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Author: Clarence Budington Kelland

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MARK TIDD IN BUSINESS ***



WE SHUT UP THE DOORS AND
COUNTED UP TO SEE WHAT WE'D
DONE

MARK TIDD IN BUSINESS

BY

CLARENCE B. KELLAND

AUTHOR OF "Mark Tidd"
"THIRTY PIECES OF SILVER" ETC.

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MARK TIDD IN BUSINESS

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MARK TIDD IN BUSINESS

CHAPTER I

The Wicksville paper told how there wouldn't be any school for six weeks, on account of somebody getting diphtheria. That same afternoon my father didn't get out of the way of an automobile and got broke inside some place, so he had to go to the hospital in Detroit to have it fixed.

"James," says my mother—that's my real name, but the fellows call me Plunk—"I've—I've got to go with—your father." She was crying, you see, and I wasn't feeling very good, I can tell you. "And," she went on, "I don't know what—we shall ever do."

"About what?" I asked her, having no idea myself.

"The store," she says.

I saw right off. You see, my father is Mr. Smalley, and he owns Smalley's Bazar, where you can buy almost anything—if father can find where he put it. With father gone and mother gone there wouldn't be anybody left to look after the store, and so there wouldn't be any money, because the store was where money came from, and then as sure as shooting the Smalley family would have a hard time of it. It made me gloomier than ever, especially because I didn't seem to be able to think of any way to help.

Mother went up-stairs to father's room, shaking her head and crying, and I went outdoors because there didn't seem to be anything else to do. I opened the door and stepped out on the porch, and right that minute I began to feel easier in my mind, somehow. The thing that did it was just seeing who was sitting there, almost filling up a whole step from side to side. It was a boy, and he was so fat his coat was 'most busted in the back where he bulged, and his name was Mark Tidd. That's short for Marcus Aurelius Fortunatus Tidd, and you maybe have heard of him on account of the stories Tallow Martin and Binney Jenks have told about him. Yes, sir, the sight of him made me feel a heap better.

"Hello, P-plunk!" he stuttered. "How's your f-f-father?"

"Got to go to the hospital," says I, "and mother's goin', too, and there won't be anybody to mind the store, and there won't be any money, and we don't know what we're a-goin' to do." I was 'most cryin', but I didn't let on any more than I could help.

"W-what's that?" asks Mark.

I told him all over again, and he squinted up his little eyes and began pinching his fat cheek like he does when he's studying hard over something.

"L-looks bad, don't it?" he says.

"Awful," says I.

"M-must be some way out," he says, which was just like him. He never bothered fussing about how bad things looked. As soon as they began looking bad he started in to find some way of fixing them up so they'd be better. Always. He kept on thinking and then he turned to me, and I saw right off he'd seen something to do.

"N-no school for six weeks," says he.

"I know," I says, not seeing what that had to do with it.

"G-gives you and me and T-tallow and Binney all the t-time to ourselves," says he.

"Sure," says I, not seeing yet.

He wrinkled his pudgy nose sort of disgusted at me.

"D-don't you figger," says he, "that four b-boys is 'most equal to one m-m-man?"

"Maybe," says I.

"Even if the man is your f-f-father?"

Then I saw it, and it sort of scared me. It looked to me like a bigger job than Mark ever tackled yet.

"You don't mean for us boys to run the store?" I says.

"Sure," says he.

"But runnin' a store's business," says I.

"B-b-business," says Mark, "hain't nothin' but makin' m-money out of somethin' you like to do. P-poor business men is them that tries to make money out of somethin' they d-don't like to do."

"Um," says I.

"We'll enjoy runnin' the Bazar," says he, as if the whole thing was settled.

"I'm afraid," says I. "S'pose we was to bust the business."

"We won't," says he. "L-let's talk to your ma about it."

We went in, and after a while my mother came down-stairs. I felt sort of foolish when I told her Mark's idea, and it didn't get any better when she said, "Bosh!"

But I was forgetting about Mark. He started in to talk to mother, and he spluttered and stuttered along for fifteen minutes, arguing and wiggling his stumpy fingers, and explaining to her how easy running a bazar was, and just why he and Tallow and Binney and I were a lot better able to do it than anybody else on the face of the earth. Why, I began to believe him myself! So did mother. Mark knew just how to go at it. At the start, when she didn't want to listen, he talked so fast she couldn't find a chance to tell him to keep quiet, and by the time he was beginning to slacken up mother was bobbing her head and almost smiling, and saying, "Yes, yes," and, "Do you honestly think you could?" and, "I don't see why I didn't think of it myself," and things like that.

"Why," says Mark, "you d-d-don't need to worry about the Bazar a minute. Just look after Mr. Smalley."

"I wish I could ask your father's advice," mother said to me, finally, "but I daren't. I'll just have to

decide myself. And it seems like there wasn't but one way to decide. I won't say a word to father about it.... You can try, boys ... and it will be a—miracle—a blessed miracle if it—comes out all right." Then she started to cry again.

Mark, he waddled over and patted her on the back and says, soothing-like, "Jest you t-t-trust *me*, Mrs. Smalley—and don't worry—not a mite."

It ended up by mother giving me the keys to the Bazar, and kissing me and Mark, and telling us she was proud of us, and—hurrying out of the room so we couldn't see her cry any more.

Mark looked at me and scowled. "Looky there, now," he says. "Looky there. Guess we g-g-got to make a go of it. Calc'late she's got trouble enough without us makin' it worse.... C-come on."

We went out and found Binney and Tallow. At first they wouldn't believe us when we told them, but when they did believe they set up a whoop like somebody'd up and given them a dollar to spend for peanuts. Anybody'd think running a bazar was some kind of a circus, which it isn't at all, because I've worked for dad holidays and Saturdays sometimes, and I know.

"When do we start?" asks Tallow.

"F-f-first thing in the mornin'," says Mark.

"When they goin' to take your father?" Binney asks me.

"On the five-forty to-night," I told him, "and I guess I'll be goin' home to see if there hain't somethin' I can help with."

"Where you goin', Mark?"

"Home, too. I got consid'able th-thinkin' to do. How'd you expect me to m-make money with this business if I don't study it some?"

Anybody'd 'a' thought it was his business, to hear him talk, and I guess he'd already begun thinking it was. No matter what he tackled, he was just that way. Every time he set his heart on doing something, whether it was for himself or for somebody else, he went at it like he owned the whole shebang and had to come out on top or get dragged off to the poorhouse.

I started to walk off, but Mark called after me:

"B-b-better gimme those keys. I'll be down 'fore you are in the mornin', and maybe I'll have to go down to-night."

Well, sir, I handed over the keys and didn't say a word. I could see who was going to be the head of that business while dad was gone, and that feller's name wasn't Plunk Smalley.

"I hope," says I, after thinking it over a minute, "that you'll at least give me a job."

"Huh!" snorts Mark. "If you don't git wider awake than you usually be I dun'no's the business can afford to h-have you around." But right after that he grinned, and when Mark Tidd grins nobody can be mad with him or envy him or think he is bossing the job more than he ought to.

"T-tell your mother not to worry," he yelled after me.

It was possible for mother to go with father and leave me at home because Aunt Minnie was there. Aunt Minnie was my father's sister, and she lived with us because if she hadn't she would have had to live alone, and she couldn't live alone because she was afraid. One day I started to count up the things Aunt Minnie was afraid of, but it wasn't any use. I guess if she was to set out and try she could be afraid of *anything*. She was afraid of pigs, and of thunder, and of tramps, and of bumblebees, and of the dark, and of sun-stroke, and of book agents, and of— Why, once she lay awake all night and shivered on account of a red-flannel undershirt hanging on the line. I'd rather have stayed at Mark's house or somewheres than with her, but it wasn't any use. There's no fun staying with a woman that's all the time squealing and squinching and jumping like somebody shoved a pin into her.

That night, after father and mother were gone, Aunt Minnie wouldn't let me go out of the house, because, says she, like as not burglars have been watching for just such a chance for years, hanging around Wicksville, waiting for this house to be left with nobody but her in it. It didn't seem to me like it would be worth a burglar's time to wait many years for a chance at what was in our house. But you couldn't reason with Aunt Minnie, so I had to sit in the house right when I wanted to see Mark Tidd the worst kind of way.

Along about half past eight there come a rap at the door, and Aunt Minnie let out a yell that startled me so I was close to seeing burglars myself. It wasn't, though; it was Mark.

"Come in," I says to him. "I'm pretty busy keepin' out robbers, but I guess I can find a minute to talk with you."

He just grinned, because he knew Aunt Minnie.

"I've b-been down to the store," says he.

"Oh!" says I.

"Just lookin' around," says he, "to g-git an idee."

"Did you git one?" says I.

"I did," says he. "I got the idee that n-n-nobody could find what he was lookin' for in that Bazar 'less he did it by accident."

"Pa used to have that trouble," says I. And it was a fact. I've known pa to spend the whole morning looking for a spool of darning-cotton—hours after the customer that wanted it had got tired and gone home. But pa never got provoked about it; he always kept on till he found it, and then put it handy. Next day if somebody come in for a brush-broom that pa couldn't find, he'd try to sell them the darning-cotton instead. Old Ike Bond, the 'bus-driver, used to say that if pa didn't have anything to sell but one spool of thread, and that was hanging by a string in the middle of the store, he never would find it without the sheriff and a search-warrant.

"F-first thing for us to do," says Mark, "is to f-find *everything*. Got to know what we got to sell 'fore we can sell it."

That sounded likely to me.

"And," says he, "we got to hustle."

"Why?" says I.

"To get a head start," says he.

"A head start of what?"

"The other bazar," says he.

I grinned because I thought he was joking, and said to git out, because there wasn't any other bazar.

"Worse'n a bazar," says he. "It's one of those five-and-ten-cent stores."

"Be you *crazy*?" I says.

"They've rented that vacant s-s-store of Jenkins's, and there's a big sign sayin' they'll be open for b-business Monday."

Well, sir, I was what Aunt Minnie calls flabbergasted. Why, Wicksville wasn't big enough for two bazars—it was hard enough for *one* to make a living.

"I—I hope it's a mistake," says I.

"Oh, I dun'no'," says Mark, sort of squinting up his little eyes. "I g-guess we'll git along somehow—and it'll be more fun."

"Fun?" I says.

"Fun," says he. "Hain't it more f-f-fun to play a ball game against another team than it is to bounce a ball against the side of the house all alone?"

Now, wasn't that just like him! If a thing was easy he didn't take any interest in it, but just the minute you put some kind of a *contest* into it, then Mark couldn't start in fast enough.

"Maybe it'll be fun for you," I told him, "but what about the Smalley family that expects that Bazar to pay for what they eat?"

"Plunk," says Mark, "don't git licked before the f-f-fight begins."

"We can't sell as cheap as those five-and-ten-cent stores. I've heard pa say so."

"I hain't so s-sure," says Mark. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it.... You be d-down to the store at seven o'clock," says he, and waddled off home.

Now, wouldn't anybody think it was *his* store? Wouldn't they? It looked to me like he was trying to be the whole thing, but you can bet I didn't feel that way before we were through with it. I was all-fired glad Mark Tidd was around with his schemes and his plans and his way of running everything in general.

CHAPTER II

I thought I'd steal a march on Mark Tidd next morning, and got to the Bazar at half past six instead of seven. I figured he'd come moggin' along in half an hour and I'd have some pretty smart things to say. But when I got there I found the door open, and inside was Mark with his coat off and dust on his nose and dust on his hands, digging around among the stock to see what was there.

"There's enough st-stuff here for three bazars," he says to me like he judged it was *my* fault.

"All the more to sell," says I.

"There's truck here you couldn't t-t-trade to Injuns for pelts," says he, and then he grinned, "but maybe we can sell 'em to white folks for m-money."

"When does the new store open?"

"Monday."

"And this is Wednesday." I expect I said it sort of downhearted, for Mark wrinkled his nose like he does when he doesn't like anything, and says:

"Figger on shuttin' the door and lettin' 'em have the t-town to themselves?"

"No," says I.

"Then," says he, "git a box of starch from the grocery and f-f-fix up your spine with it."

"They'll have a grand openin'," says I.

"To be sure. And we'll have somethin' that'll make a grand openin' look like scratchin' a match at the eruption of Vesuvius." Right there I saw he had a scheme already hatched, but he didn't go any further with it and I knew it wasn't any use to ask questions. He'd tell when he was ready.

"Come on," says he, "and let's find out what's here to sell."

We began rummaging around, and every minute or so we'd find something that father had tucked away years ago and forgot. Every shelf was full. There'd be a row of things in front, and then rows of other things behind that had been pushed out of sight. I had a sort of an idea it was that way, but in half an hour I was so surprised at the things we'd dug up that there wasn't any more room for surprise in me.

By that time Binney and Tallow got there and Mark set them to work.

"Th-there's goin' to be *system* in this store," he says. "Each of you has got to be one of these things they call specialists."

My, how he spluttered on that word!

"As how?" asked Binney.

"Each feller will take so much of the s-store, and he's got to know where every single thing in his department is so he can put his hand on it in the d-dark."

We poked around and overhauled things and sorted and fixed up till 'most noon. A couple of folks came in to buy things and stopped to talk and grin at us, and one old lady predicted we'd turn the Bazar into what she called a Bedlam in a week. Nobody seemed to think it was anything but a joke, but it wasn't any joke to us, I can tell you. We were *working*. Yes, sir, if anybody ever worked, we did.

Along about eleven in come a man I never saw before. He was pretty tall, and half of him looked like it was neck. That neck stuck out through his collar so far you had to keep lifting your eyes a full minute before you got to his head. His hair was kind of pinkish, and his eyes were so close together they almost bumped when he winked. Outside of that he looked like any other man except for a wart just on one side of his nose. It was the finest wart you ever saw, and he must have been proud of it. I don't know as I ever saw a wart that came anywhere near it.

I went up to wait on him.

"Howdy, my lad?" says he, sort of oozy-like.

It made me mad right off, because there's nothing that riles a boy so as to have some man grin soft-soapy and call him a lad. What is a lad, anyhow? I never saw one, and I never saw anybody that would own up to being one. But you mustn't get mad at customers, so I was as polite as a girl at a party.

"Pretty well, sir. What can I do for you?"

"Is the proprietor in?" he wanted to know.

"No, sir," says I. "He's out of town and we don't know just when he'll be back."

"Who's in charge durin' his absence?" says the man, talking like a college professor looking for a job.

I was going to say I was, but before I spoke up I knew *that* wasn't the truth. Not a bit of it. Mark Tidd was in charge, and don't you forget it. Being in charge was a habit he'd got, and nobody will ever cure him of it.

"Why," says I, "Mark Tidd is the boss right now."

"I'd like to speak to him," says he, so I turned and called.

Mark came waddling up with the dust still on his nose and more dust on his fingers, and what you might call a freshet of sweat cutting streaks down his face.

"This," says I, "is Mark Tidd, our manager," and then I stood off to see what would happen.

Mr. Long Neck wrinkled his nose till his wart moved up almost to his eyebrows and squinted at Mark.

"I hain't here to be made fun of," says he, mad-like.

Mark turned his head on one side, and that's a dangerous sign. When you see him pull his cheek or turn his head on one side or go to whittling—well, you want to look out, for something is going to happen.

"What can I do for you?" Mark asked, without a stutter.

"I want to see somebody in authority," says Mr. Long Neck.

"I'm the b-b-best we got," says Mark, smiling sweet as honey.

