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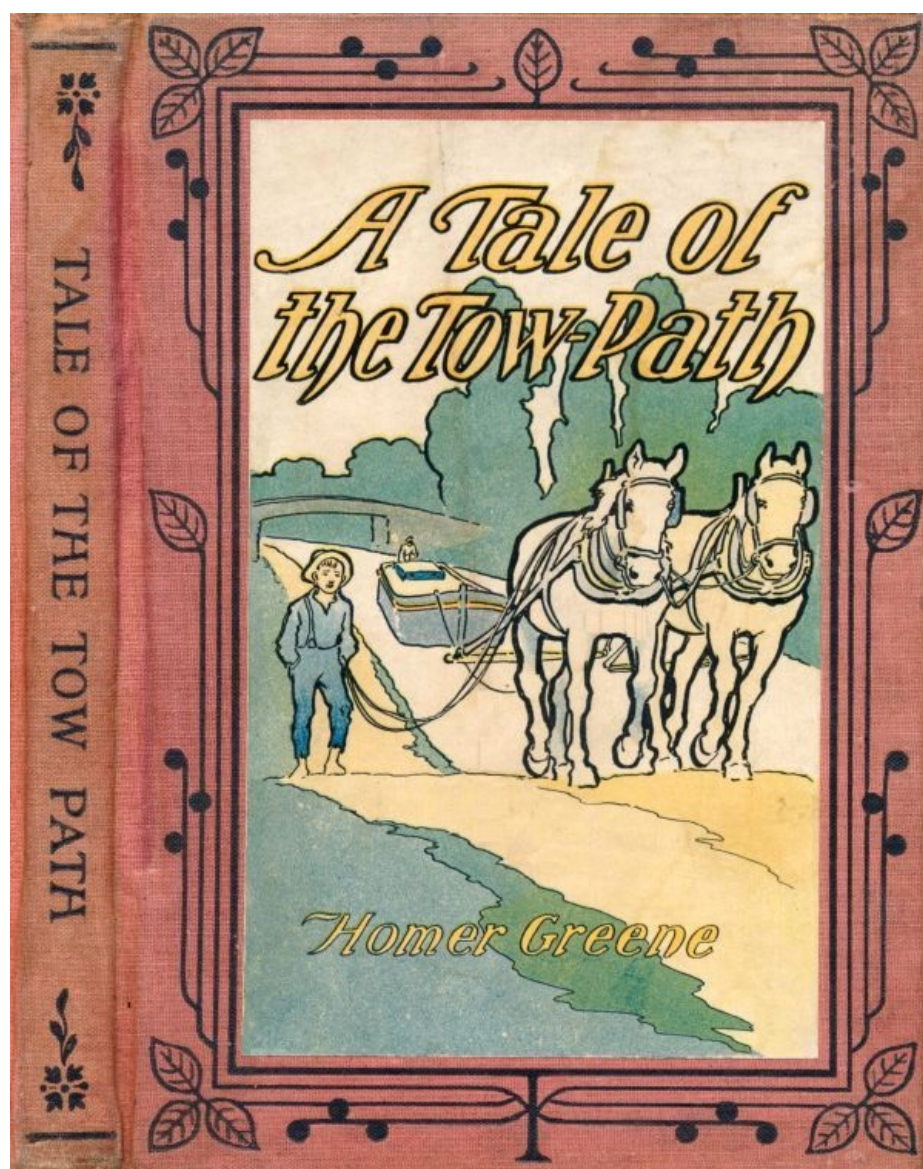
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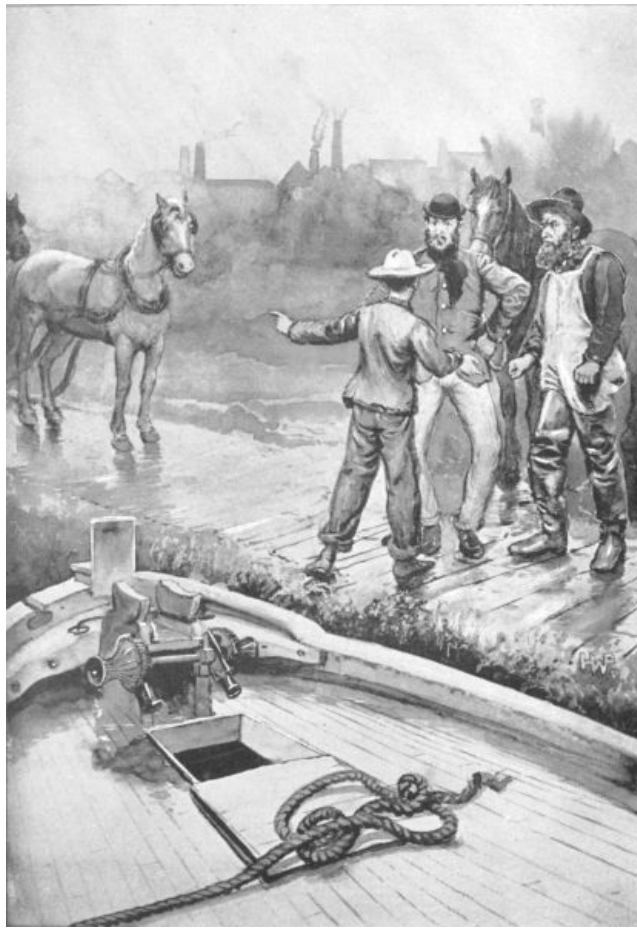
Release date: July 2, 2014 [EBook #46172]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Donald Cummings and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

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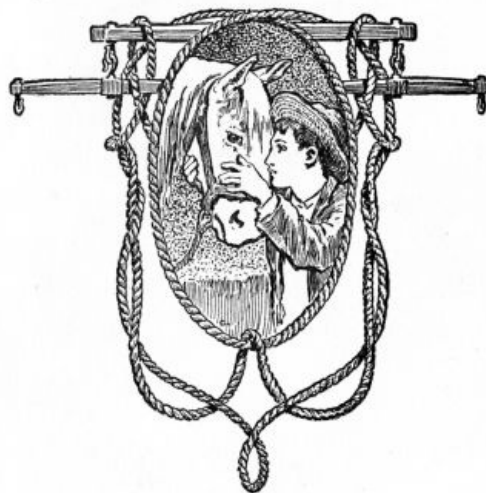




"WHERE'D YOU GET THAT HORSE?"

A Tale of the Tow-Path

By Homer Greene



NEW YORK
THOMAS Y. CROWELL CO.
PUBLISHERS

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the Tow-Path

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A TALE OF THE TOW-PATH.

[1]

CHAPTER I.

THE RESULT OF A WHIPPING.

Hoeing corn is not very hard work for one who is accustomed to it, but the circumstances of the hoeing may make the task an exceedingly laborious one. They did so in Joe Gaston's case. Joe Gaston thought he had never in his life before been put to such hard and disagreeable work.

In the first place, the ground had been broken up only that spring, and it was very rough and stony. Next, the field was on a western slope, and the rays of the afternoon sun shone squarely on it. It was an unusually oppressive day, too, for the last of June.

Finally, and chiefly: Joe was a fourteen-year-old boy, fond of sport and of companionship, and he was working there alone.

[2]

Leaning heavily on the handle of his hoe, Joe gazed pensively away to the west. At the foot of the slope lay a small lake, its unruffled surface reflecting with startling distinctness the foliage that lined its shores, and the two white clouds that hung above in the blue sky.

Through a rift in the hills could be seen, far away, the line of purple mountains that lay beyond the west shore of the Hudson River.

"It aint fair!" said Joe, talking aloud to himself, as he sometimes did. "I don't have time to do anything but just work, work, work. Right in the middle of summer, too, when you can have the most fun of any time in the year, if you only had a chance to get it! There's berrying and bee-hunting and swimming and fishing and—and lots of things."

The look of pensiveness on Joe's face changed into one of longing.

"Fishing's awful good now," he continued; "but I don't get a chance to go, unless I go without asking, and even then I dassent carry home the fish."

[3]

After another minute of reflection he turned his face toward the upland, where, in the distance, the white porch and gables of a farmhouse were visible through an opening between two rows of orchard trees.

"I guess I'll just run down to the pond a few minutes, and see if there's any fish there. It aint more'n three o'clock; Father's gone up to Morgan's with that load of hay, and he won't be home before five o'clock. I can get back and hoe a lot of corn by that time."

He cast his eyes critically toward the sun, hesitated for another minute, and then, shouldering his hoe, started down the hill toward the lake; but before he had gone half-way to the water's edge he stopped and stood still, nervously chewing a spear of June-grass, and glancing alternately back at the cornfield and forward to the tempting waters of the lake.

"I don't care!" he said at last. "I can't help it if it aint right. If Father'd only *let* me go a-fishing once in a while, I wouldn't want to sneak off. It's his fault; 'cause I've got to fish, and that's all there is about it."

[4]

In a swampy place near by he dug some angle-worms for bait. Then, taking a pole and line from the long grass behind a log, he skirted the shore for a short distance, climbed out on the body of a fallen tree that lay partly in the water, and flung off his line.

Joe had not long to wait. The lazy motion of the brightly painted float on the smooth surface of the lake gave place to a sudden swinging movement. Then the small end dipped till only the round red top was visible. In the next instant that too disappeared, and the pole curved till the tip of it almost touched the water.

For a second only Joe played with his victim. Then, with a quick, steady pull, he drew the darting, curving, shining fish from its home, and landed it among the weeds on the shore.

Flushed with delight, he hastened to cast his line again into the pool. Scarcely a minute later he pulled out another fish. It seemed to be an excellent day for the sport.

[5]

Indeed, he had never before known the fish to bite so well. They kept him busy baiting his hook and drawing them in.

He was in the high tide of enjoyment. The cornfield was forgotten.

Suddenly he became aware that some one was standing behind him among the low bushes on the shore. He turned to see who it was. There, confronting him, a frown on his face, stood Joe's father.

The pole in the boy's hands dropped till the tip of it splashed into the water; his face turned red and then pale, and there was a strange weakness in his knees.

He drew his line in slowly, wound it about the pole, and stepped from the log to the shore. As yet no word had been said by either father or son, but Joe had a vague sense that it was for him to speak first.

"I thought," he stammered, "that I'd come down and see—and see if—if the fish was biting to-day—"

"Well," said his father, grimly, "are they biting?"

[6]

"They've bit first-rate," responded the boy, quickly. "I've got fourteen in this little puddle here."

"Throw them back into the pond," commanded Mr. Gaston.

Joe bent over, and taking the fish one by one from the little pool of water where he had placed them, he tossed them lightly into the lake. He came to one that, badly wounded, was floating on its side.

"'Taint any use throwing that one back," he said. "It's—"

"Throw it back!" was the stern command.

Joe threw it back. When this task was completed, Mr. Gaston said,—

"Have you got your knife in your pocket, Joseph?"

"Yes, sir."

"Cut me a whip, then,—a beech one; you'll find a good one on that sapling."

