Ernest remained silent.

“I see that I have hit it. Now hand over the bonds, if you value your life.”

He spoke sternly and looked so fierce that the boy messenger became more and more alarmed. He saw that he must give up the package, but determined to hold out in his resistance as long as possible.

“The package is not mine, and I have no right to surrender it,” he said.

“I’ll take the responsibility, boy. You can’t be blamed, for you can’t help yourself.”

As he spoke he passed his hand over Ernest’s vest, which he saw projected more than was usual, and discovered the hiding place of the important package.

Instantly he had torn open the vest and drawn out the envelope.

“I thought I should find it,” he said in a tone of triumph.

Ernest felt very much dejected. It was a mortification to lose the first large sum with which he had been intrusted.

“Will you tell me who you are?” he asked abruptly.

“First let me know who you think I am.”

As the driver spoke he eyed Ernest sharply.

“Is your name Fox?” asked the young messenger.

His companion laughed.

“I know Mr. Fox,” he answered.

“You are either Fox or a member of his band.”

“You seem to be a sharp boy; I won’t tell you whether you are right or not.”

“I suppose I may go now?”

“Where do you want to go?”

Ernest hesitated. This was a question which he could not at once answer. To go on to Lee’s Falls without the packet would do little good. Yet the bank officers there ought to know that the bonds intended for them had been stolen.

“I will go to Lee’s Falls,” he said.

“Not at present; I have other views for you.” As he spoke the robber turned his horse to the right. Wholly ignorant as to where he was to be carried, Ernest sank back in his seat and resigned himself as well as he could to the situation.

CHAPTER XVI

IN THE OUTLAW’S HOME

Where he was to be carried or what was to be his fate, Ernest could not conjecture, nor did he speculate much. It was enough for him to know that he was in the power of one of the notorious outlaws.

There was considerable difference between his appearance and that of the man at his side. He was silent and depressed, while James Fox, for it was he, seemed in excellent spirits. He turned

to the boy with the remark: “You don’t say much.”

“No, for it would be no good.”

“Brace up, boy! There is no occasion to look as if you were going to a funeral.”

“Give me back the bonds and I will look lively enough.”

“Come now, don’t be foolish. These bonds don’t belong to you.”

“They were given into my care.”

“Very well! You took as good care of them as you could.” 72

“I shall be held responsible for them.”

“No, you won’t. I shall send your employers a letter letting them know that you did the best you could to keep them out of my hands. But perhaps they never heard of me,” and he laughed.

“If your name is Fox they have heard of you.”

“There is no need to beat about the bush. My name is Fox—James Fox.”

“What made you take up such a business, Mr. Fox?” asked Ernest gravely.

“Well, I like that! You, a kid, undertake to lecture me.”

“You were once a kid yourself.”

The outlaw’s face grew grave suddenly and his tone became thoughtful.

“Yes, I was a kid once. At sixteen—is that your age?”

“Yes.”

“Well, at sixteen I was as innocent as you. I had a good mother then. If she had lived perhaps I would have turned out different. Why, it seems a great joke, doesn’t it. I attended Sunday-school till I was fifteen. Are you afraid that you will come to harm?”

Ernest looked intently in the brigand’s face.

“No,” he said, after a pause. “I think you won’t do me any more harm. But you can do me a great favor.”

“What is that—return you the bonds?”

“I would ask that if I thought you would do it, but I don’t expect it. I should like to have you release me and let me go home.”

“I can’t do that, for I want you to visit me. You may not think it, but I always liked young people. It will be quite a pleasure to me to have you for a visitor.”

“Thank you, but I am afraid that I shall become an unwilling guest.”

“Besides, it will be a pleasure to my little boy to meet you. He does not often meet other boys.”

“Have you a son?” asked Ernest in surprise.

The outlaw’s face softened. 73

“Yes,” he answered. “He is a sweet little boy, as I can say even if he is my son. His name is Frank. Would you like to see his picture?”

“Yes,” answered Ernest, with interest.

James Fox drew from an inner pocket a small card photograph of a young boy with a very winning face. Ernest was attracted, for unlike many boys of his age he liked younger children. He looked at the picture long and earnestly.

“It is a sweet face,” he said at last.

“Isn’t it?” asked the proud father.

“Is his mother living?”

“No.”

“Was there no difficulty in getting it taken?”

“I suppose you mean on account of my profession. Well, there might be around here, but this was taken in Minneapolis—about a year ago. It was one of the few visits that Frank has made with me.”

“Are you going to bring him up to your business?”

“Take care, boy!” said the outlaw, frowning. “Don’t be impertinent.”

“I don’t mean to be. Do you think the question an improper one?”

“Well, perhaps I have no right to think so. Somehow the business, though it seems all right to me, I couldn’t think of for my boy. No, I shall soon place him at school, where no one will know that he is related to the celebrated outlaw. I want him brought up to lead an honest life.”

“I am glad you do. I respect you for that.”

“My lad, you seem to be one of the right sort. As you will see my son I want you to promise me that you won’t say a word about the business I am engaged in.”

“I will make that promise. Then the boy doesn’t know?”

“No, he has no suspicion. He is too young to think much about that. Perhaps if he had associated with other boys much he would have found out.” 74

While this conversation was going on they had entered a wood, and the road became wilder and rougher. Indeed, it was hardly a road, but rather a lane, narrow and grass-grown.

Ernest began to wonder in what sort of a home his companion lived. His evident affection for his son gave Ernest a different feeling toward him. It was plain that he had a softer side to his nature, bandit though he was.

Ernest had never read the story of Jekyll and Hyde, but he felt instinctively that the man beside him had a double nature. On the road he was an outlaw, with corresponding traits, a rough and unscrupulous man, but at home and in the presence of his son, as Ernest judged, he was a warm-hearted and affectionate father.

In truth, the young bank messenger looked forward with interest to a meeting with the boy who was so dear to the heart of a man whom the world generally supposed to be a stranger to the softer emotions.

At length they reached a rocky hillside. Here the outlaw pulled up his horse and jumped from the buggy. Ernest looked at him in a questioning way.

“You can get out,” he said. “We have arrived.”

Ernest alighted and looked about him. He naturally expected to see a dwelling of some kind, but there was none in sight. If it was at a distance, why should they not have driven to it?

James Fox looked at him with a smile, enjoying his perplexity.

From his pocket he drew a large silk handkerchief.

“Come here, my boy,” he said.

Ernest did not quite understand what he proposed to do, but he felt better acquainted with the outlaw now, and he knew that there was no cause for apprehension. He accordingly approached without question.

James Fox bandaged his eyes so that he could see nothing. Then he took him by the hand and led him forward.

Ernest could not tell what was being done, but he found himself walking on a rocky path, hand in hand with his guide. How far he walked he could not tell. It might have been two hundred feet. Then his guide stopped, and of course he stopped too. 75

Next the handkerchief was removed and he found himself in what seemed a rocky cavern. At any rate it was a large room of irregular shape, but the stone floor had been made smooth and was covered by a soft carpet. It was furnished like a sitting-room in a private house. There were comfortable chairs, including a rocking-chair and a capacious armchair. On one side of the room was an inviting-looking couch.

Of course there would have been perfect darkness but for artificial light. On a table was a large student’s lamp and in a niche in the wall was another. Besides this there was a lantern hanging from the roof of the chamber, but this was not lighted.

Ernest looked about him with curiosity and surprise. It was something new to him and recalled a story he had once read in which a cave dwelling was described.

“Well, what do you think of it?” asked the outlaw, smiling.

“It is wonderful,” said Ernest.

“You did not know where I was bringing you?”

“No. It is a cave, is it not?”

“Well, it looks like it.”

“There are other rooms, are there not?”

“Yes, but this is my private apartment; my parlor, you may call it. This is my sleeping room.”

He drew aside the hangings on the farther side and revealed an inner chamber of less size.

On a bed Ernest’s attention was drawn to the figure of a sleeping boy—evidently the original of the picture which the outlaw had shown him.

“That is your son?” asked Ernest.

“Yes, that is Frank.”

The outlaw’s stern countenance softened as he regarded the sleeping boy.

Suddenly the boy stirred; he opened his eyes and when he recognized his father a glad smile lighted up his innocent face. 76

“Papa!” he said, and James Fox bent over and kissed him.

CHAPTER XVII

FRANK

After kissing his father the young boy looked inquisitively at Ernest.

“Who is that boy, papa?” he asked.

“I have brought him here to stay with you. Shall you like to have his company?”

“Yes, papa. You know it is very lonely while you are away. What is his name?”

The outlaw looked at Ernest significantly. He took the hint and answered: “My name is Ernest Ray.”

“How old are you, Ernest?” went on the boy.

“Sixteen.”

“I am only ten.”

“Are you going to get up, Frank?” asked his father.

“Yes,” answered the young boy briskly. “I got sleepy because I was alone. Where did papa find you, Ernest?”

“Oh, I met him outside and he took me to ride.”

James Fox looked approval of this answer.

“I am glad you came with him.”

By this time Frank had slid from the bed and put his hand in Ernest’s.

“Come here,” he said, “and I will show you my books.”

Led by his small companion Ernest went up to a bookcase which he had not before observed in the main room. About thirty books stood on the shelves.

“Where did you get your books?” he asked.

“Papa bought them for me in Minneapolis. Were you ever in Minneapolis?”

“No.”

“It is a nice place. Sometimes I think I would like to live there instead of here.”

“You are not getting tired of home, are you, Frank?” asked his father half reproachfully.

“No, papa, but it is lonely here sometimes. Am I to live here always?”

“No, Frank. Some time I will send you to school. But you won’t see me every day then.”

“Then I don’t want to go.”

The outlaw stooped over and kissed the boy.

“Now, Frank, I have something to do, so you may amuse yourself with Ernest.”

“Can you play dominoes?” asked Frank.

“Yes; have you a set?”

“Yes.”

The boy opened a drawer in a bureau and drew out a box of dominoes. He poured them out on the table and they began to play the ordinary game. When they tired of that Ernest taught him a new one.

After they grew tired of playing Ernest read aloud to the boy from one of his favorite books.

They were sitting together in the armchair when James Fox, who had left the room, returned. He smiled approvingly at the picture. He was pleased to think that he had found a companion whom his boy liked.

“What have you been doing, Frank?” he asked.

“He has been reading to me, papa. He reads nicely and I liked it very much.”

“I am sorry to interrupt you, but are not you young people hungry?”

“I think I could eat something,” answered Ernest.

“Frank, you may bring him into the dining-room.”

The drapery was lifted and they passed into a room as large as the one they were in. On a table in the center a substantial meal, consisting principally of roast beef, was set forth. An old colored woman hovered near, evidently the cook.

“Juba,” said the outlaw, “this is a new boarder. His name is Ernest.”

“Glad to see you, Massa Ernest,” rejoined the old woman, nodding her turban. “Sit down here next to Massa Frank.”

It seemed very strange to Ernest to reflect that he was the guest of one of the famous outlaws of whom he had heard so much. He was half inclined to doubt whether it was real. If he had been alone he would have pinched himself to see whether he was awake or dreaming. Here he was in the bowels of the earth on intimate terms with an outlaw and his family. How long was he to stay in the cavern? That was a question impossible to answer. Meanwhile he was hungry and the dinner was well cooked.

“Where is Uncle John, papa?” asked Frank suddenly.

Ernest remembered that one of the Fox brothers was named John, and he awaited the answer with interest.

James Fox seemed busily thinking and Frank had to repeat the question.

“Your Uncle John?” repeated the outlaw. “He went away on business.”

“What kind of business, papa?”

It was a natural question, but it startled James Fox. He saw that as his son became older it might not be easy to evade embarrassing questions.

“You seem curious, Frank,” he answered after a pause. “You wouldn’t understand if I were to tell you.”

“Will you teach me your business some day, papa?”

It was on the tip of the outlaw’s tongue to say, “Heaven forbid!” but he only answered: “Wait till you are older, Frank. Then we will talk about it.”

At length they rose from the table.

They went back to the main room and Ernest read a little more to the young boy. But Frank’s eyes grew heavy and he finally dropped off to sleep.

“Shall I lay him on the bed, Mr. Fox?” asked Ernest.

“No, I will do so.”

He took the boy tenderly in his arms.

“If I had known he would fall asleep I would have undressed him,” he said.

After placing the boy on the bed he resumed his seat in the armchair and began to smoke. Finally he looked over at Ernest.

“Do you like my little boy?” he asked abruptly.

“He is a dear little fellow,” answered Ernest.

“So he is,” said the father in a soft voice. “You have no prejudice against him because he is my son?”

“No,” answered Ernest. “Whatever you are he is not responsible.”

“True, but all might not take that view of it. I don’t know why I should speak so confidentially to you, lad, but if I ever regret my line of life it is when I look at him. I wouldn’t like to have his future marred by his association with me. I wouldn’t like people to turn from him because he was an outlaw’s son.”

“I hope you will forgive my boldness,” said Ernest, “but don’t you think you will ever change your mode of life?”

“It is too late; I am too well known. Yet who knows?” he said after a pause.

At nine o’clock Juba entered the room.

“Has John returned?” asked the outlaw.

“No, massa.”

A shade of anxiety overspread the outlaw’s face.

“He should have been here before this,” he said. Then looking at Ernest he said: “I am going out a while. Lie down on the bed with Frank and if he wakes up undress him.”

“Yes, sir.”

An hour later Frank and Ernest were sleeping peacefully side by side.

When Ernest awoke the next morning Frank was still asleep on the bed beside him. In the large room adjoining, James Fox lay on the lounge. He had given up his bed to Ernest. He had not himself undressed, but had thrown himself on the couch in his ordinary clothes.

Breakfast was ready by the time they were, and the three sat down together.

“Where is Uncle John, papa?” asked Frank.

“He has not returned, Frank,” said James Fox, soberly.

“What made him stay away all night?”

“Probably it was business,” answered the outlaw, but Ernest noticed that he looked disturbed.

In truth he had been out till two o’clock seeking for his brother, who he feared had got into trouble. We know that he was in the prison at Crampton, whither he had been conveyed by Luke Robbins and Ezekiel Mason. Of course it was in the mind of James Fox that his brother might

have been arrested, since this was a risk which he daily incurred.

Just as breakfast was over there was a new arrival. It was a tall, stalwart fellow whom James Fox addressed as Hugh.

“Do you bring any news, Hugh?” asked the outlaw eagerly.

“Yes,” answered Hugh Humphries.

“Is it about John?”

Hugh glanced significantly at the two boys. Ernest he saw for the first time.

James Fox understood and followed Hugh out of the room.

“Well,” he said inquiringly when they were out of hearing.

“Mr. John is in trouble,” answered Hugh briefly.

“Go on,” said James Fox. “Do you know where he is?”

“In Crampton jail.”

“Go on. Give me the particulars.”

“He was carried there by two persons.”

“Who were they?”

“One I think was a farmer who lives in Claremont. The other seemed to be a Quaker.”

“I don’t remember any Quaker in this neighborhood. He must be a stranger hereabouts.”

“I think I have seen him before.”

“Where?”

“At the Emmonsville bank. I was passing there one day in disguise and, chancing to look in, I saw this man sitting on a bench near the paying teller’s desk.” 81

“Ah!” said James Fox, thoughtfully. “He may be a detective.”

“That is what I thought.”

“That is bad news, but the jail at Crampton is not very strong. I have been confined there myself and made my escape. However, John will need assistance from the outside.”

“I see you have a new boy,” said Hugh curiously. “When did you pick him up?”

“Yesterday, a few miles from here. He is a bank messenger.”

“From what bank?”

“The Emmonsville bank.”

“Then he may know something of this Quaker detective?”

“Well suggested. I will question him.”

CHAPTER XVIII

FOX’S BAND

When James Fox returned to the apartment where the boys were still seated at the table he said: “Ernest, I should like to speak to you a minute.”

Ernest followed him out of the room.

“Is there any person connected with the bank at Emmonsville who wears the dress of a Quaker?” began the outlaw.

Ernest hesitated a moment.

“Speak out, boy!” said Fox. “I must and will know.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Is he a detective?”

“He may act as such.”

“Is he under pay at the bank?” 82

“I think he is.”

“Do you know where he is now?”

“No.”

“Was he at the bank when you left it yesterday afternoon?”

“No, sir.”

“Do you know where he was?”

“I saw him ride away with a farmer.”

James Fox and Hugh exchanged glances. Their suspicions were confirmed.

“Is he in any trouble?” asked Ernest, becoming a questioner in his turn.

“No. For aught I know he may be at the bank.”

Ernest looked relieved and for two reasons. He was glad that Luke was not in trouble. Then he knew that when his disappearance was discovered Luke would leave no stone unturned to rescue him. It was a comfort to think that he had a powerful friend outside.

“That will do,” said the outlaw. “You may return to Frank.”

“How long are you going to keep me here?” asked Ernest anxiously.

“Are you tired of remaining with us?”

There was something in the outlaw’s tone that savored of kindness. Ernest felt that in some way he had ingratiated himself with him.

“I would like my freedom. I am not used to confinement,” he said.

“Very natural. I cannot let you go just yet, but I will not allow you to be harmed. Listen! I shall be away all day probably. Do what you can to amuse Frank.”

“I will. I should be very lonely without him.”

“That is a good boy, Hugh,” said James Fox, as Ernest left them. “I should like to keep him with us.”

“Why don’t you then?”

“I am afraid he would be unhappy.”

“I never knew you to take such a liking to a boy before.” 83

“I never have. Indeed I have seldom met any. All my dealings have been with men. But, Hugh, we must lose no time. We must try to rescue John. It is no more than he would do for me if our cases were reversed.”

“Very well, captain. I am ready to follow wherever you lead.”

“I know that, Hugh. You have always been faithful to my brother and myself.”

“I always will be, captain,” said Hugh, with a look of loyal devotion.

“I know it. I am sure that we have no better friend than Hugh Humphries.”

“You only do me justice, captain. Will you forgive me if I say something?”

“Say what you please, Hugh.”

“What you have said of me is just, but I don’t think you can say it of all in the band.”

“Is there anyone whom you suspect?”

“I don’t take much stock in Peter Longman.”

“I am afraid you are suspicious, Hugh.”

“Not without cause. I have noticed some things about him that I don’t like. I think he is quite capable of turning against you.”

“I have never remarked anything of the sort, but I know you would not speak without cause. Tell me what you want me to do.”

“Only to be on your guard. Don’t trust Peter as you trust me.”

“I never have. And now have you any suggestions to make?”

“You might visit this farmer who helped the Quaker arrest your brother.”

“It may be a good plan. Who is the farmer?”

“His name is Ezekiel Mason.”

“I know where he lives. He is the last man I should suppose would be capable of such mischief.”

“He could have done nothing without the Quaker’s help.”

“Very well, we will take the farm on the way. Still I don’t know that we shall learn anything beyond what we already know.” 84

Before leaving the cave they disguised themselves as farm workmen. In this dress they approached the farmhouse, but there was something that diverted them from their original purpose and led them to keep their distance.