The man looked all around and didn't see anybody older than we were, so I guess he must have believed Mark. He took hold of the end of his nose and bent it back and forth a couple of times as if he expected it was going to help him talk better.

"I," says he, "am Jehoshaphat P. Skip. The P. stands for Petronius."

"I know him," says I before I could think. "He's in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Mark's father knows that by heart."

"Huh!" Mr. Long Neck sniffed.

Mark looked at me out of the corner of his eye, and after that I kept still.

"P-p-leased to meet you," says Mark. "What can I do for you?"

Mr. Skip straightened up and lengthened his neck till he looked as dignified as a turkey gobbler. "I," says he, "am the sole proprietor of the Gigantic Five-and-Ten-Cent Stores, a branch of which is now being located in your village."

You could see right off that Mr. Skip wouldn't start to argue with anybody who said he was a great man.

Mark didn't say anything; he just waited.

"I came," says Mr. Skip, "to talk business—serious business."

Right off Mark looked serious. He did it fine. I don't believe there's an undertaker can look more serious than Mark when he's a mind to.

"I came," says Mr. Skip, "to warn you."

"Oh," says Mark, "to warn us? Oh."

"I," says Mr. Skip, "propose to sell articles for five and ten cents. In some measure your Bazar will conflict with me—you will be almost a competitor." He stopped and bent his nose back and forth again.

"Yes," says Mark, "I calc'late we will—almost."

"But," says Mr. Skip, "it will not be a real competitor."

"Um," says Mark. "Why?"

"Because," says Mr. Skip, "I'm here to warn you not to encroach on my business."

"Um," says Mark, again. "What was your ideas about en-encroachment?"

"Simple," says Mr. Skip. "I sell things for five and ten cents. You mustn't. You can sell for a penny or for fifteen cents or for five dollars—but not for a nickel or a dime. That's *my* business."

Mark began tugging at his fat cheek. "I calc'late," says he, as gentle as a lamb, "that there's some such law, eh? You got a law passed sayin' nobody but you could s-s-sell for five and ten cents."

"I don't need any law. I say you mustn't. That's enough."

"T-to be sure," says Mark. "But if anybody was to g-go right along and pay no attention, what then? Eh, Mr. Skip? What if somebody did?"

"In that case," says Mr. Skip, scowling until his two eyes looked like one slit, "in that case I'd bust 'em. Bust 'em, is what I'd do. Nobody can go against Jehoshaphat P. Skip and be the better for it."

"You're willin'," says Mark, "that we should s-s-sell for fifteen cents, and for a quarter, and for a d-d-dollar?"

"Yes," says Mr. Skip, beginning to smile like the cat that ate the canary-bird.

Mark thought a minute; then he says, "We'll m-make a trade with you, Mr. Skip."

"What is it? Glad to oblige if possible," says Mr. Long Neck.

"We'll swap you the r-right to open a store in Wicksville for the right to sell whatever we please," says Mark.

Mr. Skip kind of clouded up and I judged he was getting ready to thunder a bit. He did. He roared and grumbled, and made a sight of noise about it, too.

"Don't make fun of me, young feller. Don't make fun of Jehoshaphat P. Skip. Nobody ever did and failed to regret it. I've told you you can't interfere with my trade, and you can't. This is the first and

last warnin'. Don't dare sell a nickel's worth or a dime's worth or you'll suffer the consequences."

Mark looked sort of meek. "My f-f-father says competition is the life of trade," he says.

"I won't have no competition," says Mr. Skip.

"Maybe not," says Mark, still as meek as a sheep. Then all of a sudden he perked up and looked right into Mr. Skip's narrow eyes. "Maybe not," he says, again, this time some louder, "but I'm calc'latin' you *will*. I'm calc'latin' you hain't ever seen any competition till n-n-now." He swept his hand around the store. "This Bazar," says he, "is full of stuff to sell for five and ten cents—and it's goin' to be sold. It's g-g-goin' to be made a *specialty* of. I was plannin' on bein' fair. I was figgerin' on makin' it as easy for you as I could, but now, Mr. Skip, you're goin' to find your store's got the liveliest c-c-competition in Michigan. We'll s-sell what we like for how much we like.... Now, Mr. Skip, good mornin'. We're pretty b-busy."

Not another word did he say, but turned his bulging back on Mr. Long Neck and walked to the back of the store. Mr. Long Neck swallowed a couple of times so you could see it all the way from his collar to his ears, and went out muttering to himself. Mark grinned at me and winked encouraging.

"There," says I, "now see what we're up against."

"Hain't it b-b-bully? Better 'n I hoped," says he.

"He'll bust us," says I.

"He's more likely to bust his neck," says Mark.

"What you going to do?"

"I'm goin' to give Mr. Skip the time of his life," says Mark. "I'm goin' to give him c-c-competition till he's so sick of it he won't be able to eat it with molasses."

"But he's a business man, and he's got lots of money."

"Hum!" says Mark.

"His Grand Openin' 'll draw everybody in Wicksville, and maybe they'll never come here any more."

"Plunk," says Mark, "Mr. Skip 'll think his Grand Openin' has a smallpox sign stuck up on it."

"How?" says I.

"Folks'll never n-n-notice it's goin' on," says he.

I was beginning to feel some better, for it was as plain as the wart on Mr. Skip's nose that Mark had hit on a scheme. "Why won't they?" I asked.

He asked a question back: "What had Wicksville folks rather g-g-g-go to than anythin' else?"

"Fires and weddin's and auctions," says I.

"We won't have a f-fire," says Mark, "nor a weddin', but you can kick me seven times, Plunk, if we don't have the rippin'est, roarin'est, bang-up-est auction ever held in the county."

I sat right down on the floor, kerflop. I might have known it. He'd hit on the very thing, and done it as easy as wiggling your thumb. Almost anybody can cook up a scheme, but Mark Tidd always cooked up *the* scheme, the one that was copper-bottomed and double-riveted, and guaranteed to do just the business where it was most needed.

"Where," says I, "will you git an auctioneer?"

"M-me," says he, and walked off to go to work just like he'd said he'd play a game of miggles.

CHAPTER III

"What'll we auction off?" I asked Mark.

"That," says he, "is what we've g-got to find out."

"Let's auction everything," says Binney.

Mark just looked at him. It was enough. You could see how disgusted he was, and I can tell you Binney kept pretty quiet after that.

"We'll auction old stuff," says Mark. "There's l-l-lots of things here nobody could sell any other way. Whatever we get out of them 'll be clear gain."

So we went to rummaging, and the mess of things we found was enough to make you blink. We took all the rest of the day for that. Next morning Mark had us clean tables up in front. About eleven o'clock we got that part pretty well done.

"Now," says Mark, "we got to advertize."

"How?" says I. "We hain't got money to spend in the paper, and, besides, it don't come out till the auction's over."

"L-lots of ways," says Mark. "Binney, can you get your pa's horse?"

"I guess so," says Binney.

"And the spring wagon?"

"Sure."

"All right, then. Now come on."

He led us to the storeroom back of the Bazar and set us to work making a frame. This didn't take long. The frame was shaped like a tent. When it was done we tacked some white cloth on the sides so it was tight and smooth, and Mark got the lampblack and the brush and began to paint signs on it. He could make letters as good as a regular sign-painter, too, and that fast you wouldn't believe it. The same sign was on both sides of the tent. It said:

GRAND AUCTION SALE

Anything You Want For What You Want To Pay For It

SMALLEY'S BAZAR

Monday, September 30

MARK TIDD, Auctioneer

"Now," says Mark, "f-fetch down your horse and wagon, Binney. We'll set this sign on the wagon. You can drive, and Tallow 'll sit inside and bang on this drum."

"Where'll we go?"

"Out in the c-country this afternoon. To-morrow you'll ride around town."

As soon as they had their dinner they started off, and Mark and I were left in the store.

"F-first thing's to fix the windows," says he.

We picked out the showiest things and put them where folks could see them—and there was everything from a patent churn to a toy duck that waggled its head. One window was like that—just everything put in so folks could get an idea what was going to be sold. The other window Mark fixed up like a town. He used a lot of toys to do it, but we had a lot to do it with. When we were through it was a regular sight, and I'll bet nobody in Wicksville ever saw anything like it before. There were streets and houses and horses and wagons driving along, and a train coming into the depot, and a band playing in the square, and a fire-engine going to a fire that Mark fixed in a house with yellow paper for flames. It looked pretty real. There were churches and stores, and folks shopping, and kids playing. It was pretty fine.

Next Mark made some more signs—one great big one to stretch across the front of the store, and others on stiff paper to tack upon fences around town. We were to do that after we closed up at night.

All this time we didn't see a thing of Jehoshaphat P. Skip, but we found out he'd gone to the city about some of his stock that was slow coming. We were just as glad, because he'd be more surprised than anybody when he saw what we were up to.

"Bet Mr. Skip 'll most strangle all the way down his neck," I says, "when he sees what's goin' on."

Mark's little eyes got bright and twinkly, but he didn't say a word.

Next day was Friday, and we spent that arranging stock. Mark had tables moved to the middle of the store, and we covered them with all sorts of things. This wasn't for the auction, but for regular business. The first table was a five-cent one, the next was a ten-cent one, and so on. You didn't have to ask the price of a thing. That made it handy for us and for customers.

"L-lots of folks'll buy things they hain't got any use for," says Mark, "just because they look cheap."

"Shouldn't think so," says I.

"Wait," says he. "Let 'em rummage around and see things all marked plain. Right off they'll b-begin wantin' things. And they'll buy. You see."

And I did see, Saturday. Those signs and windows got folks all riled up with curiosity, and they began droppin' in to see what kind of a mess we were making of it. Everybody acted like they thought it was a big joke for Mark and us to be keeping store, but we didn't care. Mark said that was a good thing, because good-natured folks buy more than folks that don't think they've got something to laugh at.

We had more folks in the store that day than we ever had before, I believe, unless maybe nights before Christmas. We let them joke us all they wanted and didn't try to sell them things. What we wanted them to do was walk around and sell things to themselves. That was Mark's idea. You haven't any idea how people like to poke around by themselves and stick their noses into things. They right down enjoy it. The more they poked the more they bought. It kept Mark and me busy, and we wished a lot of times that Binney and Tallow were there to help us. But we did the best we could, and they were there after supper, of course. We kept open till ten o'clock, and anybody'd have thought we were running a free show to see how the place was jammed.

Mark got the idea of setting a phonograph going, and we had music all the while.

Along about nine o'clock we saw Mr. Long Neck come pussy-footing in. He stood in the door a minute and scowled and then walked all around slow, and slinking, to see what we were doing and how we were doing it. Mark said to let on we didn't know him, and then went up to him like he thought he was a customer, and says:

"Anythin' s-s-special you was lookin' for, sir?"

Mr. Skip was like to have swelled up so he cracked his long neck right there, and the way he waggled his nose back and forth was enough to have put it out of joint.

"You're a-havin' that auction Monday just to interfere with my Grand Openin'," he says, savage-like.

"Was you havin' a Grand Openin', Monday?" asks Mark, innocent as could be.

"You know I be," says Mr. Skip.

"N-now hain't that too bad!" says Mark, still looking as serious as a wall-eyed pike. "I hope it won't draw away from your crowd any."

"You better mark my word, young feller," says Mr. Long Neck, "and put it off. I won't have no interferin' with my plans."

"Um!" says Mark.

"And these here five-and-ten-cent tables," says Mr. Skip. "You got to do away with 'em."

"We're doin' away with 'em now," says Mark, with just the beginning of a grin, and he pointed at the tables that were surrounded by folks like flies on a lump of sugar. "Don't look like there'd be much l-left, does it?"

"You're a young smart Alec," says Mr. Skip, and then he hurried out like he was afraid he'd burn up if he stayed.

Mark turned and winked at me.

Everybody was interested in the auction and we were answering questions about it all day. You could see folks picking out things they figured on bidding for and making memorandums of them, and that pleased us a good deal and made me feel a whole heap better about our chances of making a

showing against Mr. Skip.

When everybody was gone we counted the money we had taken in, and it was a hundred and sixty-two dollars and ninety-five cents. Once I heard pa say a hundred and forty-five was the biggest day he ever had. I tell you we were tickled. And the best of it was everything we sold was at regular prices. Yes, sir. We didn't reduce a cent.

Before we left the store I wrote mother a long letter and told her about it all and bragged considerable, and let on I guessed we were going to get as rich as Mark Tidd's father had out of the turbine-engine he invented. Then we all signed it and sent it off. I was pretty proud, but when you come to think of it, there wasn't anything for *me* to be very stuck up about. Mark was the fellow who had a right to think he was some pumpkins, but he didn't act like he'd done anything out of the ordinary. That was the way with him. If he was to be elected President of the United States to-morrow, it wouldn't even make him blink. He'd just go ahead and *be* President like he was used to it all his life. Sometimes it made me mad to see how cool he took things. But he says you can think a lot better when you're calm-like than you can when you're all het up and flabbergasted. I guess he's right about it, too.

CHAPTER IV

Sunday afternoon Mark came and got me to go for a walk.

"Where to?" I asked him, because I was pretty tired and didn't feel like I needed to do any unnecessary scattering around.

"Uncle Ike Bond's," says he.

Then I knew there was a reason for it, so I didn't make any complaint. Uncle Ike drives the 'bus in Wicksville when he isn't too busy fishing—which is mostly. He's a great friend of ours, and if anybody in the world admires Mark Tidd more than he does then I want to see that person. Uncle Ike would get up in the middle of the night to stand on his head in the middle of the road if Mark was to ask him.

So we went to his house, which is close to the river and just outside of town. Uncle Ike was sitting on the front stoop, whittling out one of the things he's always working on—this time it was a double chain with ten links and a sort of a bird-cage with a ball in it at the end.

"Howdy, Uncle Ike!" says Mark.

"Um?" says Uncle Ike, not speaking to us at all, "if 'tain't that Mark Tidd ag'in. Um! Alfiredest smartest kid in town is what I say, and I been drivin' 'bus here long enough to know."

"G-goin' to be busy to-morrow, Uncle Ike?" asked Mark.

"Middlin' busy, middlin' busy."

"We're goin' to have an aw-aw-auction," says Mark.

"Um!" says Uncle Ike. "Auction, eh? Um! Calc'late I may find a minnit or two somehow. Auction. Um! Where?"

"Haven't you seen our signs?"

"To be sure. To be sure." We knew he was just pretending, and that he knew all about the auction all the time. "Was them your signs?"

"Yes," says Mark. Then he wrinkled up around his eyes like he does when he's going to think of something especially smart. "What's the m-main difficulty with auctions, Uncle Ike?"

"Auctioneer's wind gives out," says the old fellow.

"N-no," says Mark.

"Nobody to buy," guesses Uncle Ike.

"N-no. It's gittin' f-folks to bid as much as you want 'em to."

"'Course," Uncle Ike said. "Never'd 'a' thought of that. Never! Beats all how this Mark Tidd thinks of things. Quicker 'n greased lightenin' he is. Twicet as quick."

"If there was s-somebody in the crowd," says Mark, "that folks didn't suspicion b'longed to the auction, it might help some."

"F'rinstance?" says Uncle Ike, making one word of it.

"If," says Mark, "the real bid wasn't h-high enough, then the auctioneer could m-make some kind of a sign, and the feller in the crowd could give her a boost."

"Um!" says Uncle Ike.

"S'pose the bid was a d-d-dime," says Mark, "and the thing you was sellin' was worth more. What happens? Why, the auctioneer he wiggles his thumb like this—and the feller in the crowd bids fif-fifteen cents. See?"

