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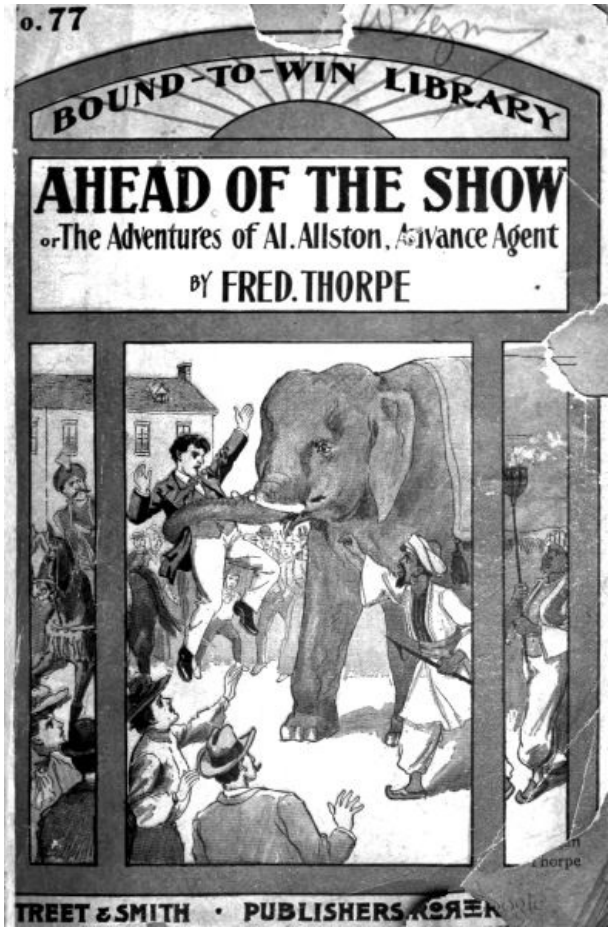


# Ahead of the Show

## OR

## The Adventures of Al Allston, Advance Agent

*By* FRED THORPE, *author of "Blind Luck," "The Boy in Black," "Chris, the Comedian," "Git Up and Git," "Walt, the Wonder Worker," etc....*

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Ahead of the Show

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# AHEAD OF THE SHOW.

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## CHAPTER I.

### AL MAKES APPLICATION.

"If I had that fellow here I'd make him wish he'd never heard the name of Augustus Wattles. And I'll do it some day, too."

The manager and proprietor of Wattles' New York Comedy Company was very, very "mad." His naturally florid face was redder than usual, and his fists were clinched in a manner that augured no good to the "fellow" referred to, had that individual chanced to appear upon the scene at this precise moment.

He stood at the door of the Boomville Opera House, in company with the local manager, Mr. Cyrus Perley, who seemed in some degree to share his discomfiture and anger.

A group of stragglers listened in silence to their conversation, gazing at them with that peculiar and unaccountable reverence that many people feel for members of the theatrical profession.

"It's pretty tough," said Mr. Perley, "but it isn't my fault."

"I know it isn't. Well, this is the last time that loafer will play that trick on me. He thinks that because I have been easy with him in the past there is no end to my patience. I'll show him that he is making the mistake of his life." [Pg 6]

"Of course, you will discharge him?"

"You had better believe I will. A healthy sort of advance agent he is! Think of my bringing my company to a town of the importance of Boomville, to find that absolutely no advance work has been done, that my advance agent, to whom I pay a fancy salary, has not even showed his face in the town."

"I suppose he has succumbed to his old complaint?" said Mr. Perley.

"Of course; he is drunk beyond the shadow of a doubt, and may not show up again for a week. Well, when he does, he'll meet with a warm reception from me. We ought to have had an eight-hundred-dollar house to-night, and now we'll be lucky if we take in half that amount."

"I don't expect we'll do as well as that. It wouldn't have made so much difference under ordinary circumstances, but, as luck will have it, they've got the strongest attraction of the season at the other house—the 'Crack of Doom' Company. You know that's a big puller everywhere."

"Sure. They have a railway collision, a tank of real water, a buzz saw and two real lunatics in the insane asylum scene."

"Yes, and their advance man has worked the show up in great shape here. According to him, the leading lady lost nine thousand dollars' worth of diamonds on her way here, and the soubrette is going to marry Chauncey Depew. And they give souvenirs to-night in honor of the five hundredth performance of the piece." [Pg 7]

"They've been giving that five hundredth performance in every town they've played in for the last month; and their souvenirs are not worth over fifty cents a gross."

"All very true, but the public will have 'em. I hoped your advance man would have some taking counter-attraction."

"So he did have, but—— Oh, well, it's no use talking about that. What's done can't be helped, but I won't be left in this way again. Where is the nearest telegraph office?"

"On the next block. What are you going to do?"

"Wire to New York for a new advance agent. I happen to know of an A1 man who is out of an engagement. There are two or three others after him, but I guess I can make it worth his while to go with me. I won't get left in this way again, you can bet your boots!"

"That's all right," growled Mr. Perley, "but it doesn't help out the present engagement any."

"No, but we are joint sufferers in that, and we may as well grin and bear it."

And the irate manager of the New York Comedy Company started for the telegraph office with fire in his eyes and a look of determination on his face.

Neither he nor Mr. Perley had observed the presence in the little group of listeners to their conversation of a rather good-looking, well-dressed boy of about eighteen.

This lad did not lose a word of the excited discussion, and, as the manager started to walk away, he muttered: [Pg 8]

"This is the chance I have been looking for; I won't let the opportunity slip. It doesn't seem as if there would be much hope for me, but there's no harm in trying, anyhow."

He followed Mr. Wattles, and just before that gentleman reached the telegraph office he tapped him on the shoulder.

The manager turned quickly. When he saw the boy, he asked, impatiently:

"Well, what is it?"

"Can I speak with you a few minutes, sir?"

"Not now, not now."

Mr. Wattles was about to resume his walk, but the boy laid a detaining hand on his arm.

"I want to see you on business, sir."

"You have business with me?"

"Important business, sir."

"Well, well, I'll see you in a few minutes; I've got to send an important telegram now."

"But I want to see you before you send that telegram."

"Before I send the telegram? Why?"

"Because I think I can prove to you that it is not necessary to wire to New York at all."

"Eh? Why, how did you know that I was going to wire to New York?"

"I overheard what you said to Mr. Perley in front of the opera house just now."

"Humph! I was excited, and spoke a little louder than I ought. Well, why do you think it will not be necessary for me to send the telegram?" [Pg 9]

"Because I am sure you can find just the person you want right here in Boomville."

"An advance agent to be picked up offhand in this place? That would be too much luck. What is your man's name?"

"Allen Allston."

"I never heard of him. What company was he with last?"

"He has never been with any company, sir, but——"

Mr. Wattles surveyed the boy with a look of supreme disgust.

"Do you suppose for one moment," he interrupted, "that I am going to take an inexperienced jay

from a town like this and send him ahead of an organization like Wattles' New York Comedy Company? Well, hardly. I've got to have an experienced man."

"And you're going to telegraph for one now, sir?"

"This minute."

"But suppose you can't get the man you want—will you talk with me then, sir?"

"Er—yes, in that case you might send your friend to see me, though it seems nonsense. But I shall get my man all right."

"I suppose you are going to request an immediate answer to your telegram, Mr. Wattles?"

"I am; I shall get it within an hour, in all probability."

"Where can I find you after you have received it?" [Pg 10]

"At the hotel next door. You are a persistent young rascal; your friend has a good advocate in you."

The boy smiled.

"I am the best friend he has in the world," he said.

"Well, if you are you had better advise him to stick to farming, or whatever he is doing, and keep out of the theatrical business; we have too many farmers in it already."

"He wouldn't take the advice, sir."

Mr. Wattles laughed as he entered the telegraph office.

"If the boy's friend has got as much 'go' as he has," he muttered, "he might do something in the business."

In a few minutes the message had been sent. An hour and a half later a messenger entered the lobby of the hotel with a telegram.

"For me?" questioned the manager, who had been impatiently pacing the floor for the last twenty minutes.

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Wattles tore open the envelope.

A muttered exclamation escaped his lips as he hurriedly perused the message.

"Well, sir?" said a voice at his elbow.

Turning, he confronted the lad with whom he had had the brief interview which we have recorded.

"You here? Well, you do mean business."

"Is your offer accepted, sir?" the boy asked.

"Confound it, no! The man I wanted signed yesterday with another manager. Well, send your friend round and I'll talk with him." [Pg 11]

"He is here, sir."

"Where?"

"I am Allen Allston."

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# CHAPTER II.

## AL TALKS BUSINESS.

Mr. Wattles stared at the boy a moment in speechless surprise, then burst into a loud laugh.

"You don't mean to say," he almost gasped, "that you made that application for yourself?"

"That's just what I mean to say, sir," replied the lad, quietly.

"Why, you must be crazy!"

"I don't think I am."

"You are only a boy."

"I'll get over that in time, Mr. Wattles; and besides, that fact is no proof that I am crazy."

"Oh, pshaw! I can't stand here bandying words with you."

Al was not in the least taken aback.

"That's just what I was thinking," he said.

"What?"

"That we had been standing up too long. Let's sit down."

"Well," said the manager, "you have cheek enough, anyhow."

"Cheek is necessary for an advance agent, isn't it, sir?" laughed the boy.

"Yes, but—oh, really, this is ridiculous, you know!"

"What is ridiculous?"

"Your applying for this position." [Pg 13]

"Why is it ridiculous?"

"Who ever heard of a boy advance agent?"

"That's just the point. Nobody ever did, and it will be a complete novelty, and a big ad. for the show."

Mr. Wattles gazed at the boy almost admiringly.

"Well, you are a corker!" he exclaimed.

"A good advance agent ought to be a corker, oughtn't he, sir?"

"I suppose so—yes."

"Shan't we sit down and talk the matter over?"

"Yes."

And the manager sank into a convenient chair, gazing at his youthful companion with an expression indicative of bewilderment.

"I've got him now sure," murmured the lad, but his companion did not hear him; Al did not intend that he should.

When they were both seated the boy said:

"Now, sir, you want an advance agent, and I want a position. It is lucky we met."

"Yes," interrupted Mr. Wattles, "but what the mischief do you know about the business of an advance agent?"

"A lot," was the calm reply.

"How did you learn it?"

"By reading and observation."

"Nonsense! You might as well talk about learning to swing on a trapeze by reading and observation."

"There's a big difference, sir."

"Not much." [Pg 14]

"Well, I've always thought I should like to do work of that sort, and I think I could do it well."

"Stage-struck, eh?"

"Not a bit of it, Mr. Wattles. Now, will you listen to me a few moments, sir?"

"Go ahead."

And the manager assumed an air of resignation.

"I generally keep my eyes open," began the boy, "and I have had a chance to watch the movements of most of the theatrical people who come to this town, particularly the advance agents."

"Why the advance agents in particular?" interrupted Mr. Wattles.

"Because I have been in the editorial office of the Boomville *Herald*, and have had a chance to see how they work the press. Some of them are very slick, but I think that if I had a little experience I should be as slick as any of them."

"Ah," said the manager, "that's the point. You haven't had experience."

"Well, I've got to begin some time, sir. If all managers had talked like you the race of advance agents would have been extinct long ago."

"There's something in that," laughed Mr. Wattles.

"There's lots in it."

The manager of the New York Comedy Company surveyed his companion for a few moments without speaking.

"My boy, I rather like you," he said, at last.

"Well, that's one point in my favor, sir," said Al. [Pg 15]

"I'd like to give you a chance, but I really do not see how I can."

"Why can't you?"

"You must remember that the New York Comedy Company is not a common, fly-by-night organization, but a first-class enterprise. I have put a good many dollars into the thing, and I can't afford to experiment. If so much did not depend upon the result, if I were running a cheap side show, I might give you the trial you ask, but——"

"I wouldn't have anything to do with any such show," interrupted the boy. "I don't intend to be that sort of advance agent. But I can understand how you feel, sir."

"Then you can also understand how impossible it is for me to engage your services."

"Oh, no, I can't understand that at all, Mr. Wattles. Now let me ask you a question."

"What is it?"

"I heard you tell Mr. Perley that you did not expect there would be four hundred dollars in the house to-night."

"That's what I said. I shall be agreeably disappointed if there is as much as that."

"Yet the opera house will hold twelve hundred dollars."

"I see you are posted, my boy."

"I am. Now, Mr. Wattles, it is a little out of the line of an advance agent's work, but, just to show you that I have a little snap and business ability, I will guarantee to fill the opera house to its utmost capacity to-night, if you will agree to give me a chance as advance agent after that." [Pg 16]

"Do you know what you are talking about?"

And the manager stared in renewed amazement at the youth.

"I do."

"You will undertake to fill the house to-night, in spite of the disadvantages under which we are laboring?"

"The 'Standing Room Only' sign will be displayed before eight o'clock."

"Well, what is your scheme?"

"You will agree to follow my suggestions?"

"Not until I hear them."

"If you don't like them you will agree not to repeat anything I may say to you?"

"Certainly."

"Then I'll give you my idea. I see you are getting ready to guy me, sir," as a rather cynical smile appeared upon the manager's face.

"Oh, no."

"You don't think I can knock out such a strong opposition as the 'Crack of Doom' Company, do you?"

"I do not."

"Well, I'll show you that I can, and get you not only a full house, but the elite of the place."

"Well, well," interrupted Mr. Wattles, impatiently, "have done with preliminaries and let me know how you propose to accomplish all this."

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## CHAPTER III.

"Mr. Wattles," said Al, in a low tone, "I suppose you have in your time met a few stage-struck amateurs—people who thought they knew it all, and only needed a chance to show the world that they were the equal of anyone who ever trod the boards?"

The manager laughed.

"I should say yes. The woods are full of them."

"Well, we have one here."

"Only one?"

"There are others, but one whom it will be worth your while to know."

"Who is she?—for it is a woman, of course."

"Yes, sir, it is a woman; she is the wife of the mayor."

"The wife of the mayor of Boomville stage-struck?"

"In the worst way, Mr. Wattles; she believes herself the only legitimate successor of Charlotte Cushman."

"They all do. Well, what has all this to do with your scheme?"

"A good deal. Mrs. Anderson—that is her name—is very anxious to appear on the professional stage."

"Of course."

"Why can't you give her a chance?"

"Eh? I? How?"

"Send her word that one of your actresses has been taken suddenly ill, and ask her to take her place. She'll do it, take my word for that, and all Boomville will go to see her." [Pg 18]

"Well, you must be crazy, young man," said Mr. Wattles, in a tone of disgust. "So that is your scheme, is it?"

"That is part of it."

"Well, it won't work."

"Why not?"

"For a dozen reasons. If I had two or three weeks to work up the thing it would be different; then it would, perhaps, be a good scheme. But you seem to forget that the performance takes place to-night."

"There's plenty of time to work up business," said Al, calmly. "It is not ten o'clock yet. See Mrs. Anderson, get her consent to play, and I'll prove my executive ability by doing all the rest."

"But, good gracious! how could the woman memorize a part between this and night?"

"Give her a short part—any old part. Two or three lines will do. What she wants is a chance to show herself on the professional stage."

"There is a small part," hesitated Mr. Wattles, "one that she could learn in half an hour. But, no, it won't do. The woman might queer the performance, and I should be the laughingstock of the profession for the next year."

"She's not as bad as all that," said Al. "She has appeared in amateur performances here and made a success. Better see her, Mr. Wattles. I know she'll be tickled to death with the idea. You'll be in plenty of time to get a big ad. in this afternoon's *Herald*, and you'll have the biggest house of the season." [Pg 19]

The manager brought his fist down on the table by his side, and said:

"By jingo, boy, I will do it! Lots of money has been made out of stage-struck society women, and perhaps I may come in for a little of it."

"You'll come in for a lot of it to-night, sir, if you just follow my advice. And now I'll show you the way to the mayor's house."

"Wait a minute. You said this amateur racket was only a part of your scheme; what is the rest of it?"

"Souvenirs. This town is wild on souvenirs. The 'Crack of Doom' Company give hand-painted fans to-night. Why don't you go one better, and announce that every lady attending your performance will receive a heavily plated silver souvenir spoon?"

"But where the mischief could I get the spoons?"

"I'll provide them."

"You?"

"Certainly."

"But where are you going to get them?"

"I've got them. You see, sir, I am a sort of speculator. I attend auction sales and that sort of thing, and if I see a big bargain I take advantage of it. It's better than clerking at five dollars a week. A few days ago I struck a bankrupt sale in New York, and bought a lot of plated spoons at 'way below cost. I meant to sell them to the stores here, but I'll let you have them at just what they [Pg 20] cost me—you can afford to give them away if you buy them at that price—and there will be plenty to go round."

Mr. Wattles surveyed his companion in amused wonder.

"Well, you are a queer sort of lad," he said. "You seem to have a pretty old head on those young shoulders of yours!"

"I think I have enough to look out for number one, sir."

"I should say you did. I should like to know more of you."

"You will, sir, when I become your advance agent."

"Well, we'll see all about that. And now I'd better be off for the home of the stage-struck mayoress. Meet me in half an hour."

"I'll be here, sir."

As the manager walked away, he muttered:

"I'm afraid I'm going on a fool's errand. Confound it! I believe that young rascal has hypnotized me. But, after all, I can't afford to neglect the chance. The treasury is pretty low, and if this scheme doesn't work there may be trouble on salary day. I'll do my best to get this woman to play, and I guess I shall succeed; people used to say that Gus Wattles was the champion jollier, and I don't think he has lost his powers yet."

Al was doing a little soliloquizing, too.

"I didn't think I had so much nerve," he mused. "I'm beginning to have a little more confidence in myself. If to-night's performance is a success I shall get the job sure—he can't refuse me. But if it [Pg 21] isn't a success, if Mrs. Anderson refuses to have anything to do with the scheme—I won't let myself think of that."

It was nearly an hour before Mr. Wattles returned.

"Well, sir?" questioned the boy, breathlessly.

"It's all right."

"She will play?"

"Not only that, but she is going to pay me for the chance. Oh, there are no flies on Augustus Wattles, my boy! Yes, she is going to play, and she is delighted because the part will give her a chance to exhibit herself in a new costume which she has just imported from Paris. Now, then, my lad, we must get up the ads. How much time have we before they must be in the newspaper office?"

"An hour at least. And you had better get out some posters announcing Mrs. Anderson's appearance. They can be on the walls in two hours. Will you leave that part to me?"

"Yes; but first you can help me with the advertisement. Undoubtedly you can give me some points."

Al was able to do so. The manager was plainly delighted and surprised at the aptitude he displayed.

"I begin to think," he said, "that you were cut out for this business."

"That is what I have thought for a long while, sir," replied the boy, as, copy in hand, he started for the office of the *Herald*.

Within a few hours everyone in Boomville knew that Mrs. Anderson, the mayor's wife, was to [Pg 22] assume a rôle in the drama, "Loved and Lost," at the opera house that evening, and all the lady's friends, all her enemies and almost everybody else who ever attended theatrical performances at all had made up their minds to go and see her.

Besides, the offer of a plated spoon as a souvenir was almost irresistible; people who had more solid silver spoons than they had any use for fell over each other in their frantic haste to secure seats for the evening's performance and make sure of the coveted spoon.

"We haven't had an advance sale like this since the house was built," said the local manager to Mr. Wattles, a short time before the doors were opened. "Why, there isn't a seat left in the house except in the gallery, and they will be all filled as soon as the doors are thrown open. And I understand that there is no sale at all at the other house. I don't believe there'll be a baker's dozen there. It was a great idea of yours to get Mrs. Anderson to appear."

"I claim no credit for it at all," said Mr. Wattles. "It was all the work of that bright young fellow."

"Oh, by the way," interrupted Mr. Perley, taking an envelope from his pocket, "here is something that came for you a few minutes ago; I had nearly forgotten about it."

Mr. Wattles tore open the note and ran his eyes over its contents. As he did so the expression of his face underwent such a remarkable change that his companion said, uneasily: [Pg 23]

"There's nothing the matter, is there?"

"I should say there was," was the reply. "We're in a nice fix. Mrs. Anderson won't play!"

[Pg 24]

# CHAPTER IV.
## AL TO THE RESCUE.

"Mrs. Anderson won't play?" almost shrieked Mr. Perley.

"That's what I said—Mrs. Anderson won't play," replied the manager of the combination, with the calmness of despair. "Read this."

The note which he handed his companion read as follows:

> "MR. A. WATTLES:
>
> "DEAR SIR: I deeply regret my inability to appear this evening as I promised. My husband objects so strongly that I have no alternative but to yield to his wishes. Trusting that this will cause you no inconvenience, I am,
>
> "Faithfully yours,
> "BLANCHE ANDERSON."

"'Trusting that it will cause us no inconvenience,'" groaned Mr. Perley. "Isn't that like a woman? Well, Wattles, we are in a nice little fix now. Of course, we shall have to give three-fourths of the audience their money back."

"Yes; but that isn't the worst of it. Think of the roasting the papers will give us!"

"Don't speak of it. And it's all your fault; you would be fool enough to listen to that kid."

"Don't say any more, Perley. I must have been out of my head." [Pg 25]

"It isn't worth while to get excited, gentlemen," said a calm voice.

And looking in the direction from which it proceeded, the two men saw Al Allston standing in the doorway.

"You young rascal——" began Mr. Wattles, but Al silenced him by a gesture:

"There is no time to waste, gentlemen," he said. "I told you that Mrs. Anderson would appear to-night, and she will."

"Do you mean to say," cried Mr. Wattles, "that you can make her do this in defiance of her husband's will?"

"Her husband will agree after he has had a short talk with me," was the boy's reply. "Go right ahead with your preparations for the performance, gentlemen; Mrs. Anderson will be here as per agreement."

And, without waiting for a reply, Al left the room.

"Well," said Mr. Wattles, drawing a long breath, "I never saw the equal of that kid. Do you know, I think he will do what he has promised."

Mr. Perley shook his head.

"It's out of the question now," he said. "Mayor Anderson is one of the stubbornest men in the world; if he has said that his wife shall not appear, she will not. The boy was talking through his hat."

"Well," said the manager of the New York Comedy Company, "all we can do now is to trust to luck. Go ahead and let the people in, and we'll see whether this confounded stage-struck female [Pg 26]

turns up or not. Somehow, I believe the lad knew what he was talking about."

Meantime Al had reached the mayor's house, a pretentious mansion on the most fashionable thoroughfare in Boomville.

In response to the rather supercilious "What is it?" from the servant who opened the door, he presented his card and asked to see Mrs. Anderson.

"I don't think she'll see you," said the flunky, "but I'll give her your card if you wish."

"I do wish," said the boy. "Give her the card, and tell her that I wish to see her on very important business that will admit of no delay."

The man left with the card. In a few moments he returned, saying with a grin:

"She don't know you, and she won't see you."

And with an impudent leer, he extended the card to the boy.

Al took it and hurriedly wrote a few words on the back. Then he returned it to the servant, saying:

"Give it to Mrs. Anderson again; I think she will see me."

The man hesitated, then said:

"Well, I'll take it to her, but the chances are she'll give me orders to kick you out."

With this cheering assurance he again departed.

"I didn't like to do it," murmured Al, "but there was no help for it."

In a few moments the flunky returned, his manner completely changed. [Pg 27]

"Please be kind enough to step into the drawing room, sir," he said, with the utmost politeness; "Mrs. Anderson will be down in one minute."

A few minutes after Al Allston had left the theater a showily dressed, red-faced man of about thirty sauntered into the manager's private office where Mr. Wattles was seated alone.

"So, Wattles, old man," he said, extending his hand, "we meet again."

The manager started to his feet.

"How dare you show your face here?" he cried, angrily.

"Eh! What's all this?" said the newcomer, in real or feigned surprise.

"I don't want to have anything more to do with you. A nice sort of advance agent you are, aren't you?"