Sitting on the portico was a tall man dressed as a Quaker.

“That’s the man!” said Hugh quickly. “That’s the man who drove up to the jail last evening with your brother.”

James Fox looked at him closely.

“It is best to let sleeping dogs lie,” he said. “We will push on to the jail.”

CHAPTER XIX

LIVING WITH THIEVES

Meanwhile Ernest was left in the cave with Frank. He had been brought in blindfolded and was therefore ignorant as to the entrance or exit. He thought he might, without arousing the boy's suspicion, seek information from him on these points.

"Are there many rooms here, Frank?" he asked.

"Oh, a good many," answered the boy.

"Have you been in many?"

"I have been around with papa."

"I should like to go around," said Ernest. "Suppose we take a little walk."

The boy was quite ready to accept any suggestion from Ernest. So he took his hand and they went from the main room farther into the cavern.

Ernest found that only the portion near the entrance had been furnished. Beyond there was a large amount of empty space. Here and there a small light revealed trunks and boxes arranged without regard to regularity. These, Ernest conjectured, contained stolen articles which had accumulated during the years in which the dreaded outlaws had been a power and a menace in the neighborhood.

It occurred to him that he would like to open some of these boxes, but the companionship of the boy prevented.

He ventured to ask, however: "What is in those boxes, Frank?"

"I don't know. Something of papa's and Uncle John's."

As they kept on they reached parts of the cavern which were quite empty. The Fox brothers were in the position of householders who occupied a house too large for their needs.

By and by the lamps ceased and the portion farther on looked dark and gloomy.

"I am afraid to go any farther, Ernest."

"Why, Frank? What are you afraid of?"

"There may be wild animals there."

"But how could they live there?"

"I don't know, but papa told me there were some."

Ernest understood why the boy had been told this. It was to prevent his going too far. But it made Ernest all the more eager to continue his explorations.

"Even if there were any wild animals I would protect you, Frank."

"But we may not find our way back. It is so dark," said the child with a shudder.

"I won't go farther. But, see, it seems to be lighter."

At a point fifty feet farther on, through a rift in the roof, a gleam of light entered the cavern.

Ernest was anxious to trace this, for, as he judged, it came from some outlet, through which he might possibly obtain deliverance.

"Stay where you are," he said. "I will just go forward and see what I can."

"Don't stay long," entreated Frank nervously.

"No, I won't."

Ernest was just as well pleased to go forward alone, for if there were really, as he supposed, an outlet, it was as well that Frank should not have his attention drawn to it, lest he should speak of it to his father and so reveal the fact of their explorations. This might excite the suspicion of James Fox and put a stop to their further walks.

Continuing on alone, Ernest then saw, perhaps fifteen feet above him, an opening some three feet in diameter, through which he could obtain a glimpse of the clear sky above.

It made his heart beat with exultation and longing. There was freedom if he could only manage somehow to lift himself up to the outlet and make his way through it.

"What is it, Ernest?" asked Frank.

"Oh, it is nothing," answered Ernest with studied indifference. "It isn't anything you would care to see."

The little boy accepted this assurance, for he did not feel the interest that excited Ernest.

"Let us go back," he said, as he resumed his clasp of Ernest's hand.

“Yes, we will go back. Have you ever been as far as this before?”

“No.”

“Then we had better not say anything about it. Your papa might not like it.”

“All right, Ernest. Will you read to me when you go back?”

“Yes, Frank.”

Ernest was glad to comply with the little boy’s request, as he thought he might in this way put the thoughts of their exploration out of his mind.

They were fortunate enough to get back without exciting the attention of Juba, who was busy in the kitchen.

Her work, however, was soon over and she brought her sewing into the room where the two boys were seated.

“Well, Massa Frank, what am you doing?”

“Ernest is reading to me. Why don’t you ever read to me, Juba?” 87

“O lor’, chile, you know I can’t read.”

“But why can’t you read? You’re old enough.”

“Yes, honey, I’m old enough, but I never had no chance to learn.”

“Why didn’t you?” persisted Frank. “Didn’t you go to school when you was little?”

“No, chile, never went to school. They didn’t have no schools where I was raised.”

“Where was that?”

“In ole Virginny.”

“Were you a slave, Juba?” asked Ernest.

“Yes, massa, I was a slave.”

“And how did you get here?”

“It was all along of the war. Ole massa he went to the war and got killed. Then young massa went, and he got killed, too. Then one day there came an officer—one of Abe Linkum’s officers—and he told us we were free and might go where we pleased.”

“Weren’t you glad to be free?” asked Ernest.

“No, honey, we didn’t know where to go nor what to do. We’d allus had some one to look after us, but now there wasn’t anybody.”

“Were you married, Juba?”

“Yes, but I don’t know whether my ole man is livin’ or not. He was sold down in Georgie to a cousin of ole massa.”

“Then he may be living yet?”

“Yes, honey.”

“How old are you, Juba?” asked Frank.

“I don’t know, chile. I’s powerful old. S’pecs I’s a hundred.”

Ernest smiled.

“No, Juba,” he said, “you are not nearly a hundred. You may be sixty.”

“Juba, did you ever hear about Uncle Tom?”

“Yes, chile, I knew Uncle Tom,” was the unexpected reply. “He was raised on Mr. Jackson’s place next to ours.”

Ernest asked some question about this Uncle Tom, but learned, as he expected, that it was quite 88
a different person from the negro immortalized by Mrs. Stowe.

In looking over Frank’s books Ernest found an old copy of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” and taking it down he read some portions, particularly those relating to Topsy. Both Frank and Juba were very much entertained.

“Did you know Topsy, Juba?” asked Frank.

“No, chile, never knowed Topsy. She must have been a no-account young nigga. If she’d lived on our plantation she’d have got flogged for her impudence.”

“How did you come here, Juba?” asked Frank.

“One of them officers took me to Chicago. I lived out with a lady, but when she died, I went to a ’telligence office and there I met your papa. He brought me out here. I didn’t at first like livin’ down under the ground, but I don’t mind it now. Massa Fox treats me well, and I ain’t no wish to change.”

This was the substance of what Juba had to communicate. The rest of the day passed quietly. At nightfall James Fox came home, looking very sober. But he came alone.

CHAPTER XX

ERNEST EXPLORES THE CAVE

James Fox had very little to say during the evening. He was evidently preoccupied and anxious and paid scant attention to the boys.

Frank knew so little of his father's business or occupation that he could conceive of no cause for worriment. When his advances met with little response he asked: "Have you got a headache, papa?"

"No—yes, child. My head troubles me some. Be as quiet as you can."

"Will it disturb you if I play checkers with Ernest, papa?" 89

"No, I should like to have you amuse yourself," answered the outlaw.

He directed the boys to go to bed early. They slept together and he threw himself on the lounge without taking off his clothes.

Ernest slept well. When he woke up at eight o'clock he saw that Frank was still sleeping, but his host was already up.

Juba came into the room.

"Get up, children," she said. "Breakfast is ready."

"Where is papa?" asked Frank.

"He took breakfast an hour ago, honey."

"What made him get up so early?"

"'Portant business called him away."

"Where's Uncle John?"

"He hasn't been home."

"Has he got 'portant business too?"

"'Specs he has, honey."

"It doesn't seem nice to take breakfast without papa," said the little boy.

"You may consider me your papa, Frank," observed Ernest.

"But you're not big enough to be a papa."

When breakfast was over there was the long day before them to be filled up in some way.

"Don't you ever wish to go out of the cave, Frank?" asked Ernest.

"Where?" asked the little boy.

"Into the bright sunshine, out on the green grass and under the trees."

"Yes, I think I should like it," answered Frank thoughtfully. "But papa does not want me to go. I don't know why. Do many little boys live in caves like me?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Can they walk about in the sunshine and play?"

"I always did."

"Do you like it better than living here?"

"Yes."

"Then what made you come here?" 90

This was an embarrassing question and Ernest felt that he must answer carefully.

"Your papa wanted me to make you a visit," he replied after a pause.

"And I am glad you came. It isn't so lonely for me. Before I had only Juba."

"Wouldn't she play with you?" asked Ernest with a smile.

"Juba is too old to play. I hope you will stay with me a good while."

Ernest could not echo this wish, so he answered evasively:

"I can't tell yet how long I shall stay. But the time will come when you will leave the cave and live like other little boys in a house."

"Did papa tell you that?"

"He told me that he should send you to school before long."

"What is a school like?" asked the little boy anxiously.

"There will be a good many boys, some older, some younger than yourself. You will study lessons together and play together."

“I think that will be nice.”

“Yes, I am sure you will enjoy it.”

“Did you ever go to school?”

“Oh, yes; I went to school for some years.”

“Perhaps you will go to school with me?”

“I can’t tell,” answered Ernest vaguely. “Perhaps Juba will go to school with you.”

Frank laughed.

“She would look funny going to school,” he said.

“What’s dat you sayin’ ’bout Juba, Massa Ernest?” asked the old woman.

“I told Frank you might go to school with him.”

“Maybe I’d go and take care of him, honey.”

“But you wouldn’t want to study?”

“I wouldn’t study nohow. I’s a poor, ignorant nigger.”

“Don’t you think you could learn to read?”

“No, I couldn’t. It takes white folks to read.” 91

“No; Juba, when I went to school there was a colored boy in my class, and he was one of the smartest scholars we had.”

“And was he a nigger?” asked Juba.

“We didn’t call him that, but he was a colored boy. If he could learn to read I am sure you could.”

“It’s no use, chile. I’m too old now.”

Much as he liked Frank, it was irksome to Ernest to remain all day in the cave.

They got through the forenoon somehow, taking dinner at twelve o’clock.

About two o’clock Frank complained of being sleepy.

“You won’t mind if I go to sleep for an hour, Ernest?” he said.

“Oh, no,” answered Ernest. “I can read.”

Since his exploration of the day before Ernest had been longing to visit once more the same portion of the cave. But he wanted to go alone. He had a hope that through the aperture in the roof he might effect his escape. It would not do to have Frank with him, as this would interfere with his plan. Now the longed-for opportunity was almost at hand.

He took a volume from the bookshelf and sitting down beside the bed began to read. But his mind was not on the book, though at another time he would have enjoyed it. He watched Frank and in less than fifteen minutes saw that he was fast asleep.

Then he left the room, Juba being occupied in the kitchen. He secured his hat, as he would need it in case he effected his escape.

As he passed through that apartment in the cave where there were trunks and boxes it occurred to him to open one of them. He was rather surprised that it should be unlocked.

It was filled with a miscellaneous assortment of articles, but on top to his surprise and joy he recognized the envelope containing the bonds that had been taken from him.

If he left the cave he would want these, and therefore he had no hesitation in taking them. He 92
put them in the inside pocket of his vest and kept on his way.

In a short time he reached the spot lighted by the aperture in the roof.

The opening was large enough for him to get through, but the difficulty was that it was fifteen feet above the floor of the cave. Ernest was something of a gymnast, but it was out of his power to reach the opening through which he could obtain deliverance.

He looked about to see if there were any articles he could pile upon one another to attain the aperture. But the cave was quite empty of articles of any description, nor could he find any that he could move in the portions which he had already traversed.

It was aggravating to be so near freedom and yet unable to obtain it. Just above him, he could see the blue sky and the cheerful sunshine, while he was a prisoner in a dark cavern.

Was there no way of reaching the opening? he asked himself.

If he had to give up hope he would feel obliged to return the envelope to the box from which he had taken it. Were its loss discovered he would of course be searched and kept in stricter seclusion than before.

In the room used by the outlaw as a sitting-room he might be able to find what he needed. But he could not remove anything without being detected, and should he return there he would possibly find Frank awake, which would spoil all.

It looked as if he would have to give up the chance that had come to him. In thoughtful mood he walked slowly back. All at once an idea struck him. In the room where the trunks and boxes

were stored he had seen a long rope. Could he do anything with it?

Looking up at the aperture he noticed a jagged projection on one side.

“If I could attach the rope to that,” he reflected, “I could draw myself up hand over hand till I reached the top, and then it would go hard if I didn’t get out.”

With new hope in his heart he retraced his steps rapidly till he reached the storeroom.

He knew just where to look for the rope. He examined it carefully and found it very stout and strong.

He took it back with him. Then making a loop at one end he stood under the opening and threw it up as he would a lasso. He had to try a dozen times before he contrived to circle the projection with the loop.

Then pulling it taut he began to climb hand over hand as he had many a time done in sport. Now his deliverance depended upon it.

Slowly, foot by foot, he approached the opening, not knowing whether if he reached it he would be able to draw himself through the hole.

CHAPTER XXI

OUT OF THE FRYING-PAN

Arrived at the opening, Ernest found that there was a trap-door, which through carelessness had been left open. It was, however, a serious problem to draw himself up so as to profit by what he had already done.

Twice he failed and nearly lost his grip on the rope. Then he caught hold of the projection from which the rope depended, and by a supreme effort he succeeded, helping himself by means of the trap-door in emerging from his subterranean prison.

Stretching himself he took a deep breath and realized joyfully not only that he was free, but that he had recovered the valuable bonds of which he had been placed in charge.

He began to look around him and tried to conjecture in what direction he must go to reach Lee’s Falls. He was quite at a loss, as he had been carried into the cave blindfolded. But help seemed to be at hand. He saw at a little distance, rapidly approaching him, a man of middle height whom he concluded to be a resident of some place in the vicinity.

“Can you tell me in what direction I must go to reach Lee’s Falls?” he asked.

The stranger paused and examined him.

“So you want to go to Lee’s Falls?” he said.

“Yes, sir.”

“Where do you come from?”

“From Emmonsville.”

“Direct?”

“No.”

“I saw you just now coming out of some opening in the earth.”

This alarmed Ernest. He felt that he might be called upon to explain where he had been.

“Who is this man?” he asked himself. “Is he one who is likely to be in the confidence of the outlaws? If so I have only got out of one scrape to fall into another.”

He studied the face of the man with whom he was speaking and to his dismay noted a resemblance to James Fox. He began to suspect that this was his brother.

Whether it was or not Ernest deemed it politic to say as little as possible of his experiences and of what he knew about the cave and its occupants.

“Yes,” he answered quietly; “there seems to be a cave underneath. I found the trap-door open and went down, but I regretted it, for I found it difficult to get out again.”

His new acquaintance eyed him scrutinizingly, as if to see whether he knew more than he was willing to reveal.

“So there is a cave underneath?” he said.

“Yes.”

“Have you any idea what it is used for?”

“I don’t think it is used at all. The room below seems empty.”

The man regarded him fixedly.

“When did you leave Emmonsville?” he asked abruptly.

“Yesterday,” answered Ernest in some confusion.

“How does it happen that you have got no farther on your way to Lee’s Falls?”

“I stopped at the cabin of an Indian,” answered Ernest, making the only explanation he could think of.

The man smiled.

“Young man,” he said, “didn’t you pass last night in this cave?”

Ernest saw that there was no further chance for subterfuge.

“Yes,” he answered.

“I thought so.”

“You were captured?” the other went on.

“Yes.”

“Have you any suspicion by whom this cave is occupied?”

“I presume by the Fox brothers.”

“Correct. I am one of them.”

“I began to think so.”

“How were you able to escape?”

“I was left with the little boy. He fell asleep and then I began to explore.”

“Where is my brother?”

“He went out quite early, I presume in search of you.”

“Exactly. I suppose my brother heard that I was in trouble?”

“Yes.”

“By the way, the Quaker detective through whom I got into difficulty you doubtless know?”

“I do.”

“I was put into jail at Crampton, but I managed to effect my escape. Are you connected in any way with the Emmonsville bank?”

“Yes.”

“In what way?”

“As bank messenger.”

“Did my brother take anything from you?”

“Yes.”

“Money?”

“No, bonds.”

“You are a sensible boy. You answer my questions freely. You are a smart boy, too. It isn’t every lad of your age who would have managed to effect an escape from the cave. Do you remember the entrance?”

“No; I was carried into it blindfolded.”

“I thought my brother would be prudent. So you couldn’t find it again.”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Still I cannot run any risk. You will have to come with me.”

“Where do you want to carry me?” asked Ernest, much disturbed.

“I will carry you back to the cave.”

“Let me go free. I will promise not to reveal anything that I have discovered.”

“I am sorry, boy, but you were made prisoner by my brother, and I owe it to him to prevent your escape.”

It was intolerable to Ernest to think of having his captivity renewed. He determined that he would at least make an effort for freedom.

Accordingly he did not hesitate, but started to run, hoping that in this way he might save himself. He had always the reputation among his boy companions as a sprinter, and resolved to see whether this was a lost art.

“So that’s your game, is it?” exclaimed the outlaw. “It will go hard with me if I don’t catch you. Stop, or it will be the worse for you!”

But Ernest had no intention of giving up so soon. He only exerted himself the more.

The contest was not so unequal as might have been supposed. Ernest was tall for his age, and the outlaw was rather below the average height. So there was in reality only about an inch difference in their height.

On the other hand, John Fox had, as might be supposed, more strength and endurance. He was not over weight and therefore not scant of breath. Ernest got the start and this was an advantage. One ran about as fast as the other, so it settled down into a contest of endurance.

The outlaw, however, was irritated at the unexpected difficulty of his undertaking. He had thought that Ernest would surrender.

“I wish I had my revolver,” he muttered.

Had the outlaw been aware that Ernest had in his possession the packet of bonds which had impelled his brother to make him a captive his zeal would have been increased. He knew, of course, that the bonds would be taken from him and he could conceive of no chance of the boy’s recovering them.

They flew over the ground, maintaining the same relative distance. But there was an unexpected contingency that worked to the disadvantage of Ernest.

Directly in his path was a projecting root which in his haste escaped his notice. He tripped over it, and as a natural consequence he measured his length on the ground.

The outlaw’s face lighted up with exultation. Now the issue was no longer doubtful.

Before Ernest could recover himself and rise to his feet John Fox was upon him.

He flung himself on the prostrate boy and clutched him in a firm grasp.

“Now I have you,” he said. “You were a fool to run. You might have known that you could not escape.”

“I came near it, though,” gasped Ernest, quite out of breath. “Let me up.”

“Will you promise to go with me without giving me any more trouble?”

“I will make no promises,” said Ernest.

“Then it will be the worse for you,” said the outlaw vindictively.

What he proposed to do must remain unknown, for as he spoke a hand was thrust into his neckcloth and he was jerked violently to his feet.

CHAPTER XXII

CASTRO TO THE RESCUE

Bewildered and angry, John Fox looked to see who was his assailant. He found himself confronted by a tall, muscular Indian, whom Ernest also recognized as the man whose child he had saved from a watery grave.

“What do you mean by this outrage?” demanded the outlaw angrily.

“Why are you hurting him?” said the Indian, pointing to Ernest.

“Because I choose to.”

“Me stop you,” said the Indian calmly.

“I have a great mind to shoot you.”

This was an empty threat, for his weapon had been taken by the Quaker detective.