"Calc'late to," says Uncle Ike.

"Comin' to the auction?" says Mark, grinning like everything.

"Calc'late to," says Uncle Ike, grinning back.

"Got t-time to stay around?"

"Put in the whole day," says Uncle Ike.

"Wigglin' the thumb means raise it a nickel," says Mark. "Wigglin' both thumbs means raise it a d-dime."

"Listen to that, now," says Uncle Ike to himself. "Easy, hain't it? Jest as easy as swallerin' slippery ellum. But it took *him* to think of it." Then he looked at Mark and says, "Your Uncle Ike'll be there, you can bet you; and will he bid? Jest you lissen to him holler."

"You m-might sort of act mean, too," says Mark. "That'll make the other folks that's biddin' get *mad*. If they get good and mad they'll bid high just out of spunk."

Uncle Ike slapped his knee and laughed all over, though you couldn't hear a noise. That's the way he always laughed. To see him you'd think he was hollerin' loud enough to bust a gallus, but there isn't a

particle of sound.

"G'-by, Uncle Ike," says Mark.

"G'-by, boys," says he, and Mark and I came away.

Monday morning bright and early all four of us boys were at the Bazar, getting things ready. The first thing we did was to fix up a place for Mark to do his auctioning from. That was easy. We put two big packing-boxes side by side against the front of the store, and on one of them we put a smaller box to use for a table. We covered these all over with flags and bunting and signs. This was done before another store on the street opened up. Even Jehoshaphat P. Skip wasn't stirring around yet.

The whole front of his place was covered with big signs and flags. Between us we made Wicksville look like it was the Fourth of July. Pretty soon we saw Skip come down from the hotel. He walked past our place with his nose in the air and never looked. My! but he was mad! He went into his store and opened up. For his Grand Opening he had four clerks he'd brought from some of his other stores, because he figured he'd have a whale of a crowd. His store did look nice and attractive. I went snooping past, and in that little time I could see a bunch of things I'd like to buy—but I'd have gone without them till a week from next year before I'd have bought from him.

Our auction was set for ten o'clock. You see, Mark Tidd knew the Wicksville folks. Everybody had something to do early in the morning, and nobody would have time to go down-town before ten. But Jehoshaphat P. he didn't know. He started right off to boom things—hired a fiddle and a horn and an accordion to sit inside his place and play tunes. But there wasn't anybody to play to, and wouldn't be for a couple of hours.

"Tallow and Binney'll stay inside," says Mark, "to l-look after folks that want to buy things—"

"But," says Binney, "we want to be out at the auction."

Mark he looked at them for half a minute without saying a word. "This here," says he, "hain't a movin'-p-p-picture show or a picnic. It's business."

They didn't have another word to say, because they knew Mark would have discharged them in a second if he had thought it was necessary.

"There'll be folks nosin' around," says Mark, "and they g-got to be looked after. Plunk'll help me."

We had piled a lot of things up in front that we figured would tempt folks, and everything was ready for the auction. We didn't open the store door till it was time, but at half past nine Mark sent Binney and me out with big bells.

"Walk up and d-down the street and ring 'em," says he, "and carry these signs."

Each of the signs had printed on it: "All ready for the auction. She's going to start."

Binney went one way and I went the other, which was right past Jehoshaphat P. Skip's new store. There were a couple of folks in there and the music was a-going it as tight as it could, but Mr. Skip didn't seem like he was happy. I stuck my head inside his door and hollered, "Auction's goin' to begin," and then ducked. He started after me, poking his long neck ahead of him like a giraffe, but I knew he wouldn't chase me, so I walked off—when I'd got outside—as calm as a parade of Odd Fellows.

Just before ten o'clock I hustled back. Mark had put the phonograph outside and it was doing the best it knew how. Quite a crowd was beginning to gather around. I looked at Mark to see if he was scared. Scared! He looked tickled to death.

"Come on," says he.

We opened the front doors and out we went. The folks let out a laugh; a couple of fellows cheered. Some kids that were hanging around began to holler at us, and it made me mad, but Mark let on he didn't hear. He climbed up on his platform and looked at the folks without saying a word. A kid on the other side of the street yelled, "Look at what's tryin' to be a auctioneer," and folks laughed some more.

I saw Mark sort of squint up his eyes and pinch his cheek.

"Aw," yelled the same kid, "better git started 'fore the box busts in."

If there's one thing Mark *hates* it's having anybody joke him about being fat. He squinted his eyes so you could hardly see them and waddled up to the edge of his platform.

"L-ladies and gentlemen," he stuttered, "the auction is about to commence, but before the first article can be sold I got to have a boy to help me." He looked all around, and then pretended he just saw the kid that had been yelling at him. "Sam Jenks," says he, "will you come here and help me just a m-minute?"

Sam puffed up important-like and pushed his way across the road and scrambled up by Mark, and Mark took hold of his arm. When you look at Mark he don't seem to be anything but fat, but he's strong. He's got a grip in his fingers like you wouldn't believe.

"L-ladies and gentlemen," says he, again, "I have the p-pleasure of presentin' to your notice a ree-markable spectacle. This is it," says he, pointing to Sam. "It l-looks like a boy. It's got arms and legs and a head. But it hain't really a boy, ladies and gentlemen. It's nothin' but a noise. In the mornin' this n-noise gits up and starts to goin'; it goes all day; and it don't stop at night, 'cause it snores." Everybody hollered and laughed fit to kill, and Sam tried to pull himself away, but Mark hung on to him. "It's a novelty, ladies and gentlemen. Nobody in Wicksville ever owned such a thing—so I'm a goin' to auction it off."

"Lemme go," says Sam, wiggling like a basketful of eels.

"The defect in this article," says Mark, "is that it's jest noise. We can't guarantee that b-brains goes with it. If you buy, it's at your own risk."

Well, sir, you should have heard those folks laugh, and you should have seen Sam's face. You could have auctioned him pretty cheap if you sold him for as much as he felt like.

"What am I offered?" says Mark.

Folks started to bid. One man offered a dead dog, and another bid a plugged cent, and another the squeak of a pig and another the hole in a fried cake. All the time Sam was straining and tugging, but Mark didn't let go. Then a man back in the crowd yelled, "I bet Sam Hoskins's yaller dawg."

"Sold," says Mark, and he let loose of Sam. You never saw a kid disappear as quick as that kid did.

He just *vanished*. You can bet no more kids interfered with Mark's auction *that* day.

As soon as folks had quit laughing Mark started in to sell things in earnest. First thing was a wash-bowl and pitcher, and to hear Mark talk about it you would have thought the King of England was all broken up because he was so far off he couldn't be there to bid on it.

Mrs. Sanders bid a dime. Mark just looked at her and pretended he couldn't hear. He put his hand up to his ear and asked her to repeat it. She got sort of red in the face and bid a quarter.

"A q-quarter—a quarter I'm bid for a bowl and pitcher the Queen of Sheeby'd be tickled to death to wash her f-face in." Mark was sort of excited and the way he stuttered was a caution. "What lady or gentleman desirin' an heirloom to hand down to their g-g-great-g-g-grandchildren raises that bid?" It was worth a dime to hear him splutter "great-grandchildren."

"Thirty cents," says somebody.

"Huh!" snorted Mark. "It cost more'n that to paint the pictures on it." He wiggled two thumbs at Uncle Ike Bond, who opened up his mouth and roared "Forty cents," and then looked as proud of himself as if he'd sung a solo in church.

Mrs. Sanders shot a mad look at Uncle Ike and bid forty-five. Mark wiggled one thumb and Uncle Ike bid fifty. Mrs. Sanders turned around and scowled at him. I could hear her whisper to Mrs. Newman, "That ol' scalawag sha'n't have it." Mark heard her, too, and he gave me just the beginning of a wink. "Sixty cents," snapped Mrs. Sanders. Mark wiggled a thumb. "Sixty-five," says Uncle Ike. "Seventy-five," says Mrs. Sanders, setting her mouth in a straight line and shaking her head. "Eighty," yelled Uncle Ike. Mrs. Sanders straightened up and glared at him—glared! I wouldn't 'a' had her look at me like that for a quarter. Her eyes 'most bored holes in him, but Uncle Ike only grinned aggravating, like Mark told him to. "A dollar," says Mrs. Sanders, and then put her fists on her hips and tossed her head.

"Dollar ten," says Uncle Ike.

"Dollar 'n' a quatter," snaps Mrs. Sanders.

"Dollar thutty."

"Dollar fifty," says Mrs. Sanders, "and if you're fool enough to bid more you kin have it."

Mark pretended to try to get more bids, but there weren't any, so he stuttered, "G-goin', goin', g-gone to Mis' Sanders for a dollar 'n' a half."

I wrapped up the sale and handed it to her and she gave me the money. I was trying hard to keep my face straight—for that pitcher and wash-bowl had been standing in our window for two months with ninety-eight cents marked on it as plain as the nose on Jehoshaphat P. Skip's face.

The next thing was a new-fangled carpet-sweeper that father had bought a year ago and never got anybody interested in. Mark he explained it careful, and threw a handful of papers and things on the floor and swept them up to show how well it worked. Then he looked the crowd over slow and calculating. Over at one side stood old man Meggs, who was an old batch and kept house by himself.

"L-labor-savin'," says Mark. "Just the thing for a single man. No broom. Gits all the dirt. Almost works by itself. Make me an offer, Mr. Meggs."

Mr. Meggs scratched his nose and hunched his shoulders and pulled down his hat and cleared his throat. "Calc'late she's wuth a quatter," says he.

"It's worth more to Miss Mullins than that," says Mark, looking over at her where she stood. Miss Mullins wasn't married, either, and she wore clothes like a man and talked about running for town clerk. She and Meggs didn't like each other, for some reason, and wouldn't even speak on the street. "You ain't g-goin' to let him have this splendid carpet-sweeper for a quarter, are you?"

She tossed her head. "Fifty cents," says she, just to show Meggs there was some real bidding going on.

Meggs says something under his breath that wasn't what you could call a compliment, and boosted it to seventy-five.

"No man that's too lazy to support a wife can outbid *me*," says Miss Mullins. "A dollar."

"Dollar ten," says Meggs, scowling like everything.

Miss Mullins edged over toward him where she could look right into his face, and says, "Dollar 'n' quatter."

"I'm goin' to have that sweeper," says Meggs to Uncle Ike, "if I have to sell my hoss.... Dollar 'n' half."

Well, sir, those two folks, just because they didn't like each other kept on a-bidding and a-bidding till they got up to five dollars, which was twice what the sweeper was worth. And then Meggs quit. He let on he didn't want it, anyhow, and said he never did have any use for them patent contraptions.

"He never had no use for anythin' he had to spend money for," says Miss Mullins, passing up a five-dollar bill.

The auction went along like that for an hour, everybody having the finest kind of a time. It was better than a circus. Mark knew just how to get them, too. He played folks against each other and used grudges he knew about until the prices he got were a caution. It looked like we were going to get rich right there.

I looked down the street to the new Five-and-Ten-Cent Store—and it was as deserted as the Desert of Sahara. But coming up the street I saw Jehoshaphat P. Skip, waving his arms and twisting his nose and talking loud and fast to Town-Marshal Sprout. They came right up and pushed their way through the crowd. The marshal walked up to Mark's platform.

"Mark," says he, "lemme see your permit to have this here auction in the street."

Mark looked sort of funny.

"P-permit?" says he.

"Yes," says the marshal, "you have to have one when you use the public street."

"Um," says Mark, "guess I sort of overlooked that."

"Then," says the marshal, "you'll have to quit. Sorry. I wouldn't 'a' said a word if somebody hadn't complained, but this here feller complained, so I got to perform my duty."

"Sure," says Mark. "D-don't blame you a mite." He turned to the crowd and says, "Owin' to the law

bein' called down on me, this auction is called off. Folks that want to buy—and buy cheap—will step inside."

It made everybody kind of mad, because Wicksville loves to be at an auction, and people scowled at Skip, but he didn't care. He just went hurrying back to his store and got his music to playing loud, and then stood in front with one of those megaphone things and yelled:

"Grand openin' now in progress. Greatest bargains ever offered in Wicksville. Step right this way."

Well, maybe folks were mad at Mr. Skip, but they were down-town to have some fun and see something and buy something, so they started stringing down his way, and pretty soon the whole crowd was jamming into his store. We were all alone. I looked at Mark and was feeling pretty glum. I expected he would look glum, too, but he didn't. His jaw was sticking out like I'd never seen it stick out before.

"We're licked," says I. "I knew we couldn't go against a grown-up business man."

"Licked?" says Mark. "Huh!"

"We might as well close up," says I.

"There's only one th-thing we might as well close," says he, "and that's croakin'. We thought we had Jehoshaphat P. Skip licked this m-mornin', but did he quit? Huh? He didn't quit, but he played low-down mean. We won't quit, and we won't play low-down mean—but Mr. Jehoshaphat P. Skip'll wish he had *two* noses to wiggle 'fore this l-little fuss is over. Come on," says he, "and look a little happier. We hain't licked," he says, "till the sheriff takes the store away from us."

"But what'll we do?"

"How do I know?" says he. "We'll do somethin'. I'm goin' back to set d-down and think."

CHAPTER V

For the next three days things were pretty slack with us. What business there was seemed to be going to Jehoshaphat P. Skip, though of course there was just a little trickle of folks into our store. Mark Tidd didn't pay much attention—just sat around and squinted and pinched his fat cheeks and *thought*. We couldn't get anything out of him and there wasn't any use trying. When he had a scheme all cooked up he'd come and tell us—and we had to be satisfied with that.

Once he looked up when I went past and says, half to me and half to himself, "What I want is somethin' that'll shoot two barrels at once. H-hit Jehoshaphat P. with one and fetch down the Wicksville f-f-folks with the other."

"Sure," says I, "but any old kind of a scheme that will do any old thing to bring a little business is what we need. We haven't sold enough stuff in three days to pay wages to an invalid cat."

"Huh!" says he; "I can bring business in. Anybody could. But so l-long as Skip stays here it'll mean one scheme after another—and that's hard work."

"I'd rather go huntin'," says I, "and shoot the first rabbit I see—and *git* it—than to sit around waiting for two to stand in a row so's I could shoot 'em both to once. 'Cause they might never git in a row."

"All right," says Mark, with a sigh, "if you're so all-fired impatient. We'll s-start somethin' to-morrow." He stopped and wagged his head. "Nope, not to-morrow. 'S Friday. 'Tain't s-safe to start things Friday."

"Saturday's a better day, anyhow. Farmers'll be comin' in."

"Saturday it is," says Mark. "We'll b-begin gittin' ready."

"For what?" says I.

"For the votin' contest," says Mark. "Plunk, we're a-goin' to do a lot of good in Wicksville." His little eyes were twinkling and glowing, but his face was as solemn as a ball of putty. "We're a-goin'," says he, "to settle a question that's been b-b-botherin' some folks I could name for years."

"Well," says I, "what is it?"

"Who is the h-h-h-han'somest man in Wicksville?" says he.

"What?" says I, and I could feel my nose wrinkle, I was that disgusted.

"Votin' contest," says Mark. "But this one'll be different. Folks have voted for the most popular girl, and the m-most beautiful girl, and sich like. But nobody, so far's I ever heard, has t-t-tried to pick the han'somest man."

"Why should they?" I wanted to know. "Besides," says I, "there wouldn't be no votes cast in a election to pick Wicksville's handsomest man. There hain't no sich thing." It made me mad to have Mark fooling with me like that when things was so serious. "Jest look at the men that live here," says I. "There hain't enough handsomeness in Wicksville to keep a self-respectin' scarecrow from dyin' of disgust."