"There's none better, so they say," replied the fellow, with a tipsy leer. "What are you on your ear about?"

"I have no time to bandy words with you. You are discharged."

"What's that—I discharged? What ails you, Wattles?"

"That's enough, Dick Farley. I told you after your last drunk that if the same thing occurred again I should have nothing more to do with you, and I meant it. Get out!"

"But, Wattles, I haven't been on a booze. I have been drugged and kidnaped. Listen and I'll tell you all about it; it's the queerest affair you ever heard of." [Pg 28]

"I guess it is; I know your talent for inventing yarns. I don't want to hear this one."

"Do you mean to insult me?"

And Farley's face reddened.

"That would be impossible."

"It would, eh? See here, Gus Wattles, do you mean to say that you are going to throw me over and ruin my chances in the business?"

"It is your own fault. I want to have nothing more to do with you."

"Then I'm bounced?"

"That is it, exactly."

"Oh, it is? Well, I'll show you!"

And the drink-maddened ruffian suddenly drew a knife and, brandishing it above his head, sprang toward his companion.

In another second the weapon would have descended but for a most opportune interruption.

"Stop!"

Farley turned and glared in the direction from which the voice proceeded.

Al Allston stood in the doorway, in his hand a revolver, which was leveled at the head of the would-be assassin.

[Pg 29]

# CHAPTER V.
## AL CLAIMS HIS REWARD.

Al was bowed, by the now obsequious servant, into Mrs. Anderson's elegantly furnished drawing room.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said the man, cringingly. "I didn't know that you were a friend of the family, or I wouldn't have spoken as I did. You see, sir, we're a good deal troubled by book agents and such like."

"Wouldn't it be a good idea to be civil to everyone?" said Al. "It would not cost you anything, and you'd be sure to make no mistake."

"Yes, sir. You won't say anything to Mrs. Anderson, will you, sir? It might cost me my place."

"No, no!" returned Al, so impatient to see the mayor's wife that he scarcely heard what the man said.

"Thank you, sir."

At this moment the sound of approaching footsteps was heard, and the servant hastily bowed himself out.

Scarcely had he gone when Mrs. Anderson entered the room, followed by her husband. She was a tall, slender, rather good-looking woman of about thirty; he a short, pompous man, at least ten years his wife's senior.

The lady approached Al with outstretched hands.

"My brave, noble boy," she cried, "how delighted I am to see you! And I did not even know your name until I received your card just now. I am so glad you did not allow yourself to be sent away. [Pg 30] But why have you not called before?"

"Yes, why have you not called before?" echoed the mayor, seizing the boy's hands, which his wife had just relinquished.

Al, considerably embarrassed, murmured something about not wanting to intrude.

"Intrude!" cried the lady. "You are, like all heroes, modest to a fault. You will always be a welcome guest here. But sit down; you must spend the evening with us."

"I cannot," began the boy.

"Nonsense! I will take no refusal. He must stay, mustn't he, Mr. Anderson?"

"By all means," smiled the mayor.

"And we will talk about his heroic deed," went on Mrs. Anderson. "It was a fortnight ago, but the scene comes up before me as vividly as if it had been only yesterday—the maddened horses, our child directly in their path, her rescue by this noble boy at the imminent risk of his own life. In another moment she would have been crushed under the feet of the runaway animals had he not sprang forward and dragged her out of danger."

"It was a heroic act," said the mayor.

"It was nothing more than almost anyone would have done, sir," said the blushing lad.

"It was more than anyone else did," returned Mr. Anderson, "and I understand that the affair was witnessed by a dozen or more persons. But why have you not called before? I understood my wife to say that she asked you to come that afternoon. You did not come, and we tried in every way to [Pg 31] discover your identity, even going so far as to advertise for you."

"I saw the advertisements, sir," replied Al.

"Ah! and that is why you are here?"

"Oh, no, sir. The advertisements mentioned that you wanted to give me a reward."

"Of course we did. You don't mean to say that it was the fear of having a reward forced upon you that kept you away?"

"Well, sir," replied Al, "I confess that had something to do with it."

The mayor laughed heartily.

"This is really refreshing," he said. "My lad, I am interested in you more than ever, now. Well, I promise you that, if you insist upon it, the subject shall not be referred to this evening."

"But I do not insist," said Al. "The fact is, Mr. Anderson, I came here to-night to ask you to make your promise good."

Both the mayor and his wife stared at the lad in surprise.

"You mean," said the former, "that you are here to claim your reward?"

"That is what I mean, sir."

There was, perhaps, just a shade of disappointment on the face of Mr. Anderson; it may be he was thinking that another idol had been rather rudely shattered. But he only said:

"I am glad you have changed your mind, my boy. What reward do you wish? My little daughter's life is worth more to me than anything else on earth, so you need not be too modest in your request. How much shall it be? I will write a check for any reasonable amount you choose to name." [Pg 32]

Al's face flushed.

"I don't want money, sir," he said.

"No? Well, what can I do for you, then? Do you want me to find you a position in my office? Perhaps I can do something for you in that way, if you——"

"Mr. Anderson," interrupted Al, desperately, "you would never guess what I want if you tried until doomsday."

The mayor, very naturally, looked surprised.

"Eh?" he stammered. "Why, r-really, you are a most extraordinary youth. Well, I will try to satisfy your demands, whatever they are. Out with them now."

"You will grant any request I make?" asked Al.

"Anything in reason, my boy."

"Well, sir, I can't explain now just why I ask this favor of you, but I will when there is time; just now there isn't."

"Never mind all that," interrupted Mr. Anderson. "Come to the point; what is it you want me to do?"

"I want you to let Mrs. Anderson appear at the opera house to-night, as she promised."

Both the mayor and his wife started from their seats, their faces showing all the surprise they felt.

"Why, what is it to you whether she appears or not?" asked Mr. Anderson. [Pg 33]

"It is everything."

"I do not understand."

"I cannot explain now; but, sir, I assure you that, perhaps, my whole future depends upon whether you grant my request or not."

"Really," gasped the mayor, "this is most extraordinary. Why cannot you explain now?"

"Because the curtain goes up in a good deal less than an hour, and Mrs. Anderson ought to be at the theater now."

Here the lady herself interposed.

"Mr. Anderson," she said, beseechingly, "do let me go! You know I promised, and that in itself is reason enough why I should appear."

"I cannot understand this at all," said the mayor, petulantly. Then turning to Al, he added:

"Boy, I will write you my check for five thousand dollars, if you will withdraw this absurd request."

Five thousand dollars was a good deal more money than Al had ever had in his possession, a good deal more than he was likely to earn as advance agent for a long time to come; but his answer was prompt and positive.

"Mr. Anderson, I don't want your money. I would not accept a penny of it. I only request that you allow your wife to keep her promise and appear to-night. I would not ask this if I thought there would be anything disagreeable to her in fulfilling her promise, but——"

Here Mrs. Anderson interrupted. [Pg 34]

"Why, of course there would not," she said. "You know, John, I am so anxious to make my début

on the professional stage. Now, do let me go, won't you? You cannot refuse now!"

After a moment's hesitation, the mayor said:

"No, I cannot. You shall go."

It was with difficulty that Al suppressed a sigh of relief.

"There is not a moment to be lost," he reminded the would-be débutante.

"I know it," cried Mrs. Anderson. "Oh, I am so glad you came! Now, don't look so downcast, John; you will be very proud of me when you see me on the stage."

"Humph! Well, we shall see."

Al rose to go.

"You will not change your mind again, Mrs. Anderson?" he asked, a little apprehensively.

"No, no," laughed the lady. "I have never changed it at all. I shall be there."

[Pg 35]

# CHAPTER VI.
## ANOTHER ROCK AHEAD.

Mr. Anderson accompanied Al to the door.

"I would have granted almost any other request you might have made with more willingness," he said. "I have a strongly rooted objection to my wife appearing on the stage."

"I am very sorry, sir," said Al. "But, perhaps, as Mrs. Anderson says, you will feel differently when you see her."

"I doubt it very much. Now, tell me, why did you insist upon this sacrifice on my part? What is it to you whether my wife appears or not?"

"I haven't time to tell you now, sir," the boy replied. "I must return to the theater at once."

"Can you call at my office, at the City Hall, to-morrow?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do so, then, at, say, ten in the morning. I should like to have a talk with you; I want to know more of you."

"I will be there, Mr. Anderson. Good-evening, sir."

"Good-evening, my lad."

As Al hurried along to take the good news to Mr. Wattles, he muttered:

"Well, I didn't think I had so much cheek. I wouldn't have insisted upon Mrs. Anderson's appearing if there had really been any harm in it, but I'm sure it can't damage her or her husband much. Besides, she gave her promise, and she ought to keep it." [Pg 36]

As the boy hurried through the long corridor leading to the manager's office, his attention was attracted by the sound of loud and excited voices, and, listening, he heard a portion of the conversation taking place between Mr. Wattles and his ex-advance agent. As we have seen, he reached the office just in time to see Farley standing over the manager with uplifted knife, and to interfere.

The advance agent proved himself a coward, for the weapon dropped from his fingers, and, throwing up his hands, he cried:

"Don't shoot! Mercy, mercy!"

Mr. Wattles picked up the knife.

"Allston," he said, "go for a policeman."

As Al turned to leave the room, Farley cried, imploringly:

"Wait! Wattles, old man, I didn't know what I was doing. The fact is, I have been drinking pretty hard lately, but I shall be all right in a day or two."

"You don't expect to get back in my employ again, do you?" the manager asked, sternly.

"No, no, I don't. All I ask is that you will not utterly ruin all my chances for life by having me arrested. Things look bad enough for me without that."

"Very well, Farley, I'll let you off this time, but I warn you to keep out of my way in the future."

"If I keep straight and show you that I am at my best we may do business together again, eh, Wattles?" [Pg 37]

"No, sir; I shall never have anything more to do with you."

"Perhaps you'll think better of that. You haven't had time to fill my place yet."

"I've got a better man for your place than you ever were," said the manager.

"Who is he?" demanded Farley.

"There he stands;" and Mr. Wattles pointed to Al.

"That kid?" gasped Farley.

"That young gentleman," said the manager, with theatrical impressiveness.

Farley stared at the boy a few moments without speaking; then, with a peculiar smile, he said:

"So you are an advance agent, are you, bub?"

"So it seems," replied Al, as coolly as he could.

"Well, you won't remain one long; I will see to that. Take my advice and quit the business before the temperature gets too high. See? Yes, I think you do. I don't propose——"

"Look here," interrupted Mr. Wattles, "I've had just about enough of this. Are you going to get out or are you not?"

Farley backed toward the door.

"I am," he said. "Ta, ta, Wattles! Ta, ta, my young friend! But we shall meet again, and don't you forget, either of you, to paste that fact in your hat."

And he swaggered out of the room.

"The impudent scoundrel!" exclaimed Mr. Wattles. "I let him off too easy. If I am not mistaken, we shall have more trouble with him." [Pg 38]

"Never mind about him," interrupted Al. "Do you know that it is almost eight o'clock, Mr. Wattles?"

"Good gracious! So it is! And Mrs. Anderson——"

"It's all right."

"She will appear?"

"Sure."

The manager grasped his companion's hand.

"Allston," he said, "you are a wonder."

"That's just what you want for an advance agent, isn't it?" the boy asked, with a laugh.

"Yes. Did she come with you?"

"No, but she is probably here by this time."

"How did you do it?"

"I'll tell you some other time, sir."

"That's right; we have no time to waste in talk now. I'll go and see if she has arrived. I should be in a nice fix if she changed her mind again."

"She won't, Mr. Wattles."

Scarcely hearing the last words, the manager rushed from the room.

"Well," mused Al, "if Mr. Wattles is a man of his word I am his advance agent now. It will be my fault if I don't make the best of the opportunity. But it's dollars to doughnuts that I shall have trouble with that loafer, Farley. Well, I guess I can hold my own."

He was interrupted by the sudden entrance of Mr. Wattles. [Pg 39]

"It's all right, my boy," laughed the manager.

"You haven't seen her yet?"

"No, but I've seen Perley, and he tells me she is here, and is dressing for the part. He thinks that she is going to make a big hit."

"Of course she will," laughed Al; "she is the leader of society here, and it would be treason not to like her."

The manager smiled.

"You know something of the world," he said.

"Not as much as I would like to. But, seriously, sir, Mrs. Anderson is not such a bad actress, and I shouldn't wonder if she did make a hit."

"She'll have to be a second Ristori, if she does in that part," grinned Mr. Wattles. "There's nothing to it; but, for all that, the woman who has been playing it is wild because I have taken it away from her for one night."

"Have you explained the circumstances to her?"

"Have I? I've talked myself nearly deaf in doing so, but it was of no use."

"She must be very thick-headed if she can't see how you are placed."

"My dear boy, a woman will never see anything she doesn't want to see. But never mind about all that. I don't care particularly whether the woman is suited or not; I can fill her place at a few hours' notice. And now I must go and see how things are going. I have a good stage manager, but I have to do a lot of the work myself, for all that. And I must acknowledge that I do feel a little [Pg 40] nervous at letting an untrained amateur appear in the piece without a rehearsal. Come with me, and we'll see if everything is going smoothly."

Al followed the manager through the long passage way and out into a damp, dingy court, on the opposite side of which was a door bearing the inscription: "Stage Door. No Admittance."

Passing through the sacred portals, Mr. Wattles and Al stepped upon the stage.

Al had been "behind the scenes" before; the scene that met his eyes was not an entirely unfamiliar one, and he trod the boards with the nonchalant air of a veteran.

"Well, Sparkley, how does everything go?" asked the manager of an anxious-looking elderly man, whom the boy rightly guessed to be the stage manager.

"Badly enough," was the reply. "There's been a big row, and your society amateur refuses to appear."

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# CHAPTER VII.
## THE DEBUT.

Mr. Wattles sank into a convenient chair.

"Well," he said, with an air of stony resignation, "there's no use in fighting against fate. I give it up. We'll return the people their money and shut up the house."

"What's the matter?" asked Al.

"Why," replied Sparkley, "Miss Hollingsworth, who has been playing the part that Mrs. Anderson is billed for, has been here, and has had an interview with her successor, and got her so worked up that she absolutely refuses to appear."

"Why, I told the woman that she needn't come at all to-night!" cried Mr. Wattles.

"Well, she's here as large as life."

"Why did you let her in, Sparkley?"

"I couldn't very well refuse her admittance; she is a member of the company."

"That's so."

"Besides, I had no idea that she was going to raise a row. I think that Farley was at the bottom of the business; I saw him talking to her outside just before she came in."

"You did? That explains the whole thing. Well, I'm just going to let things take their course."

At this moment Mrs. Anderson came rushing toward them, evidently greatly excited. She was [Pg 42] closely followed by a young woman, quite as much agitated as herself.

Both women began talking at once, and it was two or three minutes before Mr. Wattles could make himself heard. When at last he succeeded in doing so, he said:

"Now, ladies, if you will speak one at a time, and talk slow, I will try to straighten things out. What is the trouble, Mrs. Anderson?"

"That woman," sobbed the society belle, indicating the actress, "has grossly insulted me. I cannot, I will not play."

"Have you forgotten your promise to me, Mrs. Anderson?" interposed Al.

"No, I have not, and I am very sorry that I cannot fulfill it. But it is impossible."

"I only told her," snapped Miss Hollingsworth, a fiery-looking, dark-haired, black-eyed woman, "that she was a rank amateur, and so she is. Why, it is an insult to give such a woman my part!"

"Yes, that's what she said," cried Mrs. Anderson, in a high-pitched voice. "I would never play the part unless she was discharged."

The manager's face lighted up.

"Will you play," he asked, "if I discharge her?"

"Yes."

"That settles it. Miss Hollingsworth, you are discharged."

"Wha-a-t?" screamed the actress.

"You heard what I said. You are given the usual two weeks' notice." [Pg 43]

"I am discharged, I, Olga Hollingsworth, on account of this woman?"

"No, you are discharged because these exhibitions of bad temper on your part have tired me out. And now, madam," turning to Mrs. Anderson and speaking with the utmost politeness, "will you kindly return to your dressing room and complete your preparations for your appearance? You will have to go on in less than fifteen minutes."

"I will do so, sir."

And with a withering glance at the actress, the mayor's wife swept away.

"You shan't forget this evening's work in a hurry, Mr. Gus Wattles!" hissed the enraged Miss Hollingsworth. "You'll rue the day when you made Dick Farley and me your enemies!"

"So Farley is at the bottom of all this, is he?" said the manager. "I thought so."

"Never mind whether he is or not," was the actress' reply. "I wish you good-evening, Wattles. I don't want your two weeks' notice. I wouldn't play in your company again for ten times the miserable salary you paid me. Find some one else to play the part to-morrow night or shut up the house."

With these words and a vindictive glance, the woman left the theater, slamming the stage door violently behind her.

Mr. Wattles drew a long breath of relief. [Pg 44]

"I'm glad to get rid of her," he said. "This isn't the first time she and I have had words. I'll have another woman here to play the part to-morrow night, or I'll cut it out altogether; it isn't of any importance, anyhow. And, I say, I believe that Mrs. Anderson has the making of an actress in her, after all. She's as good a kicker as if she had been in the business all her life. No danger of her suffering from stage fright; she has too good an opinion of herself. Well, I must go around to the front now. Come with me and see how things look."

The house was, as Al had predicted, packed to the doors; even standing room was at a premium. Such an audience had never been seen in the opera house before.

The souvenir spoons had proved a great success; everyone was extolling the liberality of the management.

"This is immense," chuckled Mr. Wattles, rubbing his hands. "Allston, you are a trump. I wish you could do this in every town we visit."

"Well, I'll do my best to repeat the success," smiled Al. "What can't be done in one way can in another."

"And you're the lad who can do it. But the curtain is going up. I hope Mrs. Anderson will be all right. She comes on in less than five minutes. Come up to the manager's box now; it's the only place in the house where we can get a seat."

The two elbowed their way through the crowd; and, not without some difficulty, reached the box in question. They had hardly taken their seats when Mrs. Anderson stepped upon the stage. Her [Pg 45] appearance was the signal for a perfect whirlwind of applause.

"Well," said Mr. Wattles, as the lady stood bowing and smiling, "she is a good-looker, anyway. She's as well made up as if she'd been in the profesh for years; and, by Jove! she's as cool as a veteran! What a reception! Irving himself couldn't ask for a better one."

In fact, it was nearly or quite three minutes before the débutante could go on with her part. By this time the stage was half filled with "floral tributes," one huge piece being from the board of aldermen. When the mayor, who was seated in an opposite box, saw this, his face, which had until then worn a rather gloomy expression, lighted up, and he began to manifest some signs of interest in the performance.

As Mr. Wattles had said, the part that had been assigned to Mrs. Anderson was one of very little importance. It would have been difficult to make a failure of it. The lady recited her lines well, and when she left the stage she was furiously applauded.

"That shows what the public appreciation of the drama amounts to," remarked Mr. Wattles, sarcastically, although he had applauded Mrs. Anderson as loudly as anyone. "You can't hear yourself think for the noise they make about this society woman; yet, on the same stage there is a little girl who has real talent. But they ignore her."

"You mean the young lady who plays the part of *Ethel Darlington*?" questioned Al.

"Yes, of course I do. I see that you, at least, know good acting when you see it; but here comes Mrs. Anderson again. Ah! that old fellow in the box over there is going to make a speech." [Pg 46]

Al recognized in the "old fellow" referred to one of Boomville's prominent citizens—a certain Maj. Duncan.

The major, who enjoyed nothing in life more than hearing himself talk in public or in private, had risen in his seat and was signaling for silence.

In a few moments the house was so still that the fall of the traditional pin would have startled the more nervous portion of the audience.

The major, standing at the edge of the box, delivered, in a sonorous voice, a fulsome speech of praise, addressed to Mrs. Anderson, ending by presenting her with a wreath of laurels.

The lady, not in the least embarrassed, made a brief reply, and was about to resume her part, when Maj. Duncan, who had remained standing, said:

"But this is not all. There is here to-night a young fellow townsman of ours of whom Boomville should be proud. I refer to the gentleman seated in the proscenium box on the other side."

And the orator fixed his eyes on Al's face.

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# CHAPTER VIII.

## A STARTLING SITUATION.

Everyone in the house stared at Al, and Mr. Wattles whispered in his ear:

"Why, he means you! What have you been up to? I tell you, this is a great night for Boomville."

Evidently Maj. Duncan expected some acknowledgment of his compliment from Al, for after a moment's silence he added:

"I repeat, I refer to the young gentleman yonder, Mr. Allen Allston."

"Get up and bow," whispered the manager, in our hero's ear.

Scarcely knowing what he was doing, Al obeyed.

The entire audience applauded, although there were not three persons among them who knew why they did it.

"Will the young gentleman kindly step upon the stage?" went on the major.

Without speaking, Mr. Wattles seized the boy by the arm, and fairly dragged him through a narrow door in the rear of the box.

"This is the easiest way of getting on the stage," he said. "I wonder what they have got on foot. They ought to have told us. In a case like this it is always the proper caper to have a witty impromptu speech ready, and they ought to have given you a chance to prepare one at your leisure—they really ought. But this is not New York. Now, then, my boy, step out on the stage. Don't you hear them shouting for you?" [Pg 48]

But Al held back.

"I don't understand all this," he said. "What do they want with me?"

"Go and find out."

"But——"

"Allston! Allston!" came from all parts of the theater.

"Go on!"

And Mr. Wattles fairly pushed his companion upon the stage.

It is not necessary to say that Al was greatly embarrassed as he confronted the sea of faces. His appearance was greeted with wild cheers, though the audience did not know what they were cheering about.

In a few moments silence was again restored through the efforts of Maj. Duncan, who then cleared his throat and began:

"It may not be known to many of you that we have a hero, a genuine hero, among us, but it is a fact. And that hero now stands blushingly upon the stage before us. Ladies and gentlemen, picture to yourselves this scene—a team of maddened horses rushing at a terrible rate of speed directly for a spot where a defenseless child has fallen on the highway. Apparently the little girl is doomed to a horrible death. The spectators stand spellbound—all save one, a youth. He rushes forward and, at the risk of his own life, saves the child from the fate that a moment before [Pg 49] seemed inevitable. That youth, ladies and gentlemen, was Allen Allston; the little girl he rescued was the child of our mayor."

The major's rather theatrical speech was here interrupted by frantic applause, much to the orator's gratification and Al's embarrassment.

When silence once more reigned the major went on:

"It is not necessary that I enlarge upon the heroism displayed by this noble youth; it is evident to all of you, and the performance has already, perhaps, been delayed too long. I will close by requesting the acceptance by Mr. Allston of this token of esteem and appreciation from Mayor Anderson, who has delegated to me the most agreeable duty of making the presentation speech. Take it, my young friend; and always wear it in remembrance of those whom you have placed under so heavy a debt of gratitude."

As he spoke Maj. Duncan extended a diamond ring to the boy.

Al was obliged to cross the stage to receive it. By this time he had partially regained his usual self-possession. He took the ring with a graceful bow, and attempted to speak.

But the effort proved a total failure. The words stuck in his throat; he could only give utterance to an inaudible murmur.

"Speech, speech!" cried a dozen or more persons, but Al was unable to gratify their wishes. In great confusion he retired to the comparative seclusion of the stage, where Mr. Wattles met him [Pg 50] and grasped his hand.

"I had no idea you were a hero," he said. "But why didn't you make a speech? Oh, I understand—stage fright. Well, never mind, you're the hero of the hour, anyway. Isn't that ring a sparkler! Just completes your outfit as advance agent; they always wear a diamond ring, you know. Well, this is a great night, and no mistake."

By this time the performance had been resumed. It was brought to a successful conclusion two hours later, Mrs. Anderson having been called before the curtain no less than ten times.

"I'm glad everything went off so well," said Mr. Wattles to Al, when the audience had dispersed. "I was a little afraid that fellow, Farley, would try to make some trouble for us. He's just about crazy enough from drink to do something desperate if the idea occurred to him. Look out for him, Allston."