Joe took his knife and cut from the sapling indicated a long, slender branch. He trimmed it and gave it to his father. He well knew the use to which it was to be put; and although his spirit rebelled, though he felt that he did not really deserve the punishment, he obeyed without a word.

[7]

"Joseph," said his father, "do you remember my warning you last week not to go fishing again without my permission, and my telling you that if you did, I should whip you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I suppose you expect me to keep my word?"

Joe said nothing.

Mr. Gaston stood for another moment in anxious thought. He did not wish to whip the boy, surely. Though he was outwardly a cold man, he had all a father's affection for Joe; but would he not fail of his duty if he did not punish him for his disobedience?

"Joseph," he said, "can you think of any better remedy than whipping?"

"Yes, sir."

"What is it?"

"Well, if you'd just *let* me go fishing once in a while,—say Saturday afternoons,—I'd never think

[8]

of running away to go,—never.”

“That is, if I allow you to do what you choose, you won’t be disobeying me when you do it? Is that the idea?”

“Yes, sir, something like that.”

Joe felt that there was a difference, however, but he could not at that moment explain it. Besides, he wished to take the opportunity to air other grievances, of which heretofore he had never ventured to speak.

“I don’t have privileges like other boys, anyway,” he continued. “Tom Brown don’t have to work every day in the week, and he can go to town every Saturday if he wants to, and go to fairs, and have pocket-money to spend; and I don’t have anything, not even when I earn it. And Mr. Dolliver lets his Jim take his horse and go riding whenever he feels like it; but I aint allowed to go anywhere, nor do anything that other boys do!”

Joe paused, breathless and in much excitement.

Mr. Gaston said, “It’s your duty to obey your parents, no matter if they can’t give you all the pleasures that some other boys have. You are not yet old enough to set up your judgment against ours. We must govern you as we think best.”

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Again there was a minute’s silence. Then the father said, “Joseph, I had intended to whip you; but it’s a hard and unpleasant duty, and I’m inclined to try you once more without it, if you’ll apologize and make a new promise not to go fishing again without my permission.”

“I’ll apologize,” replied Joe, “but I won’t promise.”

“Why not?”

“Cause you wouldn’t give me your permission, and then I’d break the promise. That’s the way it always goes.”

“Very well; you may take your choice,—either the promise or the whipping. I can’t argue with you about it.”

Joe was excited and angry. He did not take time to think, but answered hotly that his father could whip him if he wished. Mr. Gaston tested the whip, cutting the air with it once or twice. It made a cruel sound.

[10]

“I want you to remember, after it is over,” he said slowly, “that it was your choice, and not my pleasure. Stand out here, and turn your back to me.”

Joe’s chastisement followed. It was a severe one. The pain was greater than Joe had expected. The shock of the first blow was still fresh when the second one came, and this was followed up by half-a-dozen more in rapid succession.

“Now,” said the father, when it was over, throwing the whip aside, “you may go back to the cornfield and go to work.”

Without a word, and indeed with mind and heart too full for utterance, the boy shouldered his hoe and started back up the hill. Mr. Gaston, taking a path which skirted the field, walked slowly toward home. His mind too was filled with conflicting emotions.

He felt that he was striving to do his duty by the boy, to bring him up to honest, sober manhood. Yet for the first time he began to wonder whether the course he was pursuing with him was just the right one to lead to that end.

[11]

He paused, and looked across the field to where Joe, who had reached his old place, was bending over a long row of corn; and his heart filled with fatherly sympathy for the lad in spite of his waywardness and obstinacy. The father felt that he would like to reason with Joe again more gently, and started to cross the field for that purpose. But fearing that Joe might think that he had repented of his severity, he turned back and made his way, with a heavy heart, toward home.

As for Joe, his anger settled before an hour had passed into a feeling of strong and stubborn resentment. That his punishment had been too severe and humiliating he had no doubt. That he had long been treated unfairly by his father and had been governed with undue strictness he fully believed.

Slowly, as he pondered over it, there came into his mind a plan to put an end to it all,—a plan which, without further consideration, he resolved to adopt. This, he was determined, should be the last whipping he would receive at his father’s hands.

[12]

He was interrupted in his brooding and his plans by a young girl, who came down toward him between the rows of springing corn. It was his sister Jennie, who was two years younger than he.

She looked up at him, as she advanced, with mingled curiosity and sympathy in her expressive eyes and face.

“Joe,” she said, in an awe-stricken voice, “did Father whip you?”

“What makes you think he whipped me?” asked Joe.

“Because, I—I heard him tell Mother so.”

“What did Mother say?”

“Oh, she cried, and she said she was sorry it had to be done. Did he whip you hard, Joe?”

“Pretty hard, but it’s the last time. He’ll never whip me again, Jennie.”

"Are you going to be a better boy?"

"No, a worse one."

Jennie stood for a moment silent and wondering at this paradoxical statement. Then an idea flashed into her mind. [13]

"Joe!" she cried, "you—you're not going to run away?"

"That's just what I am going to do. I've stood it here as long as I can."

"O Joe! what'll Father say?"

"It don't make much difference what he says. I'm goin' to—say, Jennie! don't you go and tell now, 'fore I get started. You wouldn't do as mean a thing as that, would you, Jen? Promise now!"

"I—I—maybe if Father knew you'd made up your mind to go, he'd treat you better."

"No, he wouldn't. Look here, Jen! if you say anything about it I'll—say now, you won't, will you?"

"N—no, not if you don't want me to, but I'm awful scared about it. What'll Mother say?" asked the girl, wiping from her eyes the fast-falling tears.

"That's where the trouble is, Jen," replied the boy, leaning on the handle of his hoe, and gazing reflectively off to the hills. "I hate to leave Mother, she's good to me; but Father and I can't get along together after what's happened to-day, that's plain." [14]

"And won't you ever come back again?" asked Jennie, plaintively.

"Not for seven years," answered Joe; "then I'll be twenty-one, an' my own boss, and I can go fishing whenever I feel like it."

"O Joe!" Jennie's tears fell still faster. "Joe! I'm afraid—what—made you—tell me?"

"You asked me!"

"But I didn't—didn't want you to tell me anything—anything so dreadful!"

From the direction of the house came the sound of the supper-bell. Joe shouldered his hoe again; Jennie rose from her seat on a rock, and together they walked slowly home. On the way Joe exacted from Jennie a faithful promise that she would tell nothing about his plan.

At the supper-table Joe was silent and moody, and ate little. After doing the portion of the chores that fell to his lot, he went at once to his room. His back still smarted and ached from the whipping; his mind was still troubled, and indignation and rebellion still ruled in his breast. [15]

Before he slept, his mother came to see that he was safely in bed, and to tuck him in for the night. She knew that this had been a very bitter day for him, and although she feared he had deserved his punishment, she grieved for him, and suffered with him from the bottom of her heart.

It was with more than the customary tenderness that she tucked the bed-clothing around him, and kissed him good-night.

"Good-night, Mother!" he said, looking up through the dim light of the room into her face; "good-night!"

He did not let go of her hand; and when he tried to say something more, he broke down and burst into tears.

So she knelt down by the side of the bed, and smoothing his hair back from his forehead, talked gently to him for a long time. After more good-night kisses she left him, and went back to her never-ending work. [16]

This, for Joe, was the hardest part of leaving home; for he was very fond of his mother, and knew that his going would almost break her heart. Still, now that he had resolved to go, he would not change his mind, even for his mother's sake.

It was long before Joe fell asleep, and even then he was beset by unpleasant dreams, so that his rest availed him but little.

Before daybreak he arose, dressed himself, gathered into a bundle a few articles of clothing, a few of his choicest treasures, and a little money that he had earned and saved, and then on tiptoe left his room.

At the end of the hall a door was opened, and a little white-robed figure glided out and into his arms. It was Jennie.

"O Joe!" she whispered, "are you really going?"

"Sh! Jen, don't make any noise. Yes, I'm going. There, don't cry—good-by!"

He bent down and kissed her, but she could not speak for the sobs that choked her. After holding her arms around his neck for a moment, she vanished into her room. [17]

Joe went softly down the stairs, and out at the kitchen door. It was cool and refreshing in the open air. In the east the sky was beginning to put on the gray of morning.

Jennie, looking down through the dusk from the window of her room, saw Joe walk down the path to the road gate, then turn, as if some new thought had struck him, and cross the yard to the barn, entering it by the stable door.

"Oh!" exclaimed the child to herself, in a frightened whisper, "oh! he's going to take the horse; he's going to take Charlie!"

She sank down on the floor, and covered her face with her hands. She did not want to see so dreadful a thing happen. But curiosity finally got the better of her fear, and she looked out again just in time to see some one lead the gray horse from the stable, mount him, and ride away into the dusk. [18]

"O Joe!" she murmured. "O Charlie! Oh, what will Father say now! Isn't it dreadful, dreadful!"

But though she did not know it, the person whom Jennie saw riding away into the dusk on old Charlie's back was not Joe.

CHAPTER II. [19]

WHO TOOK OLD CHARLIE?

Joe's errand to the stable on the morning when he went away was not what his sister Jennie supposed. He went there only to say farewell to the horse that had been his friend and companion since he was a little child. He loved "Old Charlie," and could not go away without caressing him and saying good-by.

The great gray horse, wakened by the opening of the stable door, rose clumsily to his feet, and stared, a little frightened, across his manger toward the visitor who came so early.

"Hello, Charlie!" said Joe, softly, feeling his way forward in the darkness of the stable, and laying his hand on the horse's forehead. "I'm going away, Charlie; I thought I'd come and say good-by to you."

He had talked to the horse in this way, as to a human being, ever since he could remember. To him there was nothing absurd in it. Charlie, recognizing his young master, pushed his nose forward and rubbed it against Joe's breast. [20]

"I'm going away," repeated the boy, "an' it isn't likely we'll ever see each other again."

He leaned over the manger, pulled the horse's head down to his breast, and laid his cheek against it for a moment. Then he went out at the stable door, shut and latched it, hurried across the barnyard and out upon the grassy expanse at the side of the highway.

At the turn in the road Joe looked back. He could see the white front of the old homestead showing dimly against the dark shadows where night lingered. It looked so serene, so quiet, so comfortable!

He brushed away the tears that started to his eyes, choked down the sob that rose in his throat, and turning once more, walked rapidly away toward the east. Almost before Joe had turned into the road from the bars, a man crept cautiously from the shadows behind the barn, and advanced to the stable door. He was short and thickly built, and very bow-legged. [21]

"Close call for me, that there was," he said to himself. "Another minute, an' I'd 'a' been inside o' that there stable door, an' 'e'd 'a' come plump onto me; that's w'at 'e'd 'a' done. Queer thing, anyway. W'y didn't 'e take the 'oss, I want to know, an' not be scarin' honest folk out o' their seving senses that way for nothink?"

The man unlatched the stable door, opened it noiselessly, and went in.