"It hain't the han'someness that *is*," says Mark, "it's the han'someness that homely folks thinks there is."

"Huh!" says I.

"Plunk," says Mark, patient-like, "have I got to draw a picture of this thing?"

"I guess you have," says I.

"Well," says he, "there's half a dozen old coots here that set consid'able store by their looks. There's Chet Weevil, eh? How about him?"

"Runs to yaller neckties," says I.

"Always s-s-stoppin' to look in the glass, hain't he?"

I was beginning to get a glimmer of light, so I just nodded and didn't say anything.

"And there's Chancy Miller—always w-w-wearin' a flower in his buttonhole, hain't he?"

"Yes," says I.

"And you was here yestiddy when Mis' Bloom was bragging to Mis' Peterson about what a

upstandin', fine-lookin' feller her husband was. Eh?"

"Yes," says I.

"Well," says he, again, "wimmin kin s-s-see beauty in a feller that a hoss would shy at. There's this, too: even if a woman d-d-don't think her husband's han'some, she hain't g-goin' to let on, is she? Not much, she hain't. Thing to do, Plunk, is to git the wimmin mad about it. Git them wimmin mad and the m-m-men jealous of one another, and there'll be votin', Plunk."

"There'll be fist-fights," says I.

"Hope so," says Mark; "it'll advertise."

"How we goin' to work it?"

"One v-v-vote with every ten-cent purchase," says he. "Any voter can enter a candidate. We'll paste a l-list of candidates in the window and every afternoon at two o'clock we'll put up the vote.... The p-p-prize to the han'somest m-man," says he, with the first grin he'd let loose, "will be that mirror back there with an imitation silver Cupid on top of it."

"Some folks'll make a joke of it."

"Sure," says Mark. "Some smart Alecs 'll be votin' for ol' Stan Brazer, like's not. That'll only make them that takes it serious madder 'n git-out. Every v-v-vote's a dime sale, Plunk."

"All right," says I, "go ahead. But this'll stand Wicksville on its head."

Mark only grinned and wagged his head. Then he went back and printed a big sign:

WATCH THIS WINDOW FOR OUR
ANNOUNCEMENT SATURDAY

Every Man, Woman, and Child in Wicksville Vitally Interested

A Question That Has Been Argued For Years Will Be Settled

When that was done Mark stood tugging at his cheek for a minute. "B-better send Tallow and Binney out with the wagon again," says he.

So he went to work making more signs for the wagon. One of them says:

WICKSVILLE'S BURNING QUESTION
SMALLEY'S BAZAR WILL SETTLE IT

Particulars Saturday

The other says:

MISTER, IS YOUR WIFE PROUD OF YOU?
YOU WILL SOON BE ABLE TO TELL
SMALLEY'S BAZAR—SATURDAY

We called in Tallow and Binney and explained things to them. They were more tickled with the scheme than I was, though that last sign of Mark's did make it look more likely. By printing that thing and sending it around town he'd practically fixed it so every woman would *have* to do some voting for her husband or let him think she didn't set much store by him. It beat all how Mark seemed to understand folks. He could sit and figure and come pretty close to guessing what anybody would do if this thing or that thing should happen. Sometimes it seemed almost like mind-reading.

"Now," says he, "we'll get tickets printed for votin'."

"How many?" I says. "A hundred?"

"Hundred," he snorted; "we'll start with f-five thousand." He was a little mad I could see—he always stuttered worse when he was mad.

I thought he was crazy, but there wasn't any use arguing. When once Mark Tidd gets his head set you can't move it with a crowbar. So I said all right, and he went over to the printing-office and gave his order.

Just before noon who should we see coming into the store but Jehoshaphat P. Skip. It made me mad to see him and I'd have gone right up and told him to use the door for going out and never to use it for coming in again, but Mark saw what I was up to, I guess, and grabbed me by the arm.

"B-better let me talk to Jehoshaphat," says he, and off he went before I could say a word.

"G-good mornin', Mr. Skip," says he, as sweet as molasses. "How's business with you?"

"Huh!" grunted Jehoshaphat P., and he set to twisting the little bulb on the side of his long nose.

"Hope things are openin' up w-well for you," says Mark.

"You do, eh? You do, do you?" snapped Mr. Skip, and you could see the red start 'way down by his Adam's apple and begin to crawl up his neck. It took quite a while to get to his face. Somehow he made you think of a giraffe that was provoked. "I hain't come here for no talk," says he. "I've come for business. Once and for all, will you stop sellin' five-and-ten-cent goods?"

"Once and f-f-for all," says Mark, "we won't."

Then Mr. Skip he grinned sort of mean.

"Ever hear of a chattel mortgage?" he says.

"Seems like I'd heard 'em mentioned," says Mark.

"Know how they work?"

"Can't say I d-do."

"They're sim'lar to a mortgage on land," says Skip, "only they hain't on land, but on chattels—which is things sich as furniture and animals—and bazars."

"Oh," says Mark, "bazars, eh?"

"Yes," says Skip. "You give a chattel mortgage when you got to have money, and you put up your furniture or your animals—or your bazar—to secure the loan. That means if the loan hain't paid the

man with the chattel mortgage can take your furniture or your animals or your—bazar—instead of his money.”

“Um,” says Mark; “looks like a d-d-dangerous kind of a deal, don’t it?”

“I’m a-goin’ to show you how dangerous it is,” says Skip, squinting at Mark out of his mean, narrow little eyes. “I’ve got one of them on this Bazar.”

I almost flopped over on the floor, but Mark didn’t turn a hair. He was as startled as I was, *I’ll bet*, but he didn’t let on but what he was more pleased about it than anything else.

“Oh,” says he, “you got one of ‘em, eh? How’d you come to git it?”

“Bought it,” says Skip. “Did you know this Bazar was pretty near busted?”

“We calc’lated she’d hang together a s-s-spell longer,” says Mark.

“It’s been runnin’ down for years,” says Skip. “It would of busted more’n four months ago if this here Mr. Smalley that owns it hadn’t of borrowed money to pay his debts. He up and borrowed five hundred dollars and give his note and a chattel mortgage on this Bazar. That’s what he done. And I was lookin’ around yestiddy and found out about it. That’s me, Jehoshaphat P. Skip. I look around—and I find out. Folks don’t want to git me down on ‘em or they’re sorry for it.”

“To be sure,” says Mark.

“This here mortgage and note is due six weeks from to-day,” says Skip.

“Six weeks,” says Mark, slow-like. “Guess there won’t be any trouble about that, mister.” Jehoshaphat P. choked and gurgled and blinked his eyes.

“There won’t, eh? Think you can pay off five hundred dollars in six weeks, do you?” He grinned again as mean as a cornered alley cat. “Don’t matter what you *think*,” says he, “it can’t be done. Six weeks from to-day *I’m* goin’ to be the owner of this Bazar.”

“If I was you,” says Mark, “I w-wouldn’t go spendin’ any m-m-money you’re goin’ to make runnin’ this store—yet. Mister,” says he, “there’s fair business and there’s rotten business. There’s things it’s right to do to a competitor, and things a skunk would b-be ashamed of. Mister, a skunk that was well brought up, and had a f-f-family to think about, wouldn’t stay in the same town with *you*.” He stopped for breath and to give his jaw a rest, for the way he’d been stuttering was enough to knock chips off his teeth. “That’s what we th-th-think of *you*, mister. Now about that chattel mortgage—it’ll be paid, on the m-m-minute. We’ve got six weeks. When the six weeks are up you’ve got something to say—but if you come into this place again before that note’s due—if you even stick your long nose inside the door—we’ll throw you out and r-r-roll you in the mud for the whole town to see.... Now, mister, git.”

I’d seen Mark pretty worked up before, but I don’t recollect ever watching him when his lips got white the way they were then. His lips were white and his cheeks were gray, and his little eyes sort of glowed like there was a slow fire in them that was apt to break into a blaze.

Jehoshaphat P. Skip looked at Mark and sort of caught his breath and began to look uneasy.

“Git!” says Mark, again, before Skip could open his mouth.

Jehoshaphat didn’t offer to say another word—he just turned around quick and slunk out of the store.

Mark stood right in his tracks for more than a minute, looking after Skip. Then he sighed ‘way down deep and blinked and turned around to me.

“Fellers like that,” says he, “ought to be shut up in the pen with the p-p-pigs. They hain’t got any right minglin’ with human beings.”

I was about ready to cry. There was my father in the hospital, and my mother with him. Every single thing in the world they had to support them was this Bazar. If it went I couldn’t see what would happen—and it looked to me like it was gone. Mark saw how I felt, I guess, for he came over and put his big hand on my shoulder, gentle-like. You wouldn’t believe how gentle and sort of comforting it was!

“Plunk,” says he, “it’s a hard b-b-bump, all right. But don’t get downhearted. We’ll pay that note, Plunk, and that hain’t all. Before we’re through with Jehoshaphat P. we’ll tie him into a d-double bow-knot with a pin in the middle of it.... Keep your b-backbone stiff, Plunk. We’ll pull her through.”

“Mark,” says I, and I wasn’t much used to saying things like that, “you’re—you’re all *right*.” And deep down inside I felt he *was* all right—and maybe he was a bigger sort of fellow than even we three boys had thought he was. My worry wasn’t all gone, but I did feel better and a little hopeful. But five hundred dollars—and in six weeks! For the life of me I couldn’t see where it was to come from—and father’s expenses and mother’s living, too!

CHAPTER VI

My father always went to Lawyer Sturgis when he needed any law, so we figured he’d be likely to know about that chattel mortgage. Mark went over to see him and found out that every word Jehoshaphat P. had said was true. Father had needed money and borrowed five hundred dollars from Hamilcar Wilkins, who didn’t do anything but lend money. Somehow Skip had found out about it and had bought the note. So there we were.

“Well,” says Mark when he got back, “th-that’s settled. Now all we got to do is dig up that five hundred.”

“Yes,” says I, sarcastic-like, “that’s all.”

“We’ll do it,” says he. “I’ve noticed,” says he, “that if you’ve got to do a thing or b-b-bust you usually do it—or bust.” He grinned all over his fat face. “Now let’s forget about the mortgage and start to makin’ money.”

“Suits me,” says I.

By this time we had our stock pretty well arranged. You wouldn’t have known the old store.

Everything was in order and arranged so it could be found. The most expensive things were at the front, the five-and-ten-cent things were at the back. That was Mark's idea.

"Folks is after bargains," says he, "and they'll walk to get 'em. When they come in they'll be after somethin' cheap. But we'll m-make 'em walk past the other things. They can't h-help lookin' at 'em, and chances are they'll see somethin' they need."

It was so, too. I can name three or four folks who came in to buy something for a dime, but did buy something for a half a dollar or a dollar just because they saw them on the way back. Things we calculated folks would want we had set up conspicuous, with the price marked on them plain—and it was generally a price that ended in odd cents. Mark says folks are used to paying even money, and if you make it ninety-eight cents or sixty-three cents, why, right off they think it's a bargain.

But don't get to thinking business was good. It wasn't. It wasn't any better Friday, though quite a few folks came in to ask what we were up to next. This tickled Mark because he said it meant folks were watching us and thinking about us and wondering what sort of scheme we were going to work off on them. That, says he, is good advertising.

Wicksville is full of folks with curiosity. I'll bet I was asked questions about our signs a dozen times, but wouldn't tell. Mark said to keep them guessing till we were ready, which was Saturday about ten o'clock. Then Mark put up in the window a big sign explaining about the beauty contest. Lots of folks stopped to look at it, and grinned and laughed, just like I thought they would. Once there was quite a little crowd looking in. Along came Chet Weevil. Uncle Ike Bond was there, and as soon as he saw Chet he commenced to yell at him.

"Ho, Chet!" says he, "here's somethin' 'll int'rest you. Han'somest-man contest! You and them neckties of yourn 'll be enterin', eh? Got to settle whether you or Chancy Miller is the beautifulest. Seems like I can't sleep till I git the judgment of folks on that."

Chet was all primped up with a checked suit and yellow shoes and a necktie that looked like it would burn your finger if you touched it. He didn't grin—not Chet. He sort of drew himself up and looked at his reflection in the window and felt of his tie to see if it was on straight.

"Hum!" says he. "I don't lay no claim to beauty." Then he sort of put his head on one side and looked at himself again.

"Course not," says Uncle Ike. "You're one of the modestest fellers in town, but, Chet—it's a secret and don't whisper it to a soul—folks have said to me as how they ree-garded you as a feller of strikin' appearance. Honest, Chet."

"Hum!" says Chet again. "I aim to keep myself lookin' as good as I kin. It's a feller's duty."

"To be sure. That's the way Chancy looks at it. I heard him sayin' no later than yestiddy that he took consid'able pains with himself. He says you was perty good-lookin', too. Yes, sir. Says he, if it wasn't for him, you'd be about the best-lookin' feller in the county."

"Did, eh?" says Chet, mad-like. "Did, eh? Mind, I hain't claimin' to be handsomer 'n anybody else, but this I do say, and this I'll stand by: if I wasn't better-lookin' than Chancy Miller I'd buy me a mask or raise whiskers, that's what I'd do. Why," says he, "Chancy's pants bags at the knee."

"So they do," says Uncle Ike. "But Chancy alluded it would be better if Chet was bald-headed."

"Hair!" says Chet. "Does that there gangle-legged, pig-eyed, strawberry-topped imitation of a punkin' lantern go around makin' personal remarks about me? Maybe my hair hain't curly, but, b' jing, it looks like hair, and not like no throwed-away bed-springs."

Well, just then who should come in sight but Chancy Miller, his hat on the back of his head so his frizzes would show, and a posy in his buttonhole. Uncle Ike spied him.

"Just alludin' to you, Chancy," he says. "We was discussin' them ringlets of yourn. Chet here declares as how they favor worn-out bed-springs consid'able."

Chancy scowled at Chet and took off his hat like he thought it was hot. That was a way of his. He was always looking for excuses to put his hair on exhibition.

"Chet hadn't better do no talkin' about hair," says he. "If he was to get his shaved off and then tie a handkerchief over his head so what was left wouldn't show, he'd look a sight more like a human bein'."

"Well," says Uncle Ike, "I see there's a sight of rivalry amongst you two on this here beauty question. But it's goin' to be decided, Chancy; it's goin' to be decided. Read this sign, Chancy, and be happy."

Chancy he read the sign and then took off his hat again and smoothed back his hair. He looked at Chet sort of speculating and Chet looked at him. Then both of them stuck up their noses simultaneous.

"Who's been spoke of so far?" Chancy asked.

"Nobody but you and Chet," says Uncle Ike.

"I thought," says Chancy, "it was goin' to be a *contest*. Not," says he, "that I got any idee I'm what you'd call handsome"—he stopped to take a squint at himself in the window—"but—but compared to Chet," says he, "I'm one of these here Greek statues alongside of a packin'-box."

"You be, eh?" yelled Chet. "You think you be? Well, Chancy Miller, all I got to say is this: if my mother'd 'a' had any idee I was goin' to look like you she wouldn't of tried to raise me. She'd drowned me when I was a day old. Why," says Chet, getting madder and madder, "the only resemblance between you and a good-lookin' feller is that you got two arms and legs. It 'u'd take six college professors with microscopes a year to pick out a point to you that don't class as homely. Handsome! Oh, my!"