The only answer made by the Indian was to produce a revolver, which he pointed at the breast of the outlaw.

“Two play at that game,” he answered.

John Fox shrank back, for it takes a man of nerve to face a revolver. He began to remonstrate.

“What interest have you in that boy?” he asked.

“He save my little boy from drowning,” answered the Indian. “Will you go or shall me shoot?”

There was but one answer to make to this question. John Fox turned about and walked quietly away without a word.

Ernest grasped the Indian’s hand gratefully.

“I can’t thank you enough,” he said. “You have perhaps saved my life.”

“You save my little boy.”

“Do you know that man?”

“No.”

“It was John Fox, one of the Fox brothers, the famous outlaws.”

“Humph! I have heard of him. How did he catch you?”

Ernest told the story. He also told of the commission he had from the Emmonsville bank.

“I am going to ask you a favor,” he asked.

“What is it?”

“I want you to go with me to the bank at Lee’s Falls. I have a package of bonds to carry there and I don’t think it safe to go alone. I will see that you are paid for your time and trouble.”

“I will go.”

Under the guidance of his Indian friend Ernest reached Lee’s Falls. The bank was closed, but the cashier was still in the bank building, having been detained after hours. Seeing him through the window, Ernest knocked and obtained admission.

“The bank is closed, young man,” said the bank officer.

“I know it, but I have a package of bonds from the bank in Emmonsville. I hope you will take them from me, for I don’t want the responsibility of them any longer.”

“Oh, you are the young messenger. We had advice that you would be here yesterday.”

“So I should have been, but for my capture by one of the Fox brothers.”

“And how did you escape?” asked the wondering cashier.

“Please take the bonds and I will tell you. I spent two nights in the outlaws’ cave. This afternoon I managed to get away.”

“But were not the bonds taken from you?”

“Yes, but I recovered them.”

Ernest, without waiting for further questions, told the story as briefly as possible.

“So, after all,” he concluded, “I should have been taken again but for my friend here,” laying his hand upon the Indian’s shoulder. “I told him you would pay him for his trouble in accompanying me.”

“So I will,” said the cashier, and he took a five-dollar bill and tendered it to the Indian.

The latter objected to taking it, alleging that Ernest had saved his boy’s life, but the cashier overruled his objections and he accepted it.

They were going out of the bank when the familiar figure of Luke Robbins came up the street. His face was clouded by an expression of anxiety and he seemed troubled. He had searched everywhere for Ernest, and thus far had failed to find him.

When he saw the boy emerging from the bank his face changed at once.

“So you are safe, Ernest? I thought I had lost you,” he exclaimed. “Did you see anything of the outlaws?”

“I should say that I did. I was captured by James Fox and confined two nights in the underground haunts of the robbers. When I escaped this afternoon I fell into the clutches of the other brother.”

“What! John Fox?”

“Yes.”

“This cannot be, Ernest. I lodged him myself in Crampton jail.”

“All I can tell you is that he is at liberty now. He must have escaped.”

“Then I am afraid I shan’t receive the reward offered for his capture.”

“You ought to get it. You delivered him over to the authorities. If they could not keep him that was their own lookout.”

“You ought to be right, lad. I hope you are. Who is this man?”

“My Indian friend, who proved to be a friend in need. It was he who saved me from John Fox.”

“I am proud to know you,” said Luke, grasping the hand of the red warrior. “If you have helped Ernest you are my friend.”

“He save my little boy; I will always be his friend.”

“You have saved my boy, my Indian friend, and you will always be my friend,” returned Luke.

“Well, Luke, what shall we do? I have done my errand and delivered the bonds.”

“We will go back. I have found you and have no more to do here.”

“Shall we walk?”

“No, it is too far. There is a stable a little way from here; I will hire a conveyance and our Indian friend will perhaps be willing to drive us over.”

The Indian expressed his willingness, and the three were soon on their way through the woods. They met with no adventure, nor did they fear any, for it would have required a brave man to attack two such stalwart men as the Indian and the Quaker detective.

Leaving them for the present, we will go back to the cave from which Ernest had made so unceremonious a departure.

Frank slept for two hours, but at length opened his eyes, expecting to see Ernest sitting at his bedside.

He looked in vain. There was no one in the room. This did not surprise him much, however. He thought Ernest might have gone into the next apartment.

“Ernest!” he cried, but his call received no response.

The little boy got out of bed and looked about, but his search was vain.

So he went into the kitchen, where he found Juba engaged in some domestic work.

“Juba,” he said, “where is Ernest?”

“I don’t know, chile. Isn’t he in the big room?”

“No, Juba. I went to sleep and when I woke up he was gone.”

“You look round and maybe you find him.”

But Frank was doomed to disappointment. He sat down ready to cry. He felt very lonely. He had not realized how much he enjoyed Ernest’s company.

“I don’t know where he can have gone, Juba. Do you think he’s gone and left me?”

“I can’t tell, chile. Wait till your papa comes home. He will find him.”

Frank had to wait an hour and a half before his father’s return. All this time he was buoyed up by the hope that Ernest would come back. He was continually watching the portal to see if the runaway would not come. 102

James Fox entered the room with grave face and heavy step. He had not heard of his brother’s escape and thought him still an inmate of Crampton jail.

He looked about for his young captive.

“Where is Ernest, Frank?” he asked.

“I don’t know, papa. I miss him ever so much,” said the little boy tearfully.

“But he must be somewhere about. When did you miss him?”

“He went away when I was asleep.”

The outlaw’s suspicions were aroused.

“I will look for him,” he said.

But Ernest was in none of the rooms.

“Did you walk with him into the interior of the cave, Frank?” he asked.

“Yes, papa.”

“Ha, that explains it. Go with me and tell me just where you went.”

The little boy led the way through the vacant apartments till he reached the one through which the light came from above.

The rope was still hanging from the projection, and this explained Ernest’s escape.

“He must have got out this way,” said the outlaw.

“Won’t he come back, papa?” said Frank.

“Yes,” said his father resolutely. “I will bring him back.”

CHAPTER XXIII

GIVEN IN TRUST

“Well, lad, have you had enough of Emmonsville?”

The speaker was Luke Robbins and the time was two days after the series of exciting incidents recorded in the last few chapters. 103

“Why do you ask, Luke?” replied Ernest. “Are you tired of it?”

“Yes, lad, I want to move on.”

“But what about the reward you are entitled to for the capture of John Fox?”

“The cashier thinks I will only receive a part of it, as Fox has escaped.”

“That is unlucky. You will have to wait until the matter is decided, won’t you?”

“No. He has offered me an advance of a hundred dollars, and is authorized to collect whatever prize money may be awarded to me. You have some money left?”

“Yes, about seventy-five dollars.”

“Then we both have enough to start on. I propose to go to California by train, getting there as soon as possible. When we reach there we will see what we can do to increase our pile.”

“I like that plan. When shall we go?”

“We will start on Monday.”

Before they departed there was some sensational news. Peter Longman, one of the Fox band, taking offense at some slight put upon him by James Fox, went to the authorities and revealed the existence and location of the cave, with other information of a like nature. The result was that a strong force was sent to surprise and capture the notorious outlaws.

The visit was made at night and under guidance of Peter himself. Wholly unsuspicious of treachery, the outlaws were captured in their beds and the valuable articles in the storeroom were confiscated.

James Fox was reclining on the sofa when the officers entered.

“Is your name Fox?” asked the leader of the invading party.

“Yes,” answered the outlaw proudly.

“Then you are my prisoner.”

“Who has betrayed me?” demanded Fox quickly.

There was no answer, but just behind the invading party the outlaw caught sight of Peter Longman, apparently trying to screen himself from observation. 104

“I need not ask,” he said. “There is the treacherous hound. He shall not live to profit by his baseness.”

Before anyone could interfere James Fox leveled his revolver at Longman, and a sharp scream showed that his aim was true. His treacherous follower fell to the ground, mortally wounded.

James Fox looked at him disdainfully, then threw the revolver upon the floor of the cave and held out his hands. “Now bind me if you will,” he said; “I am your captive.”

Little Frank was a terrified witness of this scene.

“What are they doing to you, papa?” he asked. “They are bad men.”

In spite of his fortitude the outlaw showed traces of emotion. “That is my little son,” he said to the lieutenant commanding.

“He shall be taken care of. Do not be anxious about him.”

“There is an old colored woman here—Juba,” went on the outlaw. “The boy is used to her. If possible let them be together.”

Under a strong guard the famous robbers were carried to jail, and the cave which had been for years their meeting place was dismantled and was never again used for a criminal resort.

When Ernest read the story his feelings were mixed. He rejoiced that the outlaws were taken, but he felt a sympathy for little Frank, and understood what a shock it must be to the father and son to be separated.

He learned where Frank was and called upon him. He had been taken to his own home by the leader of the raiding force.

When he entered the room where Frank sat disconsolately at the window the little fellow uttered a cry of joy.

“Is it you, Ernest?” he said, running forward. “I thought I should never see you again.”

Ernest stooped over and kissed him.

“You see I am here,” he said. 105

“What made you go away? Why didn’t you tell me you were going?”

“I will tell you some time, Frank.”

“Why did those bad men take papa away?”

“I do not think you would understand. Where is Juba?”

“She is in the kitchen. I will call her.”

Juba came in and seemed pleased to see Ernest.

“I have got a letter for you, honey,” she said, fumbling in her pocket.

She brought out a yellow envelope. It was directed to Ernest.

The contents ran thus:

> Now that misfortune has come upon me my chief thought is for my boy. Whatever befalls me I want him cared for. You are scarcely more than a stranger to me, but when you were in the cave you seemed to love Frank. Poor boy, he will stand in need of some friend who loves him. So far as you can, will you be his friend and guardian? He has some property—a few thousand dollars—which you will hold in trust for him. It is not stolen property. It was left him by his mother.
>
> Call upon Mr. Samuel Hardy, a lawyer in Lee’s Falls, and he will make over to you the

custody of the money, and look upon you as the authorized guardian of Frank. You know my wish that he should be sent to a good school and properly educated. Will you carry out my wishes in that respect? I do not wish to tie you down, but wherever you may go keep up an active interest in my boy, and from time to time write to him.

I do not know what my fate may be. I am not a coward, and shall not complain or beg for mercy. When you speak of me to Frank in after years, always paint me at my best, and let him understand that at least I loved him.

JAMES FOX.

P.S.—Should Frank die before maturity I desire that his property should go to you.

Ernest read the foregoing with mingled feelings. He knew that the writer was an outlaw, deeply stained with crime; but this letter showed him at his best. Paternal love softened the harsh outlines of his character, and spoke of a nature that might have made him a blessing instead of a curse to his kind. 106

Ernest lost no time in communicating with Mr. Hardy.

The lawyer read the letter in some surprise.

“Mr. Fox seems to have appointed a young guardian for his son,” he remarked.

“Yes, sir; but he appeared to have no choice.”

“I am ready to assist you, however.”

“I will depend upon you, then, for I shall start for California as soon as possible. Can you recommend a satisfactory boarding school?”

“I have a son at school in Lincoln. The school is under the charge of a clergyman, who is an efficient teacher.”

“Can you arrange to enter Frank at his school?”

“I will do so, if you authorize me.”

“I don’t think we can do any better. Were you aware that Mr. Fox was the notorious outlaw?” asked Ernest, after a pause.

“I did not know, but latterly I have suspected it. You may be surprised that under the circumstances I should have consented to serve him. But I felt that I might be of assistance to the boy, and that my refusal would occasion him embarrassment. Your letter is satisfactory, as showing that the fortune of your ward is not made up of ill-gotten gains. Were it otherwise, he would hardly be allowed to keep it. Does Frank know his father’s character and reputation?”

“I don’t think so.”

“It had best be kept from him. I will see that it does not become known at school. It would wound the boy to be twitted with it by his schoolmates.”

Thanks to Mr. Hardy, Ernest found that the new charge imposed upon him would not materially interfere with his plans. A week later than he had originally intended he and Luke Robbins left Emmonsville.

As they rushed rapidly over the prairies, Luke Robbins turned to his young companion and said: “Our journey thus far has been adventurous. I wonder what lies before us.” 107

“We won’t trouble ourselves on that score, Luke. I feel hopeful.”

“So do I, and yet we have less than two hundred dollars between us.”

“That’s true.”

“Still, I have captured an outlaw, and you at the age of sixteen are the guardian of an outlaw’s son.”

“I don’t think we shall meet with anything stranger than that.”

Two days later, in a newspaper bought at an important station, there was an article that deeply interested both travelers. It related to the Fox brothers, recounting their daring attempt to escape from the jail where they were confined. John Fox got away, but James was shot dead by one of the prison guards.

So Frank was an orphan, and Ernest now felt that his responsibility was increased.

CHAPTER XXIV

STEPHEN RAY AND HIS SON

Leaving Ernest and Luke Robbins on their way to California, our attention is called to other characters who must play a part in the drama of the boy from Oak Forks.

A few miles from Elmira, upon an eminence from which there was a fine view of the surrounding country, stood the handsome country mansion of Stephen Ray, already referred to as the cousin of Ernest's father. It passed into his possession by inheritance from poor Ernest's grandfather, the will under which the bequest was made cutting off his son for no worse a crime than marrying a girl thoroughly respectable, but of humble birth.

Stephen Ray, since he came into possession of his uncle's estate, had improved it considerably. He had torn down the old stable and built an imposing new one. The plain carriage which had satisfied his uncle had been succeeded by an elegant coach, and the slow horse by a pair of spirited steeds.

Mr. Ray had become pompous, and by his manner made it clear that he considered himself a man of great consequence. He was a local magistrate, and had for years endeavored to obtain a nomination for Congress.

Had he been of popular manners, he would probably have succeeded, but he was not a favorite among the poorer classes, and their vote must be considered.

There is an old saying, "Like father, like son," and Clarence, now turned sixteen, the only child of the country magnate, was like his father in all objectionable qualities. He was quite as much impressed with ideas of his own consequence.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon. Mr. Ray sat on the piazza, the day being unusually warm, reading a newspaper. In the street near by, his son Clarence was moving swiftly on a new velocipede which his father had just purchased for him.

"Out of the way, there!" he called out, as a shabbily dressed stranger with a weary step plodded along the pathway.

Whether because he was hard of hearing or because his mind was preoccupied, the stranger did not heed the warning, and Clarence, who might easily have avoided the collision, ran into him recklessly. Had the wheel been moving at a greater rate of speed, he might have been seriously hurt. As it was, he was nearly thrown down.

But he rallied, and seizing the offending rider with no gentle grasp, dragged him from the wheel, and shook him vigorously.

"Let me alone, you tramp!" exclaimed Clarence furiously.

But the stranger did not release his hold.

"Not till you apologize for running into me," he answered sternly.

"Apologize to a man like you!" ejaculated Clarence, struggling furiously for his freedom.

"Will you apologize?"

"There is no need of an apology. You got in my way."

"You have no business on the sidewalk with your wheel. It is meant for foot passengers."

"Do you know who I am?" demanded Clarence haughtily.

"No, I don't, nor do I care."

"I am Clarence Ray, son of Squire Stephen Ray. He is a magistrate, and he can send you to jail."

These words of Clarence had the effect he desired. The stranger released him, and eyed him with close scrutiny.

"So you are the son of Stephen Ray?" he said.

"Yes. What have you to say now?"

"That you had no right to run into me, whoever your father may be."

"I shall report your insolence to my father. I shall charge you with violently assaulting me."

"I might have known you were Stephen Ray's son," said the stranger thoughtfully.

"Do you know my father?" asked Clarence.

"I am on my way to call upon him."

"I don't think it will do any good. He never gives money to tramps."

"I have a great mind to give you another shaking up," said the man, and in some fear Clarence edged away from him.

It was evident that this shabby-looking stranger had not a proper respect for those who were in a higher station.

"I will tell him not to give you anything," continued Clarence.

"Like father, like son," said the stranger thoughtfully, apparently not disturbed by the boy's threats.

Evidently he was no common tramp, or he would have been more respectful to the son of the man from whom he was probably about to ask a favor.

"You just wait till you see my father. He'll give you a lecture that you won't soon forget."

"You'd better get on your wheel, boy, and go right along," said the stranger calmly.

"Do you know where my father lives?"

“Yes, at yonder fine house. I see him sitting out on the piazza. Shall we go along together?”

“No, I don’t keep such company as you.”

“And yet some day you may be as poor and friendless as myself.”

“That isn’t very likely. My father is a very rich man.”

“I knew him when he was poor.”

More and more puzzled by the independent manner of this shabby stranger, Clarence made a spurt, and soon found himself in the grounds of his father’s house.

“With whom were you talking, Clarence?” asked Stephen Ray as his son joined him on the piazza.

“One of the most impudent tramps I ever came across,” answered Clarence. “He made an attack upon me, and pulled me from my bicycle.”

Stephen Ray’s cheek flamed with anger. An insult to his son was an insult to him.

“Why did he do this? How dared he?”

“Because I happened to touch him as I passed,” answered Clarence.

“He actually pulled you from your bicycle?” asked Stephen Ray, almost incredulous.

“Yes.”

“I should like to meet him. I should feel justified in ordering his arrest.”

“You will have a chance to meet him. He told me he was going to call upon you—there he is now, entering the gate.”

Stephen was glad to hear it. He wanted to empty the vails of his wrath on the audacious offender.

He was accustomed to seeing men of the stamp of this stranger quail before him and show nervous alarm at his rebukes. He had no doubt that his majestic wrath would overwhelm the shabby outcast who had audaciously assaulted his son and heir.

He rose to his feet, and stood the personification of haughty displeasure, as the poor man who 111
dared his anger walked composedly up the path. He now stood by the piazza steps.

“It is well you have come here,” began the squire in a dignified tone. “My son tells me that you have committed an unprovoked outrage upon him in dragging him from his wheel. I can only conclude that you are under the influence of liquor.”

Stephen Ray waited curiously to hear what the man would say. He was prepared for humble apologies.

“I am no more drunk than yourself, if that is what you mean, Stephen Ray.”

Squire Ray was outraged and scandalized.

“You must be drunk or you would not dare to talk in this way. Who authorized you to address me in this familiar way?”

“You are only a man, I believe, Stephen Ray. I have addressed you as respectfully as you have spoken to me.”

“Respect—to you?” repeated Mr. Ray disdainfully. “Has the time come when we must be respectful to tramps?”

“A poor tramp is quite as deserving of respect as a rich rascal.”

“What do you mean by that?” demanded the squire suspiciously.

“It was a general remark.”

“It is well that it was. But it has no application in the present instance. If you are poor I will give you a quarter, but only on condition that you apologize to my son.”

The stranger laughed.

“Why should I apologize to your son?” he asked.

“You pulled him off his wheel. Do you deny it?”

“No, I do not. Do you know what he did?”

“He brushed against you with his wheel, he tells me, accidentally.”

“So that is his version of it? He deliberately ran into me.”