It was not many minutes before he came out again, leading Old Charlie, and stroking him in order to keep him quiet.

The horse was bridled, and a blanket was strapped over his back in lieu of a saddle. The animal was evidently suspicious and frightened, and moved about nervously, snorting a little, and with ears pricked up and eyes wide open. Once he snorted so loudly that the bow-legged man, glancing uneasily toward the farmhouse, made haste to close the stable door and lead the horse to the bars, where he could more readily mount him. [22]

"Nothing venture, nothing 'ave," he said, as he leaped clumsily to the beast's back. Then, having walked the horse for a few rods, he struck Charlie with his hand, and rode away rapidly in the direction which Joe had taken.

Very soon, however, he turned the horse's head into a grassy cart-road leading into the woods which he had carefully explored the previous day. This he followed—Old Charlie's smooth-shod feet leaving no track on the turf—until it brought him out upon a little-travelled highway about a mile distant.

Here the thief cut a sharp little stick from a tree, and urging Old Charlie to a rapid gait, galloped on ten miles or more, until daylight had fully broken. Then he took refuge once more in the woods, and breakfasted out of a little bag of plunder which he had brought from the Gaston farm.

"A good start, Callipers, me boy," he said to himself. "You mind your bloomin' eye an' you're all right. It don't do to lose your 'ead an' go too fast, or go too fast an' lose your 'ead." [23]

In the mean time, back at the farm the cattle had begun to stir about in the barnyard with the

lifting of the night shadows. It was broad daylight before the hired man went up through the gate with two gleaming tin pails in his hands. Smoke rose from the chimney of the farmhouse kitchen; the household was astir.

Every one was about but Joe. His mother had not yet called him. She thought to let him sleep a little later than usual. Yesterday had been such a bitter day for him!

"Where's Joe?" asked Mr. Gaston, coming into the kitchen. "Isn't he up yet?"

"No," replied the mother. "He wasn't feeling very well last night, and I thought I wouldn't call him till breakfast was all ready."

"Mother," said the farmer, "I'm afraid you're indulging the boy in lazy habits. He oughtn't to be left in bed later just because he misbehaved yesterday." [24]

"Well," she said, "he was really feeling almost sick last night."

Little Jennie, whose eyes were red from weeping, and whose face was pale with anxiety, listened timidly to the conversation, and then stole softly from the room.

What would happen when it was found that Joe had gone? What would happen when it was found that he had taken Old Charlie? This was the burden of her thought and fear.

Whatever it might be, she knew she had not the courage to face it, so she crept away to hide herself and to weep out her grief.

"If Joe was sick last night," the farmer went on, "it was just because he was disobedient and had to be whipped. I hope he's in a better frame of mind this morning. It is very painful for me to punish him. I wish I might—"

The outside door opened, and the hired man entered, interrupting Mr. Gaston's speech. He seemed to be troubled and excited. [25]

"Have you had Charlie out this morning, Mr. Gaston?" he asked.

"Charlie? What Charlie?"

"Why, Charlie the horse. He isn't in the stable."

"Not in the stable?"

"No, sir. An' I can't find him nowheres. The bridle's gone, too, an' the blanket an' the surcingle."

"Oh, dear me!" exclaimed Mrs. Gaston, dropping the toast on the hearth in her excitement.

"Who put him up last night?" asked the farmer.

"I did," replied the hired man.

"Did you tie him fast?"

"Yes, sir."

"And shut the stable door?"

"Yes, sir; but I asked Joe to water him after he'd had his feed. Joe often does that, you know."

"Call Joe!" the farmer said sharply to his wife.

Mrs. Gaston hurried upstairs to the door of Joe's room. [26]

She knocked, but there was no answer. She called, but no one responded. Then she opened the door and entered.

The bed was vacant. She looked into the closet, behind the trunk, under the bed; but no boy was to be found.

The truth suddenly forced itself into Mrs. Gaston's mind. Joe had gone—run away!—left his home and her! She grew suddenly weak, and sat down upon the bed till her strength should return to her.

Joe gone? She could hardly believe it. How could her only boy leave her? How could she live without him?

It occurred to her that he could not yet have gone far, and that he might be found and brought back before it was too late. She hurried from the room, flew down the stairs, and burst into the dining-room.

"Go after him!" she exclaimed. "Send for him quick, before any harm comes to him! He's gone—he's run away, he's—"

"Who's gone?" questioned Mr. Gaston, dazed by his wife's words and manner. "What is the matter with everybody this morning?" [27]

"Joe! Joe's gone! Follow him, Father, do, and bring him back! Take Charlie and follow him at once. He can't be far! Take Charlie and—Oh! Charlie's gone, too—they've gone, they've gone—"

"Together!" said Mr. Gaston, sinking into a chair, and staring across the table at his wife, who was already seated and silent, dumb with the revelation of what appeared to be both mystery and crime.

The hired man, after witnessing for a moment the agony apparent on the faces of both father and mother, opened the door softly and went out.

Mrs. Gaston was the first to recover her voice.

"Father," she said, "do you think Joe took the horse?"

"It looks very much like it," he said. "They're both gone."

"Yes; but they may not have gone together, after all. Or if they have gone together, perhaps Joe had some errand that we don't know about, and will come back soon. Maybe he hasn't gone at all, but is somewhere about the place now. Don't let's accuse him before we know!"

"You are right; we'll find the proof first."

Mr. Gaston went to the door and called the hired man.

"Ralph," he said, "don't say anything for the present about this. We think some mistake has been made. But you may just make a quiet search for the horse around the farm and the neighborhood, and let me know if you find any trace of him."

"Now," he continued, turning back into the house, "we will search for evidence. Let us go first to Joe's room and see what we can find there."

Together the father and mother mounted the stairs to the little east room, and looked about.

On a stand in the corner Mrs. Gaston discovered something that, in her former hurried search, had escaped her notice. It was a note in Joe's handwriting, written carefully in pencil, and it read as follows:

DEAR MOTHER,—I am going away. Father is too hard on me. I will come back to see you when I am twenty-one if Father will let me. Forgive me for making you feel bad, and for being an ungrateful boy. Good-by,

JOE.

She read the note, handed it to her husband, and, sinking into a chair, burst into tears.

When Mr. Gaston had read it he went to the open window and stood for many minutes, looking away, thoughtfully and sternly, to the distant hills.

"Father," sobbed his wife, "you will go after Joe, won't you? You'll find him, and bring him back, won't you?"

It seemed to her a long time before he answered her.

"I believe," he said at last, "that when a boy runs away from a good home, it is better, as a rule, to let him go, and find out his mistake; he's sure to find it out in a very short time. If he is followed and threatened and forced, he will come back sullen and angry, and will make up his mind to go again at the first chance."

"But if he's followed and reasoned with and persuaded?" said the mother, appealingly.

"If he is followed and reasoned with and persuaded," answered the father, "he will get a great notion of his own importance. He will believe that he has gained his point, and will come back impudent and overbearing."

"But think what harm may come to him,—what suffering!"

"Probably he will suffer. There's no easy way to learn the lesson he must learn. If I could save him from the suffering that his folly is sure to bring on him, and at the same time feel sure that he has really repented and is bound to do better, I would go to the end of the earth to find him. But we'll talk about that later. There's no doubt now that Joe's gone. Let us see if we can find out anything about the horse. It will make a difference if he has taken him."

But the good woman could not yet give up her appeal in behalf of her boy.

"You won't be too harsh with him, Father? You won't allow him to suffer too much? If he don't come back soon, you'll go and find him, won't you,—if he don't come back by the end of next week? He isn't strong, you know, and he's so sensitive. And I can't think he intended to do anything wrong; I can't think it! I will not believe it!"

They were passing through the upper hall to the head of the staircase. When they came near to the dark closet that opened on the landing, they were startled by the strange noise that proceeded from behind the door,—a noise as of some one sobbing.

Mr. Gaston threw open the closet door and peered into the darkness, while his wife stood behind him, half-frightened, looking over his shoulder.

"Why!" he exclaimed, when his eyes had adapted themselves to the inner gloom, "it's Jennie!"

"Oh, dear me!" exclaimed Mrs. Gaston, in another fright.

"Jennie," said Mr. Gaston, sternly, "come right out. What does this mean?"

Poor Jennie, her eyes red with weeping and with anguish written all over her tear-marked face, rose from her seat on an old chest, and came into the light of the hall.

She began to sob again as though her heart would break.

"What does this mean?" repeated her father.

"N—nothing," sobbed Jennie, "only I—I—"

"See here!" exclaimed her father, "did you know that Joe had gone away?"

"I—I was afraid he had."

"Did you know he intended to go?" asked her father, sternly.

"Why, he—he told me yesterday that he—was—"

"Going to run away?"

"Ye—yes."

"O Jennie!" exclaimed her mother, "why didn't you tell us as soon as you knew it, so that we might stop him?"

"He made—made me promise not to! I couldn't help it."

Little by little, in answer to repeated questions, the narration broken by many sobs, the child gave the story of the previous day's interview with Joe. [33]

"Jennie," said Mr. Gaston, finally, "have you seen Joe this morning? Answer me truly."

"Ye—yes, Father."

"Where?"

"Here, in the hall."

"At what hour?"

"I don't—don't know. It was before daylight. He was just starting. I bade him good-by, and went back into my room, and he went on downstairs."

Jennie was lavish of her information this time. The questions were getting dangerously near a point she dreaded, and she hoped there would be no more of them.

Alas! The very next question shook the foundation of her guilty knowledge of Joe's apparent crime.

"Jennie," asked her father, "did you see Joe this morning after he left the house?"

"Yes, Father; I looked out o' the window, an' saw him go down the path."

"Which way did he go when he got to the road?" asked her mother, eagerly. [34]

"He—he went off that way," replied Jennie, faintly, "east."

"He went east, Father!" exclaimed Mrs. Gaston,— "east toward the mountains, not west toward the river. It will be easier to find him, you know. And he didn't take the horse; you see he didn't take Charlie!"

"Wait," said Mr. Gaston, sternly. "Jennie, tell us the whole story. Do you mean to say that you saw Joe go down the path and out at the gate, and walk away toward the east?"

Half-unconsciously she made a final attempt to save Joe.

"No, Father, he turned around and came back up the path toward the house."

The mother asked no more questions. She instinctively felt that her worst fears were about to be realized.

"Did he come back into the house?" asked the father, mercilessly.

"N—no."

"Where did he go?"

There was no way out of it. Jennie must tell what she had seen. [35]

"O Father!" she cried, "he came back—and then—he went into the stable."

"Did you see him come out?"

"No, oh, no! But I saw him ride out through the bars on Old Charlie, and away up the road. I did, I saw him. O Joe! Oh, dear me! Oh, I wish—I wish—I was dead!"

The little girl fell to wringing her hands and sobbing again with great violence, convinced that she had been the victim of unhappy circumstances, and that she had been a traitor to Joe, whom she loved dearly.