At that Chancy started to move toward Chet and Chet started to move toward Chancy, but they didn't go far. They weren't the sort of fellows to get themselves mussed up in a fight. Nobody offered to stop them, so they stopped themselves, about six feet apart, and took it out in scowling.

"We'll let the votes of the people decide," says Chet, as grand as an emperor.

"Huh!" says Chancy. "You'll have to git a stiddy job now and spend your wages in the Bazar, or you won't git a vote."

Just then along came Mrs. Bloom and Mrs. Peterson, and they stopped to see what was going on.

First they read the sign and then they listened.

Uncle Ike grinned to himself and says:

"We men has figgered the contest is narrowed down to Chet and Chancy. 'Tain't likely anybody will enter agin 'em, is it, Mis' Bloom?"

Mrs. Bloom sniffed. "I thought this was goin' to be a contest for the handsomest *man*," says she. "If 'tis, neither of them whipper-snappers is eligible. Let 'em wait till they git their growth. For a handsome man gimme somebody that's old enough to wash his own face without his mother's helpin' him. The best-lookin' time in a man's life is when he's about forty-three."

"Forty-seven, to be exact," says Mrs. Peterson, her eyes snapping.

"Forty-three," says Mrs. Bloom. "Forty-three is Peter Bloom's age, and I ought to know. When I was young I could 'a' had the pick of the young fellers in this town, but I took Peter, and hain't never regretted it. I guess you folks hain't seen Peter in his new Sunday suit, or you wouldn't be talkin' about these—these gangleshanks."

Mrs. Peterson blinked and swallowed hard and opened her mouth a couple of times before she could speak.

"If you was to stand Peter Bloom alongside of Jason Peterson," says she, in a voice that sounded like somebody tearing a piece of tin, "I guess you'd change your mind. Maybe Peter was fair-lookin' once," says she, "but Jason's been eatin' *good* cookin' for twenty-two year—and that tells."

Uncle Ike winked to himself and says, sober-like, "It looks, fellers, as if Chet and Chancy wasn't goin' to have the field to themselves."

"No, they hain't," says Mrs. Bloom, "and I'm goin' right in now to spend a dollar—a dollar—and vote ten votes for Peter. There." She jerked her head and turned on her heel and marched into the store.

"Gimme that pair of scissors I was lookin' at the other day," says she, "and a paper of pins, and six spools of forty white thread, and if that don't make up a dollar just say so."

"It c-c-comes to a dollar and six cents," says Mark.

"Then gimme somethin' for four cents to make up the other ten," says she. "And gimme them votes so's I can cast 'em for Peter Bloom."

Mrs. Peterson came in right after, and *she* spent a dollar and thirty cents, casting *her* votes for Jason Peterson.

Mark looked at me and his eyes twinkled.

"What d'you think of the s-s-scheme now?" he asked in a whisper.

"It begins to look," says I, "like there might be somethin' to it."

It began to look like it still more as the day went on. Chet Weevil met me as I was coming back from dinner.

"Plunk," says he, "kin you keep a secret?"

"Like throwin' it down a well," says I.

"What d'you think of Chancy's chances?" says he.

"Well," says I, hardly able to keep my face straight, "I hain't much of a judge, but that curly hair of his—"

"Huh!" he growled. "Hair hain't goin' to count. Got any bang-up neckties? The kind folks can't help seein'?"

"We got some," says I, "that you could flag a train with on a dark night."

"How much?" says he.

"Forty-nine cents apiece."

He reached down into his pocket and pulled out two dollar bills. "This here," says he, "is secret between you and me. I want four of them ties—and you needn't mind the change. Vote them twenty votes for me like somebody else did it—and if Chancy goes votin' for himself, just you lemme know, and I'll beat him or—or bust a gallus."

From that on I was more cheerful. Things began getting exciting and, somehow, I almost forgot about Jehoshaphat P. Skip and his chattel mortgage.

CHAPTER VII

When I got back to the Bazar from dinner that Saturday noon Mark had a big sign in one window that said the list of candidates with their votes would be put up at two o'clock. In the other window was just a line across the top that said:

CANDIDATES AND THEIR VOTES

There wasn't anything under—it was just waiting there, staring folks in the face.

Along about a quarter past one in came a delegation of ladies from the Methodist church, nominating their parson, Rev. Hamilton Hannis. They were buzzing away, and all excited as a meeting of crows in a maple-tree. Somehow the Congregationalists had got hold of the news and in came six of them before the Methodists had cleared out. They nominated Rev. Orson Whipit, *their* minister. We got a matter of six dollars and seventy cents out of the two parties.

"Binney," says Mark, "hain't your f-f-folks Baptists?"

"Yes," says Binney.

"Skin home, then," says Mark, "and tell your ma."

Off went Binney with the news, and in twenty minutes in came seven Baptist ladies with their pocketbooks and determined expressions, ready to stand up for *their* parson, Rev. Jenkins McCormick. They invested three dollars and forty cents. That made ten dollars and ten cents we got out of those three denominations.

There were three others to hear from—the United Brethren, the Universalists, and the Catholics, but

they didn't get wind of what was going on till later in the day. We got the whole six of them in the end, but the main contest turned out to be between the first three.

Six other women came in to put up their husbands' names, and four school-teachers got there separately and privately to nominate Mr. Pilkins, the principal.

"If they v-v-vote as hard as they nominate," stuttered Mark, "we'll have to order more goods."

We put up the list at two o'clock. Just before it went up Chancy Miller came sneaking in the back door with two dollars and twenty cents, and nominated himself. He bought a pair of military brushes and a bottle of perfume. He let on he was going to buy some kid gloves as soon as he saved up another dollar.

"I calc'late," says he, "that folks'll sort of flock in to vote for me as soon's they see my name."

"Well," says Mark, "they'll f-f-flock in, all right, Chancy, but I calc'late you got to depend on the unmarried vote. It beats all what a p-p-pile of han'some husbands and ministers there is here."

"Ministers!" Chancy was like to choke. "Is *ministers* comin' in? Now I don't call that fair. Why," says he, "them Prince Albert coats of theirs give 'em a head start right off. Besides," says he, "ministers have more time to slick up."

"Sure," says Mark, "but not a one of 'em has c-c-curly hair."

"I'd buy me one of them coats," says Chancy, "but I hain't got the money. Besides," says he, "what money I git has got to go for votes."

Mark was quick as a flash.

"We can order a suit to your m-m-measure," says he, "from a Chicago catalogue. That'll give you a sight of votes and us a little profit."

But Chancy didn't have the money and we didn't give any credit, so that deal was off.

There was quite a few folks waiting in front to see the list go up, so we went and got it ready. There were a lot of names on it, but the three ministers were ahead, with Chancy and Chet next and the school principal next, and then Mr. Peterson and Mr. Bloom and the handsome husbands in a string, pretty much together.

All told there were two hundred and twenty-six votes cast. That made our morning's business twenty-two dollars and sixty cents. That was pretty good for the first half-day.

First off most of the men in town looked at it as a joke and put in considerable time laughing. That was mostly early in the day, though. By the middle of the afternoon their women folks had done more or less talking, and the men got around gradual to seeing it wasn't so awful funny, after all. The women never saw anything funny about it at all. It was pretty serious to them, I can tell you, especially to them that had husbands a person could look at without smoked glasses on.

Probably not a woman in Wicksville ever thought whether her man was handsomer than somebody else until Mark schemed up this contest. But, as Mark says, as soon as somebody else lets on he's handsomer or bigger or smarter than you are, you get mad and say he isn't. It don't matter, says Mark, whether you ever thought you were handsome or big or smart before. You begin to think so then. Even if you don't really think so you let on you do and are willing to back it up.

Everybody got it—even old Peasley Snell. His name wasn't on the list, and if you was to ask me, it wasn't likely to be, for old Peasley was about the weazenedest, orneriest, dried-up, scraggly-haired critter in Wicksville. But Peasley he stopped and read the list. His wife was with him. Peasley read from top to bottom. Then he began talking to his wife:

"Pete Bloom!" says he, and sniffed. "Huh! Handsome! Huh!... Jason Peterson. Whee! And them others! Who d'you calc'late nominated 'em, Susie?"

"I dun'no'," says Susie.

"It was their wives," I says from the door.

"Wives," grunted old Peasley. "Wives, is it? Huh! Why, young feller? Why?"

"I guess they nominated 'em," says I, "because they wanted to let on they thought their husbands was as good as anybody else's husbands."

Old Peasley stopped and thought and blinked and chewed on his tongue. Every once in a while he'd look at his wife and scowl. Pretty soon he raised his bony finger and tapped her on the shoulder:

"Susie," says he, "my name hain't on that list."

"No," says she.

"Why?" says he.

"I dun'no'," says she.

"Peterson's there," says he, "and Bloom."

"Yes," says she.

"Their wives done it."

Mrs. Snell nodded her head.

"Mis' Snell," says old Peasley, "don't you calc'late I got any pride? Don't you calc'late I got any feelin's? Say! Do I want folks rushin' around sayin' Peasley Snell's wife says her husband is homely as a squashed tomato? Eh? Well? Maybe," says he, "I hain't what you'd call *handsome*, but b'jing! I don't have to wear no veil—not when Pete Bloom and Jase Peterson's around, anyhow. What'll folks think? Eh?"

"I dun'no', Peasley," says his wife.

"I know," says he. "They'll say Peasley Snell's wife don't love, honor, and obey him, that's what they'll say. They'll say Peasley Snell hain't of no account in his own family. They'll say his wife'd rather have any other man in town than him.... And, Mis' Snell, I hain't a-goin' to endure it. Mark me! Your duty is plain before your eyes. You git into that Bazar, Mis' Snell, and you git my name on that list. And you see to it that your husband has as many votes after his name as Bloom or Peterson. That's what. Now Mis' Snell, march."

She marched, and old Peasley's name went on the list with one vote more than Bloom.

That's the way it went. Fellers that were nominated started worrying about how many votes they were going to get, and fellers that weren't nominated got mad about it. Also there were others besides Chet and Chancy that nominated themselves.

Till 'most midnight customers kept us so busy we couldn't hardly breathe. At last we shut the doors and counted up to see what we'd done. A hundred and thirty-two dollars and fifty-seven cents for one day! That wasn't the best of it, either, for we'd got rid of a lot of old stuff that had been cluttering up the store for years. In a little more we'd be down to real stock.

"Calc'late," says Mark, "we better be castin' our eyes around for somethin' new and special to sell. We want our stock to be b-b-better than Jehoshaphat P. Skip's."

"Sure," says I.

"We got to stock up on first-class s-s-staples," says Mark, "and git, besides, some specialties that'll stir folks up a leetle."

We were pretty tired and sleepy, so we didn't talk about it any more that night. Next morning all of us went to church, but after dinner we went to Mark's house, and his mother made molasses taffy—and kept scolding about it all the time and saying we'd ruin the furniture and mess up our clothes. That was the way with Mrs. Tidd. She was always stirring around, busy as could be, and mostly she was sort of scolding at Mark or Mr. Tidd—but she didn't mean a bit of it. I never knew anybody so free with pies and fried cakes and things as she was.

Along about the middle of the afternoon we heard a jangling and rattling, and above it all somebody whistling like all-git-out. Well, sir, we jumped for the window, because we knew *that* racket. There, just turning into the yard, was a red peddler's wagon. To-day, it being Sunday, the pots and pans and brooms and whips and things that usually were stuck all over it were out of sight inside, but they jangled just the same. On the seat was a man whistling "Marching Through Georgia" with runs and trills and funny quirks to it. His nose was pointed straight up and his eyes were shut. His horse was finding its way without any help from him. If you didn't look at anything but the man's face you'd have said he was about six feet and a half high, but when you looked at the rest of him you saw right off that things had got mixed—he had the wrong body. He was less than five feet tall, and he was more than three feet wide—or he looked so, anyhow.

All of a sudden his horse stopped. The little man raised his big head with a snap and jerked it first in one direction and then in another. Then he took hold of the end of his nose and gave it a tweak as if it had managed to get out of shape. Then slow as molasses he began to get down.

At that we boys rushed out of the house, and Mr. Tidd and his wife followed a little slower. The little man saw us, put his hand on his stomach and made a low bow; then he put a thumb in the armhole of his vest and straightened up as dignified as a senator.

"You are not mistaken, my friends. Your eyes do not deceive you. It is Zadok Biggs. None other. I am entranced—delighted is the more ordinary expression—to see you. I am more than delighted to see that prodigious—remarkable is the commoner word—youth, Marcus Aurelius Fortunatus Tidd. There's a name! The parents who gave that name to their son are remarkable parents! Parents, I salute you.... And there, too, are my three young friends, Plunk and Binney and Tallow." He waved his hand at us as though we were a block away.

He didn't give anybody a chance to say a word, but led us into the house and invited us to sit down.

"Ah, this is magnificent, this is glorious. How Zadok Biggs has looked forward to it! Madam, aside from a seat on the Supreme Bench at Washington, I most aspire to this one. Tell me all about yourselves; you, Marcus Aurelius Fortunatus Tidd, tell me all about yourself. Have you been finding opportunities? Ah, there's a word! Opportunities are everywhere. There's Plunk, now, missing an opportunity. There's a chair, a comfortable chair, yet he remains erect—standing is the more usual expression. Seize your opportunity, Plunk, and be seated. Now Marcus, I listen. My ears yearn for the news you have to tell."

Maybe you never met Zadok Biggs before, but we had, I can tell you. We got acquainted with him when Mr. Tidd come close to losing the turbine-engine he had invented and which made him rich, and Zadok did a lot to help us get it back. I really don't believe we ever would have got it back if it hadn't been for him. So we were pretty good friends, and every time he was near Wicksville with his tin-peddler's wagon he'd stop overnight with Mark, and we'd all spend the evening together.

"Relate—tell is the less dignified term—the news, Marcus," he directed a second time.

Mark started in and told him all about everything: how father was hurt and had to go to the hospital, and how we four boys were running the store, and about Jehoshaphat P. Skip, and about the chattel mortgage, and about the handsomest-man contest. When Mark was done Zadok got up and rushed over to me and patted me on the shoulder. There were tears in his eyes.

"Plunk," says he, "my heart bleeds for your father and mother. I could weep for them in their trouble. I will visit your father in the hospital—be sure of that, Zadok Biggs will visit him and cheer him. Ha! That is something. Also I shall tell him about his son. A father loves to hear good of his son. It will help him on the road to recovery. I am proud of you, Plunk. I am proud of all of you. You are—indeed, I may say it with honest pride—you are a credit to me." Then he hurried back and sat down.

"I'm afraid," I says, after a while, "that we've bit off more'n we can chew comfortable—countin' in that chattel mortgage."

"It is an obstacle. Oh, there is no doubt of that! Alone you might fail, but is not Marcus Tidd with you? Ha! That counts for much. And Zadok Biggs! What of him? He is heart and soul with you. From this minute Jehoshaphat P. Skip is his enemy. Zadok will help you. Zadok will advise you. Best of all, Zadok will look about him for opportunities." Looking for opportunities was Zadok's specialty. "We will show this Jehoshaphat P. Skip—a detestable name; I abhor such a name—we will show him!"

He turned to Mark.

"You are in business," says he. "Business is the game that keeps the world going. Business is checkers; business is football; business is Brains. Would you hear my business rules? They will aid you—help is the more common word. I will write them in a row so you can see them and remember them."

He pulled a piece of paper and a pencil out of his pocket and wrote:

First—Find out what people want.

Second—Give it to 'em.

Third—Buy it cheap.