“I gave you warning. I said ‘Out of the way, there!’” interrupted Clarence. 112

“Yes, but you had no right on the sidewalk.”

“It seems to me, sir, that you are remarkably independent for a man of your rank. Even if it had been as you say, you had no right to assault my son. I might have you arrested on your own confession, but I will forbear doing so on condition that you leave town at once.”

“I have a little business with you first.”

“If you expect alms, you have come to the wrong man.”

“I know very well that you are not charitable. I used to be acquainted with you.”

“Who are you?”

“My name is Benjamin Bolton.”

Stephen Ray looked startled.

“Benjamin Bolton!” he repeated, half incredulous. “I can’t believe it.”

CHAPTER XXV

A STARTLING DISCLOSURE

“Look at me closely, Stephen Ray,” said the strange visitor. “I think you will see some traces of the Bolton you used to know.”

Stephen Ray did examine his visitor closely. Against his will he was obliged to acknowledge the resemblance of the man before him to one who in past times had had an intimate acquaintance with his affairs.

“You may be Benjamin Bolton,” he said after a pause, “but if so, you have fallen off greatly in your appearance. When I first knew you, you were well dressed and——”

“Respectable, I suppose you mean to say?”

“Well, respectable, if you will have it so. Now you look more like a tramp than a lawyer.”

“True as gospel, every word of it. But it isn’t too late to mend. That’s an old proverb and a true one. It is quite in the line of possibility that I should get back to the position from which I fell.” 113

“Perhaps so, but I’m not very sanguine of it.”

“With your help nothing is impossible.”

“You must not count upon that,” said Stephen Ray stiffly. “It is a good while since we parted company. I don’t myself care to renew the acquaintance.”

“But I do,” rejoined Bolton with emphasis.

“I have very little time at my disposal,” said Ray, pulling out an elegant gold watch and consulting it.

“I think it may be well for you to spare me a little time,” went on Bolton quietly.

There was something in his tone that sounded like a threat, and Stephen Ray could not wholly conceal his uneasiness.

“Well,” he said, “I will give you ten minutes. Get through your business, whatever it is, as soon as possible.”

“Hadn’t you better send your son away?” suggested Bolton significantly.

“Why should I?”

But on second thoughts Mr. Ray concluded to act on the hint, and turning to Clarence he said: “Clarence, you might take another spin on your wheel.”

This did not suit Clarence at all. His curiosity had been excited by his father’s change of front toward the objectionable stranger, and he counted on finding out the reason for it.

“Why can’t I stay?” he grumbled.

“This man and I have a little private business together.”

He spoke firmly, and Clarence knew by his tone that further remonstrance would be unavailing, so with a dissatisfied look he left the room.

“Now, sir,” said Stephen Ray sharply, when his son had taken his departure. “I gave you ten minutes. You will need to be expeditious.”

“It will take more than ten minutes—what I have to say,” returned Bolton coolly. “I am rather tired of standing, so you will excuse me if I sit down.”

As he spoke he dropped into a comfortable chair three feet from his host. 114

“Confound his impudence!” thought Ray, much annoyed.

“I think we had better go indoors,” he said.

He did not care to be seen in an apparently friendly conversation with a man like Bolton.

“I think myself it may be better.”

He followed Ray into a room which the latter used as a library and office, and took care to select a comfortable seat.

“Really, Stephen Ray,” he remarked, glancing around him at the well-filled bookcases, the handsome pictures, and the luxurious furniture, “you are very nicely fixed here.”

“I suppose you didn’t come to tell me that,” responded Stephen Ray with a sneer.

“Well, not altogether, but it is as well to refer to it. I have known you a good many years. I remember when you first came here to visit your uncle in the character of a poor relation. I don’t believe you had a hundred dollars to your name.”

Such references grated upon the purse-proud aristocrat, who tried to persuade himself that he had always been as prosperous as at present.

“There is no occasion for your reminiscences,” he said stiffly.

“No, I suppose you don’t care to think of those days now. Your cousin, Dudley, a fine young man, was a year or two older. Who would have thought that the time would come when you—the poor cousin—would be reigning in his place?”

“If that is all you have to say, our interview may as well close.”

“It isn’t all I have to say. I must indulge in a few more reminiscences, though you dislike them. A few years passed. Dudley married against his father’s wishes; that is, his father did not approve of his selection, and he fell out of favor. As he lost favor you gained it.”

“That is true enough, but it is an old story.”

“Does it seem just that an own son should be disinherited and a stranger——” 115

“A near relative,” corrected Stephen Ray.

“Well, a near relative, but less near than an only son. Does it seem right that Dudley should have been disinherited and you put in his place?”

“Certainly. My cousin disobeyed his father.”

“So he was left in poverty.”

“I don’t see how that concerns you, Benjamin Bolton. My uncle had the right to dispose of his property as he pleased.”

“Probably Dudley Ray is living in poverty now.”

“You are mistaken. He is dead.”

“Indeed! Poor fellow! He was a generous and high-minded man.”

“Whatever he may have been, he offended his father, and suffered the consequences.”

“Too true!”

“But I fail to understand why you should have come to discuss this matter with me.”

“When did Dudley die?”

“I can’t be sure as to the year. I think it was about a year after his father’s death.”

“I presume that his father’s injustice helped to hasten his end.”

“I won’t permit any reflections upon my dear uncle and benefactor. He did what he liked with his own. He felt that the estate would be better in my hands than in Dudley’s.”

“Admitting for a moment that this was so, did your heart prompt you to bestow a part of the estate on your unfortunate cousin?”

“No; for I am sure my uncle would have disapproved of such action on my part.”

“Do you know if he suffered much from poverty?”

“No; I did not concern myself with that, nor need you.”

“I would like to comment on one of your statements. You say that your uncle had a right to dispose of his estate as he pleased.”

“Do you dispute it?” 116

“No; I agree with you. Stephen Ray, was his estate disposed of according to his wishes?”

Mr. Ray started, and his face became flushed.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“I mean that he bequeathed the estate to his son, and you took possession of it.”

Bolton spoke slowly, and eyed Stephen Ray keenly.

“Are you mad?” gasped Stephen. “How could I do that? His will, devising the estate to me, was duly probated, and I entered upon my inheritance by due process of law.”

“I know such a will was probated.”

“Then what have you to say?” demanded Stephen Ray defiantly. “Do you mean to deny that the will was genuine?”

“No.”

“Because if you do, you can go to the probate office, and submit the will to any judge of my uncle’s handwriting.”

“There will be no occasion. I admit that the will was written by him.”

“What do you mean, then?” asked Stephen Ray, showing relief.

“I mean this—that it was not his last will and testament.”

“Where is a later one? Produce it if you can?” said Stephen Ray triumphantly.

“You say this fearlessly because you found a later will—and destroyed it.”

“It is a vile slander!”

“No; I will swear that such a will was made.”

“If it was destroyed, he destroyed it himself.”

“No, he did not. I am willing to swear that when he died that will was in existence.”

“I don’t think your swearing will do much good,” sneered Stephen Ray.

“Perhaps so, but one thing has not occurred to you.”

“What is that?” 117

“A duplicate of the last will was placed in my hands. That will exists to-day!”

Stephen Ray started violently.

“I don’t believe it,” he said.

“Seeing is believing.”

“Then bring it here, and let me see it. However, there is one material circumstance that would make it of no value.”

“What is it?”

“My cousin Dudley is dead, and so is his son Ernest. There would be no one to profit by the production of the alleged will.”

Bolton was quite taken aback by this statement, as Stephen Ray perceived, and he plumed himself on the success of his falsehood.

“When did the boy die?” asked Bolton.

“About five years ago.”

“And where?”

“At Savannah,” answered Ray glibly.

“What should have taken him down there?”

“I am not positive, but I believe after his father’s death a Southern gentleman became interested in him and took him to Georgia, where the poor boy died.”

Bolton looked keenly at the face of his companion, and detected an expression of triumph about the eyes which led him to doubt the truth of his story. But he decided not to intimate his disbelief.

“That was sad,” he said.

“Yes, and as you will see, even had your story about the will been true, it would have made no difference in the disposal of the property.”

“Still the revelation of your complicity in the suppression of the last will would injure your reputation, Mr. Ray.”

“I can stand it,” answered Ray with assumed indifference. “You see, my dear fellow, you have brought your wares to the wrong market. Of course you are disappointed.”

“Yes, especially as I am dead broke.” 118

“No doubt.”

“And it prompts me to take my chances with the will in spite of the death of the rightful heirs.”

“What do you propose to do?”

“Lay the matter before a shrewd lawyer of my acquaintance.”

Stephen Ray looked uneasy. The lawyer might suggest doubts as to the truth of his story concerning Ernest’s decease.

“That would be very foolish,” he said.

“Would it? Then perhaps you can suggest a better course.”

“You are a man of education and have been a lawyer yourself. Get a place in the office of some attorney and earn an honest living.”

“You see how I am dressed. Who would employ me in this garb?”

“There is something in what you say. I feel for you, Bolton. Changed as you are, you were once a friend. I certainly haven’t any reason to feel friendly to you, especially as you came here with the intention of extorting money from me. But I can make allowance for you in your unfortunate plight, and am willing to do something for you. Bring me the document you say you possess, and I will give you fifty—no, a hundred dollars.”

Bolton eyed his prosperous companion with a cunning smile.

“No, Stephen Ray, I prefer to keep the will,” he replied, “though I can do nothing with it. Give

me the money unconditionally, and if I get on my feet you will have nothing to fear from me."

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CHAPTER XXVI

BOUGHT OFF

Bolton's reply did not quite suit Mr. Ray, but he felt that if he said too much about the will it would give it an exaggerated importance in the eyes of the man before him. So he answered carelessly: "I will give you the hundred dollars, but I wish it understood that it is all I can give you at any time. Don't apply to me again, for it will be of no use."

"I understand," said Bolton non-committally.

"Shall I give you a check?"

"I could do better with the money. My name is not known now at any bank."

"Well, I think I can accommodate you. I believe I have that sum in my desk."

He opened a drawer in his secretary, and produced a hundred dollars in crisp new bills. They had been taken from the bank the day before for a different purpose.

Bolton took them joyfully. It was long since he had so much money in his possession. He had been his own worst enemy. Once a prosperous lawyer he had succumbed to the love of drink and gradually lost his clients and his position. But he had decided to turn over a new leaf, and he saw in this money the chance to reinstate himself, and in time recover his lost position.

"Thank you," he said, but while there was relief there was no gratitude in his tone.

"And now," said Stephen Ray, "I must ask you to leave me. I have important business to attend to. You will excuse me if I suggest it would be better to go away—to a distance—and try to build yourself up somewhat where you are not known."

"I might go to Savannah."

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"Yes, to Savannah, if you think it will be to your advantage," said Ray with equanimity.

The other noticed his manner, and he said to himself: "He is willing to have me visit Savannah. It is clear that Ernest did not die there."

Benjamin Bolton left the house in a pleasant frame of mind. It was not the sum which he had received that exhilarated him. He looked upon it only as the first installment. It was clear that Stephen Ray feared him, for he was not an open-handed man, and would not have parted with his money unnecessarily.

Bolton had not arranged his campaign, but he was determined to raise himself in the world by playing on the fears of the man he had just visited.

"I wonder," he said to himself, "whether Dudley Ray's son is dead. If so the document is of no value, and though I should prefer to have it, I won't insist. He was a strong and healthy boy, and he may still be living."

This was a point not easy to ascertain.

He went to a restaurant and obtained a substantial meal, of which he stood very much in need. Then he went out for a stroll. He did not propose to leave the place yet.

As he was walking along he met Clarence Ray again, but not now on his wheel. The boy recognized him.

"Are you going to stay in town?" asked Clarence curiously.

"Not long."

"Did you get through your business with pa?"

"Yes, for the present. I suppose you know that you have a cousin about your own age. I used to know him and his father."

"Did you? His father is dead."

"So I have understood. Do you happen to know where the son is?"

"Somewhere out West, I think."

Bolton pricked up his ears. So it seemed that Stephen Ray had deceived him.

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"I would give five dollars to know where he is," he said slowly.

"Have you got five dollars?" Clarence asked doubtfully.

By way of answer Bolton took a roll of bills from his pocket. They were those which Stephen Ray had given him.

"Do you mean it?" asked Clarence in a more respectful tone.

“Yes, I mean it.”

“Why didn’t you ask pa?”

“He never liked the boy nor his father, and I don’t think he would tell me.”

“That is true. He didn’t like either of them.”

“I suppose you couldn’t find out for me?”

“I don’t know but I could,” answered Clarence brusquely.

He had a special use for five dollars, and it struck him that he might just as well earn the money offered by the stranger.

“If you could I would cheerfully pay you the five dollars. You see I used to know Ernest Ray and his father, and I would be pleased to meet them again.”

“Just so,” said Clarence complacently. “How long are you going to remain in town?”

“I did think of going to Elmira to-night, but I think on the whole I will stay at the hotel here till to-morrow morning.”

“That will give me time to find out,” said Clarence.

“All right! You had better not ask your father, for I don’t think he would tell you.”

“That’s so. He will be going out this evening, and then I will search in his desk. I saw a letter there once in which the boy’s name was mentioned. But I say, if you’ve got money why don’t you buy some new clothes?”

“Your suggestion is a good one,” said Bolton, smiling. “Come to look at myself I do appear shabby. But then I’m no dude. I dare say when you rode into me this morning you took me for a tramp.”

“Well, you did look like one.”

“That’s so. I can’t blame you.”

“Shall I find you at the hotel this evening?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll see what I can do.”

About seven o’clock Squire Ray went out to attend to a business meeting, and Clarence was left in possession of the study. He locked the door, and began to ransack his father’s desk. At length he succeeded in his quest.

Benjamin Bolton was sitting in the public-room of the hotel an hour later, smoking a cigar, and from time to time looking toward the door. Presently Clarence entered.

“Have you got it?” asked Bolton eagerly.

“Yes,” nodded Clarence.

He took a piece of paper from his vest pocket and handed it to Bolton.

It read thus: “Ernest Ray, Oak Forks, Iowa.”

“How did you get it?” asked Bolton.

“I found a letter in pa’s desk from an old man named Peter Brant, asking pa for some money for the boy, who was living with him.”

“When was that letter written?”

“About two years ago.”

“Thank you. This gives me a clue. Come out of doors and I will give you what I promised. It isn’t best that anyone should think we had dealings together.”

Five minutes later Clarence started for home, happy in the possession of a five-dollar bill.

“I never paid any money more cheerfully in my life,” mused Bolton. “Now I must find the boy!”

CHAPTER XXVII

OREVILLE

When Ernest and Luke Robbins started for California, they had no very definite plans as to the future. But they found among their fellow passengers a man who was just returning from the East, where he had been to visit his family. He was a practical and successful miner, and was by no means reluctant to speak of his success.

“When I landed in ’Frisco,” he said, “two years ago, I had just forty dollars left after paying the expenses of my trip. I couldn’t find anything to do in the city, so I set out for the mines.”

“Where did you go?” asked Luke, becoming interested.

“To Oreville. At least, that’s what they call it now. Then it didn’t have a name.”

“I hope you prospered,” said Ernest.

“Well, not just at first, but luck came after a while. When I reached the mines I was dead broke, and went to work for somebody else. After a while I staked out a claim for myself. Well, I won’t go into particulars, but I’ve got six thousand dollars salted down with a trust company in ’Frisco, and I’ve got a few hundred dollars about my clothes besides.”

“That’s the place for us, Ernest,” said Luke.

“So I think,” answered Ernest.

“Do you want to go to the mines?” asked the miner.

“Yes; we have our fortunes to make, and are willing to work.”

“Then go out to Oreville with me. Have you got any money?”

“We have enough to get there, and perhaps a little over.”

“That will do. I’ll set you to work on one of my claims. We will share and share alike. How will that suit you?”

“It seems fair. Do you think we can make enough to live upon?”

“That depends partly on yourselves and partly upon luck.”

“At any rate, we are willing to work,” said Ernest.

“Then I’m your friend, and will help you,” said the miner heartily. “Tom Ashton never goes back on his friends.”

This was very encouraging. Luke and Ernest were not dead broke, but were near it. They had less than forty dollars between them, and they had already found out that living was high in California. They remained but a day in San Francisco, and then started for Oreville with Mr. Ashton.

The two friends knew nothing of mining, but as practiced in those days it took very little time to learn. They found that their new friend was a man of consideration at Oreville. He owned several claims, and had no difficulty in finding them employment. They set to work at once, for they were almost penniless.

It may easily be supposed that the miners were not fastidious about living. The cabins or huts which they occupied were primitive to the last degree. Generally they did their own cooking, such as it was. Three of these cabins Tom Ashton owned, and one was assigned to the use of Ernest and his friend.

For years Ernest, with his old friend and supposed uncle, Peter Brant, had lived in a cabin at Oak Forks, but it was superior to their new residence. Yet his former experience enabled him the better to accommodate himself to the way of living at Oreville.

For a month the two friends worked steadily at their claim, which Ashton had finally given them. They made little. In fact, it was with difficulty that they made expenses.

“It will be a long time before we make our pile, Ernest,” said Luke one evening, as he sat in front of his cabin smoking.

“Yes, Luke, things don’t look very promising,” replied Ernest gravely.

“If it weren’t for my pipe I should feel blue.”

“That is where you have the advantage of me, Luke.”

“You have the same chance that I have. I have an extra pipe. Won’t you take a smoke?”

Ernest shook his head.

“I think I’m better off without it.”

“Perhaps you’re right, lad. I remember my poor father warned me against smoking. The question is, how long we’d better keep at it.”

“Is there anything else, Luke?”

“Well, no; not here.”

“And we haven’t money enough to get away.”

Just then a tall man with reddish hair strode across the field to their cabin.

“Good-evening, neighbors,” he said. “How are you making out?”

“Not over well,” answered Luke.

“There’s a difference in claims. You’ve got a poor one.”

“Probably you are right.”

“There’s been considerable gold-dust gathered in Oreville within six months. I have been one of the lucky ones.”

“Indeed! I am glad of it.”

“Yes; I found a nugget two months since that I sold for two thousand dollars. I have made five

thousand within a year."

"You've been in luck. I wish the boy and I could be as successful."

"The claim is not good enough to support two. Why not let the boy find something else?"

"You wouldn't have me freeze him out?" said Luke in a tone of displeasure.

"No, but suppose I find something for him to do? What then?"

"That's a different matter. Have you an extra claim?"

"Yes; but that isn't what I offer him. I have a plan in which he can help me." 126

"What is it?"

"All our supplies come from Sacramento. What we need is a retail store in Oreville—a general store for the sale of almost everything that miners need."

"It would be a good plan to open one," said Luke approvingly.

"Now, you must know that I am an old storekeeper. I had for years a store about twenty miles from Boston. I succeeded fairly with it, but my health gave out. The doctor told me I must not be so confined—that I needed out-of-door exercise. So I came out here and got it. Well, the advice proved good. I am strong and robust, and I feel enterprising. Now, what I propose is this: 'I will open a store, and put the boy in charge under me.'"