Mrs. Gaston, drawing the child to her, sat on the stair-landing and said nothing; but sorrow and sympathy, struggling for the mastery in her heart, sent the bitter tears afresh to her eyes.

Over the face of Joe's father came a look that had not been there before.

"I shall not follow him, Mother," he said. "He may have the horse, but he must not come back here until he comes in sackcloth and ashes. I am sorry that I have lived to see the day when a son of mine has come to be little better than a common thief." [36]

The father had passed down the stairs and out at the door, while mother and daughter sat long together, mingling their tears over the unhappy fate of the boy whom both had idolized, and whose strange folly had made him, to all intents and purposes, an exile from his home.

ON THE CANAL.

It is at Rondout that the Delaware and Hudson Canal, reaching across from the anthracite-coal regions of Pennsylvania, touches tide-water on the Hudson. It is here that the bulky canal-boats, having discharged their cargoes of coal, turn their bows again to the westward. From the low-lying lands at the river's edge the mouth of Rondout Creek curves back into the hills, forming for miles a safe, broad harbor.

On the northerly shore of the creek is the wharf. On the left side of this wharf long lines of canal-boats are tied to the wharf posts, and fastened one to another. On the right, canal stores, blacksmith's shops, and stables extend as far as the eye can reach.

In the early morning, before the activities of the day have begun, this wharf is a deserted and forbidding place, and on one such early morning in September, with chill air and cloudy skies, and not even a rose tint in the dull east, there was no one to be seen throughout the whole length of the wharf save one slowly moving boy. [38]

This boy was so dull and miserable in appearance as to be hardly noticeable against the general dulness around him. His clothing was ragged and dusty, his shoes were out at both heel and toe. The battered hat, pulled well down over his eyes, shaded a haggard and a hungry face. His mother herself would scarcely have recognized this scarecrow as Joe Gaston.

What his hardships and sufferings had been since that June morning when he angrily left his home, his appearance told more eloquently than words can describe them. Many and many a day he had longed for the good and wholesome food he knew was on his father's table. Many and many a night, as he lay under some unwelcoming roof, or still oftener with the open sky above him, he had dreamed of that gentle mother who used always to fold the soft covering over him, and give him the good-night kiss. [39]

But a few days before our meeting with him here on the canal Joe had met, on the public road, a roving wood-sawyer who recognized him. They walked together a long way.

The man, who had sawed wood for Joe's father several times, had been at the homestead since Joe's departure. He seemed surprised not to find the horse with Joe, and he finally asked the boy what he had done with him.

He was still more surprised when he learned that Joe had not had Old Charlie, and knew nothing about the theft. But poor Joe! It touched him to the quick to learn, as he did, that at home he was regarded as a horse-thief.

It was this that he brooded over now, day and night. To think that they should accuse him of stealing Old Charlie!

Joe had, in his wanderings, followed a sort of circle, which had now brought him within a comparatively short distance of home; but if, before this, he had thought of returning there, the thought was now driven from his mind. He felt that he could not go back to face this charge against him, for who would believe him? It was time to turn his face to the westward. [40]

Besides, he had said that he would not return until he was twenty-one years old. His pride had not yet been enough chastened by misery to cause him to abandon his foolish boast.

So here he was, on the wharf at Rondout this raw September morning, seeking not so much independence and fortune as bread and shelter.

Joe walked slowly along close to the buildings, for the wind that swept down the creek was disagreeably cold. An occasional raindrop struck his face. He was very thinly clad, too, and he could not help shivering now and then as he pushed his hands deeper into his pockets and turned his back for a moment to the wind.

He stopped to look at a few loaves of bread and a string of sausages that were displayed in the window of a cheap store. He wondered whether it would be wiser to spend his last few pennies for his breakfast, or save them for his dinner. [41]

He had about decided to buy a piece of bread, and was waiting for the store to be opened for the day, when some one accosted him from behind: "Say, you boy!"

Joe turned and looked at the speaker. He was a rather stout, low-browed man, with a very red nose and a shaven face, upon which a rough stubble of beard had begun to grow.

His pantaloons were supported from below by the tops of his rubber boots, and suspended from above by a single brace, which ran diagonally across the breast of his red flannel shirt.

"Do you want a job, young fellow?" continued the man.

"What kind of a job?" asked Joe.

"Drivin'."

"Drivin' what?"

"Hosses on the canal. My boy got sick las' night, an' I've got to git another one. Do ye know anything about hosses?" [42]

"Yes," replied Joe. "I've driven 'em a good deal, and always taken care of 'em."

"Well, my boat's unloaded, an' I'm ready to pull right out. Wha' do ye say? Go?"

"What wages do you pay?" asked the boy, hesitatingly.

"Well, you're big an' smart-lookin' an' know how to handle hosses, an' I'll give you extra big pay."

Joe's spirits rose. True, the man looked forbidding, and undesirable as a master; but if he paid good wages, the rest might be endured.

"Well, what will you pay?" persisted the boy.

"I'll give ye four dollars for the round trip, an' board an' lodge ye."

Joe's spirits fell.

"How long does the trip take?" he asked.

"Two weeks."

"An' when do I get my money?"

"Half at Honesdale, an' half when you git back here."

"Well, I don't know; I—"

"Make up your mind quick. If you don't want the job, I'll be lookin' for another boy."

Joe thought of his penniless condition. It might not be long, indeed, before he would be starving. Here was a chance to obtain at least food and shelter, and probably enough to buy an overcoat.

"Well," he said, "I'll go."

"All right. Have you had any breakfast?"

"No."

"Come along with me, an' I'll give you some."

Joe's spirits rose again at the thought of breakfast. He followed the man down the dock a short distance, then from the dock to a canal-boat lying close by, and from this boat to another, and still another.

When the last boat was reached, they went down into the cabin, where a colored man was cooking food.

A leaf projecting from the wall was already propped to a horizontal position, and on it were a few plates, knives and forks, a dish of warmed-up potatoes, a slice or two of fried ham, and some bread and butter.

The negro was preparing coffee also. The odor of it all was very pleasant to Joe as he climbed down the steep cabin stairs, and he did not wait long after being told to help himself.

"I've hired this boy for the trip," the man explained to his cook. "What's your name, young feller, anyhow?" he continued, turning to the boy.

"Joe."

"What else?"

"That's all,—for the present, anyway."

"Oh, I see! Run away, did ye? Well, I won't be so partic'ler. My name's Rosencamp,—Bill Rosencamp. Cap'n Bill, for short. An' this gentleman's name," turning to the negro, "is Blixey. He's like you; he's only got one name; but he can't help it,—he never had no other."

Blixey laughed immoderately at this, and poured the coffee with an unsteady hand. He seemed to be so weak and wavering in all his movements, his eyes were so bloodshot, and his utterance so thick, that Joe thought he must have been drinking; but he had not been,—at any rate, not that morning.

Joe enjoyed his breakfast greatly. Though it was a coarse meal, it was the best he had eaten for many days, and when he was done with it he was ready to go to work, and said so.

Accordingly he was sent to scrub the deck, while Blixey washed the dishes, and the captain looked after the tow. A bustling little tug-boat had already made fast to a fleet of empty canal-boats, Rosencamp's among the number, and was hauling them up the stream.

Rondout was now awake. The island in the bay was a scene of great activity. The clang of heavy machinery and the rasping noise of coal sliding on iron surfaces filled the air. Boats were moving in all directions. There were a hundred people on the wharf, and twice a hundred, many of them women and little children on the decks of the moored canal-boats.

Up the stream the scene became picturesque. On each side were precipitous hills, wooded to the river's edge, their green heights reflected in the still water at their feet. There were cement mines to be seen, and old white-faced mansions; and half-way up the boat passed under a lofty iron bridge across which dashed a railway train.

Notwithstanding the dulness of the sky and the occasional falling of raindrops, Joe enjoyed the ride very much. At Eddyville the first lock, a tide-lock, bars the way, and here the horses and mules are kept.

"Do you see that stable over there?" said the captain to Joe. "My hosses is there. You go an' git 'em. Ask for Cap'n Bill's hosses."

[43]

[44]

[45]

[46]

Joe did as he was told. After some good-natured chaffing on the part of the stable-keeper, the raw-boned worn-out horses were turned over to him, and the boy appeared on the tow-path leading them.

Joe was told that these animals were named Jack and Jill. Jack had fallen down the bank from the tow-path to the river one day, and Jill had come tumbling after. Whatever their names had been before, this incident had definitely renamed them. [47]

The horses were fastened to the tow-line, and the tow-line was attached to the timber-head of the boat. Joe was duly installed as driver.

His duties were not at all light. He had to walk all the way, and to keep the horses going at a good pace, which in itself was no easy task. He must keep on the inside of the tow-path, so that his boat should pass over the tow-lines of the loaded boats they met, and must pull up sharply when a lock was reached.

Sometimes, in the vicinity of locks, great confusion arose from the crowding of boats and the intertangling of tow-lines. Then Joe became practically helpless. But Captain Bill, after much pushing and angry shouting, always managed to straighten out matters and get the boat under way again.

At Rosendale there was a long delay. Something had gone wrong with the gates at the lock. [48]

Joe was not sorry for this, for it was now late in the forenoon, and he was very tired from his long tramp.

Captain Bill had gone off up the wharf to a canal store, Blixey was busy in the cabin, and the horses were drowsily munching oats from baskets tied under their noses.

A drizzling rain was falling, and Joe took shelter under a shed a little back from the tow-path while he waited.

He had not been long there when a big, uncouth-looking boy came shambling in and sat down on a box near by.

"Hello!" said the boy.

"Hello!" responded Joe.

"Drivin' for Bill Rosey?"

"Yes."

"Better look out for 'im."

"Why?"

"He's *bad*."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, an' ugly."

"Is he?"

"Yes, an' works you to death. He's used up three boys a'ready; one went home yisterday all stove to pieces. I wouldn't work for 'im; I quit." [49]

Joe was naturally very much startled, but he soon found breath to ask,—

"Did you work for him once?"

"Did I? Well, I should say so."

"What did he do to you?"

"Not much; licked me, an' kicked me, an' robbed me,—that's all. Say, what's he goin' to pay you?"

"Four dollars for the round trip."

"The thief!"

"Why, isn't that enough?"

"Enough! W'y, five dollars was my wages for the roun' trip, an' another feller I knew was to have six; only we didn't neither of us git no money. Oh, he's a bad man, he is; you better look out fer 'im."

The boy rose awkwardly, as if to go.

"Well," said Joe, anxiously, "I've hired out to him now, you know. What would you do about it if you was in my place?"

The big boy sat down again more awkwardly, if possible, than he had risen. [50]

"I'll tell ye jest what I would do," he began earnestly.

But he never told what it was, and Joe never had the benefit of his advice; for at that moment the bony figure of Captain Bill appeared at the corner of the shed.

The jaw of the large boy dropped suddenly, and jumping up from the box he made his escape to the tow-path.

"You'd better git!" shouted the man angrily after him. "What'd he say to ye?" he demanded,

turning to Joe.