"I'm not afraid of him," said Al.

"Nevertheless, be on your guard. Well, didn't everything go off in great shape? That presentation alone will be worth a good many dollars to the show. Accounts of it will be published all over the country."

"I wish they had given me the ring in private," said Al.

"You do? Well, I don't! You must get over some of that modesty of yours; you won't need it in your career as advance agent. Going now? Well, good-night. You'll be ready to start for the next town at noon to-morrow?"

"Yes, sir." [Pg 51]

"Good. Look out for Farley on your way home."

"I'm not worrying about him," laughed Al. "I guess you're more afraid of him than I am, sir. Good-night."

Al lived a little way out of the town. To get home it was necessary for him to ride for half an hour in a horse car, and then to walk some distance along a lonely country road.

Singular to say, the subject that engrossed his thoughts during the ride was not the events of the day, not the new career that he was about to begin. One face was constantly before his mental vision, the face of the beautiful young girl—Miss Gladys March, the bills called her—who had played the part of *Ethel Darlington*.

Why did her face haunt him so persistently? he asked himself. She was a complete stranger to him, yet, somehow, he felt as if he had known her all his life.

His thoughts were still on her when he left the car and began his lonely walk.

So absorbed was he in meditation that he did not notice that from the moment he alighted from the car he was followed at a short distance by a man whose face was concealed by a high coat collar and a slouch hat.

The full moon was shining brightly, but Al's pursuer lurked in the shadows of the trees and shrubbery that lined the road on either side.

For half an hour this pursuit of the boy continued; then the man gave a shrill whistle.

As Al turned, three masked men sprang from a clump of bushes on his left and seized him. Before he could cry out a gag was thrust into his mouth. A few moments later he was bound hand and foot. [Pg 52]

Then one of his assailants lifted him in his arms and bore him up a side road, near which the assault had been committed. A covered wagon stood in waiting here. Al was placed in it; then his captors and the man who had followed him from the car, entered, and the vehicle was driven rapidly away.

At the expiration of, perhaps, half an hour the wagon was brought to a standstill, and Al was lifted out.

It was a strange sight that met his gaze.

Half a dozen masked men were assembled under a tree, over one of the boughs of which was flung a stout rope.

One of the strange party stepped forward and removed the gag from the boy's mouth, saying:

"If you have any last remarks to make, make 'em now, and be quick about it. We don't propose to fool away any time on this job."

"What does all this mean?" gasped Al. "What are you going to do?"

"We're going to string you up in just about two minutes at the outside," was the reply; "so if you have anything to say you'd better hurry."

[Pg 53]

# CHAPTER IX.
## A CLOSE CALL.

"You are going to murder me?" the boy cried.

"Well, we don't put it just that way," was the cool reply of the man who had spoken before.

"How do you put it, then?"

"We are going to execute you. In cases like yours the law is a little too slow for us, so we have constituted ourselves judge, jury, executioners and all the rest of it. Young fellow, you've stolen your last horse."

The truth flashed upon Al.

For several weeks residents of the neighborhood of Boomville—principally farmers—had been the victims of a clever horse thief, who had, since he began operations, stolen a number of valuable animals. The authorities seemed to be powerless in the matter, although they professed to be using every possible means to bring the thief to justice. Only one clew had been gained; one of the stolen horses had been sold to a farmer in a village about fifty miles distant by a youth of about sixteen, who had given a plausible reason to the simple-minded purchaser for having the animal in his possession. The farmer had been able to give a quite minute description of the boy. Al had read that description, and now remembered, with a sinking of the heart, that it would apply to him fully as well as to the thief for whom he was taken. [Pg 54]

"See here," he exclaimed, impetuously, "you are making a terrible mistake! I am not the person you think me to be."

"That's all right," was the sarcastic response of the spokesman of the crowd. "I told you we were not going to waste any words on you, and we are not."

"String him up!" shouted another of the party. "Get the job done with! We're taking big chances in delaying the thing."

"That's right!"

"H'ist the derned hoss thief, then!"

"We've had enough chin music; let's get to work."

These were a few of the comments of the would-be executioners.

One man now stepped to the front. It was he who had followed Al from the town. He had now donned a mask like the rest of the party.

"I'll do the job," he said. "Will you leave it to me, gents?"

Al started. Where had he heard that voice? Before any reply could be made he said, in a loud, clear voice:

"Gentlemen, I am innocent of this crime. My name is Allen Allston. I live in Boomville. Hundreds of people there know me, and can tell you what my reputation is. Why, I should not have the slightest trouble in proving an alibi. If you murder me, you will all bitterly regret it some day. You do not want to commit a murder; you want to do what you think an act of justice. You are making an awful mistake; give me a chance, and I will prove it." [Pg 55]

These words had a visible effect upon the desperate men. They began to converse together in a low tone—all but the man who had followed Al; he stood aloof from the rest.

"See here," he presently said, in a voice that Al noticed trembled slightly, "if you gents have any more time to fool away here I haven't. I don't propose to get into any trouble through this thing. I have tried to do you a service, but you don't seem to appreciate it."

"We don't want to make any mistake," said the spokesman.

"But you're not making any mistake. Don't I tell you I know the boy, that he is the same one that sold me the horse last week?"

Here Al interposed.

"Do you claim," he asked, "that you are the farmer to whom the horse thief sold one of the stolen animals last week?"

"I do; and I recognize you as the person. It's no use, my fine fellow, the jig's up. I've been shadowing you for some time, and I've got you down fine."

Al turned to the group of men, who had been listening in silence to the brief dialogue.

"Gentlemen," he said, "do any of you know the farmer who bought the horse from the thief? Could any one of you swear to his identity?"

The spokesman replied, this time using a gentler tone than before. [Pg 56]

"No, my lad," he said, "not one of us ever saw the man until to-night."

"You don't see him now," said Al. "I do not believe that this is the man at all. He is some enemy of mine, who has imposed upon you for his own personal ends."

"Bah!" interrupted the subject of discussion, "are we to stand here all night listening to this sort of stuff? The young villain is only trying to gain time. Of course, if he will steal, he will lie."

"All I ask is a fair trial," said Al, "but I see I cannot get that here. However, gentlemen, if you must kill some one, don't kill the wrong man. It looks to me a good deal as if this fellow were the real thief, and that he was trying to throw dust in your eyes. None of you ever saw him before, you say. Now, perhaps I have seen him. Let me see his face; it may be that I can identify him."

"That's fair enough."

"That's all right."

"Off with your mask, stranger, and let the boy see your face."

It was evident that the sentiment of the crowd was turning in Al's favor.

"Why should I show him my face?" said the boy's accuser. "All the rest of you are masked."

"We'll take off our masks if you take off yours," said the spokesman. "Eh, boys?"

"Ay! ay!" came from the others.

Still the stranger hesitated. [Pg 57]

"It's risky for all of us," he said. "Have done with this nonsense. If you are going to do away with the thief, get to work; if you're not, why, let him go. We can't stand here all night chinning."

"Off with your mask!" said the leader of the crowd, sternly.

"All right," said the fellow, desperately; "I agree. Off with yours, then, all of you."

Several of the crowd removed their masks. The stranger raised his hand, as if to take his off, but instead of doing so, he turned suddenly and made a rush for a thick growth of wood near which the scene we have just described had been enacted. In a few moments—before his companions could recover from their astonishment—he had disappeared.

"After him, Hammond and Thompson, and you, Porter!" shouted the leader. "Don't let him get away from you."

Then turning to Al, he added:

"Boy, I believe we have made a mistake. That fellow is the real thief."

"I don't know about that," said our hero, "but I do know I'm not."

"If he isn't the thief, what motive could he have had in accusing an innocent person?"

"Perhaps it is some one who has a grudge against me."

"It must be an awful grudge to induce him to lay such a plot as that against you. Do you suspect anyone?" [Pg 58]

"I'd rather not mention any names," said Al.

Here an old farmer, one of the three or four who had removed their masks, stepped forward.

"Don't let this here boy fule yer," he said. "I b'lieve he's one o' the gang. Mark my word, it'll turn aout so."

"You think so, do you, Mr. Chadwick?" said Al, quietly, looking the old man full in the face.

"Yeou know me, dew yeou?"

"Yes, and you ought to know me. Have you forgotten Allen Allston?"

The farmer gasped for breath.

"I'll be derned ef it ain't Jack Allston's boy!" he exclaimed. "Why, o' course I know yeou."

"I told you my name before."

"I wuz so 'xcited that I didn't take notice. I wuz so sure, yeou see, thet we hed the right one. Boys"—turning to the others—"I'll swear thet this here lad don't know no more 'baout who stole them hosses than we do. I know all his folks, an' there ain't a dishonest hair in the heads o' enny o' them. I'd ha' know'd him at fust, but I ain't seen him fer a year or more, an' he's grow'd. An' besides, my eyesight ain't what it used ter be. Boys, we've hed a narrer escape from committin' a murder." The men now crowded round Al and shook his hands, and apologized for their rough treatment of him.

While they were thus engaged the three who had gone in pursuit of Al's accuser returned.

"Ain't you got him?" cried Farmer Chadwick. [Pg 59]

"No, he gave us the slip. The moon has gone under a cloud, and in the darkness he got away. But we'll catch him yet."

Then the man turned to Al.

"Boy," he queried, "have you any suspicion as to who the fellow is?"

Our hero hesitated, then he replied:

"Yes, I have."

"Who do you think he is?" cried two or three of the men together.

"I would rather not say," replied the boy.

"Why?"

"Because I might be wronging an innocent man."

"But we want to find the thief."

"I cannot help you do that. If the man is the one I think he may be, he did not steal the horses."

"Why did he accuse you, then?" demanded one of the party.

"Merely to satisfy a private grudge."

"Then he ought to be found and punished; so why do you try to shield him?"

"Because it is my private affair," replied Al, quietly. "And because I do not like your way of administering what you call justice. See how near you came to making a mistake to-night. But how did you run across the fellow who said I was the thief?"

"I'll tell you," replied the spokesman, rather sheepishly. "A few of us were in a saloon in Boomville the early part of the evening. We had indulged in a few drinks, and we must have talked a little louder than we realized, for this fellow overheard us telling how we were going to start a search for the horse thief to-night and string him up if we found him. He came and told us that he could lead us to him. Well, he talked as if he knew what he was saying, and—— Well, you know the rest." [Pg 60]

"So," said Al, "you took the word of a barroom loafer, or worse, on a matter of so much importance as that."

"We were excited and had drunk a little too much."

"Well, it seems to me that you had better leave the future management of the business to the proper authorities," suggested Al.

"Maybe you're right," admitted the man he addressed. "Well, you won't say anything about this night's affair to anyone?"

"I shall say nothing that can harm you. The thing shall not be made public through me."

"We'll take your word for that. And now, get into the wagon, and you shall be driven home."

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# CHAPTER X.

## AN INTERVIEW WITH THE MAYOR.

Al's ride home after his queer adventure was an uneventful one. He was glad enough to reach the solitude of his own room. Although his body was tired, his mind seemed abnormally active, and for at least two hours he lay tossing sleeplessly on his bed, reviewing not only the exciting events of the day, but much of his past life.

We have thus far said nothing of our hero's past, nor shall we now; we will let him tell the story himself, as he did the next morning when he visited the mayor's office.

Ten o'clock was the time Mr. Anderson had appointed for their interview, but Al was off hand a little before that hour. Mr. Wattles had told him that he must leave Boomville for the next town at noon, and he knew he had no time to waste.

The mayor received him cordially.

"I'm delighted to see you, my dear young friend," was his greeting, as he grasped the boy's hand. "We had a grand success last night, did we not? And it was all due to your efforts. If it had not been for your persistency Mrs. Anderson would not have appeared."

"Then you are not sorry that she played, sir?" questioned Al, somewhat surprised at the mayor's enthusiasm.

"Sorry? Not a bit of it! Why, it was one of the grandest triumphs in the history of the American stage." [Pg 62]

Al had his own opinion on that point, but he did not express it; he only said:

"The audience seemed to be very much pleased with Mrs. Anderson's work."

"Pleased! Of course they were pleased. How could they help it? As for myself, I was as much delighted as I was surprised. I have given my consent to Mrs. Anderson's second appearance to-night."

"Indeed, sir?"

"Yes. Mr. Wattles came to me and, in the most respectful manner, asked the favor. You see, the woman who has been playing the part was so angered by my wife's success that she refused to appear. I could do nothing but yield, especially as Mr. Wattles assures me that there was a widespread feeling of disappointment on the part of those who were unable to gain admission last night. Mr. Wattles, my lad, considers Mrs. Anderson one of the greatest geniuses on the American stage; he told me so this morning."

Al could not help thinking that the "foxy" manager was overdoing the thing a little; but he did not express any opinion. In fact, Mr. Anderson did not give him a chance to do so, for he went on as soon as he had caught his breath:

"But never mind about all that now. Some day you will doubtless remember with pride that you assisted at the début of Mrs. Anderson; but let us now talk of yourself." [Pg 63]

"We might find a more interesting subject, sir," suggested Al.

"It is like your modesty to say so, but I cannot agree with you. Now, my lad, I have taken a great interest in you, and I am going to do what I can to help you along in the world. What do you most need now, Mr. Allston?"

"Good health, sir," laughed Al; "or, rather, a continuance of it. I have about everything else I want."

"Well, I am about to offer you something that you haven't got."

"What is that, sir?"

"A position under the city government, a position with very little work and a good salary. It has never been held by anyone as young as you before, but I haven't the slightest doubt that you will be able to discharge its duties satisfactorily. In fact, it is almost a sinecure."

"You are very kind, sir," said Al, as the mayor paused, "but I cannot accept the position."

"Eh? You cannot? Why not?"

"For two reasons, sir."

"What are they?"

"One is that the position you are kind enough to offer to me is not the kind I am looking for. I am not looking for an easy berth. I want a place where there will be plenty to do."

The mayor stared at the boy incredulously.

"Well," he said, "you are an original. And what is your other reason for refusing?" [Pg 64]

"It is that I have a good place now, sir."

"Ah, indeed? What is it?"

"Mr. Wattles has engaged me as advance agent for his company."

Mr. Anderson's face clouded.

"And you would rather travel with a show than have an easy, respectable position here at home?"

"I would, sir."

"Well, that is a matter of taste. I should prefer the berth I have just offered you."

"I hope you are not offended, Mr. Anderson?" said Al, a little diffidently.

"Offended! No, no, my boy; but I think you are making a mistake."

"The end will show, sir."

"Yes, yes, the end will show. Well, I can't help feeling an interest in you, not only because you rescued my child, but because you seem to me to be a rather unusual lad. Do you mind answering me a few questions? Believe me, I shall not ask them out of mere idle curiosity."

"Ask as many as you like, sir."

"Do you live in Boomville?"

"A little way out of the town, sir."

"Are your parents living?"

"Only my mother."

"And your father—has he been dead long?"

"He died before I was born, sir." [Pg 65]

"Can it be that your father was John Allston?"

"That was his name, sir."

"Why, good gracious!" exclaimed the mayor, with a new interest, "I knew him. It was years ago, and we were never intimate, but I had a speaking acquaintance with him. Let me see, was there not something peculiar about the manner of his death? I remember hearing something said about it at the time, but it was so long ago that I cannot remember just what it was."

"People said, sir," replied Al, "and I guess they were right, that my father died of a broken heart."

"I remember now!" interrupted Mr. Anderson. "His child, your sister, was stolen. Her loss was such a blow to him that he only survived the shock a few months."

"Yes, sir; that is true."

"It is a sad story. Was your sister never found?"

"No, sir."

"Nor any clew to the mystery gained?"

"Nothing of any importance, sir. It was suspected that her nurse had something to do with the affair, and she was shadowed for a long time. But nothing was ever learned."

"I can sympathize with your poor father and mother, my boy," said the mayor, with more emotion than Al had seen him manifest before. "I can understand his feelings. But the depth of a mother's love is something we of the grosser sex cannot ever quite comprehend. I suppose your mother has never entirely recovered from the blow." [Pg 66]

"She never has, Mr. Anderson; and it is in the hope that I may help her to do so that I have taken this engagement with Mr. Wattles' company."

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# CHAPTER XI.
## IN PERIL.

The mayor stared at Al.

"You have taken this engagement for your mother's sake?" he said. "I don't understand."

"I didn't say that," the boy replied. "I took it because I believed the work was just the sort I could do well. At any rate, it was just the sort I wanted to do. But I also thought that it might give me a good chance to look for my sister. What can I ever do if I stay here in Boomville? Nothing. I will go out into the world; and who knows——"

He paused, perhaps a little offended, for the mayor was smiling.

"I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, my boy," Mr. Anderson said, straightening out his features, "but your hopefulness reminds me of my own when I started out in life. Alas! those dreams!"

"But you succeeded, sir."

"Yes, I succeeded, but in a far different line from that I marked out for myself. But"—in a changed tone—"it is later than I thought, and I must reluctantly say good-by. I am sorry you will not take the position I have offered you; but I cannot say that I respect you less for having refused it. When do you leave town?"

"At noon."

"And it is nearly eleven now. Well, my boy, let me hear from you once in a while; and be sure that you will always have a friend in John Anderson." [Pg 68]

"Thank you, sir. Good-morning."

And Al backed toward the door.

"Wait a moment," the mayor cried, suddenly producing a sealed envelope from his pocket. "I want you to take this. Open it at your leisure. I trust the contents will prove acceptable to you. And now, good-day, good-day."

Al could not help thinking that the manner in which his companion almost shoved him out of the room was due to a fear that he would open the envelope before he got out. But he put it in his pocket, saying:

"I am very much obliged to you for your kindness to me, sir."

"The obligation is on the other side, Mr. Allston," was the reply. "But good-day—and good luck to you."

It was after eleven when Al reached Mr. Wattles' hotel.

"I was beginning to be a little nervous about you," said the manager. "But I said to myself: 'I don't believe he is one of the kind that go back on an agreement.'"

"And you were right, Mr. Wattles."

"You know you must leave by the noon train."

"I am all ready, sir."

"Our next stand, as you are aware, is Rockton. It has the reputation of being a bad show town, and if you can create a *furore* there you will do well."

"I'll try, sir."

"There is one morning paper there; do what you can with it." [Pg 69]

"I will. If you could only persuade Mrs. Anderson to go there! She was born in Rockton, and the whole population would turn out to see her."

"I thought of that, and tried it. But the mayor wouldn't hear of it. But he is going to let his wife appear here again to-night, all the same."

"So I have heard."

"Eh? Are the bills out already?"

"I guess not. I have just come from the mayor's office."

"Ah! indeed? Well, that's right; it's policy to keep in with such people."

Al's face flushed.

"I didn't go there as a matter of policy," he said, "but only because I promised the mayor yesterday that I would."

"Well, he ought to do something handsome for you in return for the great service you did him."

"I think he did quite enough in giving me that ring last night. My mother says it must be worth at least five hundred dollars, and she knows something about such things."

"It is worth more than that. But Anderson ought to do more for you. Why doesn't he get you a job under the city with a fat salary and nothing to do?"

"That's just what he offered me this morning," laughed Al.

The manager's jaw fell. [Pg 70]

"Then I shall lose you before long, of course?"

"Not on account of that political job."

"Eh?"

"I refused it."

"You did?"

"Of course. I want a job where there is something to do."

"Well, you've got it with me," said Mr. Wattles, evidently gratified. "But he might have given you a check."

"Maybe he did," said Al, reminded of the envelope that the mayor had handed him just before he left the office.

He took it from his pocket, tore it open and drew from it a long, narrow strip of paper.

The manager, who was looking over the boy's shoulder, exclaimed:

"Well, he has done the handsome thing, and no mistake."

The check was for five thousand dollars.

"I won't take it!" cried Al.

"Yes, you will take it!" said Mr. Wattles, very emphatically. "To return it would be to offend him very deeply."

"But——"

"But you must be starting for the train. Come, I'll walk to the depot with you. I have a number of points to give you."

When they parted, the manager was better pleased than ever with Al. His "points" did not seem to be needed by the boy; a knowledge of and adaptability to the business seemed to have been born in him. [Pg 71]

"You're all right," said Mr. Wattles, slapping his new advance agent on the shoulder just before they parted. "I consider a big house in Rockton a dead-sure thing."

Al was not quite so confident, however. In Boomville circumstances had favored him, but he could not hope for the same luck in Rockton; there he would have to prove his fitness to be the advance agent of the New York Comedy Company by tact and hard work.

In conversation with a gentleman on the train, he learned a fact of which Mr. Wattles had not informed him—that Barnum's circus was at Rockton.

"There won't be a corporal's guard at your show," said his informant, unsympathetically. "Everybody for miles around has been saving up to go to the circus. Other shows will be simply not in it."

As if to add to Al's annoyance, the circus parade was going on when he reached Rockton; at any other time he would have stopped and looked at it, but he was not in the mood now.

The sidewalks near the depot were crowded with eager sightseers. Al forced his way through their ranks, and attempted to cross the street, heedless of the warning cries of those who saw him.

He had reached the middle of the street when he attracted the attention of one of the elephants, an animal with a national reputation for viciousness. The beast quickened its pace, reached the boy, seized him in its trunk and raised him high in the air, with the evident intention of dashing him to the pavement. [Pg 72]

A cry of horror rose from the crowd. Apparently Al was doomed to a frightful death.

# CHAPTER XII.
## INTERVIEWED.

[Pg 73]

The elephant that had seized Al was, as we have said, well known for his viciousness. He had killed two keepers and injured half a score of persons. One of his escapades had occurred quite recently, and was fresh in the minds of most of the witnesses of his attack on the boy.

There was an almost simultaneous cry from the onlookers, followed by a dead silence. The animal's small eyes twinkled viciously. It was evident enough that in crossing his path Al had excited his ire, and that it was his intention to revenge himself in a characteristic manner.

Suddenly a sharp cry broke the silence. It was the voice of the elephant's keeper, who had been lagging a little behind, but who now came rushing up, shouting a command to his charge in a language unintelligible to most of his hearers. To all of them, perhaps, except the animal; it was plain enough that he understood it.

His manner changed. He held his captive poised in the air a moment, then dropped him.

Al fell heavily to the pavement directly under the feet of the beast. A new plan of revenge evidently suggested itself to the elephant. He was about to plant one of his huge feet on the boy's chest when the keeper again gave utterance to the same cry of command.

The warning had its effect; the animal stepped over his intended victim, not touching him.

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In another moment Al had sprung out of harm's way.

It was an exciting scene. Men were shouting, children crying and women sobbing.

One nervous, hysterical lady, whom the boy had never seen before in his life, clasped him tightly in her arms, and wept convulsively on his shoulder.

Al was, perhaps, the coolest person in the crowd. Disengaging himself from the embrace of his new-found friend, he said:

"There's nothing to cry about, madam; I'm all right."

"You're sure you're not hurt?" sobbed the lady, scarcely knowing what she was saying.

"Not in the least; not so much as scratched."

"You've had a mighty narrow escape, all the same, young man," said the elephant's keeper—the procession had come to a standstill, and many of the employees had crowded around the boy. "This ought to be a lesson to you not to try to cross a circus parade again."

"It will be," said Al, with a smile. "At any rate, I shall be careful not to get too near the elephants."

Just then a nervous, bustling little man with a notebook in his hand forced his way through the crowd to where Al was standing.

"I represent the Rockton *Daily Banner*," he announced. "Please give me your name, sir."

"Certainly," replied the boy, with an eye to business. "I am the advance agent of Wattles' New York Comedy Company, which plays here to-morrow night, appearing in——"

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"That's all right," the reporter interrupted. "I know what it appears in. But your name, please."

"It is Allen Allston."

"What! not the youth who so heroically saved the life of the child of Mayor Anderson, of Boomville? Not the same who was presented with the ring at the opera house last night?"