"I should like it," said Ernest eagerly.

"You know what we pay for supplies. There's at least a hundred per cent. made, and no one objects to the prices. Why shouldn't we make it as well as the Sacramento storekeepers?"

"True!" said Luke.

"I don't ask you to work for me, my friend, for I don't think it would suit you."

"It wouldn't. At home—that's in Oak Forks, Iowa—I was a hunter. I was always in the open air. The sort of life we live here suits me, though I haven't made much money as yet."

"The boy, I think, would do. He looks like a hustler. I need only look at his face to know that he'd be honest and faithful. What is your name, boy?"

"Ernest Ray."

"That's a good name. You'll only have to live up to it—to the first part of it, I mean. Then you accept my offer?"

"You haven't made any," said Ernest, smiling.

"Oh, you mean about wages. Well, I don't offer any stated wages. I will give you one-third profits, and then your pay will depend on your success. The fact is, you are to keep the store."

Ernest looked an inquiry. 127

"One person can attend to it by day. I will come in the evening, and take a general look after things. Just at first I'll stay with you till you've got the hang of things. But during the day I shall be looking after my claims. Do you know how to keep books?"

"I understand single-entry bookkeeping."

"That will be all you will require."

"How soon shall you start?" asked Ernest, who began to feel very much interested.

"I will go to Sacramento to-morrow, now that we have come to terms. You know that frame building near Ashton's cabin?"

"Yes."

"I don't know what it was originally used for, but it is empty and I can secure it for our store. It isn't large, but it will hold all we need."

"Yes, that will do."

"You haven't said how you like my offer."

"Of one-third profits? I like it better than if you paid me wages. I will make it amount to a good deal."

"That will suit me. I don't care how much you make out of it, for I shall make twice as much."

"How did you happen to think of me?"

"I've watched you ever since you came. I can judge of anyone, man or boy, if I have time enough to take stock of him. I saw that you were just the man for me."

"Boy," suggested Ernest, smiling.

"Oh, well, I'll make a man of you. By the way, an idea has just occurred to me. You'd better go to Sacramento with me to-morrow."

"I should like to do it," said Ernest.

"Then you can notice where I buy my supplies. You may need to go alone sometimes."

"At what time will we start?"

"The stage leaves at seven o'clock."

“I will be ready.”

CHAPTER XXVIII

STOREKEEPING

The journey to Sacramento was made, the goods selected, and in less than a week the new store was stocked. In the arrangement of goods Ernest took a zealous part. He had never served in a store, yet it seemed to come natural to him, and he felt more interest in it than in the work of mining.

After the store was in full working order, Horace Ames left Ernest as sole manager, coming in only in the evening to look at the books, for Ernest as far as possible kept a record of every sale.

Storekeeping in those days and in that country was unusually profitable. Ernest made a little comparison between the cost of goods and the selling price, and arrived at the conclusion that the average profits were a hundred per cent. And still the miners were able to buy goods cheaper than when they sent to Sacramento for them.

At the end of the first week Ernest figured up the sales and found they aggregated two hundred dollars. His share of the profit amounted to a little over thirty dollars.

This was encouraging, being three times as much as he had ever realized in the same length of time from mining. There was one embarrassment. There was no bank in the place where money could be deposited, and of course the chance of loss by robbery was much increased. However, his partner purchased a small safe, and this afforded some security.

One day a man entered the store and purchased a pipe and tobacco. He was a stranger to Ernest, but there was something familiar in his look, yet he could not place him.

The newcomer looked about with considerable curiosity.

“You have quite a snug store here,” he remarked.

“Yes.”

“Does it belong to you?”

“I have an interest in it, but it belongs to Mr. Ames.”

“Is he here much?”

“He usually comes in evenings, but he is interested in mining.”

“You seem to have a good trade.”

“What makes you think so?”

“You have a good stock. You would not keep so many goods unless you had a call for them.”

“Have I ever seen you before?” asked Ernest abruptly, for the idea grew upon him that he and his new customer had met somewhere under peculiar circumstances.

“I don’t know. I don’t remember you,” answered the customer, shrugging his shoulders. “I haven’t been in California long. I suppose you were born here.”

“No; very few of those now living in California were born here. I once lived in Iowa. Were you ever there?”

“Never,” answered the customer. “I’ve been in Missouri, but never in Iowa.”

“I have never been in that State. Are you going to stay here?”

“I don’t know. It depends on whether I can make any money. I suppose you don’t want to hire a clerk?”

“No.”

Ernest said to himself that this man with his shifty looks and suspicious appearance would be about the last man he would think of engaging.

“Perhaps Mr. Ames would give you a chance to work some of his claims,” he suggested.

“I will look about me a little before I apply to him,” replied the customer.

“Did you come here alone?” he asked after a pause.

“No. A friend came with me—Luke Robbins.”

The stranger started a little when Ernest pronounced this name, so that young Ray was led to inquire, “Do you know Luke?”

“How should I know him? Is he a young man?”

“No; he is probably about your age.”

“I suppose he came with you from Nebraska?”

“Iowa.”

“Oh, yes, Iowa. He isn’t in the store, is he?”

“He is working for Mr. Ashton on one of his claims.”

At this point a new customer came in and the visitor, after a brief delay, left the store.

When Ernest had waited upon the new customer he looked for the first visitor, but missed him.

“I wonder who he was,” he reflected, puzzled. “I am sure that I have seen him before.”

But think as he might he could not trace him.

Yet with this man he had had a very exciting experience in Oak Forks, for it was no other than Tom Burns, the tramp who had entered his cabin during the night and robbed him, and later had attacked him when digging for Peter’s hidden treasure. It had been only a few months since they had met, but Tom Burns, during that time, had grown a thick beard, which had helped to disguise him.

It is hardly necessary to explain how Burns had found his way out to Oreville. It was his business to tramp about the country, and it had struck him that in the land of gold he would have a chance to line his pockets with treasure which did not belong to him. So fortune had directed his steps to Oreville.

When he entered the store in which Ernest was employed, he immediately, and in some surprise, recognized the boy of Oak Forks. He was glad to find that Ernest did not recognize him, and he immediately began to consider in what way he could turn the circumstance to his own advantage.

“I wonder if the boy sleeps there,” he said to himself. “If so, I will make him a visit to-night. Probably the money he has taken during the day will be in some drawer where I can get hold of it.”

As he was leaving the store in the stealthy way habitual to him, he met a man walking toward the place with a long and careless stride.

He started nervously, for this man was one whom he dreaded, and had reason to fear.

It was Luke Robbins, who, tired with working the claim, was going to the store to replenish his stock of tobacco.

Tom Burns pulled his soft hat down over his eyes and pushed swiftly on.

Luke Robbins halted a moment and looked at him. As in Ernest’s case, he seemed to see something familiar in the appearance of the tramp. He realized, at all events, that he was a stranger in Oreville, for he knew everyone in the mining settlement.

“Who are you, stranger? Have I seen you before?” asked Luke, hailing him.

Tom Burns did not dare to reply, for he feared that Luke might prove to have a better memory than Ernest. So he was passing on without a response, when Luke, who considered his conduct suspicious, demanded, in a peremptory tone, “Who are you? Do you live here?”

Tom Burns shrugged his shoulders, and said, disguising his voice, “Me no understand English, boss.”

“What countryman are you?” asked Luke suspiciously.

“Italian,” answered Tom.

“Humph! you are the first Italian I have seen in Oreville.”

“Si, signor,” answered Tom, and this comprised all the Italian he knew.

“Well, I don’t think you will find any inducement to stay.”

“Si, signor,” replied Burns meekly.

Without another word Luke entered the store.

“Ernest,” he said, “I am out of tobacco, and must have a smoke. Give me half a pound.”

“All right, Luke.”

“I ran across an Italian just outside. He seemed to be leaving the store.”

“An Italian?” queried Ernest, his tone betraying surprise.

“Yes. Wasn’t he in here?”

“There was a man in here—a stranger, but I don’t think he was an Italian.”

“This man answered me in some Italian gibberish. He said he couldn’t understand English.”

“What was his appearance?”

Luke described him.

“It’s the same man that was in here just now, but he could speak English as well as you or I.”

“Did you have some conversation with him?”

“Yes. He looked familiar to me, and I asked him who he was. He said he had come from Missouri. He was in search of work.”

“You say he understood and spoke English?”

“Yes.”

“Then I wonder what could be his game.”

“Don’t he look familiar to you?”

“Yes; there was something familiar about his appearance, but I couldn’t place him.”

“He asked me if I couldn’t employ him in the store. I told him Mr. Ames might give him a chance at mining.”

“Well?”

“He said he would look round a little before deciding.”

“Did he buy anything?”

“Yes, tobacco.”

“Did you mention my name?”

“Yes, and he looked uneasy.”

“Ernest,” said Luke Robbins, with a sudden inspiration, “I know the man.”

“Who is it?”

“Don’t you recall any man at Oak Forks with whom you had trouble?”

“Tom Burns?”

“Yes. That’s the man.”

“Why didn’t we recognize him then?”

“Because he has grown a full beard.”

“That’s so, Luke. I understand now why he looked so familiar. I am sorry to see him here.”

“He’d better not undertake any of his rascalities or he will find himself in hot water.”

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CHAPTER XXIX

TOM BURNS MAKES A CALL

When Burns left the store he walked to the outskirts of the mining settlement, not wishing to attract attention. He wished especially to avoid encountering Luke Robbins, with the strength of whose arm he was disagreeably familiar.

He proposed to keep out of sight until night, and then make a visit to the store. It would go hard with him if he did not make a raise there, either in the shape of money or articles of value.

He came to a cabin standing by itself, at a considerable distance from the homes of the other miners. Sitting in front of it was a man with grizzled beard whose appearance indicated advanced age. There were lines upon his face that betrayed ill health.

“I wonder if anything can be got out of him,” thought Tom Burns. “I’ll see.”

“Good-day, sir,” he said, affably.

The old man looked up.

“Good-day,” he replied. “Who may you be?”

“I’m an unfortunate man, in search of employment.”

“When people are unfortunate there is generally a reason for it. Are you intemperate?”

“No, sir,” answered Burns, as if horror-stricken. “I hate the taste of liquor.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

“I belong to three temperance societies,” continued Tom, by way of deepening the favorable impression he thought he had made.

“And still you are poor?”

“Yes,” answered Burns. “Once I was prosperous, but I was ruined by signing notes for an unprincipled man who took advantage of my friendship. Do you think I can find work here?” 134

“I don’t know. Probably you can get a chance to work on one of Mr. Ames’s claims.”

“Is it Mr. Ames who owns the store?”

“Yes.”

“I called there to buy some tobacco. Is the boy there his son?”

“No; he is a recent arrival in Oreville. He is a very smart boy.”

“Is he? Mr. Ames trusts him, I suppose?”

“Yes. Why shouldn’t he?”

“I—I would rather not answer that question.”

“Have you ever met the boy before?”

“Yes; I met him in the East,” answered Burns.

“Since you have said so much you must say more. I am a cousin of Mr. Ames, and if you know anything unfavorable of the boy, it is your duty to tell me.”

“I have nothing against the boy, and would prefer not to speak.”

“I insist upon your doing it.”

“It is only this. When I knew him he was employed in a store. He was trusted as he appears to be here. One night the store was robbed—that is, some money disappeared, and the boy claimed that it was broken into by thieves, who took the money, whereas he took it himself.”

“That seems bad. Was it proved that he took the money?”

“Yes. That’s why he was compelled to leave the place.”

“Did you come here to expose him?”

“No; I didn’t know he was here. I was very much taken by surprise when I saw him in the store.”

“This is important, if true. Mr. Ames ought to be informed.”

“Don’t tell him while I am here. The boy is very revengeful, and he might try to do me an injury.”

“Are you afraid of a boy?”

“I am a man of peace. I don’t want to get into any difficulty.” 135

“I suppose you wonder that I am sitting here while others are at work.”

“Well, it did cross my mind.”

“My spine is affected. I look well, but I cannot walk. I hope to be better after a while, but at present I am comparatively helpless.”

“Can’t I help you?”

“You may go into the cabin, and bring me a bottle of medicine which you will find in the cupboard.”

Burns entered the cabin gladly. It occurred to him that he might find something worth taking.

On the wall, hanging from a nail, was a gold watch. It was too good a chance to be lost. It might or it might not be valuable, but at any rate it was worth something.

So, while securing the bottle, Burns slyly possessed himself of the watch, which he slipped into his inside breast pocket.

“Here is the bottle, sir,” he said, meekly.

“Thank you. Now bring a spoon which you will find on the table.”

Burns did so.

“Now pour out a teaspoonful, which I will take.”

“I am glad to be of service to you. Don’t you want an attendant while you are sick?”

“There would not be enough for you to do. I have a son at work in the mines who is here morning and night, and he gives me all the care I require.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” thought Burns. “The son may be dangerous.”

“Then, sir, I will bid you good-by. I will pray for your recovery.”

“Thank you. The prayers of the righteous avail much. Are you righteous?”

“It isn’t for me to say, sir. I don’t want to boast.”

“That is creditable to you. By the way, are you hungry?”

“I haven’t broken my fast since morning.”

“You will find some cold meat and a loaf of bread in the cupboard. It is plain, but if you are hungry you will enjoy it.” 136

“Thank you, sir. I will accept your kind invitation.”

Tom Burns was really hungry, and he did justice to the food offered him.

When his lunch was over he came outside.

“Thank you,” he said, “for your kindness.”

“Out here we are always glad to give a meal of victuals to a stranger who needs it. Are you going to stay long in Oreville?”

“If I can get anything to do I may. You see I am a poor man, and stand in pressing need of

employment.”

“Keep up your courage! Something will turn up for you. I will ask my son if he cannot find something for you to do.”

“Thank you, sir. I will bid you good-by, with thanks for your kindness.”

“If you are not pressed for time, I will send you on an errand.”

“All right, sir. I shall be glad to be of service to you.”

“Here is a Mexican dollar. You may go to the store and bring me a dozen eggs. If there is any change you may keep it.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“A dollar in!” thought Burns, as he turned away from the cabin. “I think I can turn it to a better use than spending it in eggs. That was a profitable call. I made a gold watch and a dollar by it. The old man can’t pursue me, thanks to his spinal complaint.”

“That is a very clever fellow,” reflected the old man, when Burns had started on his errand. “A bit too religious to suit my taste. Still he seemed grateful for the little I did for him. If he had a little more push and get up and get about him he would succeed better. Why, he isn’t more than forty and he confesses himself a failure. Why, at forty I considered myself a young man, and was full of dash and enterprise. Now I am sixty and tied to my seat by this spinal trouble. However, I’ve got something laid by, and, old as I am, I feel independent as far as money goes.” 137

Half an hour—an hour—passed, and still the old man found himself alone. His messenger had not come back.

But there came up the path a tall, muscular figure, who greeted the old man in a bluff, off-hand way.

“How are you, Luke?” said the old man. “I was feeling lonely. I am glad to see you.”

“Have you been alone since morning?”

“Not quite all the time. I had quite a long call from a stranger.”

“A stranger!” repeated Luke suspiciously. “What was his appearance?”

The old man described Burns, and Luke knew him at once.

“What did he say to you?”

“That reminds me—he said he knew the boy whom Horace has put in the store—young Ray.”

“Did he?”

“Yes, and he doesn’t speak well of him.”

“What does he say about him?”

“I don’t like to tell you, Luke, for I believe he is a protégé of yours.”

“Don’t mind that. If there is anything to be said unfavorable of Ernest I ought to know it.”

“He says the boy robbed a store in which he was employed, and then pretended it was entered by thieves. It was on that account, he says, that the boy was compelled to leave the town where he lived and come to California.”

“Really, that is very interesting. To my own personal knowledge the boy was never before employed in a store, and he came out to California with me.”

“Then what could the man mean?”

“I can’t say. I can only tell you that he is a professional thief.”

“Look quick, Luke, and see if my gold watch is hanging on a nail near the cupboard.”

“No, it is not there.” 138

“Then the rascal must have stolen it. I gave him a Mexican dollar to buy some eggs at the store.”

“I don’t think you will ever see it again, unless I catch the thief, as I may to-night.”

CHAPTER XXX

A BURGLAR’S FAILURE

If Tom Burns had been more prudent, he would have made good his escape with the money and gold watch he had already secured. But he was too greedy for gain.

He pictured to himself the store with its goodly stock of money taken in during the day, and he felt an irresistible craving for it. There might be one or two hundred dollars, and no one in

charge but a boy whom he could easily overpower.

Apart from the pecuniary gain he felt that he should enjoy getting the best of Ernest, who had already foiled him at Oak Forks.

“This time he will come out second best,” chuckled Burns to himself.

Then he laughed when he remembered how his appearance had puzzled Ernest.

“It was a good idea growin’ a beard,” he said to himself. “Seems to have disguised me pretty well. The boy thought he had seen me before, but he couldn’t make out where. The next time he’ll know me, I reckon.

“I must keep out of the way till night,” he said to himself. “It won’t do for me to be seen prowlin’ round the settlement.”

He retired a mile or two among the hills, and waited impatiently for night to come.

“It is lucky that the old man gave me a meal,” he reflected, “otherwise I should be about starved. I wonder if that watch is worth much.”

He examined the watch, and decided that its value was probably not far from a hundred dollars. 139
In fact, the old man had bought it in St. Louis, and had selected a high-priced article.

It did occur to Burns that perhaps he had better remain satisfied with what he had got, for the watch would probably bring him fifty dollars at a sacrifice sale; but the temptation to stay was too strong.

“It would be a sin to give up such a fine chance,” he reflected. “There’s next to no risk, and I may get two hundred dollars.”

Then he began to consider what he would do in that case. He decided that he would go to San Francisco, and see what pickings he could find there.

He had already found out that mining men and others in the far West were more careless about their money than those in the East, probably because money came easier.

“I did well when I came out here,” he said to himself in a tone of congratulation. “I’ll make hay while the sun shines.”

Meanwhile, though he did not know it, his visit was expected, and preparations were being made to receive him.

After supper Luke Robbins came to the store and held a conference with Ernest.

“I am going to pass the night with you, lad,” he said.

“I wish you would, Luke.”

“I want to help you do the honors to my old friend Burns.”

“Perhaps he won’t call.”

“If he knows what’s best for him he won’t, but he will be like the foolish moth, and won’t be contented till he has singed his wings. I will look about me and see where to bestow myself for the night.”

Ernest occupied a bed in the rear of the store, just behind one of the counters. It was near a window in the rear of the building.

“I’ll take that bed, Ernest, and you can find another place.”

“Shall I fasten the window?” 140

“No. I am going to make it easy for my friend, Burns, to get in. Whether he will find it as easy to get out will be another matter.”

Nothing was said to the miners about the presence of a thief in the settlement. At that time there was no toleration for thieves. The punishment visited upon them was short, sharp and decisive. The judge most in favor was Judge Lynch, and woe be to the offender who ventured to interfere with the rights of property.