"He said," stammered Joe, "he said that he used to work for you."

"Did 'e say I used to lick 'im an' kick 'im, an' try to knock some sense into 'im?"

"Why, yes; something like that."

"Well, I did, an' I'll do the same to you ef ye don't 'ten' closer to business. Come! Git out there to them horses! See w'ere they're a-goin'! Jest look at that tow-line!"

The man's look and manner were so fierce that Joe dared not even reply.

He hurried out to his disagreeable task with a sinking heart, and began to draw up the tow-line, which had slipped under the boat, and which, after much scolding on Captain Bill's part, was straightened out. [51]

The boat was "locked through" at last, and not long after Blixey called up that dinner was ready. The captain ate first, while Blixey minded the tiller. Then Blixey ate, and afterward relieved Joe on the tow-path.

There was not much left when the boy reached the table,—not nearly enough to satisfy his hunger. But Captain Bill stood at the rudder-post looking fiercely down the hatchway at him, and when he had eaten what was on the table he dared not ask for more.

"Wash them dishes!" ordered the captain.

Joe washed the dishes, put them away on the shelves, and then went up on deck. The light rain of the morning had settled into a steady downpour, and the boat was drenched.

"Here!" said Captain Bill, "you come here. Now take a-holt o' this tiller, an' push it as I tell ye to." [52]

Joe grasped the tiller, and the man went back and began to pump water from the hold.

"Pull it to ye!" shouted the captain, as the boy, wondering how it worked, allowed the tiller to swing slowly from him.

"Pull it to ye, I say! Can't ye see where the boat's a-goin'?"

Joe pulled; but it was no easy matter to check the impetus of the rudder in the opposite direction, and the boat still swung stern away.

"Pull!" shouted the man. "Don't stand there like a stick o' wood. Pull!"

The boy was pulling with all his might, but as yet without avail.

Captain Bill dropped the pump-rod and sprang to the tiller. Seizing it on the opposite side from where Joe stood, he thrust it violently outward, pushing Joe with it, backing him across the deck, backing him relentlessly till the edge of the boat was reached.

The boy to save himself from the water was obliged to turn and leap toward shore. [53]

Fortunately the boat was near the bank, and Joe was able to scramble up the tow-path, more frightened than either hurt or wet.

Captain Bill shook his fist at him angrily.

"You go ahead to them hosses," he shouted; "and you, Blixey," raising his voice still higher, "you come back here an' pump out this boat!"

Blixey, who had seen Joe's mishap, laughed hoarsely. His trembling knock-knees, as he walked toward the boat, seemed each moment likely to give way.

Joe was very far from being in a laughing mood. Never in his life had he been treated like this. Still, violently angry as he was, he feared to disobey this ruffian; he was even afraid to remonstrate with him.

He went forward meekly, took the gad that Blixey handed to him, and resumed the monotonous task of urging on the tired and miserable horses. He was already drenched to the skin, sore in mind and body, and sick at heart. [54]

Once as he walked, he chanced to remember how he and his sister Jennie used to play on the haymow in the big barn on rainy afternoons. Somehow the memory brought tears to his eyes; but he brushed them away and trudged on.

Many loaded boats were met coming down, and many locks were passed. It was always a relief to the monotony to come to a lock, and take the horses around it, and wait while the boat was being locked through. Often there were little villages at the locks, too, and small stores fronting on the tow-path, and people looking out from behind the store windows.

The rain came down as steadily as ever. The tow-path grew muddier and more slippery with every passing moment, and the long hours wore on.

By and by it grew dark, but the boats in the canal kept moving. Lights shone from the cabin windows, and red lamps gleamed from the bows of the boats; but the tow-path, where Joe walked, was wrapped in the deepest gloom. [55]

CHAPTER IV.

CAPTAIN BILL BUYS A HORSE.

It was a cold, rainy, and impenetrably dark night on the tow-path. Here and there was a lantern, which, when passed, seemed only to deepen the darkness.

Now and then the swish of a tow-line in the water was heard, or the harsh scraping of a boat against another boat or against the timbers of the wharf. Men shouted hoarsely to one another or to their beasts.

Along the muddy tow-path a pair of drenched and miserable horses were urged by a drenched and miserable boy. To this boy, who was Joe Gaston, it was all like some hideous dream.

He moved under a constant strain of fear upon nerves already overwrought, and with incessant physical effort on the part of a body already worn to the verge of exhaustion.

He found relief for a few moments while he ate his supper. The boat was waiting below a lock. The captain, who had already eaten, went out on the tow-path, and Joe's only companion at the table was Blixey. [57]

When the two had eaten all that was before them, Blixey said: "Well, young un, had enough, eh?"

"No," replied Joe, "I haven't. I'm hungry yet."

Blixey rose, and climbed far enough up the cabin stairs to put his head out and make sure that Captain Bill was not on deck. Then he came back, and opening a little cupboard under the dish shelves, took out half a loaf of bread and some cold ham, and set it before the boy.

"Mum's the word," he whispered. "Don't say nothin', but jes' git around it's quick's ye can."

Joe followed the advice without further delay.

"Blixey," he said, between his mouthfuls, "you're very good."

As he ate, the captain's hoarse voice was heard from the tow-path: "Blixey!" [58]

"What is it, boss?" asked the negro, stumbling up the cabin stairs.

"Send that young rascal out here!"

The negro crawled back part of the way down the stairs. There was a certain compassion in his voice as he said,—

"You'll hef to go, honey, an' right smart, too. I know him."

So Joe went, and took up again in the blackness of night his dreary, cruel task on the tow-path. He thought it would never end; that the sun would soon rise at his back, and that he should be kept right on at his work through another day.

But when Port Jackson was reached, at ten o'clock, the boat was tied up for the night. The horses were put under shelter in a stable near by, and fed. Then the two men and the boy went down into the cabin of the boat to go to bed.

Under the stern-deck there were two bunks, and no more. These were occupied by the two men, so that Joe must sleep on the cabin floor. [59]

He was given an old quilt, and an overcoat for a pillow. Removing part of his wet clothing, he rolled himself in the quilt and tried to sleep; but sleep would not come to him. His physical and his nervous system had undergone so great a strain and fatigue that he could not at once relapse into slumber.

The cabin was shut tight to keep out the storm, but the water found its way in nevertheless. Little rills ran across the floor, and soaked the old quilt in which Joe was wrapped. The air of the room, which seemed little more than a box, became foul and oppressive.

Visions of his own room at home floated into Joe's mind as he lay there. He saw the spotless floor, the pictures on the walls, the pretty curtains at the windows, the warm, soft, tidy bed. He thought of the dear mother at his side, soothing him, with loving touch and gentle words, to sweet sleep and pleasant dreams.

That he wept, then, tears of homesickness, of sorrow, of deep and bitter shame, until he had sobbed himself to sleep, was but evidence of the gentle and manly spirit that lay beneath his boy's foolish pride and impetuous will. [60]

The next morning Captain Bill awakened Joe by pushing him rudely with his foot.

"Come, get up here," he shouted, "an' go an' feed them hosses!"

Joe rose. He was stiff and sore from exposure and exertion. His damp clothing, as he put it on, sent a chill through his whole body.

He fed the horses, as he was told. After the crew had breakfasted in the cabin of the boat, the same monotonous round of duty was taken up that had occupied the day before.

Rain was still falling, and the cold had increased. The water of the canal was muddy, and the stream that ran along below it was very high.

The tow-path was softer and more slippery than it had been the previous day, and walking upon

it was more difficult. The boy who drove the weary and wretched horses through the mud and rain was far more tired and miserable than they were.

[61]

Late in the forenoon the boat reached Ellenville.

For more than a mile Captain Bill had apparently been on the lookout for some one. As they passed under the iron bridge and in toward the lock without meeting any one, the captain uttered a sort of grunt of disappointment.

Just then, however, a man came down the tow-path, leading a gray horse.

The man was short and stout, with legs that were so bowed that it was a marvel that they held him up at all. Captain Bill's face lighted up as he caught sight of him. He leaped from the boat to the tow-path, and went ahead to meet the stranger.

"Well, Callipers," he inquired, "got a hoss for me?"

"You bet," replied the man, "an' a powerful good un, too."

Captain Bill went close to the bow-legged man, bent down to him, and said something in an undertone. The man listened and nodded.

[62]

Then followed a conversation which no one could hear, except the persons engaged in it. It ended with Captain Bill's counting out some money from a black and greasy leather wallet, and handing the money to Callipers.

Then one of the captain's horses was unfastened, and placed in possession of the bow-legged man. The gray took its harness, and its place at the tow-line.

All this time Joe had been busy at the feed-box at the bow of the boat. At this moment he came up and discovered what was going on.

The gray horse first attracted his attention. There was something about the animal that reminded him strongly of Old Charlie.

He looked again, and more closely. The horse threw up his head and neighed. It was Old Charlie!

Joe gave a leap to the side of the boat, another to the tow-path, and in the next instant he was at the horse's head.

"Charlie!" he cried. "Charlie! Why, Old Charlie, is this you?"

[63]

The beast whinnied, and putting his nose down against Joe's breast, began to rub him in the old way.

Captain Bill and Callipers looked at each other in open-eyed astonishment.

"Knows 'im!" exclaimed the bow-legged man.

"Seems to," replied the captain.

"Who is 'e?"

"Don't know 'im. He's a runaway."

The bow-legged man advanced and looked at the boy more closely.

"Bless my eyes an' ears!" he exclaimed, drawing hastily back.

He recognized Joe as the boy who had visited the stable the morning on which the horse was stolen.

"Good-by, Bill!" he said to the captain. "I'm goin'!"

But at that moment Joe, running quickly, intercepted him.

"[Where'd you get that horse?](#)" he demanded, panting with excitement. "Where'd you get him?"

"I got 'im where 'e grew, sonny, but they aint no more like 'im, so you needn't go lookin' for one."

[64]

"But I want to know—"

"You don't want to know nothin'. You go ten' to them hosses," interrupted Captain Bill. "See where the boat's gittin' to. Mind your business and stop asking questions."

"But that horse—"

"Never mind that hoss. You ten' to business. He's my hoss now!"

"No, he's not your horse! He's my father's horse. He was stolen from my father's barn. He—"

The captain took one step toward the boy, fastened his hand in Joe's collar, and dragged and pushed him to his post.

Joe was frightened and cowed. His lips turned white. He dared no longer disobey.

He went ahead and resumed his monotonous duties, but in his brain was a whirlpool of rage.

The rain fell harder than ever; the wind blew in fierce gusts; the tow-path was muddy beyond description. It was a day on which neither man nor beast should have labored except under shelter.

[65]

Joe walked as much as possible at Old Charlie's head, urging him gently at times, putting his arm caressingly over the beast's drooping neck, or twining his hand in the long, wet mane.