Fourth—Only a fair profit.

Fifth—Never spend a cent that won't bring back a cent.

Sixth—Every man is a customer—treat him so.

Seventh and last—Never sell a thing you wouldn't be glad to buy yourself at the price.

He stood up, bowed like he was going to speak a piece, and read it off to us. Folks may think Zadok is a little peculiar, but I want to tell you that every inch of room in his big head is stuffed full of brains. A half-witted cat could see the sense in those business rules of his.

CHAPTER VIII

It seems the ministers didn't hear how they were nominated in the beauty contest till Sunday afternoon—at any rate, none of them said anything about it. But Sunday afternoon they met and palavered and made up their minds it wasn't dignified and that sort of thing for preachers to get mixed up in such an affair. So that night they got up in their pulpits and said so. I was a Baptist and heard Rev. Jenkins McCormick state his views. I gathered he didn't withdraw because he thought ministers wasn't handsomer than other men, or because he didn't view himself as being as handsome as any other minister, but because, to his way of thinking, beauty and Baptists hadn't ought to run together.

Rev. Whipit, of the Congregationalists, and Rev. Hannis, of the Methodists, got off their views on the subject. The result was that there were a few hundred votes that would have to be changed. And there was where the trouble started.

The first thing Monday morning about a dozen women came down to the Bazar to ask what they should do about it.

"Well," says Mark Tidd, "th-there's the votes. So long as the parsons won't have 'em, somebody else'll have to. You can vote 'em for anybody you w-w-want to."

Then there was a *racket*. The Methodists got off in a group and the Congregationalists huddled together and the Baptists sheered off where they could talk it over. And they talked! My goodness! You could have heard the clatter on the other side of the river. Every married woman insisted on having the votes of her church cast for her husband, and the four old maids that were scattered through the three denominations were all for Mr. Pilkins, the school principal—him being an old bachelor. At last the noise got so bad and the women got so mad Mark made up his mind he'd have to do something about it—and he wanted to do something that would help out the Bazar while he was at it. He got up on the counter, and that was quite a job, considering how much of him there was to get up.

"L-ladies," he yelled, "the m-meetin' is called to order."

Well, sir, they stopped off short to see what was going on, just like hens in the yard will stop fussing if you step out with a pan of feed in your hand.

"I got a p-plan to propose," says Mark.

"Let's have it," says Mrs. Goodwillie.

"D-draw lots for 'em," says Mark. "I'll fix three boxes, one for each denomination, and put into 'em a slip of p-paper for each lady. Then you draw. One slip will say 'Votes' on it—and that one wins in each box. The votes belong to the three ladies d-drawin' the winnin' slips, and they can do as they please with 'em."

"Never," says Mrs. Goodwillie. "That's gamblin'!"

"Beg pardon, ma'am," says Mark, "b-but 'tain't. Characters in the Bible drew lots. B-besides," says he, "there was Lot's wife. How came she by her n-name, d'you s'pose, if d-drawin' lots wasn't customary? Eh?"

For a minute the ladies quarreled about it, but it *did* look like the most sensible way to go at it, and they agreed. We fixed up the boxes, and the drawing started. Every woman grabbed her slip and ran off with it like a hen that finds a worm. Then Miss Snoover yelled, "I got it!" She was a Methodist. But right on top of her yell came another "I got it!" and this one belonged to Mrs. Peterkin—and she was a Methodist, too. Somehow two winning slips had got into the Methodist box! The Baptist box came out all right with Mrs. Jenks a winner; but there wasn't any winning slip at all in the Congregational box! It was a pretty situation, but Mark didn't appear flustered a bit—he just looked solemn and interested, and when nobody was looking he winked at me sly. For some reason or other he'd gone and fixed those boxes like that on purpose!

Well, *mister!* Maybe there wasn't a squabble! Miss Snoover and Mrs. Peterkin gripped their slips and glared at each other and screeched that the votes were theirs and they'd drawn fair and square and nobody'd ever get them away. All the other Methodist ladies joined in because they saw a chance for another drawing, when maybe *they'd* win. The women that won wouldn't consent to another drawing, and the ones that lost insisted there should be one—and there we were.

In the mean time the Congregationalists had drawn all over and Mrs. Johnson won. That disposed of them.

I just kept my mouth shut and waited to see what Mark would do. He didn't do anything but look

sort of satisfied with the world—why, I couldn't see. I wished I was a mile away, because you couldn't tell how mad these women were going to get, nor what they'd do when they got there.

"Why not d-divide 'em equal between the winners?" Mark says.

"Never," yelled Mrs. Goodwillie. "We'll draw all over again!"

"Them votes is mine," says Miss Snoover, "and I'm a-goin' to keep 'em."

"What for?" asked Mrs. Peterkin, mean-like. "What you calc'latin' to do with 'em? Eh?"

Miss Snoover sort of choked and spluttered and got red in the face, and says it wasn't anybody's business what she was goin' to do with 'em, even if it was to paper the inside of her hen-house—and maybe she was an old maid, but it wasn't anybody's business, and she didn't need to be if she didn't want to, and a lot better to be one than married like some she knew—and she'd carry the matter into court and hire a lawyer to defend her rights, and everybody was trying to rob a lone woman. That was all she mentioned before she drew a breath, but I thought that was pretty good. Most folks would have had to breathe a lot sooner. The minute she was through she turned and ran out of the store, still grabbing her slip of paper.

The rest of them stayed awhile and argued, but pretty soon they went, too, because they couldn't do anything without Miss Snoover.

"Well," says I when they were gone, "that's a pretty mess to clean up."

"Um!" says Mark, and he smacked his lips like he'd had something good to eat.

"What ever," says I, "did you put two slips in that Methodist box for?"

"To start a s-s-squabble," says he.

"Well," says I, "you done it, all right."

"Plunk," says he, "excitement is the makin' of a beauty contest. The more folks gets m-mad the more votes is cast. The more squabbles there is the more money we make—and the more advertisin' we get. Don't you calc'late this thing'll be talked of more'n a simple drawin' with no row at all would have b-been?"

"I do," says I, and let it go at that. There didn't seem to be anything to say.

Binney Jenks, who had been down to the express-office, came in just then.

"Enemy's takin' flight," says he.

"What enemy?" says I, "and where is he takin' flight to?"

"Jehoshaphat P.," says Binney, "and he's goin' to Detroit. Took the ten-fifty train."

"F-flight," says Mark, with a sort of grunt. "More likely some kind of attack. Um!... Wisht I knew what he was up to."

"If it's anything to hurt us we'll find out quick enough," says I.

"The way," says Mark, "to win b-battles is to find out the enemy's plan and beat him to it."

"You might telegraph Jehoshaphat P.," says I, sarcastic-like, "and ask him what his idea is."

"Who's in charge of his store?" Mark asked.

"That clerk he brought with him. Don't know what his name is."

"Does he know you?" Mark asked me.

"Don't think I ever saw him but once," I says.

"Well," says Mark, "it's about time you bought somethin' at the t-t-ten-cent store. Take a quarter, Plunk, and spend it judicious. Take consid'able time to it, Plunk, and get friendly with the clerk. If you get curious you might ask a question or so. Good way would be to make b'lieve you thought the clerk was the boss. See? Then you could ask about the boss. Maybe this clerk is one of these t-t-talkative, loose-jawed fellers. Worth tryin', anyhow. Might drag a crumb of information out of him."

"And git hanged for a spy," says I; but for all that I was glad to go. To tell the truth I was sort of tickled that Mark wanted me to go instead of going himself. It showed he had some confidence in me and thought I was sharp enough to do what he wanted.

I took a quarter and went across to the Five-and-Ten-Cent Store. The clerk was lazying around without much to do but look at himself in a little hand-glass. He had one of those little pocket-combs and he was busy with it, fixing his hair just *so*. It was kind of straw-colored hair with a wiggle to it. He had a kind of strawberry complexion and blue eyes and chubby cheeks. Sort of cunning, he was. I says to myself he ought to be entered in our beauty contest.

I went along the counter, looking at things, but he didn't pay much attention. He got through with his hair and then began bringing up his mustache. It was a cute mustache. Yellow like his hair, it was, but you couldn't see it from some directions. When the light was right on it, though, you got a good view. I kept getting closer and closer. When I was almost in front of him I dropped my quarter and had to go chasing after it. That attracted his attention away from his mustache.

"What'll you have?" says he, crosslike.

"Oh," says I, "dun'no'. I got a quarter to spend and I'm lookin'."

"All right," says he, "look."

"You got a fine store, mister," says I.

"Yes," says he.

"Do you own all of it?" I says, "or have you got a partner?"

He felt around till he got hold of his mustache and pulled at it careful so as not to pull any out. He couldn't have spared much.

"Well," says he, "to tell the truth I hain't the proprietor. I'm just sort of manager. More money in *that* than ownin' the store—and no risk."

"Oh," says I. "Who does own it, then?"

"Feller by the name of Skip."

"Hain't he ever here?"

"Sure. Just went to town, though. Important business."

Hum! thought I, this is one of those talking jackasses. He's all excited about what a man he is and he'll just naturally lay himself out to make an impression.

"It's a big responsibility to be left in charge, hain't it?" I says.

"Oh, Skip gives me all sorts of responsibility," says he. "He knows *me*."

"I'll bet he don't," says I to myself, "or he wouldn't have you around." But I only grinned at him admiringly. "Say," I told him, "them clothes of yours wasn't just *bought*, was they? They look different. Bet a real tailor made 'em."

"Course," says he. "I couldn't wear store clothes. Man in my position has to look *swell*."

"You do it, all right," says I. Then I got an idea. "Are you figgerin' on winnin' the contest?"

"What contest?"

"Handsomest man in Wicksville," says I. "Everybody's votin'."

"Oh, that," says he. "No. I dassent be in that? Boss wouldn't like it."

"Shucks!" says I. "You ought to enter. You'd win easy."

He took another look at himself in the glass and didn't seem disappointed by what he saw.

"Well," says he, "I might have a *chance*."

"Chance!" I says. "Why, there wouldn't be anybody else in it!"

"I don't know many folks here," he says.

"Bet lots of folks wished they did know you. All you'd have to do would be enter the contest, and the way they'd vote for you would be a caution."

"Boss wouldn't like it," says he.

"If somebody put up your name without your knowin' it he couldn't object."

I could see him sort of thinking that idea over. It was one that attracted him like a bald head attracts flies.

"I sure would like to git my name in," says he, "but the boss hain't got any use for that Bazar. He's mad at the folks that run it and he says he's goin' to put it out of business. He's a bad one, Jehoshaphat P. Skip is, and when he gits after anybody they want to look out."

"Pretty smart man, hain't he?"

"You bet he is—smarter 'n a weasel."

"Don't b'lieve he could put the Bazar out of business, though," I says, shaking my head.

"You don't know Skip," says he. "Why, kid, what d'you s'pose he's up to now? Eh?"

"Hain't the slightest idea," says I, as if I didn't care much.

"He's got 'em pretty near busted now. Bought a chattel mortgage they'll never be able to pay off. He's goin' to see to it they *don't* pay it off. That's one reason he's in Detroit. Yes, sir. Take the wind plumb out of their sails, I tell you."

"Huh!" says I. "Easier said than done."

"He's goin' to the wholesale houses," says the clerk in a whisper.

"What of it?"

"The Bazar owes money," says he. "He's goin' to tell the wholesale houses they better look out or the Bazar'll bust. See? Then the wholesale houses'll demand their money. Besides that, the Bazar won't be able to buy no more stock. Skip'll fix their credit, and no store can git along without credit. See?"

Did I see? I should say I did see! This was almost worse than the chattel mortgage.

"Another thing," says he, "the Bazar's got the local agency for Wainright's sheet music. Must be a pretty good thing. Skip's going to get that away from 'em. Hurt some, I calc'late. And he's goin' to take away their agency for phonographs and records. Bet that'll hit 'em a wallop. Eh? Skip says he'll take away every one of their agencies."

"But," says I, "this is a five-and-ten-cent store. How can he sell things that come to more?"

"Oh," says the clerk, "he's goin' to open a separate department and sell every single thing the Bazar does—and cut prices. Guess this beauty contest won't get much for the Bazar folks against lower prices."

That was the way I looked at it, and my heart went 'way down into my boots, but I wouldn't let him see it.

"About that contest," says he, "I'd like to get my name in. But I wouldn't like Skip to know I went in myself. He'd have to think somebody else did it without me knowing."

"Sure," says I.

He looked all around to make sure nobody was looking, and then handed me half a dollar.

"Here," says he in a whisper. "Buy me a necktie with this, and have my name entered. Will you? Eh?"

"Course," says I; "glad to do it for you."

I hurried right out of the store and across the street, not waiting to spend my quarter at all. I had to see Mark Tidd, and see him *quick*. Something had to be done. Something had to be done in a minute. If we lost these agencies and had our credit cut off we might as well close our doors. Here was Mark's chance to show if he was as great a man as folks thought he was.

CHAPTER IX

"Mark!" I yelled as soon as I got to the front door. "Hey, Mark! Quick!"

"T-take it easy," says he. "Where's the fire?"

"Fire!" says I. "You'll wish it *was* a fire."

"Um!" says he. "Out with the sad news, Plunk. Let's weep t-t-together."

I told him as fast as I could. His little eyes began to glow and you could see his chin setting under the fat. He was mad, mad clear through the whole of him.

"That J-j-jehoshaphat P. Skip," says he, "is about as low down as they make 'em. He's a human skunk." Then he shut up like a steel trap.

"Well?" says I.

"Stay here," says he. "I'm goin' out—and I'll be b-b-back when I git here." My! how he stuttered!

"Where you goin'?" says I.

"Telegraph-office first," says he. "Don't know where then." At that he waddled out of the door as fast as he could go. He had some scheme, and he was after Jehoshaphat. Somehow I felt as if I'd rather be somebody else than Mr. Skip, too. When Mark has that look on his face you want to look out for him.

He went to the telegraph-office and sent half a dozen telegrams to the folks we did business with in Detroit. They were all the same:

Look out for a man named Skip. Make no deal till I come.

MARK TIDD.

After that he rented a horse and buggy and drove off somewhere into the country. I didn't know where, and nobody else did. He was gone till almost five o'clock. Then he came dashing in, looking pretty pleased about something, and says:

"Got to g-go to Detroit on the five-thirty. Comin'?"

"Yes," says I. "When'll we be back?"

"T-to-morrow," says he.

He left Tallow and Binney in charge of the Bazar, and we hurried off to get our nightgowns and tooth-brushes. The train was five minutes late as usual, or we never would have caught it.

It was 'most midnight when we got into Detroit, so we went to a hotel right across the road from the depot and went to bed. Mark told the man at the desk to call us at six o'clock.

I went to sleep right off because I was tired, and I guess Mark did, too. Sleeping was one of the things he was good at. He could sleep and eat more than any fellow I ever knew—and stay awake more when it was necessary.

We were waked up by the telephone-bell and got dressed and went down to breakfast.

"Now what?" says I.

"Wholesale houses first," says he.

Neither of us knew anything about the city, so we had to ask our way, but we didn't get lost. It was quite a walk to the first place we wanted—Spillane & Company—and when we got there it wasn't open yet. We sat down in the doorway to wait.

After a while an old gentleman came along in an electric automobile and got out and came up to the door. We moved over to let him through.

"Early birds, aren't you?" says he, sort of squinting at us under his gray eyebrows.

"Yes," says Mark, "but the w-w-worm hasn't come yet."

"Who's the worm?" says he.