By this time the circus parade had been resumed; but, in the immediate vicinity of the scene of the adventure we have recorded, it excited less interest than the interview between Al and the reporter.

The boy colored and hesitated.

"Yes," went on the *Banner* man, "you must be the same. Why, there were two columns about you in the paper this morning. You seem born for adventure. You being the hero of the hour, your escape of this morning will excite great interest. I can make at least a column of it. Here, Mr. Allston, come with me. We must get out of this crowd; then we can have a talk."

Al resigned himself to the inevitable, and forced his way through the crowd, arm in arm with the reporter.

While he shrank from having his personal affairs made public, he also had the interests of his employer at heart; he saw that the exciting incident of the morning might be used as an advertisement for the show, and he decided to sacrifice his feelings and let the ambitious and energetic reporter have his own way.

"We'll step in here," said the *Banner* man, leading the way into the lobby of a hotel. "Really, it is

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lucky for you that this thing happened; it can't fail to boom your show. And it needs booming, too, let me tell you, for the circus will be here to-morrow night, and is pretty sure to gather in about all the surplus cash that will be left in the neighborhood after to-day's performances."

"Still," said Al, "my company is a strong attraction."

"Under ordinary circumstances, yes; but not when the circus is in town. Still, we'll see what can be done. I've heard a good deal about you during the last twenty-four hours, and, honestly, I'd like to help you. You give me all the most startling facts in your career, and I'll write 'em up in good style."

"But," smiled Al, "there has never been anything startling in my career."

"Eh?" gasped the reporter. "What did you say?"

Al repeated the statement.

"An advance agent without a startling career!" said the *Banner* man. "Why, such a thing was never heard of before. As a rule we have to cut out nine-tenths of the blood-curdling incidents in advance agents' careers, and even then what is left sounds like an Arabian Nights story."

Al laughed.

"Well," he said, "then I am a remarkable exception. Isn't that a startling fact?"

"That may help things out a little."

"Besides, it is not myself that I want to boom, but the New York Comedy Company." [Pg 77]

"Well, you are a *rara avis*! But by booming yourself you may at the same time boom the show. Now, tell me all about yourself first. You see, the public is more interested about you personally than about Mr. Wattles' company. But I'll work in a good notice for the show, too. Now, then, please tell me where you were born, when—and all the rest of it."

Within ten minutes the reporter was in possession of most of the facts of Al's "career"; and, as the boy had said, there was nothing very startling in the story. But when the *Banner* man had wormed the fact out of the lad that his sister had been lost or stolen in infancy, he exclaimed:

"Why, that's just what I want. A romance in your life! Nothing could be better. A long-lost sister! That will show up in great shape in the heading."

"But," interrupted Al, coloring, "I don't want anything said about it. Please omit any reference to my family."

"Well," said the reporter, "just as you say; but it is easy to see that you have not been an advance agent very long. Why, my dear boy, the article which I am going to write will be copied all over the country, and might be the means of restoring your sister to you. But there, there"—as Al was about to speak—"I'll consider your wishes in the matter, and if I say anything about your sister it will only be a passing reference, couched in the most delicate terms. And now, then, what about the company? How many thousand dollars' worth of diamonds has the leading lady lost during [Pg 78] the last week? Which of the men of the company is engaged to be married to one of Gould's daughters? Don't be bashful; tell me all you have to tell, and I'll use all of the stuff I can. You've given me an A1 interview, and I'm glad to have a chance to do you a good turn."

Al had a few alleged facts about certain members of the New York Comedy Company, and he proceeded to retail them to his companion, who made notes of them.

"They're rather chestnutty," he said, as he returned his notebook to his pocket, "but I'll fix them up in as good shape as I can, and they may help you out a little. However, you mustn't expect a big house to-morrow night, for you won't have it."

With this cheering assurance the *Banner* scribe took his leave.

It had occurred to Al, too, that the notices which had been furnished him by Mr. Wattles were somewhat "chestnutty."

"Never mind," he said to himself, "somehow or other I'll fix things so that we'll have a big house. But, judging from the way I have begun, my first engagement as advance agent is not going to be much of a 'snap.'"

Al was busy during the entire day seeing that the paper—that is, the posters, window hangers, etc.—of the company was displayed to the best advantage.

This work had been done after a fashion some days before by the local manager, but the way in which the duty had been performed did not suit the young advance agent, and he kept men [Pg 79] "hustling" all day.

"What's the use?" said the manager of the theater, with a weary smile. "It's sure to be a losing engagement, anyhow."

"Maybe not," returned Al. "You'd better get the 'standing-room-only' sign dusted off, in case we need it."

"Rats!" was the response. "Young man, when you know this business and this town as well as I

do, you'll sing a different tune. We shall have about two hundred people in the house to-morrow night—maybe not quite so many."

And he exhibited the advance sheet, which Al examined with a sinking heart. Only half a dozen seats had been sold for the performance.

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# CHAPTER XIII.
## A STROKE OF LUCK.

"Something has got to be done," said the young advance agent.

"Everything possible has been done," returned the manager, pettishly. "The amount of the thing is that we have struck an unlucky night, and there's no help for it."

"Maybe there is," said Al, quietly. "I mean to have a big house to-morrow night somehow or other."

The manager laughed sarcastically.

"I've heard beginners like you talk before," he said. "You think you are going to set the river on fire, but the river is not inflammable. I admire your nerve. I've heard how you drummed up business in Boomville, and you did well. But you can't do that sort of thing all the time. My friend, Wattles, wrote and told me that you would work things so that the house would be full when his company played, but he made a mistake that time."

"Did Mr. Wattles say that?" cried Al.

"He did; and I was surprised at it, for Wattles is not usually a very sanguine man."

"If he said it, I'll do it," announced the boy.

Again his companion laughed.

"There's nothing like youthful enthusiasm," he said, "and I acknowledge that it cuts lots of ice at times—but not every time. You might as well try to square the circle as to get a crowd here to-morrow evening. It can't be done." [Pg 81]

"We'll see," responded Al, with the most confident air he could assume.

The task before him was a hard one, apparently an impossible one, but he resolved that he would try to accomplish it.

"Sail ahead, and do it if you can," said the manager, with something very much like a sneer. "I shall watch your methods with interest."

"It's a pity," said Al, "that you have only one morning paper here. Now if——"

"Oh," interrupted his companion, yawning, "we'll have another to-morrow morning."

"How is that?"

"A young dude named Marcus, with more money than brains—and not very much of either, by the way—is to issue the first number of a new daily to-morrow morning. He is going to call it the *Bugle*, I believe."

"It being the first issue," suggested Al, "it is likely to have a good sale. Wouldn't it be a good scheme to spend a little extra in advertising in it?"

"My lad," said the manager, wearily, "your ideas are primitive in the extreme. I have given them my usual size ad., and even if I wanted any more space—which I don't—I couldn't get it, for the paper is about all made up now. Oh, we can't do anything against the circus, and that settles that matter."

It did not settle the matter with Al, however. He returned to his hotel, and spent what was left of the afternoon in trying to devise some plan to arouse public interest in the performance of the New York Comedy Company. [Pg 82]

He worked at the problem until his head ached, but the harder he thought the farther he seemed to be from a solution.

In the evening he went down to the restaurant connected with the hotel, quite discouraged.

There was no one in the room when he entered; but a few minutes later two men, both of them evidently very much excited, came in and seated themselves near him.

After a glance at the boy and a hurried order to the waiter, they resumed a conversation in which they had been engaged when they entered.

Al could not help overhearing nearly every word they said, for in their excitement they spoke louder than they thought.

"I tell you, Marcus," he heard one of the men say, "it's a bad knockout."

Marcus! Al remembered that this was the name of the proprietor of the new paper. He was, as the manager had said, a rather dudish-looking young fellow, but his face was by no means indicative of a lack of brains.

"The worst of it is," added Mr. Marcus, "that the *Banner* people will have the grand laugh on us. They have been poking fun at the 'amateur daily,' as they call it, ever since the *Bugle* was announced; now they will go for us."

Al was now interested; for the time he forgot his own worries. What could the trouble be in the office of the new paper? [Pg 83]

"They'll have a good chance," said Mr. Marcus' friend. "Really, my dear sir, I can't see how you could have made such a break. The idea of accepting a full-page ad. for 'Dr. Gurgles' Metallic Liver Pads,' only to find that there is no such thing on the market, and that you have been made the victim of a practical joker! I wish I had had charge of the business end of the thing, this would not have happened."

"I dare say not, but don't reproach me, for I'm too much broken up to stand it. The question is, how are we going to fill up that page? I've been boasting, right and left, about the phenomenal amount of bona-fide ads. the first number of the *Bugle* would contain, and now we are a full page short. And I've told a number of people that we were to have a page ad. from a well-known concern—something the *Banner* never had."

"Have you told anyone what the concern was?"

"No."

"Then perhaps you could get some firm in town to take the page."

"I'd let 'em have it at any price. But, no, it wouldn't do; I should have to own up how I had been victimized. Besides, it's too late now, anyhow. Why, nearly the whole paper is in type, and one side is printed."

"Well, what are you going to do with that page?"

"I give it up."

Al rose from his seat and approached the table where the two gentlemen were seated. [Pg 84]

"Perhaps I can help out, sir," he said.

Mr. Marcus started from his chair, his face flushed with anger.

"You've been listening, boy!" he exclaimed.

"I have; I couldn't very well help it, for you spoke in a loud tone."

"That's so, Marcus," added the other gentleman. "A public restaurant is not just the place to talk over such a matter."

"Well," said Marcus, glaring at Al, "I suppose you mean to go and tell everyone in town what you have heard?"

"I don't know anyone in town, and if I did I shouldn't repeat a word. As I just said, I think I can help you out."

"You! How?"

"You said you'd let that page go at any price?"

"I did."

"Perhaps I will take it. I couldn't afford to do anything like regular rates, but perhaps by helping you out I can get a lot of advertising almost free. I tell you frankly that is my object, and I give you my word that no one shall know anything about the transaction."

Mr. Marcus and his companion stared at Al in amazement.

"Well," said the former, "you are a queer youngster. Who the mischief are you—another practical joker?"

"No. I am Allen Allston, advance agent of Wattles' New York Comedy Company, which plays here to-morrow night." [Pg 85]

"A lad like you occupying a position like that?" exclaimed Mr. Marcus.

"Just so, sir. Now, what will you let us have that page for?"

"Perhaps your employer would repudiate the bill."

"I'll pay it myself, right here and now."

"I'll take you up. You can have the page for one hundred dollars. When can I have the copy?"

"Not at all at that price," replied Al, coolly. "The page wouldn't be worth that much to us. I'll give you fifty dollars, cash now, and the copy in an hour or less."

After a moment's hesitation, the proprietor of the *Bugle* said:

"Done! Give me the fifty dollars, and I'll give you a receipt for four hundred. But mind, mum's the word about this deal."

"You may depend upon me, sir."

"But," asked Mr. Marcus, "how are you going to have a full page of copy ready in an hour?"

"I'll get it ready," replied Al. "Your foreman will have it on time."

He handed the publisher the fifty dollars, and received a receipt for four hundred.

"Well," said Mr. Marcus, "you have a head for business, and no mistake."

"I hope so," said Al, modestly; "but this transaction does not prove it."

"I think it does." [Pg 86]

"My overhearing your conversation was only blind luck."

"Yes; but many a man would not have been smart and quick enough to take advantage of it. The successful business man is he who seizes upon the lucky accidents that others pass by, and turns them to his own advantage. You'll get along, my boy."

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# CHAPTER XIV.
## AL'S AD.

Mr. Marcus' words haunted Al for some time after their parting.

"I don't know but there is something in that," the boy said to himself: "I'll look out for the lucky accidents after this."

But the full-page advertisement had to be prepared in less than an hour, and Al had to turn his attention to its preparation.

When he went to his room he had not the slightest idea what sort of an advertisement he was going to write; he only knew that it must be something taking and brief.

"Brevity is the soul of wit, anyhow," he reflected, "so I don't believe I shall make any mistake on that point. But what shall I say in the ad.? I wonder if I haven't bitten off a little more than I can chew?"

In half an hour he had the advertisement ready, and a few minutes later he presented himself with it at the office of the *Bugle*.

Here everything was in confusion, but he found the foreman of the composing room ready and waiting for him.

"Have you got your copy all ready?" asked the man, nervously. "There is no time to spare."

"Here it is," said Al, producing a slip of paper from his vest pocket.

"I thought you were to have a full page?" said the foreman. [Pg 88]

"So I am, according to contract," smiled the boy.

"But there are only half a dozen lines here."

"That's all."

"Oh, you want a display ad.?"

"No—at least not the kind you mean. I want those few lines repeated over and over again until the entire space contracted for is filled."

"You want it printed solid?" gasped the foreman.

"That's it."

"But I could give you a much more attractive ad. We can get up a full-page display ad. that would be simply out of sight."

"I don't doubt it, but I want another kind."

"All right," said the foreman, with a pitying sigh; "you pay your money and you take your choice."

"That's the idea."

The foreman carefully perused the advertisement. This is what he read:

"See the New York Comedy Company, Augustus Wattles, Manager.

"See this great company in 'Loved and Lost.'

"See the real locomotive, under a full head of steam.

"See the real steam yacht.

"See all this.

"But——

"Please don't look at the queer old man in the third row of the orchestra."

The foreman stared at Al as if he thought him an escaped lunatic. [Pg 89]

"That's a strange ad.," he said.

"Is it?" laughed the boy.

"I never saw anything like it before."

"Well?"

"Well, do you want it to go in just as you have written it?"

"I do."

"Without any attempt at display?"

"Without the slightest attempt at display."

"That goes, then. Good-night; I must get the men at work on this at once."

"I've done all this on my own responsibility," reflected Al, as he left the place. "If it turns out a fizzle, Mr. Wattles won't have so much confidence in me in the future. Well, there's no use fretting now; the thing is done. If it doesn't work I shall know enough not to repeat the experiment."

Still Al did fret a little after he got to his room. The apartment that had been assigned to him was a large, gloomy room on one of the upper floors of the building. It was about half filled with paintings not hung, but standing against the wall. These, the hotel clerk had explained, were the property of an impecunious artist who had formerly boarded in the house, and were being held until his bill was paid.

"We left them right there," explained the clerk, "not thinking that we would need to put anyone in the room for some time. But on account of the rush to the circus the house is full, and we must put you there." [Pg 90]

It made very little difference to Al where he slept, and he said so. He was only going to spend one night in the house, and the room was comfortable, if it was rather gloomy.

Entering it after his visit to the *Bugle* office, he threw himself into a chair and fixed his eyes on a full-length picture of a man in modern dress. He did not even take the trouble to light the gas.

The rays of the moon dimly illumined the room and lighted up the picture. The boy sat for nearly half an hour staring absently at the portrait, thinking nothing about it, but trying to plan his work for the next day or two.

But soon he began to realize that he was very tired. He found himself yawning, and his eyelids drooped in spite of himself.

"It's no use," he said to himself, "I'll have to leave business until to-morrow. I'll go to bed."

But just as he rose from his chair—could he believe the evidence of his senses?—the figure of the man stepped from the canvas and approached him.

It was no dream, for in an instant the boy was as wide awake as he had ever been.

Apparently the picture had come to life!

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## CHAPTER XV.

### SAVED BY A SHADOW.

In a few seconds Al perceived that the picture had not been endowed with life; the painted figure remained in its place; it was a being of flesh and blood that was approaching him.

The intruder had been standing in front of the picture; the dim light and Al's preoccupation had conspired to render the boy unconscious of his presence.

"Who are you?" our hero exclaimed, as the man approached him.

The next moment he recognized the fellow, and added in a startled voice:

"Farley!"

"Yes," said the ex-advance agent, "it's Farley, the man you knocked out. You're a little surprised to see me, aren't you?"

"What do you want?" demanded the boy.

"I'll show you what I want."

And he darted between Al and the door.

"Get out of my way!" the lad exclaimed, attempting to push him aside.

But Farley seized him by the throat and forced him to the floor.

"You won't escape me this time," he hissed.

Al struggled to release himself, but the grasp of the drink-maddened brute was not to be shaken off. [Pg 92]

"No, you don't!" he said, in a fierce whisper. "I warned you that you had not heard the last of me."

Al tried to cry for help, but could only make an inarticulate sound.

Farley dragged him in the direction of the window, saying:

"You got away from me last night, but you won't this time."

"So," Al managed to gasp, "you were the masked man who accused me of being a horse thief?"

"I was the man. You nearly turned the tables on me that time, but you won't have the same luck twice in succession."

As he spoke Farley relaxed his grasp on the boy's throat.

"Youngster," he went on, "if it hadn't been for you I shouldn't have lost my job with Gus Wattles. Its loss, under the circumstances, means ruin for me. I can't catch up again, unless——"

"Is that my fault?" interrupted Al, seeing that the man was crazed with drink, and that the wisest policy was to attempt to conciliate him. "I didn't take the position until Mr. Wattles had decided to discharge you."

"It's a lie!"

"It's the truth."

"If you had not been available he would have taken me back."

"I don't know anything about that. Of course, I had no feeling against you in the matter. I wanted the place, but I could not have obtained it if your work had been satisfactory." [Pg 93]

"You used some underhanded method to oust me."

"I did not."

"You did. If you had not, how could you have gotten the place? There are dozens—hundreds—of experienced men, who would have been glad to take the position at half my salary. No, you did it for private reasons of your own. You were hired to do it to separate me from her."

"From whom?"

"You know well enough who I mean."

"I have not the slightest idea," replied Al.

By this time Farley had permitted him to rise to his feet, but still kept between him and the door.

"I mean Gladys—as you know," said the drink-maddened man; "Gladys, for whom I would give my very life."

"Miss March?"

It was with genuine surprise that Al asked this question.

"Yes."

"You think that I am in a conspiracy to separate you from her?"

"I know it."

"You are entirely mistaken. I know nothing at all about Miss March's affairs; in fact, I have never even spoken to her."

"It is a lie. But come, I have no more time to waste. This job must be done." [Pg 94]

He again seized the boy by the throat, and dragged him toward the window. Al was by no means a weakling, but he was absolutely powerless in the grasp of his frenzied assailant.

With one hand Farley held his intended victim, while with the other he threw up the window sash.

"No one in the street below," he hissed, "is looking, and if they were they could not see us. When your body is found, your death will be considered an accident."

Al now lay on his back upon the sill; half his body was out of the window. Apparently the villain's object was almost accomplished, and in a few seconds the boy's mutilated body would be lying upon the pavement below.

"I never knew before," said Farley, "how sweet revenge was."

"You won't know just yet," said Al, "if I can help it."

As he spoke, realizing his extreme peril, he made one last, desperate effort, exerting all his strength, and succeeded in regaining his footing.

The struggle was renewed, but it seemed certain that it must result in the boy's defeat.

Suddenly, however, Farley released his hold on Al and rushed to the opposite side of the room, crying:

"Interfere, will you?"

At first our hero could not understand this action, but in a moment he comprehended it.

The villain had actually been frightened by his own shadow, which was strongly outlined on the wall opposite. It might have been mistaken even by a sober man for an intruder; and in his excited condition Farley was certain that some one had come to the rescue of his intended victim. [Pg 95]

Of course, he quickly discovered his mistake, but Al had now time to rush to the door, fling it open, and make his escape from the room.

Outside the door stood one of the hotel clerks, who had evidently just arrived upon the scene, and who demanded:

"What's going on in there?"

Before Al could reply Farley rushed out of the room and started for the staircase. In a moment he had disappeared.

Al started to follow him, but the clerk seized him by the collar, shouting:

"You won't get away quite as easily as all that, my fine fellow! Now, what's your little game?"

"Don't keep me standing here," cried the boy, trying to shake off the man's detaining grasp.

"That's all right," was the response of the zealous employee, who was under the impression that he had captured a hotel thief. "You just keep quiet. I've got you all right, and your pal won't get out of the house as easily as he thinks."

By the time Al had explained the situation so that the clerk understood it, Farley had had ample time to make his escape.

The man was somewhat crestfallen when he realized that he had made a mistake. [Pg 96]

"No matter," he said, "the ruffian can't have gotten out. They'd be sure to detain him downstairs."

But, as they learned when they reached the office, Farley had eluded them. He had walked leisurely out, lighting a cigar, apparently in a perfectly easy, unconcerned frame of mind.

Having notified the police of what had occurred, Al returned to his room, and in a few minutes had retired for the night, having first assured himself that there were no other unbidden guests in the apartment.

The next morning he found a note awaiting him in the office. It read as follows:

> "You are a lucky youth, but your luck won't last forever. You don't lead a charmed life. I am on my mettle now, and I am going to settle you if I swing for it."

There was no signature, but of course Al knew well enough who the writer of the precious communication was.

He did not feel particularly worried; in fact, he had no time to worry just then, for, as he put the note in his pocket, the morning papers were placed in his hand by the clerk, with the remark:

"Well, young man, you are a corker and no mistake."

# CHAPTER XVI.
## A LESSON IN JOURNALISM.

[Pg 97]

Al laughed.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked.

"Read that interview with you in the *Banner*, and you'll find out. If you've been through half the startling adventures that the reporter says you have it is a wonder you are alive now."

Our hero opened the paper with a feeling of apprehension which proved to be well grounded.

Undoubtedly the interview would prove a good advertisement for the show, but it embarrassed Al greatly; he would gladly have given a hundred dollars to have been able to withdraw it. But it was too late for that now; already it had, doubtless, been read by half Rockton.

The reporter had not kept faith with him.

"If I say anything about your sister," he had told him, "it will only be a passing reference, couched in the most delicate terms."

But instead of that he had headed the article:

A BOY WONDER!

AN EXTRAORDINARY CAREER! A LONG-LOST SISTER!

And there were other headlines that startled and dismayed Al.

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According to them he had been a lion hunter, a champion football and baseball player, an exceptional sprinter, and the greatest boxer of his age that the world had ever known.

"You must have made yourself mighty solid with the *Banner* man to get an ad. like that," remarked the clerk. "It's simply great."

"I wish I hadn't succeeded in making myself quite so solid," groaned Al.

The clerk stared at him, asking in surprise:

"Don't you like the notice?"

"Hardly."

"What's the matter with it?"

"I'm not here to advertise myself but the New York Comedy Company."

"You're the first advance agent I ever saw who wasn't trying to advertise himself at the expense, if necessary, of his show."

"That isn't my way of doing business."

"Well, this article will boom the show, and don't you forget it. But if you don't like the headlines what will you think of the interview?"

Al sank into a chair and began a hasty perusal of the article.

He was dismayed at the reporter's audacity; the information he had given the man had been so altered and distorted that he could only dimly recognize himself in the hero of the newspaper man's weird fancy.

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The interview was in the highest degree complimentary—at least from its writer's standpoint; it was evident that the reporter had written it in a friendly spirit, and with the intention of giving its subject a good "send off."

The portion that referred to his sister annoyed Al the most. It was near the end of the two-column article, and read as follows:

> "But the life of the hero of this strange, though strictly authentic, tale has not been entirely one of adventurous pleasure. Deep in his heart he carries a sorrow about which he was extremely reticent to speak to the *Banner* reporter. In referring to it this lad, who has faced dangers from which many a stalwart man would shrink appalled, wept like a child. Years ago he lost an idolized sister. She was taken from the home of which she was the pride, not by the hand of death, but by that of a kidnaper. The story is a most romantic one. The little child was playing one morning on the sloping lawn in front of her father's palatial country seat in Tarrytown, adjoining that of the late Jay Gould. Her nurse was called away for a few moments. During the woman's absence the child disappeared. What became of it? Alas! to this day no one save the ruthless destroyer of the happiness of this once peaceful home knows. It was rumored that a rejected suitor of the little girl's mother was the villain, but nothing was ever proven against him. The father of the child died of a broken heart, and his wife would, without doubt, have soon followed

him to the grave had it not been for her boy—the subject of this necessarily incomplete article. For his sake she resolved to live. When he was but four years of age she made him promise her that he would devote his life to solving the mystery of his sister's fate."