He talked to the horse, too, in the old familiar way; telling him of his troubles, pitying him for his own hard lot, sympathizing with him, until he fancied that tears stood in the horse's eyes. He knew they were rolling down his own face.

It was evident that the horse had been on a long journey, though the distance was not great from the place from which he had been stolen.

The thief was a crafty and skilful one, and had kept the animal out of the channels of travel, where search would be most likely. What adventures he had had, and what other operations he had carried on meanwhile, no one knew.

Late in the afternoon, when both boy and horse should have been relieved from further work, Old Charlie began to indulge in a habit which he had acquired on the farm. [66]

Whenever he had thought his work too hard, or his hours too long, or the weather too inclement for further labor, he would stop in his tracks and turn his head around to his driver, and stand gazing in mute appeal, until he was urged forward.

Charlie had never been punished for this. It was not really balkiness, for the horse went on stoutly after a moment's rest. But for that matter, Old Charlie had been indulged at home in all sorts of queer ways.

Now, however, the case was quite different. Joe tried to make these interruptions as short as possible, so that they should not interfere seriously with the passage of the boat; but the horse's conduct soon attracted Captain Bill's attention.

"Tryin' to loaf, eh? Well, I'll cure the lazy old beast o' that," he said.

He took a whip from the cabin and tossed it out to Joe. [67]

"Next time that hoss does that," he said, "whip 'im! Don't let him do it again."

"No, sir! I—I'll try not to."

Even as Joe spoke Old Charlie stopped, turned, and looked back at him with melancholy eyes.

"Go on, Charlie!" entreated Joe; "that's a good fellow, go on!"

But Charlie stood still, half-turned in his tracks, in mute remonstrance. It was new business to him, and he had not a favorable opinion regarding it. The leading horse, nothing loath, had also stopped.

"Whip 'im!" shouted Captain Bill from the boat, which, with its impetus, was bearing rapidly down on horse and boy. "Thrash 'im!"

Joe lifted the whip and let it fall lightly on the horse's back.

"Get up, Charlie!" he cried; "get up now, quick!"

"Oh, whip 'im!" cried the captain. "Give 'im a good un!"

Again the whip descended lightly on Old Charlie's back; but the horse did not move. This, too, was new treatment, which he did not seem in the least to understand. [68]

By this time Captain Bill was very angry. He seized the tiller, and swept it back till the stern of the boat touched the bank. "Whip that hoss!" he cried, leaping to the tow-path, "or I'll whip you!"

For an instant Joe stood irresolute; then, with sudden determination, he passed the handle of the whip to the angry man who faced him.

"I won't," he said slowly, with set teeth; "I won't whip Old Charlie. I'll die first!"

Infuriated beyond measure, Captain Bill seized the whip and raised it swiftly in the air. Just as it was about to descend on Joe's head and shoulders, the frightened horse, swinging his body around nervously, caught the full force of the blow.

But it mattered little to Captain Bill. The beast was as much an object of his wrath as was the boy. [69]

Again the whip cut the air and curled cruelly about the horse's body. Again and again it fell, while Old Charlie, frightened and tortured, leaped and struggled for release.

Poor Joe, who was trying alternately to soothe the horse and to entreat the man who was beating him, felt every stroke of the cruel whip almost as sharply as if it had been inflicted on his own back.

At last the captain stopped.

"It'll be your turn next!" he said savagely, throwing the whip toward Joe, and leaping to the deck of his boat.

The tow-line was pulled taut, and the boat moved on again. The poor beast, still quivering with excitement and pain, and allowing himself now to be led quietly along, showed by the occasional touch of his nose to the boy's breast or shoulder that he wanted his sympathy and friendship.

So they trudged on together, boy and horse, each helping and comforting the other,—on in distress and despair, through cold and rain and mud, into the darkness, the dreariness, the frightfulness of another night! [70]

How they got through that evening until ten o'clock, Joe could never quite recollect. His memory recalled only a confusion of lights and noises, of splashing mud and roaring water, of tangled tow-lines and interfering boats.

It was only when the horses had been put up for the night, and he was once more lying on the wet cabin-floor, listening to the beating of the rain on the deck above his head, that he was able to think clearly. How everything that he had done, and all his woes and troubles, rushed before him!

With his prejudice and passion all swept away, he went over in his mind the events of the last three months. His follies and sins became as plain to him as if they had been committed by another. Slowly but surely, as he pondered, there came into his mind the irresistible conviction that he must go home.

The old and beautiful story of the Prodigal Son came up from the depths of memory and glowed before him. He would go back, as did the child of the parable; but he would go in such repentance and humility as the Prodigal Son had never dreamed of. [71]

He could not wait. He resolved to start at once,—now, in the night, in the storm, if he could but escape his keepers.

But there was Charlie,—poor Old Charlie!—who deserved, far more than did he himself, to escape from the sufferings of the present. How could he leave the old horse?

A thought came into his mind so suddenly that it brought him up on his elbow. Charlie should help him to escape! He would take the horse home where he belonged. They would go back to the old home together.

Joe lay back for a moment, almost breathless with his scheme. Then, cautiously laying his quilt aside, he rose, put on his jacket, hat, and shoes, and climbed softly up the steep cabin-stairs to the deck.

The rain had ceased at last, and low in the west a half-moon was struggling through the mist of clouds. [72]

For a moment Joe listened. No sound came from the sleepers in the cabin. Then he leaped lightly to the tow-path. It was not far to the stable where the horses and mules were kept, and he lost no time in going there.

As he opened the door and peered into the darkness of the stable, the heavy breathing of the sleeping animals came strangely on his ears.

In a near stall, a dim, white shape struggled up and was still. It was Old Charlie. He recognized his young master with a subdued neigh, and tossed his head impatiently.

The next moment Joe had untied him, and led him out into the night.

“We’ve got a long ride before us, Charlie,” he said, standing for a moment at the stable door to transform the halter strap into driving reins. “It’s a long ride; but then, you know, we’re going—we’re going home!”

Again the horse tossed his head, as if he understood. Joe, catching hold by the mane, leaped to Charlie’s back, as he had done many times in the dear old days. [73]

He rode slowly down the little hill to the tow-path, turned in the direction from which they had come,—the direction in which home lay,—and galloped away.

Away they went toward the east, with lighter hearts and higher spirits than either had known before for many a day. To Joe it seemed that he was doing no more than his duty in riding away with Old Charlie. He was too inexperienced to know that he had no right to seize the horse in this way, even though the animal was his father’s lawful property. He was too much confused by his sufferings and excitement, moreover, to have a nice sense of propriety in such a matter.

As he passed the boat he had just left, Joe noticed that there was a light in the cabin window. He heard a noise there as of something falling. To his ears came distinctly the sound of angry words from Captain Bill.

CHAPTER V.

HOMEWARD BOUND.

 [74]

The window of the telegraph office on the canal at Ellenville faces the tow-path. Although day was breaking and the sky was cloudless, the telegraph operator was still working by the light of an oil lamp.

He was taking a message, which, when it was reduced to writing, read as follows:—

Stop boy on gray horse going east. Horse stolen from me. Coming at once to claim property.

WILLIAM ROSENCAMP.

The operator, with the telegram in his hand, went out at the door and looked up the canal. As he did so he saw bearing down upon him a gray horse ridden by a boy. It was Joe with Old Charlie.

Both boy and horse were splashed with mud, and bore evidence of having come far and fast [75]

through the night.

The operator stepped quickly out upon the tow-path, and threw up his hand, with the telegram still fluttering in it.

"Stop!" he shouted. "Hold up, there!"

Joe reined in Old Charlie, and the young man seized the improvised bridle.

"Where are you going with this horse?" he asked.

"Home," replied Joe, promptly.

"Isn't this Bill Rosencamp's horse?"

"No, sir," said the boy, stoutly; "he isn't. He's my father's horse! He was stolen, and I'm takin' him back home."

"Didn't Captain Bill have him?"

"Yes, but he hadn't any right to him, and he abused him, too."

"Didn't you take him without Captain Bill's knowledge?"

"Of course I did! I couldn't have got 'im at all if I hadn't."

"Well, I guess you'd better get off and let me take charge of the horse, and we'll investigate this matter a little. Come," he called, as Joe hesitated, "get down! Get down, I say!"

The boy let himself wearily to the ground.

Several men and boys who were standing near the offices and on the tow-path came crowding about.

"The superintendent is due here soon," said the operator. "He's coming up with the paymaster, and he'll settle it."

On the canal the superintendent's authority was almost absolute. Local authorities deferred to him in all matters pertaining to the canal and its employes, unless the law were formally invoked.

The crowd stood about impatiently. The operator still held the horse, and Joe stood near, looking confident and very earnest. Presently a steam-launch came puffing up the canal, gave two shrill whistles, and was quickly made fast to the dock.

A heavy, well-built man, with a closely cropped beard and a kindly face, stepped from the deck to the tow-path. He was followed by a man who carried a heavy valise, and by one or two other men.

They were the canal superintendent and the paymaster and their assistants.

"What's the matter here, Matthew?" asked the superintendent, approaching the group.

"This boy is charged with stealing this horse," replied the operator. "Here's the message."

The superintendent took the telegram and read it.

"Is this Bill Rosencamp's horse?" he asked, turning to Joe.

"No, sir!" repeated Joe. "He isn't. He's my father's horse."

"But he acknowledges having taken him from Rosencamp," the operator explained.

"Well," said the superintendent, "Rosencamp is coming. When he gets here we shall find out whose horse it is."

"But I don't want to stay here till he comes," said Joe.

"Probably not," remarked the operator, sarcastically.

The superintendent, who seemed to perceive that this was not an ordinary case of horse-stealing, now looked more closely at Joe, and noticed the boy's haggard, hungry look.

"He won't hurt you," he said. "Rosencamp's a rough fellow, but he won't hurt any one around here; and if it turns out that the horse is yours or your father's, you will get possession of him, of course. Meantime we shall have to find out the exact truth of the matter. Have you had any breakfast?"

"No, sir," replied Joe, "I haven't had any, nor Old Charlie either."

The superintendent smiled. "Matthew," he said, "tell the stable-man to take this horse up to the barn and feed him and rub him down. And you," turning to the boy, who was not a little bewildered by the invitation, "come with me."

He led the way across the street into a large boarding-house. There, in a warm and pleasant dining-room, Joe ate the first good meal he had taken in several weeks.

Under its cheering influence his heart warmed, his tongue was loosened, and to Mrs. Jones, the kind landlady, who sat by and served him, he told the story of his folly, his suffering, and his desire.

When he had finished his breakfast, Mrs. Jones went with him to the office, and calling the superintendent aside, said,—

"This boy is no thief. He is honest and right in what he has done."

"We shall soon find out about it," was the reply. "Here comes Rosencamp."

[76]

[77]

[78]

[79]

Captain Bill rode up to the office door, dismounted, and tied his horse. To the group of men and boys who quickly surrounded him he told, with many threats and much rough language, the story of his night ride, and denounced the wickedness of Joe.