Had Luke breathed a word about Burns, half a dozen miners would have volunteered to stand guard, and would thus have interfered with Tom Burns’s visit.

“I want to keep all the fun to myself, Ernest,” said Luke. “We’ll give him a lesson he won’t soon forget. If I told the boys they’d hang him up in short order. I don’t want to take the fellow’s life, but I’ll give him a first-class scare.”

It was about ten minutes of twelve when Tom Burns, leaving his place of concealment, walked with eager steps toward the mining settlement. The one street was not illuminated, for Oreville had not got along as far as that. The moon gave an indistinct light, relieving the night of a part of its gloom.

Burns looked from one cabin to another with a wistful glance.

“I suppose some of these miners have got a lot of gold-dust hidden away in their shanties,” he said to himself. “I wish I knew where I could light on some of their treasure.”

But then it occurred to him that every miner was probably armed, and would make it dangerous to any intruder.

So Tom Burns kept on his way. He was troubled by no conscientious scruples. He had got

beyond that long ago. Sometimes it did occur to him to wonder how it would seem to settle down as a man of respectability and influence, taking a prominent part in the affairs of town and church.

"It might have been," he muttered. "My father was a man of that sort. Why not I? If I hadn't gone wrong in my early days, if I had not been tempted by the devil to rob the storekeeper for whom I worked, and so made myself an outcast and a pariah, who knows but I might have been at this moment Thomas Burns, Esq., of some municipality, instead of Tom Burns, the tramp? However, it is foolish to speculate about this. I am what I am, and there is little chance of my being anything else."

So he dismissed the past, and recalled the work he had set for himself.

Everything was still. In the mining village probably there was not a person awake. It was like a dead town. Everything seemed favorable to his designs.

There was the store. He could see it already. And now there was nothing to do but to get in and take the money, which he had no doubt was waiting ready to his hand.

Perhaps he might be fortunate enough to secure it without waking the boy. He hoped so, at any rate, for he was not a desperate or cruel man. He did not wish to injure Ernest unless it should be absolutely necessary.

Arriving at his destination, he paused to reconsider.

He did not expect to enter by the front door. He did not as yet know whether there was any other. But at any rate there must be a window somewhere, and he preferred to get in that way.

He walked around to the rear of the store, and there he discovered the window. He had been afraid it might be blockaded with shelves, that would make entrance difficult, but fortunately this did not appear to be the case. He stood at the window and looked in.

The faint moonlight did not enable him to penetrate the interior very far, but he could make out something. There were goods of various kinds scattered about, and he could just see a recumbent figure on a bed near the counter.

"That's the boy," he said to himself. "I wonder if he is asleep."

There seemed to be no doubt on this point.

But for the indistinct light Tom Burns might have thought the outstretched figure rather large for a boy. But he only glanced at it furtively.

The next thing to consider was whether the window was fastened. In that case he would have some difficulty, though for this he was prepared, having an instrument by which he could cut a pane of glass, and, thrusting in his hand, unfasten the catch.

But through some strange inadvertence, apparently, the window was not fastened, and much to his relief he had no difficulty in lifting it.

He was as careful as possible, fearing lest he might stumble over some article, and by the noise betray his presence.

What if there was a dog inside? This thought brought alarm to the burglar. In that case his visit would probably be a failure. He remembered, however, with a feeling of relief, that he had seen no dog about during his visit to the store during the day.

Now that he had passed through the window, and was fairly in the store, he looked round for the money drawer. He had not seen the safe, or probably he might not have entered the store at all, for he was not expert in breaking open safes, and at any rate it would be a matter of time and difficulty. So he was looking about when, as he passed by the bed, he felt himself seized by the leg. Evidently the sleeper had awakened and discovered his presence.

Burns got down on his knees and grasped the recumbent figure by the throat.

"Lie still, or I'll choke you!" he said fiercely.

But as he spoke he felt the rough beard of a man, and with dismay he realized that he had tackled a more formidable foe than the boy for whom he was prepared.

He felt himself seized with an iron grasp.

"I've got you, you rascally burglar!" were the words he heard, and gave himself up for lost.

"Who are you?" he asked faintly.

"I am Luke Robbins, and I know you of old. You are Tom Burns!"

CHAPTER XXXI

THE ADVERTISEMENT

If there was anyone of whom Tom Burns stood in fear it was Luke Robbins. When he found himself in the grasp of his dreaded enemy, he grew weak with terror.

It was no longer a question of successful robbery. It was a matter of personal safety.

“Well, what have you to say for yourself?” demanded Luke, tightening his grasp.

“Have mercy on me, Mr. Robbins! Don’t kill me!” ejaculated Burns, half choked.

“What did you come here for?”

“I—I had no money, and——”

“You thought you could get some here?”

“Ye-es,” faltered Burns.

“You thought you would be more than a match for the boy. Well, you have no boy to deal with.”

“I know that very well,” confessed Burns.

“How long have you been in Oreville?”

“I only came this morning.”

“You have improved your time,” said Luke dryly. “You have stolen a gold watch, besides making this attempt at robbery.”

Tom Burns could not deny it, though he was surprised at Luke’s knowledge.

“Hand over that watch!” said Luke in a tone of authority.

“Will you let me go if I do?”

“I will make no conditions with you. Hand over the watch!”

Burns drew it from his inside pocket and handed it over.

“Humph! So far so good. Now how about that dollar you took to buy eggs?”

“It is the only money I have, except a few pennies. Please let me keep it.” 144

“If I tell what you have done to the miners you won’t need any more money,” said Luke grimly.

“Why not?” asked Burns, trembling.

“Why not?” repeated Luke. “Because they will hang you to the nearest tree. You won’t need to trouble about money matters after that.”

“You won’t give me up, Mr. Robbins,” pleaded Burns, in an agony of terror. “I—I am not fit to die. Besides, I am a young man. I am not yet forty. I will turn over a new leaf.”

“It’s high time you did. It is a long time since you earned an honest living.”

“I know it, Mr. Robbins. I have been a bad man, but it is not too late to reform. If you’ll let me go I will leave Oreville to-night, and I will never trouble you again.”

“It isn’t me you have troubled. It is the boy. You robbed him, or tried to do it, at Oak Forks, and now you have turned up here.”

“I didn’t know he was here.”

“You didn’t know I was here, or I think you would have given the place a wide berth.”

“I am very sorry for what I did, and if you’ll only spare my life, I’ll promise to reform.”

“I haven’t much faith in your promises, but I’ll leave it to the boy. Ernest, what shall I do with this man?”

Ernest had come forward, and was standing but a few feet from Luke and his captive.

“If he promises to reform,” said Ernest, “you’d better give him another chance, Luke.”

“I am not sure that I ought to, but it is you to whom he has done the most harm. If you give him over to the miners we shall never be troubled by him again.”

Tom Burns turned pale, for he knew that life and death were in the balance, and that those two —Luke and the boy—were to decide his fate.

Ernest could not help pitying the trembling wretch. He was naturally kind-hearted, and at that moment he felt that he could forgive Burns all that he had done. 145

“Since you have left it to me, Luke,” he said, “let him go.”

“It shall be as you say, Ernest.”

As he spoke he released his hold, and Tom Burns stood erect. He breathed a deep sigh of relief.

“May I go?” he asked submissively.

“Yes.”

Before leaving he turned to Ernest.

“You are a good-hearted boy,” he said, “and I shall not forget that you have saved my life. If I am ever able to do anything for you, I will do it. You will find that Tom Burns, bad as he has been, knows how to be grateful.”

“I think you mean what you say,” returned Ernest. “I hope you will keep your promise and will

turn over a new leaf. Is it true that you are penniless?”

“Not quite. This is all I have.”

Burns drew from his pocket a handful of small change—less than a dollar in all—and held it out for inspection.

“Then I will help you along.”

Ernest took from his pocket a five-dollar gold piece, and offered it to the tramp.

“That is more than I would do for him,” said Luke.

“It is more than I deserve,” replied Burns, “but you won’t be sorry for your kindness. If ever you see me again, I shall be a different man.”

He passed out of the window, and they saw him no more.

Luke and Ernest said very little of their night’s adventure, but the gold watch and the Mexican dollar were returned to the man from whom they had been taken.

Six months passed. Oreville had doubled its population, the mines had yielded a large sum in gold-dust, and the store presided over by Ernest was considerably enlarged.

His services had been so satisfactory that Horace Ames, whose time was taken up elsewhere, had raised his share of the profits to one-half.

At the end of six months, besides defraying his expenses, Ernest found himself possessed of a thousand dollars. 146

“Luke, I feel rich,” said he, when his faithful friend came round for a chat.

“You’ve done better than I have,” rejoined Luke. “The most I have been able to scrape together is four hundred dollars.”

“I will give you a part of my money, so that we may be even.”

“No, you won’t, Ernest. What do you take me for?”

“Mr. Ames has been very liberal, and that is why I have got so much. I don’t feel that I ought to have so much more than you.”

“Don’t bother about me, lad; I feel rich with four hundred dollars. I never was worth so much before, though I’m almost three times your age. And I wouldn’t have that but for you.”

“How do you make that out, Luke?”

“Because I never had any ambition till I met you. I never thought of saving money; as long as I got enough to eat I cared for nothing else. I should have died without enough to bury me if you had not set me the example of putting something by for a rainy day.”

“I am glad if I have done you any good, Luke, for you have been a kind friend to me.”

A week later Luke came into the store, holding a letter in his hand.

“Here is a letter for you, Ernest,” he said. “I was passing the post-office just now when I was hailed by the postmaster, who asked me if I would take the letter to you. I didn’t know that you had any correspondents.”

“Nor I, Luke. I think it is the first letter I ever received. Whom can it be from?”

“From some one who knows you are here. It is post-marked St. Louis.”

“Well, I can easily discover who wrote it,” said Ernest, as he cut open the envelope with his penknife.

He turned at once to the signature, and exclaimed, in great surprise, “Why, it’s from Tom Burns.” 147

“The man who tried to rob the store?”

“Yes.”

“He has probably written to ask you for some money.”

“No, Luke, you are mistaken. I will read it to you.”

The letter started thus:

> Ernest Ray: You will probably be surprised to hear from me. Let me begin by saying that I have kept the promise I made to you and Mr. Robbins when you let me off six months ago. I have turned over a new leaf, and have been strictly honest ever since, as I promised you I would be.
>
> I won’t trouble you with an account of my struggles to get along. I will only say that I am employed at present as a waiter at the Planters’ Hotel, and though I can’t save up much money, I am able to live comfortably. But you will wonder why I am writing to you. It is because I have seen your name mentioned in an advertisement in one of the St. Louis daily papers. I inclose the advertisement, and hope it is something to your advantage. I have taken the liberty to write to Mr. Bolton, telling him where you were six months since, and I now write to you so that you may communicate with him also. Yours respectfully,
>
> Tom Burns.

The advertisement appended ran thus:

> INFORMATION WANTED.—Should this meet the eye of Ernest Ray, some time residing at Oak Forks, Iowa, he is requested to communicate with Benjamin Bolton, Attorney at Law, 182 Nassau Street, New York City.

CHAPTER XXXII

MR. BOLTON AS A HUSTLER

When Benjamin Bolton left the house of Stephen Ray with a hundred dollars in his pocket, it was his clearly defined purpose to find the boy who had been so grossly wronged, and force the present holder of the Ray estate to make restitution. 148

Only a few hours previous he had been nearly penniless. Even now, though he was provided with a sum of money that made him feel comparatively rich, he knew it would not last long.

He provided himself with a respectable suit of clothing, and took the next train for New York. He had been in the metropolis two or three times in the course of his life, but knew no one there.

While other paths might be open to him, for he was a man of education and worldly experience, he felt that he should like to get back into his own profession. He flattered himself that if properly started he could make himself valuable to an established attorney in the way of hunting up cases, and taking part in any legal work that might be intrusted to him.

But how could he, an unknown man, recommend himself to any lawyer whose standing and business would make a connection with him desirable? Perhaps in any other business there would be less difficulty in making a start.

But Mr. Bolton was resolute and determined, and fortune favored him.

Within thirty miles of the city a stout gentleman of perhaps fifty entered the car and sat beside him. He looked like a well-to-do business man, free from care, but for the anxious expression on his face. He appeared like a man in trouble who stood in need of advice.

The train had gone several miles before he decided to confide in the quiet man who sat beside him. He had already taken stock of Bolton in furtive glances.

“There is something on his mind,” thought Bolton. “He looks as if he wished to speak to some one.”

He addressed a casual remark to his companion, who instantly responded.

“I don’t like to trouble you,” he said, “but I am somewhat perplexed.”

“My dear sir, if in any way I can help you I shall be glad to do so,” answered Bolton. “I am a lawyer——”

“Are you?” said the other eagerly. “I want to meet a good, honest and smart lawyer, who will undertake a case for me.” 149

Bolton pricked up his ears. This seemed to be a providential opportunity, of which he resolved to avail himself.

“I should not like to praise myself,” he said modestly, “but I think you will find me faithful to your interests.”

“No doubt of it, sir. Are you a New York lawyer?”

“I am about to connect myself with a law firm in the city,” answered Bolton, hoping that this statement might prove accurate.

“Then you will be able to help me.”

“State your case, if you don’t mind.”

Bolton took out a small memorandum-book, and, pencil in hand, sat ready to take down the important points.

“Twenty years ago my father died, leaving an estate of fifty thousand dollars. It was divided equally between my sister Martha and myself. I married, and Martha for the last twenty years has been a member of my family. Being a spinster, with only herself to provide for, her property has doubled, while I, having several children, have barely held my own. Of course I expected that my children and myself would inherit Martha’s money when she died.”

“Very natural, sir, and very just.”

“Well, Martha died last August. Imagine my dismay when her will was opened and proved to bequeath her entire estate to various charities in which she never took any particular interest when living.”

“Do you suspect anyone of influencing her to this disposition of her property?”

“Yes, she had various conversations with a collector for these societies, who resided in the town during the summer, who sought an introduction when he learned that she was a lady of independent fortune. He called frequently, and flattered my sister, who had lately shown signs of mental weakness.”

“Did she cut off your family entirely in her will?”

“Yes, she didn’t leave even a dollar to any one of my children, though one of my daughters was named for her.”

“Was the collector entitled to a commission on sums secured for the societies which he represented?”

“Yes, that is the cause of his zeal. He would make a very handsome percentage on an estate as large as my sister’s.”

“But for him would she have been likely to cut off her relatives?”

“No. We should probably have received every dollar.”

“Do you think the collector cherished any matrimonial designs with reference to your sister?”

“I did think so at one time, but Martha’s condition as an invalid led her to discourage his attentions, though she was evidently flattered by them.”

“Of course you wish to break the will?”

“Yes. Do you think it can be done?”

“Upon the basis of what you have told me I should think the chances were greatly in your favor.”

His companion brightened up very perceptibly at this assurance.

“Have you ever been employed in any similar cases?” he asked.

“My dear sir, I have a very important case of the kind on my hands at this moment. The amount involved is quarter of a million dollars.”

Mr. Bolton rose greatly in the estimation of his new client after this statement.

“Is the case at all similar?”

“Hardly. It is the case of a will concealed, or rather suppressed, and acting upon a will previously made. I cannot go into details, as I wish to keep our enemy in the dark.”

“I understand. Have you your card with you, so that I can call at your office?”

This was a puzzling question for Bolton, but he was equal to the occasion.

“Tell me what hotel you propose to stop at, and I will call upon you at eleven o’clock to-morrow morning.”

“I don’t know much about the New York hotels.”

“Then let me recommend a house,” naming a comfortable but not expensive hostelry on upper Broadway.

“I will go there.”

“I think you have not yet mentioned your name.”

“My name is Ephraim Paulding.”

Bolton noted it down in his memorandum-book, and soon after the train ran into the station at Forty-second Street.

There was no time to lose. Bolton made inquiries and obtained the name of a successful lawyer, with an office at 182 Nassau Street. He did not wait till the next day, but made a call that same evening at his house on Lexington Avenue.

Mr. Norcross, the lawyer, entered the parlor with Bolton’s card in his hand, and a puzzled expression on his face.

“Have I ever met you before, Mr. Bolton?” he asked.

“No, sir.”

“Please state your business.”

“I should like to enter your office. I am a lawyer with fifteen years’ experience.”

“I should hardly think so, considering the strange proposal you are making.”

“I am quite aware that it seems so, but I can make it worth your while.”

“How?”

“By bringing you business. I can put in your hands now a will case involving an estate of fifty thousand dollars, and further on probably a much more important case.”

“You seem to be a hustler.”

“I am.”

“Where has your professional life been spent?” asked Norcross.

“At Elmira. Now I wish to remove to this city. It will give me a larger and more profitable field.”

“Give me some idea of the case you say you can put in my hands.”

Bolton did so. His terse and crisp statement—for he was a man of ability—interested the lawyer, and disposed him favorably toward the matter. 152

The result of the interview was that he engaged Bolton at a small salary and a commission on business brought to the office for a period of three months.

“Thank you,” said Bolton as he rose to go. “You will not regret this step.”

The next morning Bolton brought his railroad acquaintance to the office, and Mr. Norcross formally undertook his case.

“I think we shall win,” he said. “It is an aggravated case of undue influence. Mr. Bolton will from time to time communicate to you the steps we have taken.”

It is unnecessary to go into details. It is enough to say that the will was broken, and a goodly sum found its way to the coffers of Lawyer Norcross.

By this time Benjamin Bolton had established himself in the favor of his employer, who at the end of three months made a new and much more advantageous arrangement. Bolton had not yet taken any steps in Ernest’s case, but he now felt that the time had come to do so. He wrote to the postmaster at Oak Forks, inquiring if he knew a boy named Ernest Ray, but learned in reply that Ernest had left the place some months before, and had not since been heard from.

CHAPTER XXXIII

ANSWERING THE ADVERTISEMENT

The advertisement for Ernest in a St. Louis daily paper came about in this way.

Bolton was in the habit of inquiring from time to time of Western clients if they were acquainted with any persons bearing the name Ray. One gentleman, who frequently visited St. Louis, answered, “Yes, I know a boy named Ray.” 153

“Tell me all you know about him,” said Bolton eagerly.

“I was staying at the Southern Hotel last winter,” answered Mr. Windham, “when my attention was called to a bright-looking newsboy who sold the evening papers outside. I was so attracted by him that I inquired his name. He said it was Ray, and that he was alone in the world.”

“What was his first name?”

“I can’t recall. I am not sure that I heard it.”

“Was it Ernest?”

“I cannot speak with any certainty.”

“How old did the boy appear to be?”

“About sixteen.”

“That would have been the age of Dudley Ray’s son,” said Bolton to himself.

“I suppose you didn’t learn where the boy lived?”

“No.”

This was all the information Mr. Windham was able to impart, but Bolton felt that it was possibly of importance. It was the first clue he had been able to obtain.