Al looked up from the paper, his face white with anger. [Pg 100]

"The villain!" he exclaimed.

The clerk looked up in surprise.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Have you read this thing?" Al demanded.

"Why, yes."

"The part that speaks of my long-lost sister?"

"All of it. Of course, it's a fake, but nine people in ten will swallow it whole."

"I don't want anyone to believe it."

"You don't?"

"Of course I don't."

"Then why did you grant him the interview?"

"Because he insisted, and because he promised me that everything should be printed just as I gave it to him."

The clerk laughed.

"It's evident," he said, "that you have not enjoyed a very extensive acquaintance with reporters."

"I've known several, but none like this fellow."

"He's considered one of the smartest men in his line in the State."

"Well, I'd like to interview him just now."

"What would you say?"

"I'd at least give him my opinion of his methods."

"You wouldn't have a chance."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"You have met him once, and you ought to know. Why, he wouldn't give you an opportunity to get in a word edgewise. Anyhow, I don't see what you are kicking about; you've got the best ad. of the season free of cost. Hello! here comes your reporter now. If you want to go for him you have your chance." [Pg 101]

While the clerk was speaking the little reporter of the *Banner* who had interviewed Al only a few hours before entered.

The boy strode toward him.

"You're just the man I want to see," he began.

The scribe pretended not to notice the look of anger in his face. Seizing his hand and holding it tightly, he said:

"And you're just the person I want to see. There are one or two little mistakes in that interview of ours, and I was looking for you to find out whether the fault lies with you or me. But the article shows up well, doesn't it?"

"I——"

"Don't say another word."

"But——"

"I know exactly what you are going to say, but it will be all right next time. It was the fault of the compositor that your name was spelled wrong."

"I wasn't——"

"I was going to ask you whether it was three men or only two that you knocked out at that scrap referred to in the second column; I'm afraid I got that wrong. But never mind, I gave you the benefit of the doubt, anyhow. He! he! he!"

"No such incident ever occurred, and I——"

"Tut! tut!" interrupted the reporter, with a shocked look. "What made you tell me the yarn, then?" [Pg 102]

"I——"

"Never mind, we'll have to let it go now; and, after all, it doesn't make much difference. But you ought to be more particular in talking to reporters in the future, my dear young friend."

"If I——"

"Oh, that's all right—— No thanks. Hello! there goes a man I've got to see right now. S'long!"

And the scribe rushed out, leaving Al staring helplessly after him.

"Isn't he a dandy?" said the hotel clerk, admiringly. "You'll never catch him. The traditional Frenchman's flea was a graven image compared with that fellow. In your line of business you can profit by the lesson he has just given you. He is an artist in 'bluffing.'"

Before Al could reply Mr. Wattles entered the office and approached him with outstretched hand.

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# CHAPTER XVII.
## "I WANT YOU."

"I thought I should find you here," the manager said. "I want to offer you my congratulations before I say another word."

"Your congratulations upon what, Mr. Wattles?" asked Al.

"Why, upon the way you have worked things here, of course. I heard about it before I left Boomville this morning. That interview is out of sight."

"I wish it was," groaned Al.

"Eh?"

The boy expressed his opinion of the interview in very emphatic terms.

"Well," said Mr. Wattles, when he had finished, "you're 'way off in your ideas on that point. Why, the interview is great. I supposed you had taken the reporter out and got him full."

"The interview didn't cost me a cent."

"That's so much the better. I'm mighty glad it appeared, and you ought to be, too. It'll help biz; and how do you know but that through it you may find your sister?"

"That's not possible," said Al. "Why, the facts are all distorted. My father never had any palatial country seat in Tarrytown; there was never any talk of a rejected suitor of my mother's; there ——" [Pg 104]

"Never mind," interrupted Mr. Wattles; "it's a good ad., anyway, and we got it for nothing. You mustn't be so thin-skinned, my boy. You see here"—in a changed tone—"that ad. of yours in the *Bugle* must have cost a young fortune. You ought to have consulted me by wire before you did that. The idea is a good one, and everyone is talking about it, but it will not be worth to us what it cost."

"How much do you suppose I paid for it, sir?"

"Oh, I don't know; three hundred at least, probably more."

"It cost just fifty dollars; and if it is not worth that to you, I'll pay it out of my own pocket."

"Fif—— Is that straight?"

"Certainly."

"How did you do it?"

Al explained.

"Well, that was a mighty good transaction, and you deserve credit for it, as well as for writing the ad. The new paper was selling like hot cakes on the train this morning, and everyone was reading that ad. Al, my boy, you're a genius!"

"Not quite that, I guess," laughed the boy.

"You are, I tell you. But who is the queer old man in the third row of the orchestra?"

"A myth, a creation of my imagination."

"I supposed so, though I did not know but you had hired some one to play the part." [Pg 105]

"No."

"Well, there'll be lots of people out to see the old man. How did you happen to strike the idea?"

"I don't know. I had to get the copy ready in a hurry, and I wanted something new and taking."

"Well, you got it. I believe that ad. and the interview are going to produce results."

They did; though some of the results were quite different from those Mr. Wattles and his advance agent expected.

While Al went into the restaurant for breakfast, his employer hurried to the theater to inquire about the advance sale.

He returned an hour later, flushed and excited.

"Well?" questioned the boy.

"Well, we've caught 'em again. Half the house is already sold, and that means a crowd to-night. The local manager says you're a corker."

Al laughed.

"He didn't think so yesterday."

"He does now. He's going to try to get you to stay here under his employ."

"I shall not do it."

"I told him you wouldn't, but he's going to make you an offer, anyhow. Oh, by the way!"

"What is it, sir?"

"I nearly forgot that Miss Gladys March, who, with the rest of the company, came with me this morning, is very anxious to have a talk with you." [Pg 106]

"With me? Aren't you mistaken, Mr. Wattles?"

"No; she asked me to tell you as soon as I saw you, but I did not think of it."

"What can she want of me?"

"I give it up."

"I don't know her; I never spoke to her in my life."

"So I thought. Well, the best way to find out what she wants is to go and ask her. You'll find her upstairs in her room."

"I'll go at once."

A few minutes later Al presented himself at the door of Miss March's room and knocked rather timidly.

"Come in," said a sweet voice, which the boy recognized as that of the young actress.

He entered the room.

Miss March, who was seated by the window, rose to meet him.

"I supposed that it was one of the servants," she said, with a sweet smile, "or I should have welcomed you at the door. Please be seated."

The young girl's perfect self-possession embarrassed Al a little. He stammered out something about its being of no consequence, and seated himself on the extreme edge of the sofa.

Certainly Miss March was a very beautiful girl; unlike many actresses, she looked prettier off the stage than on it.

"I suppose," she began, "that you wonder why I have requested the favor of this interview." [Pg 107]

"I am a little curious to know," Al admitted.

"When I have told you, I suppose you will think me a very foolish girl; probably I am. But I cannot leave a stone unturned."

She paused, evidently agitated. What new mystery was this? Al asked himself.

"I have read the interview with you in this morning's Rockton *Banner*," went on the young lady.

"I'm sorry to hear that," said the boy, bluntly.

"Why?"

"Because there are scarcely ten words of truth in it."

A genuine look of disappointment appeared upon Miss March's face.

"I am very sorry to hear you say that," she said.

Al stared at her in surprise.

"You surely did not believe all that stuff, Miss March?"

"Not all of it, of course," replied the girl, with a faint smile; "but there was one part that I thought might be true."

"What part?"

"About your sister, who was stolen in infancy."

"It is true," said Al, "that my sister was stolen."

"Ah!" interrupted the young lady, with an appearance of agitation that the boy could not understand.

"But the facts were so twisted and distorted that the story is very different from the truth."

"What is the truth?"

Al hesitated. [Pg 108]

"Believe me," said Miss March, "I do not ask from mere idle curiosity. I have a most important reason for putting the question. Will you not tell me the story?"

Her agitation communicated itself to her companion; the boy's voice trembled slightly as he replied:

"Certainly, Miss March; for I feel that you have some strong motive for desiring to hear it."

"Believe me, I have. Go on, I beg of you."

Al was about to speak when the door was thrown open and a rough-looking man strode into the room.

"I thought I should find you here," he said, addressing our hero.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" demanded the boy.

"I'm a deputy sheriff, and I want you. I have a warrant for your arrest."

[Pg 109]

# CHAPTER XVIII.
## MR. MARMADUKE MERRY.

"A warrant for my arrest?" gasped Al, half believing that the sudden appearance of the stranger was only a joke.

"That's what I said. Now, young fellow, don't you try to resist me, for it won't work."

"I'm not going to resist you if you really have a warrant," said Al.

"Well, I have, and here it is."

And the stranger produced a document from his pocket.

"What am I accused of?" asked the boy.

The deputy, who evidently felt the importance of his position, produced a copy of the first number of the Rockton *Bugle* from his pocket.

Slowly unfolding it, he turned to Al's full-page advertisement, and said:

"You writ that, didn't you?"

"I did," admitted our hero, promptly.

"Well, that settles it. Come along."

"But hold on," laughed Al. "It isn't a crime in these parts to advertise a theatrical performance, is it?"

"Yes," replied the deputy, without hesitation, "it is—the way you advertise."

"What is the matter with my advertisement?" asked the astonished boy.

"You don't know, eh?" [Pg 110]

"I certainly do not."

"Well, of course my business here is only to serve the warrant, but I'll read the advertisement over to you."

"Go ahead," said Al, thinking that there might be a misprint in the page.

The deputy sheriff read:

"See the New York Comedy Company, Augustus Wattles, Manager.

"See this great company in 'Loved and Lost.'

"See the real locomotive, under a full head of steam.

"See the real steam yacht.

"See all this.

"But—

"Please don't look at the queer old man in the third row of the orchestra."

The deputy laid the paper down and glared at his prisoner with a triumphant air.

"Well?" said Al, greatly puzzled.

"Didn't you write that and cause it to be inserted in the *Bugle*?"

"I did."

"That settles it, then."

"It may settle it for you, but it doesn't for me," said the boy. "What is the matter with the ad.?"

"You know well enough what the matter is with it."

"I do not. Is it a crime in this town to try to boom a show by any legitimate means?"

"No; but it is a crime to try to boom it the way you have; it is a crime here and everywhere else, as you will find out if you try the same game again in another town." [Pg 111]

Here Miss March, who had listened in silence until this moment, interposed.

"What is the matter, sir?" she cried. "I read the advertisement, and I am sure there was nothing in it that could offend anyone."

The deputy, who until now had forgotten or neglected to doff his hat, did so.

"As far as you see, miss," he said, "the ad. is all right."

"Well, what is there—what can there be—that I do not see?" the young lady cried.

"You are not acquainted in this town, are you, young lady?" the deputy asked.

"I am not."

"That accounts for it, then. But this young fellow is acquainted here, and he knew just what he was doing when he wrote that advertisement."

"Yes, I think I did," interposed Al, "But will you please tell me right now why you are here?"

"I am here in my capacity of deputy sheriff of this county," replied the official, with dignity, "and also as a personal friend of Mr. Marmaduke Merry."

"Mr. Marmaduke Merry!" exclaimed Al.

"Yes. No wonder you start and turn pale at the mere mention of that name."

"But I did not start or turn pale. Who is Mr. Marmaduke Merry?"

"You pretend not to know?"

"I pretend nothing at all; I do not know. I never heard the name of Marmaduke Merry before in my life." [Pg 112]

"This subterfuge will avail you nothing," said the deputy, who was becoming theatrical. "We know all."

"All what?"

Al could not help laughing, and this evidently angered the overzealous deputy.

"I am not here to bandy words with you, young man," he said; "I have already spent too much time in talk."

"That's what I think," smiled Al.

"I'm glad we agree upon that point. Come along."

"I am ready."

"One moment," interposed Miss March. "Won't you please tell me, sir, of what crime Mr. Allston is accused?"

"I will," the deputy replied, with a look that was very evidently intended to be languishing. "I can refuse you nothing, miss. He is accused of holding one of Rockton's most respected citizens up to public ridicule; and Mr. Marmaduke Merry is the man."

"But," interrupted Al, more bewildered than ever, "haven't I told you that I never heard of this man, Merry, before?"

"You have told me so—yes."

"Well, I told the truth."

"You will have to convince the court of that."

"But what has my ad. to do with Mr. Merry? His name is not mentioned in it."

"Ah, that is where your cunning comes in. But doesn't everyone in Rockton know that for years and years Mr. Merry has always occupied a seat in the third row of the orchestra at the first performance of a new play?" [Pg 113]

At last Al grasped the situation.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, "that's what you mean?"

"That is what I mean."

"And you think I meant Mr. Merry when I referred to the 'queer old man'?"

"Of course I do, and so does Mr. Merry."

"Both of you are very much mistaken."

"For your own sake, I hope you will be able to prove that statement."

"Why, I never heard of Mr. Merry until you mentioned his name."

"You have said so several times since I have been here, but I do not believe you. However, I am not your judge. But if you did not mean Mr. Merry, whom did you mean?"

"Nobody at all; the old man was only a creation of my imagination."

The deputy coughed, and had the audacity to wink knowingly at Miss March.

"This is a great tale," he said, "and will be believed, I don't think. You have got yourself and the local management into a scrape, my lad. But what could be expected?"

At this moment there was a tap upon the door. "Come in," the actress cried.

A servant entered.

"A card for you, Miss March."

The young lady took the bit of pasteboard and glanced at it; then she exclaimed: [Pg 114]

"Mr. Marmaduke Merry!"

"Mr. Marmaduke Merry!" echoed the deputy.

"Show him up, please," the actress said.

[Pg 115]

# CHAPTER XIX.

## A STARTLING ACKNOWLEDGMENT.

"He is here!"

With this theatrical exclamation, a man pushed his way past the servant and entered the room.

"I am Mr. Marmaduke Merry," he announced.

Both Al and Miss March gazed with considerable curiosity and interest at the visitor.

He was at least seventy years of age, but was dressed in the most youthful fashion, and wore a light blond wig. Much below the medium height, shrunken, shriveled and weazened, he presented a decidedly ludicrous appearance as he stood, a huge bouquet in hand, bowing and smiling at the young actress.

Miss March could not help smiling herself; this evidently encouraged the old gentleman.

"You pardon the liberty I have taken, then?" he said. "I was sure you would."

"What is your business with me, sir?" the girl asked, composing her features.

"It is to offer a tribute to your art and beauty," replied Mr. Merry, with a smirk. "But"—for the first time seeing the deputy and Al—"who are these persons?"

"Don't you know me, Mr. Merry?" asked the official.

"Why, bless my soul!" ejaculated the old man, adjusting his glasses, "it's Bullfinch!"

"Yes, sir; it's me." [Pg 116]

"What are you doing here in Miss March's apartment?"

"Attending to business, sir."

"What business?"

And the old man glared suspiciously at the cringing deputy.

"Your business, Mr. Merry."

"I didn't send you here."

"You sent me to find the writer of that infamous advertisement in the *Bugle*, didn't you, sir?"

"Yes."

"Well, I have found him."

"Where is he? Who is he?"

"There he stands."

And Mr. Bullfinch pointed triumphantly at Al.

"That boy?" gasped the old man.

"Yes, sir."

"You must be mistaken."

"I am not. I went to the office of the *Bugle* and asked who wrote the advertisement. They told me it was the advance agent of the company, a young man named Allston. I tracked him to this place, and was about to drag him forth when you arrived."

"You talk like a fool, Bullfinch," snapped Mr. Merry.

"Sir, I——"

"That will do. If this is the person who is responsible for that advertisement take him away."

"Yes, sir."

And the deputy laid his hand on Al's shoulder.

But Miss March interposed. [Pg 117]

"Wait a moment, Mr. Merry."

"Certainly, my dear young lady. What is it?"

"This gentleman, Mr. Allen Allston, never saw or heard of you before he came to Rockton. It was not in a spirit of malice that he wrote that advertisement. Don't you see, Mr. Merry, that by having him arrested you will only subject yourself to ridicule? You acknowledge yourself to be a 'queer old man.' Why should you do that?"

The old gentleman coughed.

"Ahem! That aspect of the case had not occurred to me," he said. "You assure me, Miss March, that the young man did not intend to hold me up to ridicule?"

"I am absolutely certain," interrupted the deputy, "that he did."

"Shut up, Bullfinch!"

"Mr. Merry," interrupted Al, "I give you my word of honor that I should not have inserted that advertisement if I had for one moment supposed it would injure the feelings of anyone. It was only a joke on the public."

"A joke at my expense, young man!"

"I have given you my word of honor, sir, that I did not intend to hurt you or anyone else by that ad."

"Your word of honor!" sneered Mr. Merry. "What is your word of honor good for? Who are you?"

Al colored.

"You have heard my name from Miss March. I am Allen Allston."

The old man started.

"I did not catch the name before," he said. "Surely you are not Allen Allston from Boomville?" [Pg 118]

"I am."

"The noble young fellow who saved the life of my grandchild?"

"Is Mayor Anderson's little girl your granddaughter, sir?" asked Al, a little embarrassed.

"Of course she is. My boy, I beg your pardon."

And the old man grasped Al's hand and shook it warmly, adding:

"The youth who performed such a heroic act could not be guilty of such a crime as that of which you are accused. Bullfinch"—turning fiercely upon the deputy—"you are a fool!"

"Sir——"

"What put it into your head that he could have had any malicious intent in writing that advertisement?"

"I only acted upon your instructions, sir," responded the deputy, very humbly.

"Nonsense! I thought you had a little common sense. Leave the room, sir. Your presence is an insult to me and to my friends."

"But the arrest, sir——"

"There will be no arrest to-day; I withdraw the complaint."

"But the warrant——"

"Tear it up—do anything you like with it, only don't worry me any further with your nonsensical remarks. Go, sir!"

The deputy slunk out of the room. [Pg 119]

Mr. Merry turned to the actress.

"I am extremely pained," he began, "that such a scene should have occurred in your room. I am ——"

"Will you please state your business, sir?" interrupted Miss March.

The old gentleman was a little disconcerted at first, but he quickly recovered himself and said:

"I come, as I remarked before, to pay a tribute to genius and beauty."

"Well?"

Al had not supposed the girl capable of assuming such a frigid air as that with which she now confronted her aged admirer.

"Will you accept these flowers?" stammered the old man. "They are a tribute to——"

"Thanks," interrupted the actress. "You may leave them on the table."

"You are very kind. And now——"

"And now you must excuse me; I have business of importance with Mr. Allston."

"Oh, certainly! May I call again?"

"I am too much occupied to receive callers. Good-morning."

And with perfect self-possession the young girl opened the door.

Mumbling a few inaudible words, the aged admirer of the drama left the room.

"I am sorry to say," remarked Miss March, "that I have seen men like him before. He means no harm, but I cannot endure such silliness. But never mind about him; let us talk about ourselves. Sit down, please, and I will try to commence where I left off. When we were interrupted I had asked you to tell me the story of your sister's disappearance——" [Pg 120]

"And I was about to do so."

"Exactly. Go on."

Al hesitated.

"Why do you want to hear the story, Miss March?" he asked.

"Because—because——"

"Well?"

"Because I believe that I may be your sister!"

[Pg 121]

# CHAPTER XX.
## THE LOCKET.

Al started. Could Miss March seriously mean what she said?

"You surely do not think," the girl said, earnestly, "that I would jest on a subject so sacred?"

"No, no," Al assured her, "but what ground have you for thinking that we may be related?"

"No logical ground, perhaps," the actress replied; "but from the moment I first saw you—and I have seen you when you were not aware of my presence—I was strangely attracted to you. You may laugh at this, you may think it only the foolish fancy of a foolish girl, but it is true."

"And I, too," said Al, thoughtfully, "have had the same feeling toward you. I remember I could think of nothing but your face all the way home on the night of your first performance in Boomville. Can it really be that you are my sister, restored to me in this strange way? If she is alive she must be about your age."

"Tell me all you know about her," entreated the girl; "the circumstances under which she was lost—all. But no"—with sudden change of manner—"I will tell you my story first, if you will listen to it."

"Go on, please, Miss March."

"My first recollections are of a miserable home on the upper floor of a tenement house in New York. I lived with a hard-featured woman who called herself my aunt. Her name was Ann Thompson. Did you ever hear of her?" [Pg 122]

And Miss March gazed anxiously into the boy's face.

Al shook his head.

"Never!"

"Aunt Ann, as I used to call her," went on the actress, "was always more or less under the influence of liquor. Gin was her favorite drink. She would work until she had money enough for a debauch, and then—but I cannot bear to recall my unhappy childhood."

Miss March paused and turned away her face; her trembling voice showed the emotion she felt.

"I can imagine it all," said Al, sympathetically. "Go on, please, and spare yourself unnecessary pain."

"How kind you are!" the young girl said, gratefully. "I will, then, omit many details which I am sure would be as painful for you to hear as for me to relate. When under the influence of alcohol Aunt Ann was sometimes very cruel to me. She would beat and otherwise ill-treat me; and to-day I bear scars inflicted by her. But I bore all as patiently as I could, and for what reason, do you suppose?"

"I should think you would have left her," said Al, as the actress paused.

"I should have done so but for one thing."

"And that was?"

"Sometimes while intoxicated she would hint to me that in reality we were not flesh and blood, that I was in no way akin to her, that there was a secret in my life that she could reveal if she would, a secret the publication of which would be greatly to my advantage. But she never became so intoxicated that she told me the whole truth; I could only guess it. Sometimes during her sober intervals I would tax her with what she had said; but she would always reply by telling me that I must pay no attention to anything she said when she was drunk—that she was at such times out of her mind, and did not know what she was saying. Once, when I persisted, she became greatly enraged, and gave me such a beating that I was taken to a hospital and she was arrested and sentenced to a term of imprisonment." [Pg 123]

At this point in her story Miss March burst into tears.

"Postpone telling the rest of it until another time," said Al, to whom the recital was almost as painful as to the girl.

"No," said the actress, "I must go on. I was discharged from the hospital on the day on which Aunt Ann was released from jail, and the old life was renewed."

"You went back to live with the woman?" cried Al.

"Yes. I had no other home. Besides, I still hoped that I might be able to learn from her the secret of my birth—for that there was a secret I was now more firmly convinced than ever. At the time of which I have just been telling you, I was about twelve years of age. Three years later Aunt Ann, while under the influence of liquor, met with an accident which terminated her miserable life in two days. When she was told that she was really dying, she sent for a priest and confessed to [Pg 124]

him. When the clergyman was gone she summoned me to her bedside, and told me that at the suggestion of the good father she was about to tell me at last the secret that I had been striving so long to learn."

"And she said——" demanded the boy, breathlessly.

"She began by telling me that she was not my aunt, that we were in no way related. Years before she had been my nurse. My poor mother had in some trivial way offended her, and under the influence of her anger—and, I suppose, of alcohol—she determined to revenge herself by kidnaping me. She carried this resolution into effect, and her guilt was never proven, although it was suspected. 'My name is not Ann Thompson,' she said to me, 'but you shall know now what it really is, and who your parents are. Your father is dead, but your mother still lives. For years she has mourned you unceasingly.' The woman then bade me unlock and open a certain drawer in her bureau. I did so, and took from it at her direction a small package. 'That bundle,' she said, 'contains proof of your identity. Take it to your mother and show her what is in it. Tell her what I have said, give her my real name, and she will acknowledge you as her 'daughter.' 'What is your name?' I cried, breathlessly—'what is mine?' The woman opened her lips to reply, but not a sound escaped them. The next moment she fell back upon her pillow. I bent over her, crying in an agony of suspense: 'Speak, speak!' But she could not, she was dead!"