"Ef I once git my hands on 'im," he muttered, "he'll never want to see another hoss agin as long as *he* lives!"

Tired with his journey, splashed with mud, his face red with anger, he entered the office and demanded the gray horse.

"Was it your horse that the boy took?" inquired the superintendent. [80]

"Course it was," replied Captain Bill, with a fine pretence of indignation.

"Where did you get the horse?" was the next question.

"Bought 'im."

"Where?"

"Right here in Ellenville."

"From whom?"

Rosencamp hesitated a little. "I don't rightly know the man's name," he said. "A feller 'at had 'im to sell."

"I know!" piped out a shrill voice from the crowd that had gathered in the room. "It was Callipers, the man that's been in prison for horse-stealing. I see 'em strike the bargain here on the tow-path yisterday."

Rosencamp lost something of his bravado. The kindly look disappeared from the face of the superintendent.

"Did you get this horse from Callipers?" he asked severely.

"Well, yes, if that's what 'is name is," replied Captain Bill, doggedly.

"Don't you know that Callipers has been convicted of horse-stealing?" [81]

"I don't know's I do."

"And didn't you know that this horse had been stolen?"

"If I had 'a' knowed it, do you s'pose I'd 'a' took 'im? Who says it was a stolen hoss, anyhow?" added Captain Bill, looking the crowd over savagely.

"I say so," said a man who had just entered the room. "I saw Callipers arrested last night for stealing the horse he traded to Bill Rosencamp. The constable has the irons on him now, and the sheriff has gone across to Port Jervis to head off the horse."

"Well, Rosencamp," said the superintendent, "what have you to say to that?"

"If the hoss was stole," said Rosencamp, "how was I to know it? Nobody told me it was stolen."

"Yes, somebody did tell you!" exclaimed Joe. "I told you the horse was stolen, and the man you got him of stood right there an' didn't deny it, either! I said it was my father's horse, an' it is!"

The superintendent turned to Joe. "Who is your father?" he asked. [82]

Joe hesitated a moment. Then he replied, "His name is Gaston."

"What Gaston? Do you mean Leonard Gaston, of Laymanville?"

"Yes, sir, that's his name. That's where he lives."

"And you—look here! Are you the boy who ran away from home last June? I know your father, if you are Joseph Gaston, and I know that he has been breaking his heart about you for three months."

Joe turned his face from the crowd, and looked down at the floor. There was perfect stillness in the room. Joe was the first to break the silence. He held up his head, and looked the superintendent squarely in the face.

"I did run away from home," he said, "and it was foolish and it was wicked. I didn't know it then, but I do now, and I want to go back, especially since I found the horse. I think maybe if I take Old Charlie back with me they—they won't be so hard on me; they—they'll be gladder to—to —"

The boy burst into tears, and broke down completely. The superintendent rose from his chair, and opened the door into a private office. [83]

"Here," he said to Joe; "come in here. I want to talk with you."

On the threshold the superintendent turned to look at Captain Bill.

"Are you going to institute proceedings against this boy? If you are, he will be placed under bonds, and I shall become his bondsman. If you are not going to prosecute him, you may go straight back to your boat," he said sharply. "And if I hear of your dealing in stolen horses again, or abusing any more boys, this canal company will dispense with your services on very short notice."

Rosencamp, disappointed, cowed, more angry than ever, knowing that he could not prosecute Joe, made his way to the door and out to the tow-path amid the jeers of the waiting crowd. He

mounted his horse, and rode away.

Fifteen minutes later Joe and the superintendent came out from the private office. It was evident that the boy had been weeping; but in his eyes there was a look of gladness and firmness that expressed, more plainly than words could have done, the condition of his mind. [84]

"Matthew," said the superintendent, "tell the stable-man to get this boy's horse, put a saddle and bridle on him, and bring him here. Have him get out a horse for you, for I want you to go with the boy as far as Darbytown. From there he knows the way home, and can go alone."

That afternoon, while the sun was still high, Joe and Old Charlie were on the highway not far from their home. Matthew had left them at Darbytown, after getting a good dinner for all of them, and now they were travelling homeward alone.

The old horse jogged on, trotting or walking as he liked, stopping at the roadside now and then to nibble at a tempting bunch of grass or a bit of fresh foliage, or to plunge his nose into the cooling waters of a wayside stream.

Even now, however, they were not making very slow time on the whole; and earlier in the day they had gone faster. It had seemed to Joe that he could not wait till the white front of the old farmhouse should come into sight from the top of Hickory Hill. [85]

The eager anticipation of his return to the dear old home had heightened his spirits, and brightened his eyes.

But after Matthew left him he began to think; and the more deeply he thought, the slower became his progress. Many suspicions and misgivings had come into his mind.

He no longer paid heed to the beauty of the day, the splendor of the sun, or the rich luxuriance of the early autumn foliage. He was looking only into his own heart. He was thinking only of his inexcusable folly and wickedness in leaving so good a home. He was wondering what his father would say to him; how his mother would receive him; whether his little sister would ever again care to play with him as of old.

He was wondering, indeed, if his parents would wish to have him come home at all, disgraced as he was; if the door of his father's house would not be shut and barred against him forever. [86]

"Hello, ther! W'at's the matter wi' ye?"

The exclamation, coming so suddenly and unexpectedly, so startled Joe that he almost fell from his horse. He had been so deeply engrossed in thought that he had not seen any one approaching. He looked down now and discovered a little old man standing near the horse's head.

The man was shrunken, knock-kneed, eccentric in dress and manner, and leaned heavily on his cane. Joe recognized him at once as a neighborhood character, whom every one knew by the name of Uncle Billy.

"W'y, I thought ye was asleep," said the old man. "I was fearful ye'd tumble off the hoss."

"I wasn't asleep," replied Joe. "I was thinkin'."

"A-thinkin'!" exclaimed Uncle Billy; "w'at right's a boy like you got to be a-thinkin', I'd like to know?" He advanced a step and laid his hand on Old Charlie's neck. "Ben a good hoss in 'is day," he commented; "looks like the hoss Leonard Gaston use to hev,—the one 'at was stole." [87]

"It is," replied Joe; "it's the same horse."

The old man started back so quickly that he tripped and almost fell over his cane.

"Who be you?" he exclaimed, shading his eyes with his hand, and looking up intently at Joe. "You aint Joe Gaston, be ye?"

"Yes, I am; I'm Joe Gaston," responded the boy, sadly.

Uncle Billy retreated still farther. "Well, I'm dumflustered!" he exclaimed. After a minute he added, "W'ere ye goin'?"

"Home!" replied Joe.

The old man shook his head solemnly. "Ye won't git much of a welcome ther," he said.

"Why? Is my father set against me?" asked Joe, anxiously. [88]

"Set against ye? That's puttin' it too mild. He's cast ye off. He's unherited ye. He won't speak of ye to nobody, an' he won't let nobody so much as mention yer name in his presience. Now what ye think o' that?"

The old man seemed to take delight in giving his unwelcome information. He looked up at Joe with a quizzical smile on his thin face, and waited for an answer.

Joe did not reply to the question, but after a minute he asked,—

"Do—do you know whether my mother feels the—the same way?"

"Of course she doos! First along she purty near cried 'er eyes out over ye. She went around makin' out't ye never stole that hoss; said ye'd be back in a day or two an' clear it all up. But she's give ye up now. They don't none on 'em ever expect to see ye agin; an' w'at's more, I guess they don't none on 'em want to. What ye think o' that? Hey?"

Again the old man smiled grimly at Joe, and again Joe left his question unanswered. He was [89]

struggling now with a great lump in his throat that was growing larger and more uncontrollable each moment.

"What—what does my little sister—what does Jennie think?" he asked, choking sadly over the question.

"Well there now!" was the reply; "that gal—I didn't think o' her. She don't da's't talk about ye to hum, ye know, but w'en she's away she kind o' finds oportetunities to discuss the subjec'. 'Twa'n't but last week she says to me over to Williams's place, says she, 'It's awful lonesome without Joe,' she says. 'I wisht he'd come back an' be a good boy,' says she. 'Aint it sad about his goin' away so?' she says. 'Do you think he'll come back agin soon, Uncle Billy?' says she. An' I says, 'No, he won't never come back agin. He's gone too fur,' says I, 'in more ways 'an one,' says I. What ye think o' that? Hey?"

But this time Joe could not have answered the question if he had tried. The lump in his throat seemed to have dissolved into tears; they filled his eyes, and ran freely down his face. [90]

The old man saw that the boy was crying, and for a moment seemed to repent his hardness of heart.

"I'm sorry for ye, sonny," said Uncle Billy, after an awkward pause; "but I tell ye they aint no use o' yer goin' hum; they don't ixpect ye, an' they don't want ye."

Still Joe sat, weeping and speechless.

"Well," the old man added, "I must be joggin' on. Somebody might come along an' see us two together, an'—well, I've got a reppytation to lose, ye know."

He burst into a shrill cackling laugh, grasped his twisted cane more firmly, and hobbled on around a bend in the road and out of sight.

Old Charlie, unheeded by his young master, started on.

The sun sank till the light it threw on the green September foliage was mellow and golden. From somewhere in the distance came the ting-a-ling of a cow-bell, as the herd wandered slowly home. The sound and the memories it brought started fresh tears into Joe's eyes, and when the mist they occasioned had cleared away he found himself on the summit of Hickory Hill. [91]

Down in the valley, half-hidden by trees, he saw the white front of his home. Behind it rose the gray roofs of the barns; before it stretched the yellow road; on it fell the soft light of the dying day.

He had drawn the reins and sat looking down on it, while Old Charlie, pricking up his ears in glad recognition of the familiar sight, pawed the ground impatiently.

"No," Joe said, at last, "we won't go on. It's no use. I'm sorry, but—it's no use."

He turned the horse's head, and Joe and Charlie started back.

CHAPTER VI.

OLD CHARLIE BRINGS BACK JOE.

On the day Joe left home his mother put his room in order for him as usual, and placed on the table a little bouquet of red and white geraniums and verbenas. She could not believe that he would be gone over night, and she knew that when he came he would be tired, broken, repentant, and grateful for the least mark of tenderness.

She delayed supper beyond the hour, in the hope that he might come. Even after the others had forced themselves to eat, she set aside enough for Joe.

She went many times to the east window to look down the road for him, and sent Jennie to the top of the hill to see if she could discover in the distance a boy riding toward her on a gray horse.

But Jennie, whose eyes had been full of tears all day, came back at dusk to say that she had seen nothing. Then she went weeping to bed. [93]

The next day came, and many days thereafter; but Joe's room was still vacant, and Old Charlie's stall was still empty.

Farmer Gaston's grief was less touching than his wife's perhaps, but it was really as deep as hers. The habitual sternness of his face was tempered with the lines of sorrow.

He had made no effort to find the horse. There was no doubt in his mind that Joe had taken him; but he did not care to bring the boy into deeper disgrace by making public search.