That Dudley Ray’s son should be forced by dire necessity to sell newspapers was not improbable. Bolton therefore inserted the advertisement already mentioned.

A few days later he received two letters post-marked St. Louis.

He opened them with a thrill of excitement. He felt that he was on the verge of making an important discovery.

One letter was addressed in a schoolboy hand, and ran thus:

> Dear Sir: I saw your advertisement in one of the morning papers. I hope it means me. My name is not Ernest, but it may have been changed by some people with whom I lived in Nebraska. I am sixteen years old, and I am obliged to earn my living selling papers. My father died when I was a baby, and my mother three years later. I am alone in the world, and am having a hard time. I suppose you wouldn’t advertise for me unless you had some good news for me. You may send your answer to this letter to the Southern Hotel. The clerk is a friend of mine, and he says he will save it for me. 154
>
> Yours respectfully,
> Arthur Ray.

“That isn’t the boy,” said Bolton, laying down the letter in disappointment. “The name is different, and, besides, the writer says that his father died when he was a baby. Of course that settles the question. He is a different boy.”

He opened the second letter, hoping that it might be more satisfactory.

It was the letter of Tom Burns, setting forth his meeting Ernest at Oak Forks, and afterward at Oreville in California.

“Eureka!” exclaimed Bolton, his face beaming with exultation. “This is the boy and no mistake. I will at once answer this letter, and also write to Ernest Ray in California.”

This was the letter received by Burns:

> Dear Sir: I am very much indebted to you for the information contained in your letter of two days since. I have reason to think that the boy you mention is the one of whom I am in search. If it proves to be so, I am free to tell you that he will be much benefited by your communication. There is a considerable estate, now wrongfully held by another, to which he is entitled. Should things turn out as I hope, I will see that you lose nothing by the service you have rendered him and myself. I will write to him by this mail. Should you change your address, please notify me.
>
> Yours truly,
> Benjamin Bolton.
>
> 182 Nassau Street, New York.

The letter written to Ernest ran thus:

> Ernest Ray, Oreville, California:
>
> I have for some time been seeking to find you. In response to an advertisement inserted in a St. Louis daily paper, I learn that you are at present living in Oreville, California. This information was given me by one Thomas Burns, who is employed at the Planters’ Hotel. The name is, I hope, familiar to you. It is very desirable that I should have an interview with you. If you are the son of Dudley Ray, formerly residing at or near Elmira, what I have to say will be greatly to your advantage.
>
> Will you write me at once, letting me know whether this be the case? Also state your present circumstances, and whether you need pecuniary help. It is unfortunate that we are so far apart. I am connected with a New York legal firm, and cannot very well go to California; but I might assist you to come to New York, if as I suppose, your means are limited. Will you write to me at once whether this is the case? I shall anxiously await your reply.
>
> Benjamin Bolton,
> Attorney at Law.
>
> 182 Nassau Street, New York City.

Ernest read this letter with eager interest, and showed it to Luke Robbins.

“What do you think of it, Luke?” he asked.

“What do I think of it? It looks very much as if you were entitled to some money.”

“What shall I do?”

“Write this Mr. Bolton that you will go at once to New York, and call upon him.”

“But how about the store? I should not like to leave Mr. Ames in the lurch.”

“I will take your place here, and to qualify myself for it I will come in to-morrow, and begin to serve an apprenticeship.”

Ernest wrote to Bolton that he would start for New York in a week. He added that he had the money necessary for the journey. He said also that he was the son of Dudley Ray, and that he remembered visiting Elmira with his father.

When Bolton received this letter, he exclaimed triumphantly: “Now, Stephen Ray, I have you on the hip. You looked down upon me when I called upon you. In your pride, and your unjust possession of wealth, you thought me beneath your notice. Unless I am mistaken, I shall be the instrument under Providence of taking from you your ill-gotten gains, and carrying out the wishes expressed in the last will of your deceased uncle.”

Ernest left Oreville with four hundred dollars in his pocket. The balance of his money he left, in the hands of his friend Horace Ames, upon whom he was authorized to draw if he should have need.

“I don’t intend to carry all my money with me,” he said to Luke Robbins. “I might lose it all.”

“Even if you did, Ernest, you could draw on me. If you need it, do so without any hesitation.”

“You are a good friend, Luke,” said Ernest warmly. “What should I do without you?”

“I am beginning to wonder what I should do without you, Ernest. Suppose, now, this lawyer puts a fortune in your hands?”

“If he does, Luke, I am sure to need your help in some way.”

“Thank you, Ernest. I know you mean what you say. You may find a better friend, but you won’t

find one that is more ready to serve you than Luke Robbins."

"I am sure of that, Luke," said Ernest with a bright smile as he pressed the rough hand of his faithful friend.

Ernest did not loiter on his way, though he was tempted to stop in Chicago, but he reflected that he would have plenty of chances to visit that bustling city after his business had been attended to.

As he approached Buffalo on the train his attention was attracted to two persons sitting a little distance in front of him. They were a father and son, as he gathered from the conversation.

The son was about his own age and size apparently, but rather more slender in figure. He had a peevish expression, and Ernest doubted whether he would like him.

"Father," Ernest heard him say, "won't you give me a little money? I am dead broke."

"I gave you five dollars when we set out on this journey," he said.

"Well, five dollars won't last forever," was the pert rejoinder.

"It ought to last more than four days, Clarence." 157

Ernest started. He knew that his cousin's name was Clarence. Could this be Stephen Ray and his son?

Even if it were so, he felt that it would not be advisable to make himself known. This business which was carrying him to New York might bring him into conflict with Stephen Ray. If so, he would not care to let his presence be known.

On arriving at Buffalo Ernest left the train. He had never visited Niagara, and being now so near he felt that he could not forego the opportunity.

He registered at the Tefft House, and decided to remain for a day. This would give him time to see the Falls.

Ernest had a room assigned to him, and went up to it at once to have the luxury of a good wash.

Five minutes afterward Stephen Ray and his son Clarence entered the hotel.

Mr. Ray, in a pompous manner, went up to the desk and said to the clerk: "Can you give me a good room?"

"Yes, sir."

"I want a front room if you have it."

"I can't give you a front room, but I can give you a good side room."

Stephen Ray grumbled a little, but finally decided to take the room offered him. He saw that his haughty manner did not impress the clerk, who was accustomed to men of his class.

Clarence looked over his father's shoulder as he registered.

"Why, pa," he exclaimed in surprise, "there's another guest of our name."

"Where?" asked his father.

"There, three names above your signature."

158

CHAPTER XXXIV

A STRANGE MEETING

Stephen Ray looked at the register, and started violently as he read the entry:

"Ernest Ray, Oreville, California."

"What's the matter, pa?" asked Clarence, noticing his father's agitation.

"Oh, nothing, nothing," answered his father with an effort.

"Haven't we a cousin named Ernest Ray?"

"We had, but he is dead."

"It is strange that there should be another person of the name."

"Not at all. The world is large, and there are a good many persons of one name."

"This one is from California."

"So I see. By the way," here Mr. Ray addressed the clerk, "did you observe the person who registered under the name of Ray?"

"Yes. It is a boy about the size of this young gentleman."

"It is strange," said Clarence. "It may be our cousin."

“Didn’t I tell you that the person you refer to is dead?” said his father testily.

“I don’t believe it,” thought Clarence, but he did not express his unbelief. He determined, however, to have an interview with the boy, and find out all about him.

He saw Ernest at the table soon after, and so did Stephen Ray. The latter noted with alarm the resemblance of the boy to his cousin Dudley Ray, whose estate he had usurped.

“I hope Bolton won’t get hold of him,” he said to himself. “It would be dangerous to me.” 159

After supper Mr. Ray went out, leaving Clarence to himself.

He improved the opportunity. Seeing Ernest sitting alone, he went up to him.

“Is your name Ray?” he asked.

“Yes, Ernest Ray.”

“My name is Clarence Ray.”

“So I thought. We are cousins.”

“That’s what I told pa, but he said it was not so—that Ernest Ray was dead.”

“Your father’s name is Stephen Ray?”

“Yes.”

“I have known of him and you since I was old enough to remember anything.”

“Then you are really my Cousin Ernest?”

“Yes.”

“I wonder why pa said you were dead. I will tell pa he is mistaken.”

“No, Clarence, I would rather you wouldn’t. There are reasons why it is better not to say anything about it.”

“All right. Are you well off?”

Ernest smiled.

“I am not rich,” he said, “but I am comfortably fixed.”

“Do you live in California?”

“I have lived there for the last few months.”

“Why did you come East?”

“On a little business.”

“I am glad you are well off. I think pa was afraid you were a poor relation.”

“Your father is rich?”

“Yes, ever so rich. We’ve got a fine place near Elmira. If pa wasn’t so cranky I would invite you there to visit me.”

“Thank you all the same,” said Ernest, smiling.

Later in the evening, when Stephen Ray came in, Ernest noticed that he looked at him critically. He, too, examined the man who, he had reason to believe, was enjoying the estates that should be his, and was not attracted toward him. 160

“What will he say,” thought Ernest, “when I make a formal demand for the property?”

“What in the name of all that’s unlucky can have brought that boy here at this time?” Stephen Ray was saying to himself.

He never for an instant doubted Ernest’s identity—in fact, he could not well have done so, for he bore a strong resemblance to Dudley Ray.

Stephen Ray’s curiosity was excited. Ernest did not appear like the average poor relation. He was quite as well dressed as Clarence. Besides, he had registered at a high-priced hotel, which showed that he was not cramped for means.

This gave him satisfaction, as it made it less likely that he would appeal to him for assistance.

Stephen Ray was rather surprised that Clarence made no further reference to Ernest. Had he known that the two had had a conversation he would have been seriously disturbed. He hoped that Bolton would not get hold of the boy.

CHAPTER XXXV

MR. BOLTON AND HIS CLIENT

Benjamin Bolton sat at his desk in the law office of Albert Norcross, on Nassau Street. He was

well, even handsomely dressed, and looked very unlike the shabby tramp who had called months before at the house of Stephen Ray.

He was really a man of ability which his employer had found out. He had raised Bolton's salary to a liberal figure, and felt that in securing his services he had made a real acquisition.

Bolton was absorbed in preparation for a case which had been assigned to him, when a boy came to his desk with a card. 161

Bolton no sooner read the name, "Ernest Ray," than he became eager and excited.

"Tell him to come in," he said.

Ernest, quiet and self-possessed, entered the office and approached the lawyer's desk.

"Are you Mr. Bolton?" he asked.

"Yes, and you——"

"I am Ernest Ray."

Benjamin Bolton looked keenly at the boy, admiring his handsome face and manly bearing.

"I see your father's looks in you," he said.

"Then you knew my father?" said Ernest.

"Yes. We were young men together."

"I am glad to meet you, then."

"You come from California?"

"Yes."

"I judge from your appearance that you have not suffered from poverty."

"I have been fortunate at Oreville. At Oak Forks I lived very humbly with Peter Brant, an old servant of my father."

"Yes, I remember Peter. Is he alive still?"

"No, he died a little less than a year since. Till his death I thought him my uncle and knew no other relatives. Before he died he told me who I was."

"How did he live?"

"On a small sum left by my father. When he died it was all exhausted except a hundred dollars. I took that and went to California with a man named Luke Robbins, who has proved my faithful friend."

"What were you doing in California? Were you working at the mines?"

"No. I was keeping a store where I sold miners' supplies."

"Did it pay you well?"

"I was very well paid for a boy. When I left Oreville I was worth a thousand dollars." 162

"That is well, but it is only a drop in the bucket compared with the fortune you are entitled to."

"Now held by Mr. Stephen Ray?"

"Yes; he will be surprised to see you in the East."

"He has seen me," said Ernest quickly.

"What!" exclaimed the lawyer. "You have not called upon him?"

"No. I met him on the train and afterwards at a Buffalo hotel. My Cousin Clarence was with him."

"Did you have any conference with them?"

"I talked with Clarence, not with his father."

"Did you think the father knew you?"

"Yes, but he did not speak to me."

"He told me when I called upon him some time ago that you were dead—that you died in Georgia."

"What could have been his object?"

"He did not wish me to find you, for I had the proof that the estate was rightfully yours."

"What led you to think I was alive?"

"I cross-examined Clarence, who did not know his father's desire to keep us apart."

"Is the estate a large one?"

"Quarter of a million, at least."

Ernest's eyes opened wide with amazement.

"But I will introduce you to Mr. Norcross, my principal, and we will talk over our plan of operations. You must assert your rights, and demand that your grandfather's will be carried out. Are you content to place yourself in our hands?"

“Entirely so. But I am sorry for Cousin Stephen. It will be a great blow for him.”

“Don’t waste any pity upon him. He defrauded your father, and meant to defraud you.”

CHAPTER XXXVI

STEPHEN RAY ALARMED

“A gentleman to see you, sir.”

This was the message brought to Stephen Ray by the servant one morning.

“Did he give his name?”

“No, sir.”

“Very well; bring him up.”

Mr. Ray was sitting at the desk in his library. He was looking over some plans for the improvement of his handsome residence.

He proposed to enlarge a lower room by a bay window and to carry the piazza round on each side. It would cost something, but his income was ample—at least four times his expenditure.

He looked up as a handsomely dressed gentleman entered the room.

“What is your business, sir?” asked Stephen Ray formally.

The visitor smiled.

“You don’t recognize me, Stephen Ray?” he said.

“Benjamin Bolton!” exclaimed the other, his countenance changing.

“The same.”

“I judge from your appearance that your circumstances have improved,” said Mr. Ray coldly.

“Fortunately, yes.”

“I congratulate you.”

“Thank you. The money you kindly loaned me when I was last here did me a great deal of good.”

“I presume you have come to repay it,” said Ray, with a sneer.

“You are right,” and Bolton drew from his pocket two fifty-dollar bills, which he tendered to his host.

Stephen Ray was fond of money, and he received the notes with satisfaction.

“You have acted honorably,” he said more graciously. “Are you located in the neighborhood?”

“No, in New York City. I am in a law office there.”

“I am pleased with your success. I would ask you to remain, but I am quite busy this morning.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Ray, but the repayment of the loan was not my only errand. I am here on more important business.”

Stephen Ray’s countenance changed. He began to fear that Bolton had found Ernest.

“When I was here last year you told me that Dudley Ray’s son, Ernest, was dead.”

“Yes, he died in Alabama.”

“When I was here before you told me he died in Georgia.”

“I believe it was Georgia,” said Stephen Ray, disconcerted.

“You will be glad to hear that it is a mistake—about the death, I mean. He is as much alive as you are.”

“Mr. Bolton,” said Ray angrily, “you are trying to impose upon me. The boy is dead, I tell you.”

“And I tell you he is not dead. I saw him only yesterday.”

“You may have seen some one who pretended to be Ernest Ray.”

“I should not be easily deceived. He is the image of his father.”

“I don’t believe the boy is alive.”

“Shall I bring him here?”

“You need not trouble yourself. I can have nothing to say to him, whether he is really Ernest Ray, or an impostor.”

“I beg your pardon. If he is Ernest Ray, under the will which I have in my possession, he is the owner of this property.”

Bolton spoke firmly, and looked Ray resolutely in the eye.

Stephen Ray flushed and paled. There was a great fear in his heart, but he resolved to brave it out.

“This is a base conspiracy. Your share in it ought to land you in State’s prison.”

“I am willing to take my chance of it,” said the lawyer. “Didn’t you recognize the boy when you saw him?”

“What do you mean?”

“You saw him in the hotel at Buffalo. He recognized you, and had a conversation with your son.”

“Had a conversation with Clarence? That is a lie. Clarence never spoke to me about it.”

“You had better question him. But there is no need of sparring. I tell you confidently that Ernest Ray is alive, and demands the estate under his grandfather’s will, which you hold.”

“This is ridiculous. There is but one answer to such a proposal.”

“What is that?”

“I refuse absolutely to make any concession to an impostor.”

“That is your final answer?”

“It is.”

“Then I give you notice that the boy will at once bring suit for the restoration of the estate and the vindication of his rights.”

“I suppose you are his lawyer?” sneered Ray.

“The firm with which I am connected has undertaken the case.”

“What is the firm?” asked Stephen Ray with an anxiety which he could not conceal.

“Norcross & Co.,” answered Bolton.

Great drops of perspiration appeared on the brows of Stephen Ray. He knew well the high reputation and uniform success of the firm in question.

He did not immediately answer, but began to pace the room in agitation. Finally he spoke.

“This has come upon me as a surprise. I thought the boy dead. I may be willing to make some arrangement. Bring him here next week—say Tuesday—and we will talk the matter over.”

“You must do more than talk the matter over, Stephen Ray. A great injustice has been done, the wrong must be righted.”

“Come here next Tuesday,” was the only answer.

The lawyer bowed and withdrew.

CHAPTER XXXVII

ERNEST COMES INTO HIS OWN

On Tuesday Bolton returned with Ernest. Two hours were spent in conference with Stephen Ray. The latter fought hard, but yielded at last. He understood the strength of his opponent’s case.

Ernest consented to receive the estate as it was bequeathed to his father, without any demand for back revenues. Whatever Stephen Ray had accumulated besides, he was allowed to retain.

As this amounted to a hundred thousand dollars, Ray felt that it might have been worse. Had he not been dissuaded by Bolton, Ernest would have consented to share the estate with the usurper, but the lawyer represented that this would be condoning the wrong done to his father.

In a month the whole matter was settled, and Stephen Ray removed to Chicago, where he had business interests.

“But what shall I do with this large house?” asked Ernest. “I don’t want to live here.”

“I know a gentleman who would like to hire it for a term of years,” responded Bolton. “He will pay a rental of five thousand dollars a year. The bonds which you inherit will yield an income equally large.”

“So that my income will be ten thousand dollars a year?” said Ernest, dazzled.

“Yes.”

“What shall I do with it all?”

Bolton smiled.

“You are but seventeen,” he said. “A few years hence you will probably marry. Then you can

occupy the house yourself. Meanwhile——”

“I will go back to California. Luke will expect me. While I am away I appoint you my man of business. I wish you to have charge of my property at a proper commission.”

“I will undertake the charge with pleasure.”

Bolton knew how much this would increase his importance in the eyes of the firm by which he was employed. Ernest could not have made a better choice. Bolton was no longer intemperate. He was shrewd and keen, and loyal to his young employer.

Ernest returned to California, but he had lost his old zest for business, now that his fortune was secure. He soon came East again, and entered upon a plan of study, ending with a college course. He brought with him Frank Fox, the son of the dead outlaw, who regarded him with devoted affection. They lived together, and he placed Frank at a well-known school, justly noted for the success of its pupils.

Of the many boys with whom Frank associated not one suspected that the attractive lad, who was a favorite with all, was a son of the desperado whose deeds were a matter of common knowledge in the West. Ernest had cautioned the boy to say as little as possible of his past history.

Years have gone, what Bolton predicted has come to pass. Ernest is a college graduate, and will soon marry a young lady of high position in the city of New York. He will go abroad for a year, and on his return will make his home on his ancestral estate.