"What did the package contain?" asked Al. [Pg 125]

"Only a few articles of infant's clothing and two pieces of jewelry. Some time they may be of assistance to me in finding my parents, but thus far they have proved of no value as a clew. Well, after Aunt Ann's death I was adopted by a family in moderate circumstances. They had no interest in my personal affairs, all they wanted of me was my services as housemaid, and I served in that capacity for two years. Then came an opportunity to adopt a stage career, and I eagerly seized it, against the advice of all who were in any way interested. I must say that, so far, I have had no reason to regret my decision in the matter. I find that the stories of the temptations of stage life that I had heard were gross exaggerations, and that a woman can be as good and pure on the stage as off it. And now, my friend, you have heard my story; can you help me find my mother? Do you think it possible that I am the sister for whom you have been searching?"

Al's voice trembled with emotion as he replied:

"That question can very soon be decided. Have you the package of infant's clothing that you spoke of?"

"Yes; I always have it with me wherever I go."

"May I see it?"

"I am very anxious to show it to you."

And the actress rose and opened her trunk, from which she took a small parcel.

Her face was very pale, her hands trembled as she unfastened the little package.

"Look!" she said.

Al took the garments, yellowed with time, in his hands. [Pg 126]

"I have heard my mother describe the clothing that my little sister wore when she disappeared," he said, "a thousand times. She would be able to tell you if these are the ones, but I cannot. But the jewelry—where is that?"

"Here."

And the girl handed him a box.

The lad took from it a baby's ring and a chain, to which was attached a locket.

"My sister wore a chain and locket like these when she was lost," he said, "In a moment I will tell you if this is the locket."

"How can you?" the actress cried.

"Because the locket contains my father's picture."

"There is no picture in this," said Miss March, with a look of deep disappointment.

"You do not know whether there is or not," said Al. "There is a secret spring and I can find it. Look!"

As he spoke the locket flew open.

[Pg 127]

## CHAPTER XXI.

### BROTHER AND SISTER.

As Miss March bent over the locket she uttered an exclamation of wonder and delight.

The portrait revealed was that of a singularly handsome man in the prime of life. The calm, thoughtful eyes and the sensitive mouth were those of the young actress herself; the likeness was not only unmistakable, but remarkable.

"Is it possible that this picture has been here all these years, and I have never known it?" the girl exclaimed.

"You might never have discovered it," replied Al. "I should not have known but for the fact that I have a locket precisely like it, which opens in the same way."

"Then there can be no doubt——"

"That you are my sister."

"Brother!"

The next moment the singularly united couple were folded in each other's arms.

It was a moment that in all their after lives neither of them ever forgot, a joy that no future sorrow had the power to efface from their memories.

When the first transports of emotion were over, the young girl said, tremulously:

"My mother—when shall I see her? Oh, I must go to her at once! I must, I must!"

"Of course, Mr. Wattles will give you leave of absence as soon as we tell him what we have discovered." [Pg 128]

"I do not see how he can."

"Why can't he?"

"I have no understudy. No, I must remain; he has been very kind to me, and I could not ask a favor that I knew it would be so very difficult for him to grant."

"That is right, sister. But I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll telegraph to mother to come on here at once. She will arrive before the evening performance."

"Do so, brother—— Oh, how strange, yet how delightful, it is to utter that sacred name! But do not tell her the truth until she comes."

"No, indeed. Why, I think the shock would almost kill her. We must break it to her gently."

At this moment Mr. Wattles came bustling into the room.

"The advance sale," he began, "is something unheard of in Rockton. Why—— But what's the matter? Nothing wrong, is there?"

"No, indeed," Al replied. "Everything is all right."

And he proceeded to acquaint the manager in a few words with what had happened.

"Well," said Mr. Wattles, when he had finished, "you beat the deck, young man. I'm going to write a romance about you when the season is over. You're no sooner done with one startling adventure than you're right in the midst of another. Why, you're almost equal to one of Dumas' heroes! Well, I sincerely congratulate you both." [Pg 129]

After a hearty handshake the manager added:

"And now I must be off to give this story to the papers."

"No, no!" cried Miss March.

"Not by any means," added Al.

Mr. Wattles stared at them.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"We mean," said Al, "that this is a private affair with which the papers have nothing to do."

"But, my dear boy, think—only think—what a grand ad. it would make for the show!"

"No matter; we don't want a word printed about it."

"Of course not," said the actress. "I should think you would understand our feelings in the matter, Mr. Wattles."

"Well, I don't," returned the manager, evidently chagrined. "I cannot, to save my life, see why you are willing to throw away such a chance for a stunning free ad. Nor"—addressing Al—"can I understand your scruples. By Jove! you are the queerest combination of impudence and modesty that I ever met. But have it your own way, my children; throw away the chance if you want to."

As he was about to leave the room the old gentleman turned again, saying:

"I almost forgot that I had a letter for you, Miss March. Here it is, and I think I know the handwriting."

As the actress glanced at the superscription on the envelope she changed color. [Pg 130]

"It is from that wretch, Farley!" she exclaimed.

"So I thought," said Mr. Wattles. "You had better look out for that man, my dear. He is, or thinks he is, desperately in love with you, and he may give you some trouble yet. If you don't mind, I should like to know the contents of that letter. Believe me, it is not from mere idle curiosity that I ask you to let me read it."

"I know that, Mr. Wattles," said Miss March. "Ever since I have been in your company you have been like a father to me. You shall open the letter yourself if you will."

She handed the epistle to the manager, who tore it open. As he glanced at its contents a frown appeared upon his usually cheerful countenance.

"The scoundrel!" he muttered, crushing the letter in his hand; "if I ever meet him again I will thrash him within an inch of his life—I will, by Jove!"

"What does he say?" the girl asked, anxiously.

"It will do you no good to know the contents of this precious epistle," replied Mr. Wattles. "You had better let me destroy it."

But Miss March's feminine curiosity was now aroused, and she insisted upon knowing what was in the letter.

"Well, if you will have it," said the manager, resignedly, "I'll read it to you. But if you don't sleep nights for the next week or two you mustn't blame me."

"Go on, go on!" [Pg 131]

The old gentleman read as follows:

> "GLADYS: This is to remind you that, although we are separated, I am near you. Do you remember what I told you the last time we met, that no power on earth could make me give you up? I meant what I said, I mean it still. I am not far away; you will see me sooner than you think."

"Is there no signature?" asked Miss March.

"None, but there can be no doubt as to the identity of the writer."

"Of course not."

"I don't want to alarm you, my dear, but you ought to be very careful."

"I shall be."

Al laughed.

"I don't think there is much danger," he said. "That letter sounds like an extract from a sensational novel. A barking dog never bites, you know."

"I don't know anything of the sort," returned Mr. Wattles. "Some barking dogs do bite; and this one, as you have reason to know yourself, has sharp teeth. Well, just let me lay my hands on him and I'll settle him in short order."

"What will you do?" smiled Al.

"First, as I said before, I'll give him a sound thrashing. Oh, you may laugh, but I can do it, if I am not a boy. And then I'll hand him over to the authorities. By Jove! I had no idea that the fellow was such a scoundrel when he was in my employ, or I wouldn't have kept him an hour. But now I [Pg 132] really must be off. Do your best to-night, Miss March; you'll have one of the biggest houses of the season—thanks to the exertions of that sharp young brother of yours."

And the manager rushed out of the room.

"Brother!" the girl said, softly. "How sweet the name sounds. To think that I have a brother! And a mother!"

"Don't cry—please don't!" entreated Al, with a boy's horror of feminine tears.

"They are tears of joy, brother. And now you must go and send the telegram."

[Pg 133]

## CHAPTER XXII.

### AN AWFUL CATASTROPHE.

A telegram, carefully worded so that Mrs. Allston's maternal alarms might not be aroused, was sent. In it Al requested her to come to Rockton by a certain train, and promised to be at the depot to meet her.

A reply came within an hour:

"Yours received. Shall be there. Hope nothing has happened."

"I should say something had happened," laughed Al, when he and his new-found sister had read the message.

"Poor mother!" sighed the girl. "She fears that you have met with some accident."

"In a very few hours that fear will be dispelled. What will she say when she learns the truth?"

"Ah, what?" responded Miss March. "I dread almost as much as I long for the meeting."

The anxious mother arrived on time. It is not our purpose to chronicle the first meeting between the long-separated couple. Such scenes defy the skill of the storyteller's pen or the artist's brush. Suffice it to say that the proofs of her identity presented by the young girl were perfectly satisfactory to Mrs. Allston, and that the reunion of mother and daughter was all that the fancy of either had ever pictured it.

True, the somewhat Puritanical old lady was a little shocked at finding her daughter a member of the theatrical profession; she had always regarded player folk as far beneath herself, both socially and morally, and her own daughter was probably the first actress she had ever seen off the stage. [Pg 134]

"I wish, my dear," she said, "that you would give up this dreadful business and go home with me. To think of my child, my daughter, a play actress! It is dreadful!"

"Not quite as dreadful as you think, mother," the girl replied, quietly. "I could not conscientiously leave Mr. Wattles until he had secured some one else to play the part. Then, however, if you wish me to give up the stage, I shall do so. We will talk it all over after the performance to-night."

"Yes, we will talk it over after the performance," echoed the mother.

The house was crowded to the doors that night. Not a seat was to be had at eight o'clock; even standing room was at a premium.

Again Al had demonstrated his ability as a hustler.

Everyone in town had read and re-read his strange advertisement; many eyes were bent on the third row of the orchestra, in search of the "queer old man." And Mr. Marmaduke Merry was there, too, not a whit abashed, a huge bouquet in his withered hand.

A good many people had heard of his attempt to have Al arrested in the morning—such news travels fast—and he was the unconscious butt of many a covert jest.

Some one—it will never be known who, though there may be reason to suspect Mr. Augustus Wattles—had caused the report to be spread that the pretty actress, Miss Gladys March, was the long-lost sister of the young press agent, Al Allston, and that they had been reunited through the article in the *Banner*. That more than one person knew about it was evident when Al made his appearance in a box, with his mother on his arm; the applause that greeted him was as unexpected as it was embarrassing. [Pg 135]

At first the boy did not realize that he was the object of these unusual demonstrations.

"What are they making all that noise about?" he said.

"Why, they are applauding you," his mother said.

"Nonsense!"

"Don't you see that every eye is fixed on this box?"

"I don't know but you are right," gasped Al, feeling symptoms of a return of the "stage fright" with which he had been seized on the occasion of the first performance in Boomville.

"Of course I am."

"Of course she is," added Mr. Wattles, suddenly appearing upon the scene. "Bow, my boy, bow! And couldn't you make a little impromptu speech?"

"Not much!" replied Al, very emphatically. "I tell you, Mr. Wattles, if I had had any idea that the duties of a press agent included so many public appearances, I should not have gone into the business."

He bowed; then some one—probably under the manager's direction—called out:

"Speech! speech!"

But Al shook his head so emphatically that the audience saw he meant his refusal, and the applause soon subsided. [Pg 136]

A few moments later the curtain rose.

There was very little applause until Miss March made her entrance; her appearance was the signal for another demonstration of enthusiasm. Probably seven-eighths of the audience did not know why they were applauding, but the other eighth did, and its enthusiasm was, as a matter of course, contagious. The applause was literally deafening. In its midst Mr. Merry hurled his bouquet upon the stage. It fell at the feet of the young actress, who picked it up, smiling and blushing, to the evident delight of the elderly "masher."

Mrs. Allston shuddered.

"This life of feverish excitement will kill my child," she said. "She must abandon it."

"Wait till you see her play, mother," said Al.

"That will not alter my determination."

"Wait," added the boy, quietly.

He was not wrong in the conclusion he had reached. Miss March's part was small, but it was a strong one. It was that of a persecuted young girl who had been driven from home because of a misunderstanding. It was a pathetic rôle, and before the actress had been on the stage five minutes the entire female portion of the audience were in tears, and there was a suspicious moisture in the eyes of more than one of the sterner sex.

"Isn't she fine?" whispered Al in his mother's ear, as the girl left the stage, after her first scene.

"It is wonderful! I am amazed." [Pg 137]

"You did not think there was so much talent in the family, did you? Now, wouldn't it be a pity to rob the stage of such an ornament?"

"Yes."

"I thought you would say so. I believe she has a great future. But let us leave the decision to her."

"We will do so, my boy."

At this moment there came a shrill cry from the gallery.

"Fire!"

For one instant there was a dead silence; then three-quarters of the audience sprang to their feet.

Then came a mad rush for the exits.

It was a scene of indescribable confusion. Women and children were trampled beneath the feet of those who should have been their protectors, but whose only thought now was to save their cowardly selves.

The shrieks of the terrified women, the groans of the injured, the curses of the rougher element, who, though face to face with death, did not fear to blaspheme—these added to the horror of the scene.

It was evident that the alarm had not been a false one, for the house was rapidly filling with smoke, and the crackling of flames could be plainly heard.

The doors soon became blocked. It seemed certain that many must perish in the flames.

Al quickly led his mother through the door that connected the box with the stage, and conducted her in safety out of the building through the stage entrance.

As he passed Mr. Wattles at the door he uttered one word: [Pg 138]

"Gladys?"

"She is safe," the manager replied. "She went out but a moment ago."

"Thank Heaven! Mother, are you afraid to go back to the hotel alone?"

"No, no; it is but a very short distance. But what are you going to do, my boy?"

"I think I can be of some assistance in getting the people out. Good-by! I shall be with you again soon."

And he rushed around to the front of the house, where the confusion was greater than ever.

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## CHAPTER XXIII.

### AN EVENTFUL NIGHT.

The Rockton police force were evidently not equal to the emergency—two or three Hibernians in blue uniform were rushing wildly about, issuing orders to which no one paid the slightest attention.

Meanwhile nearly a thousand people were confined within the burning building, most of them apparently doomed to a horrible death.

At the doors—of which there were only two—men were fighting like maniacs to escape, and actually retarding their own progress in their mad excitement.

What could one boy hope to do against this panic-stricken throng?

This is the question that Al Allston asked himself.

"I'm afraid I shan't accomplish much," he said to himself; "but I'm going to try, anyhow."

Assuming as cool an air as he could, he ran up to the entrance.

"Gentlemen," he said, "there is no danger. Take it easy; walk out just as you would at any other time, and everything will be all right. Keep cool."

Probably not more than half a dozen persons heard the words, but the few who did hear them were impressed by the calm, fearless demeanor of the boy, which was in such striking contrast to that of everyone else in the crowd.

An example of this sort is contagious; word was passed from one man to another that the danger was not as great as had been supposed. The conduct of the throng changed almost immediately. [Pg 140]

"Walk out quietly," went on Al, who was now able to make himself heard. "Those on the right-hand side go in the direction of Grand Street, and those on the left in the direction of Market Street. Don't block the sidewalk. Keep cool, and everyone will get out all right. There is nothing to get excited about."

These words had almost a magical effect. In reality, there was quite enough in the situation to excite anyone, but Al's apparent calmness and his assertion that the danger did not amount to anything produced just the result he desired.

The crowd became more rational, and to make a long story short, within three minutes the building was emptied, even of the women and children who had fainted or been injured.

Five minutes later the roof of the building fell in, but there was every reason to believe that not a single human life had been sacrificed.

Al started for his hotel as quietly as if nothing unusual had happened. But he had gone only a few steps when he was overtaken by Mr. Wattles.

To his astonishment, the manager folded him in his arms, exclaiming:

"By Jove! I wish you were my son!"

"What's the matter now?" asked the boy, disengaging himself. [Pg 141]

"Matter? Why, the matter is that you have in all probability saved the lives of several hundred people."

"Nonsense!"

"That's just what you have done, all the same. You have a cool head for such a young fellow—I can tell you that. If it hadn't been for you—I shudder to think of what might have happened. You are, as I have had occasion to remark before, a wonder."

"Nonsense, Mr. Wattles! But I must go now; mother is sure to be worrying about me."

"But there are a score of people waiting to be introduced to you, and I have promised to bring you back with me."

"I can't go, Mr. Wattles."

"But——"

"Tell them that I—— Oh, just tell them the plain truth."

"That you have a morbid horror of being lionized?"

"If you want to put it in that way; and that my mother is waiting for me."

"Well, well, I won't urge you—particularly as I know that you generally mean what you say and stick to it. But, let me tell you, young man, you will have to stand considerable lionizing before you leave this town, whether you like it or not."

"I don't think so," smiled Al. "There is an early train in the morning, if I am not mistaken."

"But you won't take it." [Pg 142]

"You will see. Well, good-night, Mr. Wattles. Oh, wait a moment!"

"What is it?"

"You are sure my sister got out all right?"

"Oh, yes; everyone on the stage escaped within two minutes after the first alarm. Don't you know I told you that I saw her go out? You will find her with your mother when you get back to the hotel."

Al said good-night once more, and walked away.

"Well," muttered the manager, as he stood and watched the lad's slim figure until it was lost to view, "that boy is a corker. I don't believe he is afraid of anything on earth—except speech-making. I should like to see him really agitated for once."

Mr. Wattles had his wish in less than fifteen minutes.

He had just lighted the gas in his hotel room when there was a quick knock upon the door.

Before he could say "Come in!" Al rushed into the room.

One glance at his face showed the manager that something unusual must have happened. Never before had he seen the boy so intensely excited; he was panting for breath, and his face was ghastly pale.

"What is the matter?" the old gentleman gasped.

"Gladys—my sister——" the boy began.

"Has anything happened to her?"

"We cannot find her."

"She has not returned to the hotel?"

"No." [Pg 143]

"Oh, there can be no occasion for alarm. I told you she got out of the theater all right."

"But she may have returned."

"What should she return for? But she did not; that I am sure of."

"Where is she, then?"

"Oh, don't worry, my boy; she will turn up all right. Perhaps she has gone to visit friends."

"Would she be likely to visit friends under such circumstances?" said the boy, almost angrily. "She has no acquaintances in this place—she told me so only this afternoon; and if she had, this is not the time she would choose for making a social call."

"No, of course not, my boy. Well, what do you think has become of her?"

"I believe that she has been the victim of foul play. Have you forgotten Farley's letter?"

Mr. Wattles started.

"It may be so."

"I am sure it is."

"But I have seen nothing of Farley."

"He would not be likely to let you see anything of him if he could help it."

"True. Well, what shall we do? Command me, my boy; I am at your service."

Before Al could reply the door, which the boy had only partially closed, was opened, and a man entered.

Both our hero and the manager recognized him as one of the stage hands in the Rockton Theater. [Pg 144]

When he saw Al he started, then he said:

"Mr. Wattles, I came here on purpose to get this here young gentleman's address."

"My address?" cried Al. "What do you want that for?"

"Is it true, sir," the man asked, "that the young lady as was on the bills as Miss Gladys March is your sister?"

"Yes."

"Then, sir, I have some information for you."

"Do you know where she is?" demanded the boy, breathlessly.

"No, sir; but I know that she is in a trap, and that if you want to save her you must act quick. I've come here, sir, to make a clean breast of my part in the affair."

Overcome by excitement, Al seized the fellow by the throat and forced him to his knees.

"Speak!" he hissed. "Tell the truth, or I will strangle you!"

[Pg 145]

# CHAPTER XXIV.
## A CLEW.

Mr. Wattles stepped forward and gently forced Al to relax his hold on the man's throat.

"Don't get excited, my boy," he said. "This is just the time when you need a cool head."

"That's so, sir," added the visitor. "I don't blame the young gent for the way he feels, but if he expects to get the best of that villain, Jack Farley, he has got to keep his wits about him."

"Then," gasped Al, "it was Farley that enticed her away?"

"It was him, sir."

"And what had you to do with it?"

"More than I wish I had. The truth is, sir, I did not realize what I was doing at the time. I was not onto his game until it was too late, and then I——"

"Don't beat about the bush any longer," interrupted Mr. Wattles, impatiently. "What was Farley's game?"

"Where is my sister?" added Al, in an agony of suspense.

"It's like this, gents," replied the man. "Just before the alarm of fire was given a man came to the stage door, where I happened to be standing at the time. His collar was turned up, and his hat was pulled down, and at first I did not recognize him. 'I want you to do me a favor,' he says. [Pg 146] 'What is it?' says I, 'and who are you?' 'Don't you know me?' he asks me. 'No, I don't,' I tells him, 'and I ain't got no time to stand here fooling with you.' You see, I thought maybe he was a stage-door masher, though he didn't look much like one, to tell the truth, for he was dressed in a way that——"

"Never mind all that," interrupted Mr. Wattles again. "Get to the point. The man told you he was Farley?"

"He did, sir."

"Why were you any more willing to talk to him then? Had you ever met him before?"

"Oh, yes."

"By your own admission you knew he was a villain. Why, then, were you willing to do him a favor?"

"He did me a great service once, sir, and I was glad of a chance to repay him."

"Even at the risk of a young girl's life happiness, perhaps her life itself?"

"I did not think it was as serious as all that then, sir. You see, all he asked me was to tell Miss March that a friend bearing important news was waiting just outside the stage door to see her, and that he would not detain her more than a minute. He also told me not to say that it was him if she should ask."

"And you did this?"

"I took the message to Miss March, and, as she had at least half an hour's time before she had to go on again, she went with me to the door without any hesitation."

"And then?" cried Al, breathlessly. [Pg 147]

"There was no one else around at the moment. Miss March stepped out. I was surprised to see that there was a carriage waiting in the alley. He said something to her that I could not hear, and led her to the door of the carriage. The next moment, to my surprise, he lifted her in his arms and put her into the carriage. She didn't have time to make any resistance at all. I am not sure, but I think there was another person in the carriage."

"And you made no attempt to interfere?" cried Mr. Wattles.

"What could I do, sir?"

"I am pretty sure that if I had been in your place I should have done something," said the old gentleman, warmly.

"The carriage drove off like mad as soon as the young lady was put into it, sir."

"Didn't Farley enter it, too?"

"Oh, yes, he jumped right in after her. The driver seemed to know what to do; anyway, he received no directions from Mr. Farley in my hearing. I suppose it had all been arranged between them beforehand."

"Of course. You might have given the alarm at once; why didn't you?" demanded Al.

"By that time, sir, the alarm of fire had been given, and there was a terrible commotion in the theater. In the confusion I did not know what to do."

"Well," said Mr. Wattles, "better late than never. But what put it into your head to come here at all?"

"I don't know that I should have come, sir, but when I heard of the heroic way in which this young gent behaved, and how he saved the lives of maybe half the audience—when I heard all this, and was told that the young lady, Miss March, was his sister, I made up my mind that I would come here and make a clean breast of my part of the affair." [Pg 148]

"And you have really told us all you know?"

"All, sir, so help me Heaven!"

"I believe you, my man," said Mr. Wattles.

"And so do I," added Al. "But we must not spend any more time in talk; we have got to do something at once."

"I will do anything in my power to help you, sir," said the man.

"I don't see that you can do much more than you have done," said Al. "You can give me a description of the carriage and the horse, though."

"The carriage was an ordinary livery coach. There were two horses, both of them gray. It was a livery turn-out—there can't be any doubt about that—and not a first-class one, either."

"You don't know what stable it came from?"

"No, sir; but it won't be a very hard job to find that out, for there are only three stables in town. Two of them are quite swell, but the other isn't, and I guess it was from that one that the coach came."

"Well," said Mr. Wattles, springing to his feet, "we can get to work now. Come, my boy, this man shall take us to the stable at once, and we will see what they have to tell us there." [Pg 149]

"I don't want to drag you out, Mr. Wattles," said Al. "I can manage this business alone."

"You can, eh?" said the manager, almost indignantly. "Well, maybe you could, but you won't get the chance. I am going to be right in it with you. Why, do you suppose I could sleep a wink to-night with this thing on my mind? I tell you, my boy, I thought more of that girl than you imagine, and if anything should happen to her——"

Mr. Wattles choked and turned away his head. Al was surprised at this exhibition of emotion; he had not given his employer credit for the possession of so much feeling.

He extended his hand.

"Mr. Wattles," he said, "you are a good friend of mine and hers. Have it your own way, then. Come!"