"Spillane & Company," says Mark.

The old gentleman kept on squinting at us under those eyebrows without ever the sign of a smile.

"What do you want of Spillane & Company?" says he.

"Want to talk business to 'em," says Mark.

"Haven't any jobs for boys," says he, and stuck the key in the lock.

"I've got all the j-j-job right now I need," says Mark, with a twinkle in his eye.

"What do you want, then?"

"I want to talk to the man that runs this business," says Mark. "The boss of the whole th-thing."

"What about?"

"Are you him?" Mark asked.

"What if I'm not?" says the man.

"Then," says Mark, his mouth setting stubborn-like, "I'll wait till he comes."

"Huh!" says the old gentleman, and it was hard to tell if it was a growl or a chuckle. "My name's Spillane, and I'm president of this concern. What is it, now? Don't keep me standing here all day."

"I want to t-talk to you about Jehoshaphat P. Skip."

"What's your name?"

"Mark Tidd."

The old gentleman grunted again and scowled—actually scowled. I edged off because it looked to me like he was going to do something unpleasant. "So you're Mark Tidd, are you? You're the one that sends mysterious telegrams? What do you mean by it? Eh? What do you mean by sending telegrams nobody can make head or tail to?"

"I meant business when I sent it, and I m-mean business *now*," says Mark.

"Come in," says Mr. Spillane.

We followed him into the office and he jerked his head toward a couple of chairs.

"Always get down first," says he. "Open the door myself. Get in half an hour's thinking before the help comes."

Mark and I nodded polite.

"Well," says Mr. Spillane, "what about Jehoshaphat P. Skip?"

"Jehoshaphat P. Skip," says Mark, "was here to see you yesterday. I d-don't know what he told you—maybe it was true and maybe it was lies. We've come to tell our side of it."

"And who are you?"

"We're Smalley's Bazar," says Mark.

"Where's Mr. Smalley?"

"In the hospital. We're runnin' the business."

"Four kids," says Mr. Spillane.

"He told you, didn't he? Yes, sir, four kids—but we play fair. We don't go s-s-sneakin' off to spoil a competitor's credit, and we don't lie and we don't cheat."

"Smalley's Bazar is on the verge of bankruptcy," says Mr. Spillane. "I am writing you a letter to-day refusing further credit and demanding a settlement of the account now standing."

Mark thought a minute. "The more retail businesses there are," says he, "the more goods wholesale houses sell. Every t-time a little store is killed off it costs the wholesaler money, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"Then it's to your advantage to keep the l-little stores going."

"Yes."

"It's to your advantage to keep Smalley's Bazar going."

"That's another matter. You owe us money you can't pay. It would be poor business to let you owe us more."

"It would be if we couldn't pay," says Mark, "but if we get a square deal we can p-pay—every cent. Yes, sir, and make money besides."

"Smalley's Bazar never did amount to much."

"It's going to.... Just lemme t-t-tell you about this Skip and what we're d-doin' and what we're goin' to do."

"I don't think it will make any difference. Our credit man has looked you up and he advises against further dealings."

Well, Mark set in and began to talk. He told about how we boys started into the Bazar and about how Skip came to town and about the auction Skip broke up and about the threats he made and the chattel mortgage and about his trip to town. He told about his plans and how they were going to work, and then he ended up:

"Skip may have money now—but he ain't honest. Nobody's honest that'll do what he's d-done. We haven't his money—but—but you can ask anybody in Wicksville about us—anybody. If we're let alone we'll pull through. If creditors come down on us we'll b-bust—and there won't be much for the creditors. Here's your chance, Mr. Spillane, to give us a chance to make good or to play into the hands of a feller like Skip. The d-difference between us and Skip is, we'll pay if we can and he'll cheat you if he can. Now, sir, is it Skip or us?"

"Who thought up that auction scheme?"

"I did," says Mark.

"Who thought up the beauty contest?"

"I did," says Mark.

"Who thought up these other things you've told me?"

"I did," says Mark.

"Young fellow," says Mr. Spillane, "how'd you like to work for me?"

"F-f-fine," says Mark, "but I've got something else to do now."

"I'll give you more than you can make out of the Bazar."

"I'm making nothing out of it," says Mark. "I d-d-don't get paid."

"What?" says Mr. Spillane.

"None of us does," says Mark.

"Ummmm!" says Mr. Spillane.

We waited and didn't say a word. The old gentleman didn't say a word, either, for quite a while; then he grunted ferocious-like again, and says:

"Where else are you going?"

We told him the names of the other firms, and then he turned around to his desk and began working at some papers just as if we weren't there. I thought it was a funny sort of thing to do, and it made me mad. He had a right to refuse to do what we wanted, but he didn't have any right to treat us like that. I started to get up, but Mark looked at me and winked and shook his head. So I sat back.

It was twenty minutes before Mr. Spillane paid any more attention to us. By that time other men had come in and there was a pile of mail on his desk. He looked that over and then turned around.

"Come on," he said, reaching for his hat.

We followed him without any idea where he was going. He made us get into his electric and drove us across town. There he stopped at a big building and we got out. It was The Wolverine Novelties Company, another of our wholesalers. He went right in and pushed past a clerk that wanted to know what he wanted, and into a private office where a fat man was sitting at a desk.

"Hello, Jake!" says Mr. Spillane.

"Hello, Pat!" says the other man.

"Here's a couple of kids, Jake. From Wicksville. Fat one's the author of the telegram you got yesterday about Skip. Runs Smalley's Bazar."

"Goin' to shut 'em up, Pat?"

"I was—but I've arranged differently." Mr. Spillane turned and scowled at us. "This kid"—he stuck his thumb at Mark—"has argued me out of it. I'm going to give 'em a new line of credit."

"Not feeling sick, are you? Better get more fresh air, Pat."

"And," says Mr. Spillane, just as if he hadn't been interrupted, "you're going to extend their credit, too." He jerked his head at Mark. "Tell him about it, Tidd."

Mark sailed in and told it all over again, while the fat man began to grin and grin. When Mark was done the fat man says:

"Looking for a job, Tidd?"

"N-no, sir," says Mark. "Not till I get this Bazar off my hands."

"Well, when you *do* want a job come around to see me."

"He's mine," says Spillane. "Keep off."

"Tell you what I'll do," says the fat man. "You write me a letter so I get it every Saturday, telling me everything that goes on and what schemes you work, and—you can have any reasonable credit you want. You won't be pushed, either."

Marked thanked him and then Spillane hauled us off in a hurry. Mark tried to thank *him* when we were outside, but he only growled at us, so it wasn't possible. From The Wolverine Novelties Company he took us to every other wholesaler we did business with, and to the sheet-music people, where he fixed it so Skip couldn't take away our agency. He fixed *everybody*. Then he went back to the office and dictated letters to the phonograph company and other folks whose goods we were handling—folks in New York and Chicago and Cincinnati, and they were real bang-up letters, too. When he got

through there wasn't a thing for us to worry about on the score of credit. Then he took us to dinner at a big hotel and drove us to the train.

We got back to Wicksville toward evening, tired, but pretty average well satisfied with things in general, I can tell you. The Bazar was closed, of course, so we went right home.

"Wish I could see Jehoshaphat P. Skip's face when he hears about it," says I.

"He's goin' to hear about somethin' he'll like worse," says Mark, in the way he talks when he's done something big but isn't ready to tell about it.

"What's up?" says I.

"You'll find out pretty soon," says he. "It'll m-make Mr. Skip swaller his false teeth."

CHAPTER X

Old Mose Miller came slouching into the Bazar just before noon next day. Old Mose lived up the river in a little shanty, but he had a big farm and fine barns and a herd of Holstein cattle that would make your eyes bung out. He lived all alone. Seemed like he didn't like folks. Mostly he wouldn't speak to anybody, and the man who went through his gate without good and sufficient business was taking a chance. I suppose every boy in Wicksville had been chased by Old Mose—and quite a lot of the men.

Well, Old Mose came in and began snarling around and making faces like everything he saw hit him on the wrong side of his temper. He was the homeliest old coot you ever saw. Downright homely, he was! He didn't have a hair on his head, and his eyebrows and eyelashes were gone. If that was all he wouldn't have had much chance to be thought good-looking, but it wasn't all. His nose was broken and came zigzagging down the middle of his face like a rail fence, and he had only about every second tooth in front. That's all that ailed his head if you forgot about his ears—and they were so big they flapped when he walked.

The rest of him was just as bad, but I expect his feet were his strongest point. They were flat—flat as pancakes. And big! Well, say, folks was used to saying that in winter he didn't need to use snow-shoes. If the rest of him had grown up to match his feet he'd have been eleven feet tall.

Mark stepped up to wait on him.

"W-what can I do for you, Mr. Miller?" he asked, as polite as could be.

"You kin talk like a human bein'," says Old Mose, "and not like a buggy joltin' over a corduroy road."

I ducked down back of the counter so Mark couldn't see me laugh, for he does hate to have anybody make fun of his stuttering. I listened sharp, expecting him to give Old Mose as good as he sent, but not a word did he say. In business hours he tended to business, and so long as a customer didn't go too far Mark would be patient as a lamb. So he just waited.

"Folks," says Old Mose, "is a pesky nuisance."

"Yes, sir," says Mark.

"Shet up," says Mose. "What d'you know about it?"

I could see Mark's eyes begin to twinkle and knew he was enjoying himself. Pretty soon Old Mose snapped at him again.

"I won't have no folks in the house with me. Not me. Can't make 'em shet up when you want 'em to. Talk, talk, talk, that's the way with folks. Never run down."

"Yes, sir," says Mark.

"*Yes, sir! Yes, sir!* Can't you say nothin' but 'Yes, sir'?"

"Yes, sir," says Mark, as innocent to look at as a head of cabbage.

Old Mose reached for his ears and took one in each hand. Then he stamped on the floor, and while he stamped he pulled. That's how his ears got so big, likely. Mad! My! he was mad. He jabbered and growled and called Mark an "idjit," and allowed that of all idjits he was the worst, and how came anybody to take the trouble to raise him? He went on quite a spell before he quieted down. Then he started off on folks in general again.

"I don't like folks," he says in his cracked voice. "I don't like to have 'em around. But I git tired of the sound of my own voice. Mighty tired. Lots of times I don't talk to myself for a whole day, b'jing! There's times when I want somebody to talk to me. But you can't trust folks. They wouldn't shut up. Not them. Can't turn 'em off. That's why I come here." He glared at Mark as though he was to blame for the whole thing. "Heard one of them talkin'-machines, that's what! Human voice comin' out of it. Talk! Sing! Whistle! Likewise playin' of bands and sich-like. Better'n a human. Better comp'ny. Kin turn the screw and shut 'em off.... Got one of them talkin'-machines to sell?"

"Yes, sir," says Mark, and Old Mose scowled at him like he was ready to take a chunk out of his leg. "We g-got three kinds. Forty dollars, seventy dollars, and hundred and ten dollars."

"More'n they're wuth! More'n they're wuth. It's a cheat, I say. Forty dollars! Whoosh!"

"Let me p-play them for you," says Mark.

He started the seventy-dollar one off with a woman singing, and then played a band piece, and another with a fellow telling jokes, and some more and some more. Right in the middle of a piece Old Mose yelled:

"Shut 'er off! Lemme see you shut 'er off."

Mark snapped it off short, and Old Mose looked almost pleased—and I guess he came as close to it as he could.

"Always shet up like that?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," says Mark.

"How much do them wax plates come at?"

"Different p-prices," says Mark. "Here's the list."

"Don't want to see it. Don't want to see it." He pulled a wallet out of his pocket and laid down a

hundred-dollar bill. "Here," says he, "gimme that machine and enough of them wax things to make up a hundred dollars' worth. Hear me? Want to keep me waitin' all day?"

"All ready for you in a s-second, sir," says Mark, and quicker than I can tell you about it he had picked out the records and was packing them careful so they wouldn't break.

"This'll give you a th-thousand votes," he says to Old Mose.

"Votes? What votes? What do I want of votes?"

"Handsomest-man contest," says Mark. "Folks in Wicksville is votin' to see who he is."

Old Mose glared. "Young feller," says he, "if you're a-makin' fun of me I'm a-goin' to lay you acrost my knee and give you what your pa's neglected to."

"It's not a j-joke, sir. Everybody's votin'. 'Most every man in t-town's entered."

Old Mose chuckled. "Kin I vote 'em for anybody I want to?"

"Yes, sir."

He chuckled again, sort of mean-like.

"Gimme them votes. I calc'late I'll take 'em home and think it over. 'Tain't no easy job to pick the handsomest man in this town. Wicksville's that full of handsome men they're stumblin' over each other in the street. Handsome! If there's a feller in this town that kin look at his own reflection without feelin' timid of it then I hain't seen him. Gimme them votes, I say. What's ailin' you?"

Mark counted out the votes and then we helped Old Mose load his phonograph into his wagon. He climbed on to the seat and went off without even looking at us again. Crusty old codger, I say.

"Plunk," says Mark, "d-don't hesitate about spreadin' the news."

"What news?"

"Why, that Old Mose has g-got a thousand votes—and that he hain't made up his mind who to cast 'em for."

"What good 'll that do?"

"Remember the time Old Mose sicked his d-dog on us?"

"You bet I do."

"Here's our chance to g-git even. Mose don't like folks. As soon as this news gits out he'll see plenty of 'em—mostly wimmin. Everybody that's g-got a man entered in this contest'll be after Old Mose. There'll be a procession out to his house. He'll have more folks campin' on his trail than he thought was in the county."

It was plain enough. I could just see Mrs. Peterson and Mrs. Bloom and the Presbyterian ladies and the Baptist ladies trotting out to Old Mose's and honeying around him and making his life miserable. It would be as good as a show. They'd catch him in the morning and they'd catch him in the afternoon, and it would be as much as his life was worth to show his face in town. I just threw back my head and laughed like I haven't felt like laughing since father was hurt.

Mark didn't laugh, but his eyes twinkled. When I sobered down he says:

"We don't want to l-let this beauty contest take all our time. We got to think up other schemes."

"Sure," says I.

"I been th-thinkin'," says he, "that we ought to find out somethin' everybody'll be wantin' about now—and git some we can sell cheap."

"Good idee," says I. "What'll it be?"

"I dun'no'—yet," says he.

We stood and thought and thought. Finally I remembered right off I knew something every woman in Wicksville would be buying about then.

"Cannin' season," says I.

"Course," says he. "Mason jars. Wonder what they cost?"

"I'll run over to the grocery and see," I says, and off I went.

The clerk said they were selling for fifty-five cents a dozen without the rubbers.

"Hum," says Mark. "That's about a n-nickel apiece. If we could sell 'em three for a dime and make any profit at all we'd do consid'able b-business."

"Where d'you buy 'em?" I wanted to know.

"Spillane & Company handle 'em," says he. "I'll write 'em a letter.... No, I'll telegraph 'em. Save time." He went back to the desk to write a message, but he stopped and thought.

"Price 'd d-depend on how many we was goin' to use," says he. "Wonder how many we'd sell?"

"No way of tellin'," says I.

"There m-must be," says he in that arguing way of his. "We got to find out.... Say, you fellers go home and ask your mothers and my mother how many they're goin' to buy this fall."

We went off obedient as little sheep. Mark's mother was going to need two dozen new ones, Binney's mother figured on three dozen, and Tallow's mother allowed as how she needed about two dozen and a half.

Mark blinked and pinched his cheek and whistled a little.