Last week he received a letter from a patient in a New York City hospital. It was signed John Franklin, a name with which he was not familiar.

In some wonder he answered the call, and was led to a bed on which lay a gaunt, spectral man, evidently in the last stage of existence.

“Is this John Franklin?” asked Ernest doubtfully.

“That is the name I go by now,” answered the dying man.

“Do I know you? Have I ever met you?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t remember you.”

“If I tell you my real name, will you keep it secret?”

“Yes.”

“Then I am John Fox. You will not betray me?”

“No; certainly not. Can I do anything for you?”

“Yes; you are the guardian of my brother’s child.”

“Yes.”

“Is he alive? Is he well?”

“Yes.”

“Will you bring him here before I die?”

“I will. I cannot refuse the request of a dying man.” Ernest brought Frank to the bedside of his dying uncle. It was a sad interview. Frank was moved, but John Fox, seeing him strong, handsome, robust, felt comforted.

“He at least has profited by the fate that overtook his father and myself. I shall die content, for I leave him in good hands. Don’t let him think too hardly of us!”

“I will not. So far as I can compass it, his future life shall be happy.”

The dying outlaw reached out his hand and pressed Ernest’s gratefully. A day later he was dead.

THE END

Transcriber’s Note: Bound with the preceeding book is an excerpt from “Lincoln’s Stories and Speeches,” specifically from the chapter “Early Life.” As originally published, that material is included here.

How Lincoln Became a Captain.

In the threatening aspect of affairs at the time of the Black Hawk War, Governor Reynolds issued a call for volunteers, and among the companies that immediately responded was one from Menard County, Illinois. Many of the volunteers were from New Salem and Clarey’s Grove, and Lincoln, being out of business, was first to enlist. The company being full, they held a meeting at Richland for the election of officers. Lincoln had won many hearts and they told him that he must be their captain. It was an office that he did not aspire to, and one for which he felt that he had no special fitness; but he consented to be a candidate. There was but one other candidate for the office (a Mr. Kirkpatrick), and he was one of the most influential men in the

county. Previously, Kirkpatrick had been an employer of Lincoln, and was so overbearing in his treatment of the young man that the latter left him.

The simple mode of electing their captain, adopted by the company, was by placing the candidates apart, and telling the men to go and stand with the one they preferred. Lincoln and his competitor took their positions, and then the word was given. At least three out of every four went to Lincoln at once. When it was seen by those who had ranged themselves with the other candidate that Lincoln was the choice of the majority of the company, they left their places, one by one, and came over to the successful side, until Lincoln's opponent in the friendly strife was left standing almost alone.

"I felt badly to see him cut so," says a witness of the scene. 46

Here was an opportunity for revenge. The humble laborer was his employer's captain, but the opportunity was never improved. Mr. Lincoln frequently confessed that no subsequent success of his life had given him half the satisfaction that this election did. He had achieved public recognition; and to one so humbly bred, the distinction was inexpressibly delightful.

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A Humorous Speech—Lincoln in the Black Hawk War.

The friends of General Cass, when that gentleman was a candidate for the Presidency, endeavored to endow him with a military reputation. Mr. Lincoln, at that time a representative in Congress, delivered a speech before the House, which in its allusions to Mr. Cass, was exquisitely sarcastic and irresistibly humorous:

"By the way, Mr. Speaker," said Mr. Lincoln, "do you know I am a military hero? Yes, sir, in the days of the Black Hawk War, I fought, bled and came away. Speaking of General Cass' career reminds me of my own. I was not at Stillman's Defeat, but I was about as near it as Cass to Hull's surrender; and like him I saw the place very soon afterward. It is quite certain I did not break my sword, for I had none to break, but I bent my musket pretty badly on one occasion. * * * If General Cass went in advance of me in picking whortleberries, I guess I surpassed him in charges upon the wild onion. If he saw any live, fighting Indians, it is more than I did, but I had a good many bloody struggles with the mosquitoes, and although I never fainted from loss of blood, I can truly say I was often very hungry." 47

Mr. Lincoln concluded by saying that if he ever turned Democrat and should run for the Presidency, he hoped they would not make fun of him by attempting to make him a military hero!

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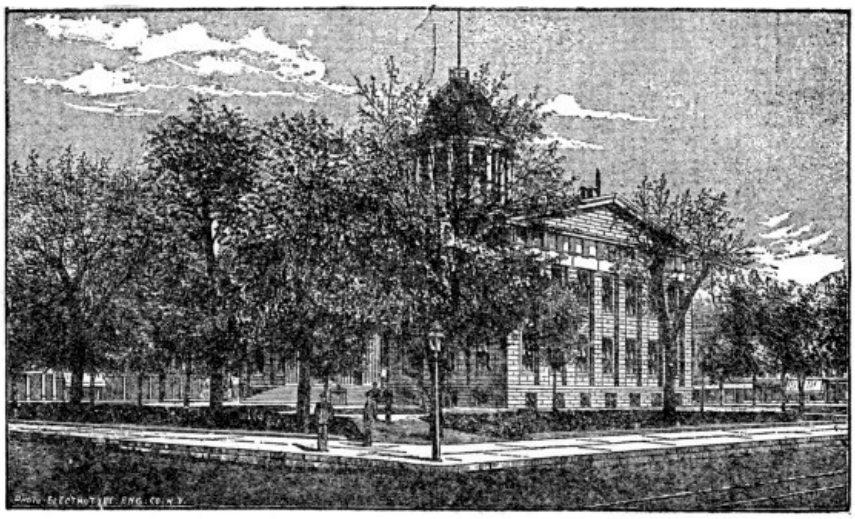
Elected to the Legislature.

In 1834, Lincoln was a candidate for the legislature, and was elected by the highest vote cast for any candidate. Major John T. Stuart, an officer in the Black Hawk War, and whose acquaintance Lincoln made at Beardstown, was also elected. Major Stuart had already conceived the highest opinion of the young man, and seeing much of him during the canvass for the election, privately advised him to study law. Stuart was himself engaged in a large and lucrative practice at Springfield.

Lincoln said he was poor—that he had no money to buy books, or to live where books might be borrowed or used. Major Stuart offered to lend him all he needed, and he decided to take the kind lawyer's advice, and accept his offer. At the close of the canvass which resulted in his election, he walked to Springfield, borrowed "a load" of books of Stuart, and took them home with him to New Salem.

Here he began the study of law in good earnest, though with no preceptor. He studied while he had bread, and then started out on a surveying tour to win the money that would buy more.

One who remembers his habits during this period says that he went, day after day, for weeks, and sat under an oak tree near New Salem and read, moving around to keep in the shade as the sun moved. He was so much absorbed that some people thought and said that he was crazy.



Not unfrequently he met and passed his best friends without noticing them. The truth was that he had found the pursuit of his life, and had become very much in earnest.

During Lincoln's campaign he possessed and rode a horse, to procure which he had quite likely sold his compass and chain, for, as soon as the canvass had closed, he sold the horse and bought these instruments indispensable to him in the only pursuit by which he could make his living.

When the time for the assembling of the legislature had arrived Lincoln dropped his law books, shouldered his pack, and, on foot, trudged to Vandalia, then the capital of the State, about a hundred miles, to make his entrance into public life.

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"The Long Nine."

The Sangamon County delegation to the Illinois Legislature, in 1834, of which Lincoln was a member, consisting of nine representatives, was so remarkable for the physical altitude of its members that they were known as "The Long Nine." Not a member of the number was less than six feet high, and Lincoln was the tallest of the nine, as he was the leading man intellectually in and out of the House.

Among those who composed the House were General John A. McClernand, afterwards a member of Congress; Jesse K. DuBois, afterwards Auditor of the State; Jas. Semple, afterwards twice the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and subsequently United States Senator; Robert Smith, afterwards member of Congress; John Hogan, afterwards a member of Congress from St. Louis; General James Shields, afterwards United States Senator (who died recently); John Dement, who has since been Treasurer of the State; Stephen A. Douglas, whose subsequent career is familiar to all; Newton Cloud, President of the convention which framed the present State Constitution of Illinois; John J. Hardin, who fell at Buena Vista; John Moore, afterwards Lieutenant Governor of the State; William A. Richardson, subsequently United States Senator, and William McMurtry, who has since been Lieutenant Governor of the State.

This list does not embrace all who had then, or who have since been distinguished, but it is large enough to show that Lincoln was, during the term of this legislature, thrown into association, and often into antagonism, with the brightest men of the new State.

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A Joke on Lincoln's Big Feet.

He had walked his hundred miles to Vandalia; in 1836, as he did in 1834, and when the session closed he walked home again. A gentleman in Menard County remembers meeting him and a detachment of "The Long Nine" on their way home. They were all mounted except Lincoln, who had thus far kept up with them on foot.

If he had money he was hoarding it for more important purposes than that of saving leg-weariness and leather. The weather was raw, and Lincoln's clothing was none of the warmest.

Complaining of being cold to one of his companions, this irreverent member of "The Long Nine" told his future President that it was no wonder he was cold—"there was so much of him on the ground." None of the party appreciated this homely joke at the expense of his feet (they were doubtless able to bear it) more thoroughly than Lincoln himself.

We can imagine the cross-fires of wit and humor by which the way was enlivened during this cold and tedious journey. The scene was certainly a rude one, and seems more like a dream than a reality, when we remember that it occurred not very many years ago, in a State which contains hardly less than three millions of people and seven thousand and six hundred miles of railway.

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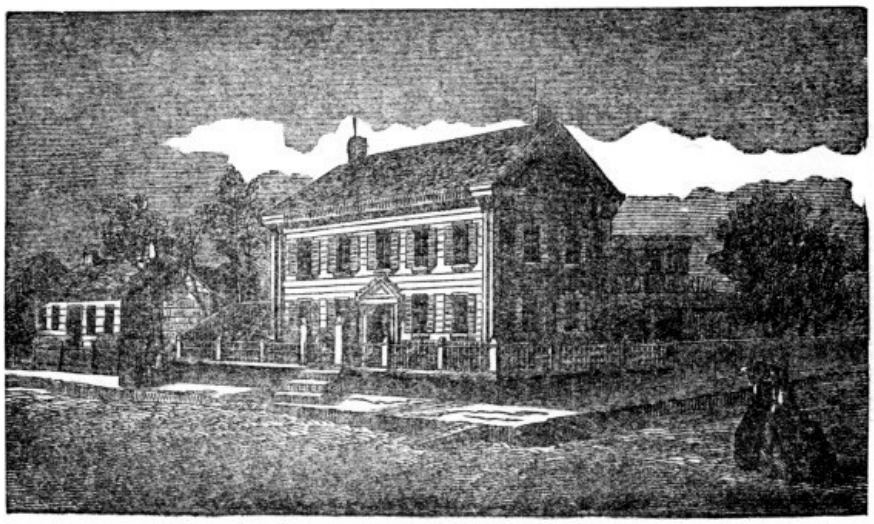
Lincoln’s Marriage—Interesting Letters.

In 1842, in his thirty-third year, Mr. Lincoln married Miss Mary Todd, a daughter of Hon. Robert S. Todd, of Lexington, Kentucky. The marriage took place in Springfield, where the lady had for several years resided, on the fourth of November of the year mentioned. It is probable that he married as early as the circumstances of his life permitted, for he had always loved the society of women, and possessed a nature that took profound delight in intimate female companionship.

A letter written on the eighteenth of May following his marriage, to J. F. Speed, Esq., of Louisville, Kentucky, an early and a life-long personal friend, gives a pleasant glimpse of his domestic arrangements at this time. “We are not keeping house,” Mr. Lincoln says in this letter, “but boarding at the Globe Tavern, which is very well kept by a widow lady of the name of Beck. Our rooms are the same Dr. Wallace occupied there, and boarding only costs four dollars a week. * * * I most heartily wish you and your Fanny will not fail to come. Just let us know the time, a week in advance, and we will have a room prepared for you, and we’ll all be merry together for awhile.” 52

He seems to have been in excellent spirits, and to have been very hearty in the enjoyment of his new relation. The private letters of Mr. Lincoln were charmingly natural and sincere. His personal friendships were the sweetest sources of his happiness.

To a particular friend, he wrote February 25, 1842: “Yours of the 16th, announcing that Miss —— and you ‘are no longer twain, but one flesh,’ reached me this morning. I have no way of telling you how much happiness I wish you both, though I believe you both can conceive it. I feel somewhat jealous of both of you now, for you will be so exclusively concerned for one another that I shall be forgotten entirely. My acquaintance with Miss —— (I call her thus lest you should think I am speaking of your mother), was too short for me to reasonably hope to long be remembered by her; and still I am sure I shall not forget her soon. Try if you cannot remind her of that debt she owes me, and be sure you do not interfere to prevent her paying it.



ABRAHAM LINCOLN’S RESIDENCE AT SPRINGFIELD, ILL. 53

“I regret to learn that you have resolved not to return to Illinois. I shall be very lonesome without you. How miserably things seem to be arranged in this world! If we have no friends we have no pleasure; and if we have them, we are sure to lose them, and be doubly pained by the loss. 54

“I did hope she and you would make your home here, yet I own I have no right to insist. You owe obligations to her ten thousand times more sacred than any you can owe to others, and in that light let them be respected and observed. It is natural that she should desire to remain with her relations and friends. As to friends, *she* should not need them anywhere—she would have them in abundance here. Give my kind regards to Mr. —— and his family, particularly to Miss E. Also to your mother, brothers and sisters. Ask little E. D—— if she will ride to town with me if I come there again. And, finally, give —— a double reciprocation of all the love she sent me. Write me often, and believe me, yours forever, LINCOLN.”

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Lincoln’s Mother—How He Loved Her.

“A great man,” says J. G. Holland, “never drew his infant life from a purer or more womanly bosom than her own; and Mr. Lincoln always looked back to her with unspeakable affection. Long after her sensitive heart and weary hands had crumbled into dust, and had climbed to life again in forest flowers, he said to a friend, with tears in his eyes: ‘All that I am, or hope to be, I owe to my angel mother—blessings on her memory!’” She was five feet, five inches high, a slender, pale, sad and sensitive woman, with much in her nature that was truly heroic, and much that shrank from the rude life around her. 55

Her death occurred in 1818, scarcely two years after her removal from Kentucky to Indiana, and

when Abraham was in his tenth year. They laid her to rest under the trees near their cabin home, and, sitting on her grave, the little boy wept his irreparable loss.

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Gen. Linder's Early Recollections—Amusing Stories.

I did not travel, says Gen. Linder, on the circuit in 1835, on account of my health and the health of my wife, but attended court at Charleston that fall, held by Judge Grant, who had exchanged circuits with our judge, Justin Harlan.

It was here I first met Abraham Lincoln, of Springfield, at that time a very retiring and modest young man, dressed in a plain suit of mixed jeans. He did not make any marked impression upon me, or any other member of the bar. He was on a visit to his relations in Coles, where his father and stepmother lived, and some of her children.

Lincoln put up at the hotel, and here was where I saw him. Whether he was reading law at this time I cannot say. Certain it is, he had been admitted to the bar, although he had some celebrity, having been a captain in the Blackhawk campaign, and served a term in the Illinois Legislature; but if he won any fame at that season I have never heard of it. He had been one of the representatives from Sangamon.

If Lincoln at this time felt the divine afflatus of greatness stir within him I have never heard of it. It was rather common with us then in the West to suppose that there was no Presidential timber growing in the Northwest, yet, he doubtless had at that time the stuff out of which to make half a dozen Presidents. 56

I had known his relatives in Kentucky, and he asked me about them. His uncle, Mordecai Lincoln, I had known from my boyhood, and he was naturally a man of considerable genius; he was a man of great drollery, and it would almost make you laugh to look at him. I never saw but one other man whose quiet, droll look excited in me the same disposition to laugh, and that was Artemus Ward.

He was quite a story-teller, and in this Abe resembled his Uncle Mord, as we called him. He was an honest man, as tender-hearted as a woman, and to the last degree charitable and benevolent.

No one ever took offense at Uncle Mord's stories—not even the ladies. I heard him once tell a bevy of fashionable girls that he knew a very large woman who had a husband so small that in the night she often mistook him for the baby, and that upon one occasion she took him up and was singing to him a soothing lullaby, when he awoke and told her that she was mistaken, that the baby was on the other side of the bed.

Lincoln had a very high opinion of his uncle, and on one occasion he said to me: "Linder, I have often said that Uncle Mord run off with the talents of the family."

Old Mord, as we sometimes called him, had been in his younger days a very stout man, and was quite fond of playing a game of fisticuffs with any one who was noted as a champion.

He told a parcel of us once of a pitched battle that he had fought on the side of a hill or ridge; that at the bottom there was a rut or canal, which had been cut out by the freshets. He said they soon clinched, and he threw his man and fell on top of him. 57

He said he always thought he had the best eyes in the world for measuring distances, and having measured the distance to the bottom of the hill, he concluded that by rolling over and over till they came to the bottom his antagonist's body would fill it, and he would be wedged in so tight that he could whip him at his leisure. So he let the fellow turn him, and over and over they went, when about the twentieth revolution brought Uncle Mord's back in contact with the rut, "and," said he, "before fire could scorch a feather, I cried out in stentorian voice: 'Take him off!'"

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"Clary's Grove Boys"—A Wrestling Match.

There lived at the time young Lincoln resided at New Salem, Illinois, in and around the village, a band of rollicking fellows, or more properly, roystering rowdies, known as the "Clary's Grove Boys." The special tie that united them was physical courage and prowess. These fellows, although they embraced in their number many men who have since become respectable and influential, were wild and rough beyond toleration in any community not made up like that which produced them. They pretended to be "regulators," and were the terror of all who did not acknowledge their role; and their mode of securing allegiance was by flogging every man who failed to acknowledge it.

They took it upon themselves to try the mettle of every newcomer, and to learn the sort of stuff he was made of. 58

Some of their number was appointed to fight, wrestle, or run a foot-race with each incoming stranger. Of course Abraham Lincoln was obliged to pass the ordeal.

Perceiving that he was a man who would not easily be floored; they selected their champion, Jack Armstrong, and imposed upon him the task of laying Lincoln upon his back.

There is no evidence that Lincoln was an unwilling party to the sport, for it was what he had always been accustomed to. The bout was entered upon, but Armstrong soon discovered that he had met more than his match.

The boys were looking on, and seeing that their champion was likely to get the worst of it, did after the manner of such irresponsible bands. They gathered around Lincoln, struck and disabled him, and then Armstrong, by “legging” him, got him down.

Most men would have been indignant, not to say furiously angry, under such foul treatment as this; but if Lincoln was either, he did not show it. Getting up in perfect good humor, he fell to laughing over his discomfiture, and joking about it. They had all calculated upon making him angry, and they intended, with the amiable spirit which characterized the “Clary’s Grove Boys,” to give him a terrible drubbing. They were disappointed, and, in their admiration of him, immediately invited him to become one of the company.

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