The manager pressed the boy's hand.

"I don't like scenes—off the stage," he said, rather shamefacedly. "I dislike emotion, and am seldom betrayed into it. But—but—— Oh, well, we mustn't stand here talking all night. Lead the way to the stable you spoke of, my man."

Ten minutes later the trio reached the stable. Here several delays awaited them. In the first place, the man who had been on duty in the office at the time the coach must have been hired, was asleep in a room above the stable, and when awakened refused to get up. After some persuasion, he agreed to do so, and came downstairs half dressed. He was also half asleep, and for several minutes could not recall the event about which his visitors were so anxious to be informed. It had been an unusually busy evening, and he was not sure whether the coach had come from that stable or not. [Pg 150]

At last, however, his memory having been stimulated by a five-dollar bill, which Mr. Wattles slipped into his hands, he remembered having rented the team to a man who answered Farley's description.

"There was a lady with him, too," the man added.

"What sort of a looking woman?" asked the manager.

"Tall, dark, with very black eyes."

"Miss Hollingsworth!" exclaimed Mr. Wattles.

"Just the idea that occurred to me," added Al.

"It was she, beyond the shadow of a doubt. She is in the scheme, too, then. That woman is capable of anything. At last we have a clew, and a strong one."

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# CHAPTER XXV.
## ON THE TRACK.

"But why," questioned Al, "should Miss Hollingsworth lend herself to such a scheme?"

"For several reasons," Mr. Wattles replied. "In the first place, she is a woman who likes mischief for its own sake—there are such people, you know. Then, she is under the influence of Farley; that is a fact that I have known for a long time. That man can make her do almost anything he wishes."

"Is she in love with him?"

"Sometimes I have thought so, and sometimes I have thought she almost hated him. He seems to exercise a sort of hypnotic influence over her; that is the only way in which I can explain it."

"If she is in love with him," suggested Al, "it is rather strange, isn't it, that she should help him to abduct a rival?"

"Not when you consider everything. Remember that the woman has a grudge against you. You haven't forgotten that episode at the Boomville Opera House, have you? You were the indirect means of throwing her out of an engagement."

"That is so."

"You can depend upon it," went on the manager, "that the woman in the case—and in the carriage—was Miss Olga Hollingsworth. But we mustn't stand talking here any longer."

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Mr. Wattles had observed that the stableman was listening to the dialogue with considerable interest.

"Where did the couple say they were going?" he added.

"They said," was the reply, "that they wanted to catch a train, but that they had to make a call first."

"Did they say where they were going to call?"

"They did not."

"Did they say what train they wanted to catch?"

"No, sir."

"Where is the driver that took them out? Has he returned yet?"

"He came back long ago, and has gone home."

"Did he say where he took them?" questioned Al.

"No, sir, he said nothing about the matter; all we were talking about was the theater fire."

"Well," said Mr. Wattles, with a wink at Al, "we are much obliged for your information. Good-night."

And he took the boy's arm and walked him rather unceremoniously out of the place.

"I wanted to ask a few more questions," said Al, when they were outside.

"It wouldn't have done any good, my boy. The man told us all he knew about the case."

"I'm not so sure about that," demurred Al. "It seems rather queer to me that the driver should say nothing at all about such a peculiar case when he got back to the stable. According to the report of the stage hand he must have been posted about Farley's intention. He was really a party to the crime."

[Pg 153]

"Exactly; and that, of course, is just the reason he said nothing when he got back. But we can find out all that later on. Now, in my opinion, they—Farley, Hollingsworth and their victim—did really take a train. The question now is, what train?"

"Perhaps we can learn that at the railway station."

"Just what I was going to say. We will go to the station now and find out what trains leave at about the time that our friends would have been likely to reach the place."

"Rockton is not a very big place; there are not many trains a day."

"No; we shan't have any trouble in getting the information we want."

They found the station agent at the depot. He was a small, shriveled-up old man, and he glared suspiciously at them when they questioned him.

It took them some minutes to elicit the information that two trains left the station at nine-ten—about the hour that the carriage would have reached the place if it had gone there direct from the theater.

"And where do these two trains go?" asked Mr. Wattles.

"One goes to New York."

"And the other?"

"The other is the Boston express."

The manager then described the occupants of the carriage. [Pg 154]

"I remember them; what of it?" said the station agent, crustily.

"What do you remember about them?"

"I remember that one of the ladies—the smaller one—seemed to be sick; at any rate, she had to be helped into the waiting room, where they all three stayed till the train arrived."

"Which of the two trains did they take?" cried Al.

"That I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"That's what I said. Do you suppose I keep tabs on everyone that comes into this place? Hardly."

"The New York train and the Boston train were here at the same time?"

"Yes."

"And they might have taken either?"

"They might."

"It is of a good deal of importance to us," said Al, "to learn which of those two trains they took."

"I can't help that," was the reply. "I'm no clairvoyant or fortune-teller."

"Isn't there some one about the station who could give us some information?"

"I don't think there is. The ticket-seller that they bought their tickets from might tell you something, but he's off now; there is another man in his place."

Al and Mr. Wattles stared at each other in perplexity.

Just then a hang-dog looking young fellow of about Al's age came slouching up. [Pg 155]

"Here, Smith," called out the station agent, "these folks want some information; perhaps you can give it to 'em. Tell this chap what you want, gents, and maybe he can help you out."

Al explained the situation to the fellow, who said, readily enough:

"Oh, yes; I remember that party."

"And which of the two trains did they take?"

"The one goin' to Boston."

"At last," exclaimed Mr. Wattles, "we have a little information. Now, then, my boy, what shall we do?"

"I shall follow them," replied Al, promptly.

"I wish I could go with you, but——"

"I know it would be impossible, Mr. Wattles; and probably I shall get along just as well alone."

"Maybe; but I'd like to be with you to witness the discomfiture of that arch-villain. Well, come along and get your ticket for Boston."

They were now walking in the direction of the ticket office.

"No," said Al, "I shall get a ticket for New York."

"Eh?"

The boy repeated the statement.

"But that fellow said they went to Boston; you must have misunderstood him."

"Oh, no, I didn't."

"He certainly said Boston."

"I know he did." [Pg 156]

"And yet you are going to get a ticket for New York?"

"I am."

"I don't understand you."

"I'll explain. You didn't see the wink he gave the station agent when he told us the Boston train yarn, did you?"

"No."

"I did."

"You think he was lying to us?"

"I am sure of it. Farley probably paid him to put us off the track."

"Allston, you are a smart young fellow, but there is such a thing as being too smart. It may be that by going to New York you will lose them."

"I don't think so, Mr. Wattles; I am sure I am right. At any rate, I will take the chances."

Twenty minutes later Al was on his way to the metropolis.

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# CHAPTER XXVI.
## "DR. FERGUSON."

As may be imagined, Al was very tired when he boarded the train for New York. It had been a hard day for him; yet, though physically fatigued, he was mentally alert.

Next him sat a clerical-looking man of about fifty, who presently remarked:

"You got on at Rockton, young gentleman, did you not?"

Al, glad of the chance to speak to anyone, replied in the affirmative.

"I once had a charge there," went on the old man.

Al did not understand him.

"A charge?" he said, interrogatively.

"Yes; I am a minister of the Gospel."

"Indeed, sir?"

"Yes; I was pastor of the wealthiest church in Rockton. I left it to accept a call to New York."

As this statement possessed no especial interest to the boy, he made no reply.

There was a silence of some minutes' duration. Then the old gentleman broke out with:

"May I offer you my card?"

At the same time he thrust a bit of pasteboard into Al's hand.

Upon it was inscribed the name, David Ferguson, D. D. [Pg 158]

"I haven't a card with me, Dr. Ferguson," said the boy; "but my name is Allen Allston."

His traveling companion grasped his hand, and shook it with a remarkable exhibition of warmth, considering their short acquaintance.

"I am delighted to meet you, my young friend," he said. "Are you going far?"

"To New York, sir."

"Indeed! Then we shall be traveling companions for nearly three hours. How delightful!"

The prospect did not seem quite so delightful to Al; for, although he was glad to have some one to talk to, he began to fear that the Rev. Dr. Ferguson might not prove a wholly congenial

companion.

"Are you a resident of Rockton?" went on the doctor.

"No, sir."

"Only a visitor there?"

"That's all."

"Rockton is a beautiful place."

Al acquiesced.

"And you don't live there?" continued Dr. Ferguson.

"I do not."

"You were visiting friends?" questioned the old man, whose bump of curiosity seemed to be well developed.

"I was not, sir; I was there on business."

"On business! Really? You are quite young to be actively engaged in business."

As this was a point upon which Al was a little sore, he made no reply. He was now quite willing to let the conversation end right there and then. [Pg 159]

But Dr. Ferguson would not have it so.

"What was the nature of your business, if I may ask?" he resumed. "Pardon me, if I seem inquisitive."

"Well," said Al, with a sigh, "I don't know that I have any reason to be ashamed of my business."

"I trust not, my dear young friend—I most sincerely trust that you have not."

"I am connected with Wattles' New York Comedy Company."

Dr. Ferguson gasped for breath.

"You are an actor—at your age?" he cried.

Al laughed, a little sarcastically, it is to be feared.

"It isn't quite as bad as that," he said.

"Ah!"

"I am only the advance agent."

"And what, may I ask, is an advance agent?"

Al explained.

"It is not, then, quite as bad as I thought," said his companion.

"It might be a heap worse," responded the boy, laconically.

"But still," went on the reverend gentleman, "a position such as that you hold may lead to something worse. You may in time—pardon me, if I hurt your feelings—you may in time become an actor."

"I guess not," said Al, who had some difficulty in repressing a smile.

"You cannot tell, my dear young friend; one wrong step leads to another, and once on the road to destruction, there is no knowing where or when the end will come." [Pg 160]

"I hope I am not on the road to destruction yet," said Al, "and I feel pretty sure that I am not."

"Pride cometh before a fall, my dear young friend," said the doctor, impressively. "The moment you begin to be too sure of yourself, you have taken the first downward step. You may not be conscious of it, but it is taken."

Al began to shift about uneasily in his seat.

"I know that what I say is not pleasant for you to hear," continued the old gentleman, "but I speak for your own good."

He then went on to deliver a long homily on the evils of theatrical life, and actually succeeded in tiring Al to such an extent that he fell asleep.

He was awakened by a voice shouting in his ear:

"This ain't a sleeping car, young man. All off!"

Al leaped to his feet, only half awake. The car was empty of everyone except himself and a brakeman.

"Where are we?" he cried.

"In New York," was the reply. "Say, young fellow, you are a pretty sound sleeper."

"Well, I'm awake now," said the boy. "I'm sorry to have given you any trouble."

"Oh, that's all right. But you haven't lost anything, have you?"

"No. Why?"

"I don't see your baggage anywhere?" [Pg 161]

"I didn't bring anything with me."

"That's all right, then. I was afraid that duck in the seat with you might have got away with your stuff."

Al laughed.

"That was a clergyman," he said—"the Rev. Dr. Ferguson."

"Reverend nothing," grinned the brakeman. "Say, young man, you must be from 'way back."

"Why?"

"Why, that fellow is one of the cleverest confidence men in the country."

"Do you know what you are talking about?" asked the boy, in amazement.

"You can bet I do. Oh, he has fooled sharper ones than you or I. You didn't lend him anything, did you?"

"I did not."

"Nor invest in green goods or anything of that sort?"

"No."

"Well, you are one of the lucky ones, then. When I saw him giving you so much chin music I thought he had you sure."

"Well, he didn't."

And Al left the car on very good terms with himself.

"Now, then," he mused, "I'll start in on the business that brought me here. I'll go to the nearest police station first. I don't know where it is, so to save time I'll take a cab."

As he thus ruminated, he mechanically felt in his pocket. [Pg 162]

The next moment he uttered an involuntary exclamation.

His money was gone, and so were his watch, and the ring that had been presented to him in Boomville.

He had not, after all, escaped scot-free from the "Reverend David Ferguson."

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## CHAPTER XXVII.
### AN UNLUCKY ERROR.

Al's self-esteem had suffered a severe shock.

He had considered himself quite competent to look out for "Number One," but this plausible swindler, the very first person he had met on the train, had easily succeeded in swindling him out of all the valuables he had about him.

He had lost about a hundred and fifty dollars in cash, his watch, which was worth at least another hundred, and the valuable diamond ring that had been presented to him on the stage of the Boomville Opera House.

He was alone and penniless in a great city at two o'clock in the morning, with a mission to perform that would almost necessarily involve the outlay of money.

While he stood at the entrance of the Grand Central Depot the brakeman who had addressed him on the car came along. Noticing the look of dismay on the boy's face, he said:

"There's nothing the matter, is there?"

"I should say there was."

"What is it? That bunco man didn't get the best of you, after all, did he?"

"Rather."

And Al proceeded to inform the man of his loss.

His companion uttered a low whistle.

"Well, he did soak it to you, for fair," he said. "He don't generally play that game; as a rule he works the thing in a more artistic way than that. Well, he got the money, all the same. It was a pretty good haul, too." [Pg 164]

"I don't see how he got that ring off my finger without waking me up," said Al, ruefully.

"Oh, he can do more than that," grinned the brakeman. "He'd manage to rob you of your eyeteeth if he happened to take a fancy to them. He's a daisy!"

"I wish you had warned me when you saw him talking to me on the train."

"I couldn't very well do that; but I kept an eye on you both, and if I had seen him up to any funny business, I should have spoken. Hasn't he left you any money at all?"

"Not a cent."

"Well, see here, I'll let you have a few dollars if you'll promise to return 'em as soon as you get funds."

"Of course I will, and I am very much obliged to you," said Al, surprised at this unexpected offer.

"Here you are, then."

And the man handed him a small roll of bills.

"Give me your address," said Al, "and I'll return this to you within a day or two, with something to boot."

"I don't want anything to boot. I'll write down my address, if you'll lend me a pencil a minute."

Al handed him a pencil. The man was about to write the address on the back of an envelope, when, to his amazement, his companion made a rush for a cab that stood at the curbstone, gave the driver a few hasty directions in a low tone, and then leaped into the vehicle, which immediately started off at a rapid pace. Before the brakeman could recover from his astonishment, the cab had turned a corner and disappeared. [Pg 165]

"Well," gasped the man, "if I haven't been buncoed myself, and by a kid at that. I'll bet he and the other fellow were pals. And I never suspected it! Well, I'll get my ten dollars back if it costs me a hundred to do it. This is the last time I'll ever lend money to a stranger. I wish I could hire some one to kick me round the block."

The brakeman could scarcely be blamed for forming this opinion of Al, erroneous though it was. Appearances were certainly against the boy, and the reader is, perhaps, wondering if he had suddenly become insane or developed into a kleptomaniac.

The reason for our hero's strange action was this: Just as he handed the brakeman the pencil a carriage was passing the depot, from the window of which peered the face of the very man for whom Al was seeking—Jack Farley.

There was no time for explanations; the carriage was going at a rapid rate. Al rushed out to the cab that stood at the entrance and said to the driver:

"Do you see that carriage yonder?—the one that is just about to turn the corner? Follow it wherever it goes and I'll pay you well."

"Enough said!" the man responded.

As we have seen, the boy entered the cab, and was driven away. [Pg 166]

"That brakeman will think that I am a thief, too, I'm afraid," Al mused. "Well, I can't help it; it will be all right to-morrow. But he is a good fellow, and I don't like the idea of being misunderstood in that way by him even for a few hours. There's no help for it, though; I couldn't afford to let Farley get away from me!"

The two vehicles kept at an even distance from each other until Tenth Street was reached. At the corner of that thoroughfare and Fifth Avenue the carriage in advance came to a sudden halt.

Al's driver stopped almost at the same moment.

"What shall I do now, sir?" he called out to his passenger.

"Go right ahead," the boy directed. "When you get to the spot, stop, if the other coach has not started again in the meantime; if it has, go on as long as it does."

In less than a minute later Al's carriage once more come to a standstill.

At the same moment a man leaped from the other carriage, advanced to the cab and threw open the door.

"What do you mean," he demanded, "by following my carriage? I have been onto you ever since you started. Who are you, and what do you want?"

The man was not Jack Farley; he did not resemble him in any way.

He was an elderly man, fashionably dressed, and had the appearance of one who was on his way home after a ball, or some other social function, with just enough wine on board to make him quarrelsome. [Pg 167]

"What is your little game?" continued the man. "Come, out with it; I am going to know."

Al was decidedly embarrassed.

"It is all a mistake," he stammered.

"That's too thin," said the stranger. "I'm onto you; you are a detective! Now, what are you shadowing me for?"

Al could not help laughing.

"I am no more a detective than you, sir," he said. "I told my driver to follow a certain carriage, and he has made a mistake; that's all there is to it."

"I made no mistake," interposed the driver, surlily. "This is the carriage you told me to follow."

"You are wrong; the man in that carriage was not this gentleman. Remember, it turned the corner before we left the depot, so you lost sight of it for half a minute or so."

"That's so," admitted cabby.

"It had probably turned out of the street before we turned into it, and you, seeing this gentleman's carriage, supposed it to be the same, and followed it."

"I guess that explains it."

"Well, it doesn't explain it to me," said the aggrieved stranger. "I consider this affair an outrage, and I am going to have it investigated."

"Go ahead and investigate, then," said Al, losing his patience. "You are making a mountain of a mole hill."

"I am, eh? Well, you'll see whether I am or not. Cabman, I have your number." [Pg 168]

"That's all right; keep it," growled the jehu.

"I shall keep it, and make good use of it, too. You will hear from me again."

And the man climbed back into his carriage, flushed almost as much with anger as with wine.

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# CHAPTER XXVIII.

## AN EXCITING INTERVIEW.

As the carriage rolled away Al and the cabman stood and stared at each other. Then the latter burst into a loud laugh.

"Well, sir," he said, "this is the funniest job I have had for many a long day."

Al failed to appreciate the humor of the situation.

"It does not strike me as being particularly funny," he said.

"It doesn't?"

"Decidedly not. Why did you lose sight of the other cab?"

"Why, you explained that yourself just now. The two carriages looked just alike; I believe they were the same."

"No, they were not. The man I saw looking from the window of the carriage that passed the Grand Central Depot was not the man we have just been talking to."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. You followed the wrong carriage; that is all there is to it."

"Well," admitted the cabby, "I think you are right. Where shall I take you now?"

"Nowhere; I'll walk. How much do I owe you?"

"Ten dollars," was the calm reply.

"Ten what?" demanded Al. [Pg 170]

"Dollars."

"Ten dollars for driving me that short distance?"

"Do you call that a short distance?"

"Yes; I could have walked it in a good deal less than half an hour."

"Why didn't you, then?"

"I——"

"Now, see here," interrupted the cabman, with a threatening air, as he put his face in very close proximity to Al's, "I don't want no muss with you. See? But I get that ten dollars. Do you think I'm driving this here thing for fun? Not on your life!"

This was Al's first experience with one of the class known in New York as "night-hawks," and for a moment he hesitated. Imagining that he had gained an advantage, the man added:

"Now, look lively! I've got something else to do besides standing here chinning with you."

"Yes," said the boy, quietly, "you have. On second thoughts, I'll keep your cab a little longer. Drive me to the nearest police station."

The man stared at him, then asked, rather uneasily:

"What for?"

"So that I can find out just what I ought to pay you. It won't take either of us long to get the information."

The night-hawk saw that he had, for once, met his match.

"See here, young gent," he said, "I don't want no trouble with you." [Pg 171]

"If there is any trouble, you will bring it on yourself," responded the boy.

"I've got no time to waste. Give me a V and I'll call it square."

"I'll give you nothing of the sort."

"What will you pay, then?"

"Two dollars is quite enough."

"Make it three, boss."

"I can't do it," said Al, who saw that he had by luck hit upon about the right price. "Will you take two, or will you go with me to the nearest police station and let them settle the matter there?"

"Give me the two," said the man, sullenly. "I'll take it, but I'm losing money on the job. If I'd stayed up at the station I might have picked up——"

"You might have picked up a bigger greenhorn than you did," added Al. "Well, I'll wish you good-morning."

He was about to turn away when a heavy hand was laid on his shoulder, and a familiar voice exclaimed:

"Well, this is luck. I didn't expect to find you as easy as all this."

"Oh, it's you, is it?" cried Al, recognizing the friendly brakeman who had loaned him the money. "I'm mighty glad I ran across you."

"You are, eh?" sneered the man.

Al looked at him in surprise.

"Yes, I was going to hunt you up."

"Oh, you were?" [Pg 172]

"Of course I was. I wanted to explain to you why I left you so suddenly. You must have thought ——"

"I thought the truth—that I had been made the victim of a swindler. I made up my mind that I would hunt you up, but I didn't expect to find you quite so soon; that was blind luck."

"See here," said Al, his anger rising, "you are going a little too far. I was, and am, much obliged to you for lending me that money, but I——"

"Lending nothing," interrupted the cabman, who had been a silent listener to the conversation. "Why, the young villain has just been telling me how he euchered a brakeman up at the Grand Central out of a wad."

"It is a lie!" burst from the lips of the indignant boy, and he advanced toward the treacherous fellow with clinched fists.

But the cabman retreated and leaped upon his box.

"If I didn't have my cab here," he said, as he gathered up the reins, "I'd teach you to call me a liar. Boss"—to the brakeman—"you're in luck to find the young rascal so easy. Don't let him off; I know him well, and, in spite of his innocent looks, he is one of the toughest youngsters in the city."

With these words the rascal whipped up his horses and started up the avenue at as rapid a pace as his steeds were capable of.

"Do you believe that fellow's story?" demanded Al, looking his companion squarely in the eyes.

"You can bet I do," was the prompt reply. [Pg 173]

"You think I am a thief?"

"Haven't I pretty good proof of it?"

"I——"

"Now, see here, young fellow," interrupted the indignant brakeman, "I am not going to sit up till daylight to discuss this matter with you. You can talk it over with the judge later. You buncoed me in a very neat manner; I admit you did the job well, but luck happened to be on my side, and the game is lost for you. But see here; just to avoid trouble, if you hand me back my ten dollars, I'll let you off."

"I'll give you all I have left of it," said Al; "and some day I'll prove to you that I am not——"

"That's all right," interrupted the uncompromising brakeman. "I don't care what you are; all I want is my ten dollars, not what you have left, but just what I gave you."

"I have just paid that cabman two dollars," said Al, "and all I can give you is eight. I am very sorry I accepted the loan at all."

"You ain't as sorry as I am," sneered the brakeman. "But, see here, I'm not going to fool any more time away with you. I've had a hard day, and I've got to start in again at eleven o'clock. To save myself trouble, I have offered to let you off if you would give me my money back. If you won't, you will go with me to the station house, where I shall make a formal complaint against you. Now, what do you say?"

Before Al could reply a man suddenly turned the corner of Eleventh Street. [Pg 174]

As he approached, the boy grasped his companion's arm.

"Now," he said, "I'll prove to you that you have made a mistake."

"How?"

"Do you see this man coming?"

The brakeman looked, then started.

"It's your pal!" he exclaimed, recognizing the individual who had been introduced to the reader as the "Rev. David Ferguson."

"He's no more my pal than you are," said Al. "Just keep your eyes and ears open, and I'll convince you on that point, at any rate."

The alleged reverend gentleman was approaching rather slowly. His eyes were on the pavement. He was smiling; evidently his thoughts were of an agreeable nature.

He did not observe Al and his companion until he was within a few feet of them; then the boy suddenly stepped forward, saying:

"Good-morning, Mr. Ferguson."

[Pg 175]

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### A DANGEROUS JOB AHEAD.

The reverend gentleman started; a decidedly uneasy expression appeared upon his face.

"I don't know you, young gentleman," he said.

"Oh, you can't have forgotten me, Mr. Ferguson," said Al. "My name is Allston; don't you remember the interesting conversation we had on the train this morning?"