Mr. Gaston sometimes wondered if he had taken the right course with Joe. His theory had been that the more strictly a boy was held to his work and duty as a boy, the more earnestly would he follow both as a man.

But he began now to think that possibly he had been too strict with Joe. Had he not left too little room for independence of thought and action? Had he tried to smother those boyish instincts of freedom and fair play that go, no less than other qualities, to make up the man? [94]

His grief was mingled thus with a degree of remorse; but he still believed that it would not be wise to go out in search of Joe, offering terms of forgiveness. The boy's offence had been too great for that. His own salvation depended on his coming back voluntarily in repentance and humiliation, with a full confession of his fault.

The hot days of July went by, and the hotter days of August. The summer tasks went on as of old about the farm, but the old place had never before been so silent and lonely.

The lines on Mr. Gaston's face grew deeper. He went about with shoulders bent, as if bearing some heavy burden.

Joe's mother, pitifully silent and anxious-eyed, not venturing to question the wisdom or oppose the will of her husband, went every day to place fresh flowers in Joe's room. Every night she sat and looked up the long road to the east till darkness came and swallowed it, hoping, waiting, and yearning for the sight of her returning boy. [95]

Meantime there had been, after a long delay, a movement in the community to look a little more deeply into the matter of the disappearance of Joe and the horse. Squire Bidwell, who happened to be at once the local justice of the peace and a good friend of Joe Gaston, found it hard to believe that the boy who had been an apt and receptive pupil in his Sunday school had proved to be a common thief.

The squire, moreover, had been Farmer Gaston's friend from boyhood, and he saw with great pain the havoc which Joe's disappearance, and his father's belief in his guilt, was making in the family. He resolved to do what he could to probe the matter to the bottom.

He called together three or four of his most prudent townsmen, and set them at work making inquiries and doing a sort of detective work. Presently it was found that a farmer in an adjoining town had, on the evening of the day after Joe's disappearance, while driving a cow from pasture, seen a rough-looking man ride a gray horse out of a wood-lot, and had found the place where the man and the horse had apparently passed several hours, and eaten a meal or two. [96]

This clew was followed up. Still farther on other traces of the real thief were found. He had now passed quite beyond any jurisdiction of Squire Bidwell, but the authorities were notified of what had been learned, and were on the alert.

Callipers was well known through previous misdeeds. The man who had been seen answered his description. For a long time he evaded pursuit; but at last, as we have seen, he was apprehended, the very day after he had turned Old Charlie over to Rosencamp on the canal.

Late one September afternoon, after a day of sunshine and blue skies, Joe's father sat on the westerly porch of the farmhouse, looking away toward the lake, on which the shadows were now falling deeply, and thinking of what had occurred on its shores on a memorable day in June.

On the steps at his feet, her chin in her hands, thinking also of poor Joe, sat his daughter Jennie. Mrs. Gaston, busy with some household task, moved about in the rooms near by. [97]

Suddenly through the lane around the corner of the house came Squire Bidwell. He declined Mrs. Gaston's invitation to enter the house, and Mr. Gaston's invitation to take a chair on the porch. Then with some embarrassment, as though he were treading on delicate ground, the squire said,—

"Neighbor, you remember that gray horse you used to have?"

"Yes," replied Mr. Gaston, coldly. "I remember him."

"Well, some of us were talking about that horse the other day, and—and we kind of thought we'd look him up. We haven't found him yet—"

"No, I presume not."

"But we found out who took him."

"I suppose we know who took him," said Mr. Gaston, uneasily.

"I don't think you do, Gaston," said the squire. "It wasn't Joe."

"What!" exclaimed the farmer. [98]

Mrs. Gaston had approached, and called out eagerly, "Mr. Bidwell!"

"O Joe! Oh, goody!" screamed Jennie.

"No," repeated the squire, "it wasn't your boy. It was a common horse-thief,—a bow-legged, stumpy fellow by the nickname of Callipers."

"Are you sure about this?" questioned Mr. Gaston. "What evidence have you got?"

"You won't deceive us?" exclaimed Joe's mother.

"No, Mrs. Gaston, I wouldn't," said the squire, who had now found his tongue,— "not for anything. What I'm telling you is truth, every word of it. Joe didn't take that horse. He didn't know any more about the taking of that horse than you did,—not a bit. But we've run down the man who did it, from one clew to another, and the deputy sheriff's got him in a wagon out here in the road in front of the house now. Will you go out and see him? I guess maybe he can tell you something about Joe. He seems inclined to make a clean breast of it. I'd have brought him around [99]

here with me, but the sheriff's got handcuffs on him, and it's hard to get him out and in the wagon."

The next minute all four were on their way to the front gate. Callipers sat there in the wagon, under the eye of the deputy sheriff, with stoical indifference on his face.

"Good evenin', ladies!" he said briskly, as the party approached him. "Good evenin', Mr. Gaston, sir. I'm sorry to 'ave put you to the trouble of comin' out 'ere, sir, but circumstances over which, as I may say, I have no control has made it inconvenient for me to meet you in your 'ouse."

"Never mind that," answered Mr. Gaston, sharply. "I'll talk to you here."

"Thank you, sir! I'm glad to meet you an' your hinteresting family, sir. I 'ad the pleasure o' visitin' your 'andsome place once before, sir. It was in lovely June, in the early mornin', sir. I may say it was so early that I 'adn't the 'eart to disturb your slumbers. But as the result o' that 'ere visit, be'old me now!"

[100]

The man held up his hands to show the steel bands firmly clasped about his wrists, and joined by a few short links.

"Do you know anything about my son?" asked Mr. Gaston, abruptly.

"Yes, sir. I will proceed with my tale. You see I was jest about to enter the stable door that mornin' w'en that young feller appeared a-comin' down the path, and as 'e appeared I disappeared be'ind the corner o' the barn. He went in w'ere the 'oss was, an' talked some sort o' rubbish to 'im about 'is goin' away an' all that, you know. I couldn't quite make out the drift of it. But 'e bid good-by to the 'oss, an' went out a-wipin' of 'is eyes, an' struck into the road 'ere, an' walked away in that direction."

The man was about to indicate the direction referred to; but finding his right hand securely clasped to the other, he abandoned the attempt, begging to be excused from pointing out the direction.

"Seein' that the 'oss was up an' awake," he continued, "an' probably wouldn't sleep no more that mornin' anyhow, I took 'im with me into the country."

[101]

"But about Joe, the boy?" asked Mr. Gaston, eagerly. "Have you seen him since?"

"Well, yes, sir, I 'ave. But now, look 'ere; you expects me to criminate myself, do you?"

"It will probably go less hard with you," said Squire Bidwell, "if you tell the whole story of your performances, and reveal what you know about this boy that you've put under such a grave suspicion."

"All right, all right," said the horse-thief. "You've got me, 'ard and tight, that's sure, an' I don't see no way out o' it, now. I can give Mr. Gaston information that will lead him to the boy and the 'oss, sir."

Then the man told how he had seen Joe on the canal, driving the tow-horses.

"How do you know it was our son you saw?" inquired Mr. Gaston, sternly.

"Well, it was the same lad that went into the barn an' came out of it again that lovely mornin' in June. Besides, this 'ere gray 'oss was there, you know, and the 'oss knowed 'im, an' 'e knowed the 'oss. W'y, w'en they see each other on the canal, they was that tickled they rubbed noses an' cried,—both of 'em."

[102]

"Papa," exclaimed Jennie, "that was Joe! I know it was! It was Joe and Old Charlie!"

"To tell the truth," said Callipers, "the lad didn't look just to say swell. 'Is clothes, if I must remark on 'em, seemed to be summat the worse for wear. His jacket an' trousers was jest about so-so. 'Is shoes 'ad give out in places too numerous to mention. An' there was 'ardly enough left of the 'at 'e 'ad on to make it proper to speak of it."

"Father," exclaimed Mrs. Gaston, "we must get him at once. He is in want; he is suffering! He is honest, too. He has been foolish and headstrong, but he is honest, and we have wronged him in our thought every day for three months. Now he must come home!"

It had been many years since Mrs. Gaston had expressed herself in so positive a manner as this to her husband. But now it was not necessary. He was as impatient for Joe's return as she.

[103]

"I shall go to-morrow morning," he said firmly, "and find him and bring him home."

For the last two or three minutes Squire Bidwell had been gazing intently at something that had attracted his notice off on the hillside in the distance.

"Well, I declare!" he exclaimed, finally, "that *is* curious. Look!"

He pointed to the place where the open country road wound up the long slope of Hickory Hill. The sun had so far descended that the valley was in shadow, but it was still flooding the hilltops with its yellow light; and in its glow the figure of a boy on a horse, almost a mile away, was distinctly outlined.

"Do you see them," asked the squire,—*"up there in the road? They've done it twice or three times already. Now they're going to do it again; watch 'em!"*

What "they" had done was this: The boy was apparently laboring under some indecision, as if wishing to remain on the top of the hill. The horse, however, was plainly bent upon rushing down

[104]

the hill toward the house. After a plunge down the road, the rider would succeed in turning the animal's head up again; but he would no sooner have got a fair start in that direction, than the horse, swinging suddenly around, would begin to gallop furiously down the road once more toward the Gaston farm.

Now, again, in sight of them all, the boy succeeded in stopping the horse, in turning his head, and forcing him to reascend the hill; and once more the horse whirled about and plunged down the road toward the house.

This time, however, he received no check. The boy, as if in weariness and despair, allowed the reins to droop. The animal sped on, and the next moment both were hidden behind the trees at the bend of the road.

Mr. Gaston, shading his eyes with his hand, still stood gazing intently at the place where horse and rider had disappeared. [105]

Mrs. Gaston's white face and eager eyes, fixed on the point where the road came out of the grove, showed that she divined the truth.

"It is Joe!" she said, with forced calmness. "He is coming home!"

Then Old Charlie, with his young master on his back, bounded into sight, and presently boy and horse were in the midst of the group.

The next moment Joe was kneeling in the road, with his father's hand clasped in both his.

"Father!" he said, "will you please forgive me and let me come home?"

Before the father could reply, the arms of Joe's mother were around him, and Jennie was laughing and crying and clinging to his neck.

Then the good old horse, pushing his nose in among the four faces that he loved, met with a welcome that was no less sincere.

"He made me come," explained Joe, a minute later. "I got to the top of the hill, and my courage gave out, and I didn't dare come down, and I thought I would ride back on the road a piece farther, and then turn the horse loose and let him come home, while I went on afoot; but Old Charlie would come, whether or no, and—" [106]

Joe's voice gave out. Every one cried a little. Even Squire Bidwell and the deputy sheriff and Callipers had tears in their eyes. Mr. Gaston's face, even with the tear-marks on it, was radiant.

Soon the squire and the deputy sheriff, with their prisoner, Callipers, drove off toward the county seat. Then the whole Gaston family went with Old Charlie to the stable, and gave him his supper and his bed before seeking their own.

Joe's father and mother and sister were happy people that night.

THE END.

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