"Ahem! I think I do recognize you now."

"I thought you would. Isn't this rather early for you to be out, Mr. Ferguson?"

"I have not yet returned to my home; I have been on an errand of mercy. And now I must ask you to excuse me, for I am greatly fatigued."

"Wait a minute."

"Well, what is it?"

"I suppose you have often heard it said that justice and mercy ought to go hand in hand."

"It is a very true saying, my lad."

"Well, you say you have just been on an errand of mercy; suppose you now perform an act of justice."

"What do you mean?" demanded Mr. Ferguson, uneasily.

"I guess you know. I mean that I want you to hand back the money and jewelry that you stole from me."

"Do you mean to insult me, or are you mad?" almost shouted the alleged clergyman. "Do you dare accuse me, me, David Ferguson, of theft?" [Pg 176]

"That's about the size of it," replied Al, coolly. "And, remember, I know now that your name is no more David Ferguson than mine is."

"Do you dare——" began the fellow.

"That'll do," interrupted Al. "Bluff will not work with me. Are you going to return my property?"

He had not uttered the last word when "Mr. Ferguson" abruptly turned on his heel and started to run.

He did not go far, however. Out went Al's foot, and the next moment the adventurer lay sprawling on the pavement. He was helped to his feet by Al and the brakeman, who both kept a tight hold on him.

The sanctimonious expression had entirely vanished from the fellow's face, which now wore a look of rage and fear.

The transformation was wonderful; he did not seem the same man.

"Well," he said, "what are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to hand you over to the police in short order if you don't return my property."

"If I give it all back," demanded the man, "will you agree not to make any charge against me?"

"Don't agree to anything of the sort," interrupted the belligerent brakeman.

But Al said:

"I ought not to do it, but I have no time to attend to the case, so, if you hand back what you took from me you can go." [Pg 177]

"Mr. Ferguson" fished the roll of bills from his pocket and handed it to Al, who carefully counted it.

"Now, the watch and ring," he said.

The "crook" produced the timepiece and gave it to its owner.

"I can't return the ring," he whined.

"Why can't you?"

"I've pawned it."

"Give me the ticket, then."

"I can't do that, either."

"How is that?"

"I've lost it."

"Well," said Al, "that's unlucky—for you. Now, see here, my reverend friend, I have no more time to waste. If your story is true, you'll come along with me to the police station. If it is a lie, which I believe, you had better hand over that ring in quick time."

"I——"

"I advise you to hurry, for here comes a policeman, and if the ring is not on my finger by the time he gets here, I shall hand you over to him as sure as I am standing here."

The "crook" hesitated no longer.

"Here you are, then," he said.

As he spoke, he thrust the ring into Al's hand.

"Now," he asked, in a voice that trembled with nervousness, "may I get out?"

"Skip," responded Al, laconically. [Pg 178]

In less than ten seconds the fellow had disappeared from view.

The brakeman extended his hand to his companion.

"I have wronged you," he said.

"That's what I told you," replied Al, quietly, "but you wouldn't take my word for it."

"I hope you'll accept my apology."

"Of course I will; and you must accept your money back."

And the boy handed his companion a ten-dollar bill.

"I hope you don't feel hard toward me?" persisted the man.

"Not at all," Al responded, readily. "You were very kind to offer me the money at the depot. I was a perfect stranger to you."

"But I sized you up as a square lad."

"It didn't take you long to change your mind, though."

"You must admit that I had some reason to change it."

"I do admit it. Appearances were very much against me, and if I had been in your place I should, very likely, have thought just what you did."

"Nevertheless, I'm sorry I was so hasty. Now, see here, young fellow, I've taken a liking to you—honest, I have. I'd like to help you. Now, I have an idea that you are in some sort of trouble."

"You are not far out of the way there," admitted the boy.

"Of course, it's none of my business, and I'm not one of the sort that cares much about other people's affairs; but—but what is your trouble? I only ask, thinking that I may be able to help you in some way." [Pg 179]

Al hesitated, then said:

"I need help badly enough, but I don't see what you could do. However, I will tell you why I am in New York."

In a few words he told the story of his sister's abduction. When he explained why he had left the depot so suddenly his companion interrupted him.

"Why," he cried, excitedly, "I saw the cab that you wanted to follow! I can tell you just where you can find its driver, too."

"You can?"

"Yes. As it happens, he is an old friend of mine, and there isn't much that he won't do for me. He drives for a stable up on Fifth Avenue, but he ought to be home by this time. I can get a good deal more information out of him than they would give you if you went up to the stables. Do you want to go round to his house with me now and see if he is in?"

"Is it far from here?"

"Not ten minutes' walk."

"Let us go, then. But, perhaps, we ought to go to a police station first."

"We shall pass one on our way there. Come on; I'll bet that you won't be sorry you met me."

Within five minutes Al had given a description of his sister to the police, and an alarm was about to be sent out when he left the station. [Pg 180]

"Now, to see my friend, Tim Story," said the brakeman, "who, if I am not mistaken, will be able to give us as much information in five minutes as the police will gain in twenty-four hours."

Tim Story's home proved to be a floor in a West-Side tenement. The cabman had just returned home, and did not seem to be in a very communicative mood. But in a few minutes Al's new friend had obtained information from him that gave the boy a new hope.

"We have found her!" he exclaimed. "How can I thank you?"

"Don't thank me yet," was the reply. "Remember the old saying, 'There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip.' You have a dangerous job ahead of you, my boy."

# CHAPTER XXX.

## HARD LUCK.

[Pg 181]

Among the passengers that arrived at the Grand Central Depot by a train which reached the city about three hours before Al Allston's arrival, were a trio who attracted some attention from their fellow passengers; attention that was evidently unwelcome and annoying to at least two of the three.

There were two women and a man. One of the women, slight and heavily veiled, was supported, almost carried, by her companions. She seemed to be very ill.

As she was lifted from the car, one of the passengers, an elderly gentleman, overheard her say:

"Where am I? Where are you taking me?"

The gentleman stepped forward and asked:

"Can I be of any assistance? The lady seems to be sick."

His voice and manner showed very plainly that he suspected there was something wrong, but the two persons he addressed either did not notice this, or willfully ignored it.

"You are very kind, sir," responded the male member of the party of which the apparent invalid was one. "The lady is ill, and we are anxious to get her to her home as soon as possible. Would you be kind enough to call a carriage for us? I would not ask this of a stranger had you not so kindly proffered your assistance."

[Pg 182]

"I will do so with pleasure," replied the gentleman, evidently a little surprised at the manner in which his offer was received. "But may I ask what is the matter with the lady?"

The man he addressed tapped his forehead significantly.

"Brain disease?" questioned the gentleman.

"Yes. Brought on by overwork at school. Poor girl! But we have hope that in a few weeks she will be herself again."

"It is very sad."

"Very; and now, sir, if you will kindly call the carriage for me, I shall be greatly indebted to you."

"Certainly, sir."

As the gentleman hurried away, the woman whom we have mentioned as the third member of the party, a tall, showy-looking brunette, said:

"What's your game, Jack? Why did you send that old fellow for a carriage?"

"It was the easiest way to get rid of him," was the reply. "Didn't you see that he was very suspicious?"

"Of course."

"The way in which I accepted his offer took him off his guard, and, perhaps, saved us some trouble."

"Hush! here he comes."

"I see him. Don't say a word. Leave all to me."

"I have found a very good coach for you," announced the old gentleman, hurrying toward them. "Come this way, please."

[Pg 183]

Murmuring his thanks, Jack Farley, whom the reader has, perhaps, ere this, recognized, hurried toward the entrance, supporting the alleged invalid, who was now moaning piteously.

A few moments later the three were ensconced in the carriage.

"Where shall I tell the driver to go?" asked the gentleman.

Farley gave an address.

As the carriage started, Miss Hollingsworth asked:

"Why did you give that address?"

"You didn't suppose I was going to give the right one, did you?" said Farley, petulantly. "When we are out of sight of the depot I'll tell the driver where to go."

As soon as the coach had turned a corner he leaned out of the window and called out:

"Driver, I've changed my mind."

"Well, sir?"

"Take us to this address."

And he handed the man a card.

"You think of everything," said Miss Hollingsworth.

"I have to."

"I was afraid that we were going to have some trouble with that old man."

"So was I at first, but it turned out all right. I tell you, Olga, it takes a smart one to get the better of Jack Farley."

Miss Hollingsworth gave a peculiar laugh. [Pg 184]

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Farley. "What have you got in your head now?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Yes, you have. What is the matter with you, anyway? Your whole manner to-night has been unnatural and peculiar."

"That is only your imagination."

"It is not. Olga, you are not thinking of rounding on me, are you?"

"Of course not. What an idea!"

"Because if you are, I warn you not to try it; if you do, I'll make you wish you had never been born."

"Why should I round on you, as you put it? Are not our interests one? Am I not helping you in this affair? Am I not unquestioningly obeying you in everything? Jack, you are nervous and excited."

"Well, I guess that's so. What I need is a bottle of fizz; and, as soon as I get the girl to your flat, I'll go down to Billy's and get it."

"Don't do that," said Miss Hollingsworth, uneasily.

"Why not?"

"It is too late."

"It's only a little after twelve o'clock."

"But you will stay there gambling and drinking until morning, and I do not want to be left alone with this girl."

"I shan't stay more than an hour or so; as for the girl, give her another dose of the stuff, and she'll be quiet enough." [Pg 185]

At this moment the carriage halted in front of a tall apartment house on a fashionable thoroughfare within a stone's throw of Fifth Avenue.

Farley alighted first, carrying the unconscious girl, and was followed by Miss Hollingsworth.

"Wait for me, driver," he ordered. "I shall need you again in a few minutes."

"All right, sir."

Ten minutes later Farley emerged from the house.

"Do you know Billy Rawlins' place?" he asked the cabman.

It was a notorious gambling house, and the man knew it well, as did most of his fraternity.

"Take me there, and wait for me."

Twenty minutes later the resort of vice was reached. Farley entered, and did not emerge for more than an hour. When, at last, he did come out, his face was flushed with wine, and wore a look of disgust and anger.

"That's the last time I'll ever set foot in that place," he said, addressing the sleepy driver. "I believe I've been hoodooed by some one. I never have any luck in Billy's nowadays, anyway."

"Luck against you to-night, sir?" asked the cabman, sympathetically.

"I should say luck was against me. I went in there with two hundred dollars, and all I have got left now is only a little more than enough to pay you."

"Hard luck," commented the man, evidently relieved by the latter part of the sentence. [Pg 186]

"Home," ordered Farley, leaping into the carriage.

As the vehicle passed the Grand Central Depot he happened to look out; it was at the precise moment when Al Alston handed the brakeman the pencil.

"That boy here!" muttered Farley. "Well, he hasn't lost any time. I believe he is my evil genius.

Somehow or other the sight of him sends a cold chill over me. I wonder if he saw me? I hope not. Pshaw! Why should I bother my head about the kid? I'll try to dismiss him from my mind for to-night."

The task did not prove an easy one, however, though Farley stopped at two saloons on the way; when the carriage reached its destination his mind was still busy with the boy he hated.

Having paid the driver with almost the last cent he possessed, he entered the house and ascended to the second story.

Unlocking a door at the head of the stairs, he entered a plainly furnished flat.

Miss Hollingsworth met him at the door. There was something in her face that he did not like, as she said:

"Back at last, are you?"

[Pg 187]

# CHAPTER XXXI.
## A WOMAN'S VENGEANCE.

Farley stared at her, scowling savagely, as he said:

"What's the matter? Got one of your cranky fits? If so, you had best not worry me, for I'm in no mood for nonsense."

"Neither am I," was the quiet reply. "But I am going to talk a little solid sense to you."

"I won't listen to you. I'm tired, and want to sleep."

"You will sleep soon, and soundly. Come into the drawing room."

Farley followed her, asking:

"How is the girl?"

"Asleep, under the influence of another dose of the drug."

"Good! Well, what have you to say?"

And he threw himself into a chair.

"I shall not detain you long. I see by your manner that you have lost again to-night."

"Nearly every cent I had with me."

"As usual."

"I shall never enter Billy's place again."

"No, I don't think you will."

"What do you mean?" demanded Farley, uneasily. "I don't understand you to-night, Olga."

"Don't you? Well, I will try to make myself understood." [Pg 188]

"Go on, then, and be quick about it. I'm dead tired."

"I have stood by you for five years, have I not, Jack Farley?" demanded the woman, fixing her large, dark eyes firmly on those of her companion.

"Well, what of that?" growled the man. "It has been to your interest to do so, hasn't it? Have you ever had a decent engagement that I have not obtained for you? And haven't I stuck to you, too? See here, Olga, I am in no mood for recriminations this morning, and you may as well quit just where you are. I see you are going to have one of your tantrums; well, you can have it all by yourself."

Farley rose to leave the room, but his companion placed herself between him and the door.

"Wait," she said, in a strange, hard tone.

"What's the matter with you to-night?" demanded Farley. "Have you gone crazy?"

"Perhaps. At any rate, I will compel you to listen to me."

"You will compel me?" sneered the man. "And how do you propose to do that?"

"Do you see this?"

And Miss Hollingsworth opened her hand, revealing a small cylindrical object.

"What is it?" asked Farley, curiously.

"Dynamite."

The man recoiled.

"You're joking, Olga." [Pg 189]

"I am not. There is enough of the explosive here to tear this house to pieces."

"Where did you get it? What are you going to do with it?"

"Never mind where I got it. As for what I am going to do with it, that you will learn very soon. Now, Jack Farley, will you listen to me?"

"Yes, yes; but give me that stuff, Olga."

"Sit down."

Farley obeyed, with a very pale face.

"Well, what is it?" he asked.

"We are going to have a settlement at last. You no longer love me, Jack Farley."

"Nonsense, Olga. You know——"

"I know that I am speaking the truth. You have thought me merely the creature of your will; I have let you think so, I have borne your indignities patiently——"

"What indignities?" interrupted Farley. "I don't know what you are talking about."

"Was it not an indignity to almost force me to assist you in abducting my rival?"

"Your rival! Nonsense!"

"This girl has supplanted me in your affections."

"This is folly. I only did what I have to revenge myself on that kid, Allston, the girl's brother."

"It is a lie, and I know it. But all will soon be over now."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say, Jack Farley." [Pg 190]

"What are you going to do?"

"Explode this dynamite, and end all at once. Jack, in two minutes you, she and I will be in eternity!"

"Are you stark, staring mad? Give me that stuff!"

The woman laughed wildly.

"No, the hour has come!" she cried.

She lifted the cylinder above her head, with the evident intention of hurling it to the hard wood floor.

But at that instant her arm was seized and the dynamite forced from her hand.

"You have saved at least twenty lives!" gasped Farley, sinking, pale and trembling, into a chair.

"Where is my sister?" demanded Al Allston—for the newcomer was he—paying no attention to his enemy's words.

"She shall be restored to you," said Farley, who was thoroughly sobered by the shock.

"She shall not," cried the woman. "She shall not leave this house alive!"

It was plain to Al that Miss Hollingsworth was mentally deranged, and not wholly responsible for her conduct and words.

"Where is she?" he repeated.

"She is asleep in yonder room," said Farley, pointing to a door at the farther end of the drawing room. "Take her with you and go."

The plotter seemed entirely unnerved; he was ready to surrender at once and without protest all that for which he had schemed so long. [Pg 191]

The boy advanced toward the apartment designated. Miss Hollingsworth made no attempt to detain him as he passed her; but there was a strange, meaning smile on her face, the significance of which our hero did not comprehend.

He entered the adjoining room. His sister lay upon the bed, fully dressed and apparently asleep. He was about to lift her in his arms when there came from the other room a strange, wild peal of laughter. It was immediately followed by a terrific explosion.

Al was thrown to the floor, half stunned by the shock.

In a few moments he had risen. The wall separating the two rooms was partially destroyed; the drawing room was in flames, there was no possibility of escape in that direction.

The boy rushed to the window and threw it open.

An exclamation burst from his lips; there was a fire escape outside.

He lifted the still unconscious girl in his arms, and a moment later he had begun the perilous descent of the frail iron ladder.

It was made in safety; in a few moments Al had deposited the girl in a carriage which had been in waiting for him.

By this time, early as was the hour, the street was thronged with people, attracted by the terrific explosion.

The upper part of the house was in flames, the fire escape was now crowded, and the half-dressed tenants of the building were rushing out, panic-stricken, from the various exits. [Pg 192]

Al was fortunate enough to attract but little attention; five minutes later he and his sister were in a place of safety.

His sudden appearance on the scene may be briefly explained.

The hack driver, Tim Story, had given him the card which he had received from Farley, and Al had lost no time in going to the address given.

In their excitement Farley and his companion had left the outer door of their flat unfastened, and the boy had been able to effect an entrance without difficulty. As had happened more than once before in his life, his natural energy and push had been supplemented by good luck.

A physician, whom Al at once summoned, gave it as his opinion that Gladys was under the influence of an opiate, but that in all probability there was no danger of serious results from the adventure.

[Pg 193]

# CHAPTER XXXII.
## AND LAST.

It was nearly ten o'clock that morning when the girl awoke from her stupor; and, to Al's intense relief, she seemed none the worse for her experience.

All she could remember of the events of the previous night was that she had been forced to enter the carriage at the stage door of the Rockton Theater, and that as soon as she was inside the vehicle a handkerchief saturated with some drug—chloroform, she believed—had been pressed to her nostrils. Then she lost all consciousness of her surroundings.

She had no recollection whatever of the journey to New York, or of any of the subsequent events.

The afternoon papers contained exciting accounts of the explosion. Al had unreservedly given the police all the facts in the case; and in the hands of the reporters the story lost nothing.

The building had been saved from total destruction by the efforts of the firemen, and it was known that no lives had been lost, except those of Miss Hollingsworth and Jack Farley; it seemed certain that they must have perished. It was found that the former had premeditated her horrible crime, and had prepared for emergencies; she had, on the previous day, supplied herself with no less than half a dozen of the dynamite cylinders, so that the loss of the one which Al had taken from her was no obstacle to the accomplishment of her plan. [Pg 194]

Once more Al was the hero of the hour. When he rejoined Mr. Wattles, two days after the events we have just related, he was met at the station by a crowd of citizens, who unhitched the horses from the carriage that was in waiting for him and his sister, and insisted upon dragging the vehicle to the hotel, much to the embarrassment of the two young people.

Al suspected Mr. Wattles to be the instigator of this proceeding, and accused him of having incited the populace to behave as they had.

"What is the matter with you?" the old gentleman asked. "Such a tribute of admiration would turn the head of almost anyone, but you kick about it."

"Didn't you work up the demonstration?" persisted Al.

"Suppose I did?"

"Well, don't do it again."

"I shan't have to. I've set the ball rolling, and the chances are that something of the sort will happen at every town we visit during the next two weeks."

Al groaned.

"I believe I'll throw up the job," he said, half in jest, and half in earnest.

"Well, I believe you won't," said the manager, very much in earnest. "You're just the sort of agent I want. Why, you can't help having adventures and getting into the papers."

"That sort of thing won't last forever."

"I suppose not; but, when you cease to be a popular hero, I think I can trust to your good judgment and business ability to manage things. Throw up the job! I should say not! I couldn't get along without you. And, besides, if you left me, your sister would go, too." [Pg 195]

"That need not necessarily follow."

"She would go; and I tell you I could not get along without her, either."

Mr. Wattles always spoke of Miss March with an awkward, embarrassed air that puzzled Al.

"But, of course," he continued, hastily, "you do not mean what you said. Remember, you promised me——"

"I never went back on my word yet," interrupted Al, "and I shall not now. But I wish these public demonstrations would cease. They seem to me ridiculous, and they annoy me a good deal more than you seem to think."

"Well, you are the queerest press agent I ever struck," said the manager. "However, I guess you won't be much bothered—after to-night."

"Eh?" cried Al. "After to-night? What do you mean by that? What is to be done to-night?"

"Oh, nothing in particular. I ought not to have mentioned it."

"Yes, you ought. Come, out with it!"

"Well, I suppose I may as well. The fact is, the citizens of this place have decided to——"

"Not another speech-making affair at the theater?" interrupted the boy, in horrified accents.

"Well," blurted out Mr. Wattles, "that's just it."

"I shan't be here. You know I've got to go ahead to the next town this afternoon." [Pg 196]

"Oh, no, you haven't," smiled the old gentleman. "The fact is, the sale is so big that I have felt justified in canceling the next two towns, and we are to stay here the remainder of the week. There's no getting out of it, my boy; the thing has got to come off, and this time you will have to make a speech."

At first Al would not hear of this, and declared that he would start for home. But he at last allowed his companion's eloquence to overcome his objections, and agreed to remain.

How he dreaded the ordeal no one but he ever knew, but he made up his mind that, as he put it to himself, he would "see the thing through." He prepared a brief speech, which he memorized, and which he hoped to be able to deliver without breaking down.

Evening came only too soon, and Al, arrayed in a new dress suit, awaited the inevitable call for his appearance. Everything had been "cut and dried," and he knew that there was no escape.

At the end of the first act of the play there arose a shout, "Allston! Allston!"

"Go on, my boy," said Mr. Wattles, who, with his protégé stood upon the stage, just behind the curtain. "What are you trembling for? This ought to be the proudest moment of your life."

With these words he fairly pushed the boy before the audience.

Then arose a whirlwind of applause. When it had subsided, Al tried to begin his speech. But to his utter consternation, he found that he had forgotten every word of it. [Pg 197]

But he was not, after all, obliged to deliver it. As he stood, trying to remember at least one word of the carefully prepared effort, a man suddenly advanced from the rear of one of the proscenium boxes, leveled a pistol at the boy's head and fired.

The bullet whistled past Al's ear, but did not graze it. The next moment the would-be assassin was struggling in the hands of the other occupants of the box. He managed to free himself; then came another report, and the next moment Jack Farley lay dead on the floor of the box, a suicide.

How he had escaped from the doom with which he had been threatened on the previous night, how he had succeeded in entering the theater without attracting attention, will never be known.

Al's speech was forgotten in the excitement, and he was not obliged to make it, after all.

In a few weeks Al ceased to be a popular idol, but he was daily learning new "points" and becoming more and more valuable to his employer; he was already recognized as one of the brightest advance agents on the road.

One morning, about two months after the tragedy that we have just recorded, his sister came to him and said:

"Al, I have a favor to ask of you. Will you grant it?" [Pg 198]

"I promise in advance," was the prompt reply.

"Then congratulate me."

"On what?"

"I am going to be married."

"Married!" gasped the boy. "To whom?"

"To Mr. Wattles."

"You're joking."

"Indeed, I am not!"

"Why, he is forty years your senior."

"He is a good, true man, and I love him; that's enough for me."

"Then it is enough for me, too, sister," was Al's quick reply, "and I do heartily congratulate you."

We need add but a few words. The marriage proved a most happy one, and Mrs. Wattles—whose real name we should give, if we were permitted—is now one of the most popular actresses and most estimable ladies on the American stage.

Al is now no longer an advance agent, but a manager. He is rapidly making a fortune; and, what is better, has earned a reputation for integrity and uprightness second to that of none in his business.

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Transcriber's Note:

The original edition of this book did not contain a table of contents. A table of contents has been created for this electronic edition.

The following typographical errors in the original edition were corrected.

In Chapter III, "would, perhaps, he a good scheme" was changed to "would, perhaps, be a good scheme", and "his eyes over s contents" was changed to "his eyes over its contents".

In Chapter IV, "your prepartions for the performance" was changed to "your preparations for the performance".

In Chapter VI, "his attention was atrracted by the sound" was changed to "his attention was attracted by the sound".

In Chapter XI, "I want you take this" was changed to "I want you take to this".

In Chapter XXVI, "Where are ye?" was changed to "Where are we?"

In Chapter XXVIII, "the boy grasped his ccompanion's arm" was changed to "the boy grasped his companion's arm".

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