"There's about two hundred h-houses in Wicksville. The population of the township's about four thousand, so that means about two hundred more farm-houses. That's figgerin' five folks to the house for town and country. Looks like the average number of cans was about two d-dozen and a half. But that's high. Lots of folks don't set as good a table as your f-folks. But 'most everybody in Wicksville cans some. Let's guess low. Say a dozen cans to every house. How about that?"

"Too high," says I.

"Maybe so," says he; "b-better be safe and figger 'way low. Say eight cans to a house. How many's that?"

"Thirty-two hundred cans," says I.

"Course we couldn't sell *all* of 'em—even if the p-price was low. But we could sell most—if we let folks know about it. Ought to sell two thousand of those cans."

"Ought to," says I, "but it'd be better to turn some f-folks away than to have a couple of hundred cans left on hand."

"Um!... Well, say ten g-gross. That's fourteen hundred and forty. How about that?"

"Sounds safe to me," I says, and Tallow and Binney agreed.

"Then we'll wire for a price on that m-many," says Mark, and he turns and makes out the message.

Wire best price ten gross quart Mason jars for sale.

SMALLEY'S BAZAR.

We sent off the message, but the answer didn't come till next morning. It said:

Can quote special price three ninety-five per gross delivered.

SPILLANE & COMPANY.

We sat down to figure. That would make the cans cost two and three-quarter cents apiece. We could sell them three for ten cents and make a profit of a cent and three-quarters. That would give us a total profit of eight dollars and forty cents. That wasn't much, but it was a brand-new profit in addition to everything else. We thought it was worth trying, so we wired Spillane & Company to send on the goods.

They wired back that the goods would be shipped immediately and would get to Wicksville the next afternoon.

"Now for the advertising," says Mark.

He brought the horse and wagon and Tallow and Binney into commission again. This time the signs were about the Mason jars and the great sale we were going to have on Friday—three cans for ten cents. They drove all over town and out through the country, banging on a drum. I guess folks were getting used to this way of telling them things, for when they heard the drum whanging women would come running to the door to see what new thing we were up to. Mark put a big sign up in the window, too, and as the paper came out Thursday he put an advertisement in that told all about it. That was about all we could do. Now the Wicksville folks would have to do the rest.

I can tell you we were all anxious. That deal meant an investment of thirty-nine dollars and fifty cents. Not very much, maybe you will say. But it was a lot to us, fixed the way we were. If we should be stuck for nearly forty dollars just at that time we would be in a hard way, and don't ever forget it. We *had* to sell those jars!

Friday morning the jars were there and displayed in the window. Everything was ready for the sale, which was to start at ten o'clock. Mark had fixed up special tables and arranged things so that two of us would sell, one would handle the money, and the other would wrap up the jars folks bought. By nine o'clock we were ready—and there wasn't anything to do but wait. It was a long, anxious hour.

Well, sir, about a quarter past nine we heard a bell ringing fit to bust itself out in the street. Then we heard another bell. All of us ran to the door. There, just starting out from the Five-and-Ten-Cent Store, were three boys with big signs on the ends of poles—and those signs said:

GREAT SALE OF MASON JARS!
FOUR FOR TEN CENTS
AT THE FIVE-AND-TEN-CENT STORE
SALE OPEN NOW!

Four for ten cents! That was a quarter of a cent less than we had to pay Spillane & Company for them!

CHAPTER XI

"There," says I, "goes thirty-nine dollars and a half."

Tallow and Binney were pretty discouraged, too, and Mark looked more downhearted than I ever saw him. Mr. Jehoshaphat P. Skip had about knocked us all off our feet.

"We'll have to go on with the sale," I says. "Maybe we can get rid of some—and that'll save us a dollar or so, anyhow."

Mark didn't say a word. I saw him fumbling around in his pocket after his jackknife—and that meant business. He had done a lot of thinking since we started to run the Bazar, but this was the first time he had wanted to whittle. That was about the last help he depended on. When everything else failed Mark Tidd whittled.

He went back behind the counter with a piece of box and started littering up the floor. We stayed away from him and waited. It was fifteen minutes, maybe, before we saw his head coming up into sight. He didn't look happy and his eyes didn't twinkle. But he *did* look determined. We fellows have been in some tight places with Mark, and have met some pretty mean men, but Jehoshaphat P. Skip was the first one to get Mark mad clean through and through.

"Well?" says I, as he came around the end of the counter.

"This man Skip," says he, "hasn't had time to get in a fresh s-s-stock of Mason jars."

"What of it?"

"D-don't b'lieve he's got many. Just his regular stock."

"But he's spoiled our sale, anyhow."

Mark shook his head. "Maybe so—but we'll see. Got some friends we can depend on? Grown-up folks?"

"There's Uncle Ike Bond—and I'll bet Chet Weevil and Chancy Miller 'd do 'most anything for us, with the beauty contest going on."

"G-good," says Mark. "Who else?"

"Dad," says Binney.

"My dad, too," says Tallow.

"F-fine. Need more, though."

We thought up a dozen folks and Mark asked us to run to see them and find out if they would come to the Bazar just a minute. He said to tell them it was important.

In another fifteen minutes they were there—a dozen of them. Mark stood up and says:

"I want you f-f-folks to buy Mason jars—from Jehoshaphat P. Skip. He's sellin' 'em for less than we can buy them for. D-don't b'lieve he's got many dozen."

"What's the idee?" says Uncle Ike.

"We got a sale on," says Mark. "Th-three jars for a dime. This man Skip—just to bust up our sale—goes and advertises f-four jars for a dime. What we got to do is buy every last jar he's got—*quick!* We got to buy 'em before Wicksville folks start buyin'. When they come to buy from the Five-and-Ten-Cent Store there mustn't be any there to b-b-buy."

Uncle Ike slapped his leg. "Smartest kid I ever see," says he to himself. "Greased lightenin's slow. Folks, I've been drivin' a 'bus a good many years, and you git to know a lot on a 'bus. Grand eddication. But never in all them years have I seen the beat of this here Mark Tidd. No, sir. He tops the pile."

Everybody was willing to help us out, so Mark gave them money out of the till and they straggled off to the Five-and-Ten-Cent Store. Each one was to buy all he could.

Uncle Ike came first with two dozen, and Binney's dad brought two dozen—seems that's all Skip would sell to one person. Then the rest straggled in with two dozen apiece till it came to Chet Weevil.

"Only got half a dozen," says he, grinning all over. "The last half-dozen there was. We've cleaned him out. Every last can's bought."

Then Mark grinned—and said thank you to everybody and told us to get to our places, for the sale was going to start. He went back to paint a new sign. It said:

WHEN YOU COME BACK FROM
THE FIVE-AND-TEN-CENT STORE
WITHOUT ANY MASON JARS
BUY THEM HERE
THREE FOR A DIME
WE HAVE PLENTY

He put that up and then we waited.

I stood in the door where I could watch the Five-and-Ten-Cent Store. Quite a lot of folks went in—and came out again looking sort of mad. Most of them came back up the street, and when they saw our new sign they turned in. Provoked! Say, they believed, I guess, that Skip had played a joke on them.

"Have *you* got any Mason jars?" old Mrs. Stovall says, sharp-like.

"L-lots of 'em, ma'am," says Mark. "Three for a dime."

"Gimme two dozen," says she. And then she shook her black bonnet till the jet beads rattled. "I went into that other place," says she, "and that smart Alec of a clerk says they was all sold out. Fine way to treat folks! Advertise a thing and then not have it to sell."

"Yes, ma'am," says Mark. "You'll find this Bazar always has what it advertises, and as g-g-good as it advertises."

"I hain't never been cheated here," she says, "and I won't never be cheated *there*. I'll never step a foot inside that store again if it was the last place on the footstool."

Mark began to look cheerful, and as time went along he looked more cheerful. We had a steady stream of customers—and most of them had been to the other store first. And they were mad. Skip had done his business more harm that morning than as if he'd locked up his door to shut folks out. He'd made them mad—and he'd fixed it so they were suspicious of him. Mark says if you get folks to distrusting you you might just as well shut up shop, and I guess it's so.

By noon eight gross of our cans were gone and we were beginning to worry for fear we would run out—and we would have run out, too, if it hadn't been for those we bought from Skip—almost a gross. They just saved our bacon. When we shut the store at six o'clock there were exactly six cans left in the house. We had made a profit of eight dollars and forty cents on our own cans, and on the one hundred and twenty-six jars we bought from Skip at two cents apiece we had cleared just one dollar—and lots of satisfaction. It was a total profit of nine dollars and forty cents instead of a loss of thirty-nine dollars and a half. And Mark Tidd had done it. With that *thinking* brain of his he'd got us out of the worst kind of a hole—and put Jehoshaphat P. Skip into one. He's done a lot of things that got bigger results, but I don't believe he ever did anything that was any *smarter*.

"Wish somebody'd tell Skip just what happened to him," I says.

"Me, too," says Binney and Tallow, and Tallow said he guessed he'd go tell Skip himself.

"No need," says Mark, "the story's all over town. Everybody knows by this t-time—and everybody 'll be laughin' at Jehoshaphat to-morrow. It hain't a good th-thing for a b-business man to have the town laughin' at him."

"Humiliatin'," says I, "and especially when he got caught in his own trap by a kid he's 'most old enough to be granddad to."

Mark chuckled.

"We did pretty good," says he.

"*We!*" says I. "We didn't have anything to do with it. It was you—and you get all the credit that's comin'."

Mark shrugged his shoulders so the fat at the back of his neck tried to crowd his ears. He was willing enough to be praised and liked to have folks think he was a wonder—but he wasn't mean about it. He never tried to hog the glory and was willing the rest of us should get all we could. But it did tickle him to know we appreciated him—and he deserved to be tickled.

We passed Jehoshaphat P. on our way home and grinned at him cheerful-like. I thought for a minute he was going to stop and say something, but he strangled it back and went on as fast as his thin legs would carry him. Tallow started to yell something after him, but Mark made him shut up.

"That's all right for kids," says he, "but we're business men—for a while, anyhow. Let's act like b-b-business men."

Wasn't that Mark all over! Whatever he did or whatever he pretended to do—he was that thing. If we played cowboy he was a cowboy, and acted and thought like a cowboy. I calculate if we were to make believe we were aeroplanes he'd spread his arms and fly.

We passed my house and I turned in.

"To-morrow's Saturday," says I, "and a long day. Get a good sleep to-night."

"Yes," says Mark. "We g-got to stir things up t-to-morrow. Folks 'll be expectin' somethin' of us. Mustn't d-disappoint anybody. Good night."

I said good night and went in the house. There was a letter there from mother. She said dad was getting along pretty well, but it would be a month before he could leave the hospital. She said she told him what we boys were doing and he was proud of us, and she was proud of us, too.

"I don't know what we'd ever do without our boy and his friends," she said. "Especially Mark Tidd. You thank the boys for us, son, and tell Mark Tidd the thing he is doing and the way he has come to help us is something a very sick man and a troubled woman are grateful for to the bottoms of their hearts. His mother must be proud of him."

I went over to Mark's house after supper and read him that. He was quiet for a long time—and I saw him blink and blink because something came into his eyes he didn't want me to see. Pretty soon he says:

"Plunk, there's different ways of gettin' paid for things. There's money and fame and such-like, but, honest, seems to me, and you can t-tell your mother so for me, that what she says in her letter is the finest thing that ever happened." He blinked again a couple of times. "When you're th-through with it, Plunk, I wish you'd give me that letter. I'd—I'd like to keep it—always."

That was a side of Mark Tidd I never saw before. It sort of gave me a look inside of him. Always before I'd thought about his being smart and scheming and sharper than most folks, but now I saw there was something more—maybe something better and worth more to have—a great big heart that was full of sympathy for folks and that could be sorry when other folks were sorry and glad when they were glad.

I was pretty embarrassed and couldn't find a word to say, but I gave him the letter. He folded it carefully and put it in his pocket.

"Plunk," says he, "I'd s-sort of like to read this to dad and m-mother.... I guess they'd like to hear it."

"Sure," says I, sort of pinched in my throat. I know how *my* folks would be glad to have somebody say such a thing about me. My mother 'd cry, I know, but it wouldn't be because she was sorry. Not much. So I says "Sure," and got out of there as fast as I could, because I didn't know how much longer I'd last without getting messy and acting like—like a fellow doesn't like to act.

CHAPTER XII

By Saturday our beauty contest was getting pretty warm. Folks had talked about it and argued about it till they really got to believe there was some importance to the thing. There were quarrels over husbands, and Chet Weevil and Chancy Miller had to be separated every time they met. Those two young men took it pretty serious. Chet said if Chancy was to win he'd pick up and leave Wicksville for ever, and Chancy said if Chet was to win he'd go off and live in a cabin in the woods where he never would see another human being, he'd be that ashamed.

Mrs. Peterson and Mrs. Bloom didn't speak to each other any more, but put in all their spare time fussing around town trying to scrape up votes for their husbands. There were a lot of others just as bad.

But when Wicksville heard how Old Mose Miller had a thousand votes and didn't know who he was going to cast them for, there was excitement. You can bet there was. Early Saturday morning Chancy came sneaking into the store to find out about it.

"Mark," says he, "is it a fact that Old Mose has got a thousand votes?"

"Yes," says Mark. "He's got 'em, all r-right."

"Sort of an uncle of mine—Old Mose is," says Chancy, and he grinned satisfied-like. "Blood's thicker 'n water. Guess I'll go out to see him."

"I would," says Mark. "If I was you I wouldn't l-lose any time."

Chancy was no sooner gone than Chet came in with the same question.

"Huh!" says he when Mark told him the rumor was so. "Thousand votes. That'll about win this contest, won't it?"

"Come p-pretty close," says Mark.

"Then," says Chet, "I got to have 'em. *Got to!* I'm goin' out to see the old skeezicks. I'm goin' this minnit."

"Good idee," says Mark. "But Old Mose is Chancy's uncle. Know th-that? Blood's thicker 'n water."

"No sich thing," says Chet. "There hain't no sich hate as that between relatives. Chancy's father and Old Mose had a row over their father's will. Been hatin' each other twenty-odd years. Chancy 'll never count them votes, you listen to me."

Well, sir, I looked toward the door, and who should be coming in but Old Mose himself. Right behind him was Chancy. Chet he took one look and made for the old fellow and grabbed him by the arm.

"Why, Mr. Miller," says he, grabbing for the old man's hand to shake it, "I dun'no' when I've been so

tickled to see anybody. How be you, anyhow? Hope you're feelin' spry as a two-year-old."

Old Mose scowled at him.

"Do, eh? Do you, now? Huh! Who be *you*, anyhow? What call you got to be mixin' up with my health? Glad to see me, be you? Well, young feller, 'tain't mutual. Not none. Leggo that hand. Leggo."

"But, Mr. Miller, I am glad to see you. You and my father is old friends. He often speaks of you. Honest he does. You hain't forgot Henry Weevil, have you?"

"No, nor I hain't likely to, the shiftless old coot! Henry Weevil's son, be you? Reckon you take after him, too. Necktie looks like it. Henry had about gumption enough to spend his last quarter for a red rag to tie around his neck."

Just then Chancy came springing forward and made a grab at Chet.

"You quit pesterin' and disturbin' this old gentleman," says he. "He's my uncle, he is, and I hain't goin' to stand by to see no town loafer molestin' him. You git."

Old Mose took one look at Chancy—and it was considerable of a look, too.

"Uncle!" he snorted. "Uncle, is it? Don't let it git out. I hain't proud of it. Don't go claimin' no relationship with me, you young flapdoodle. I'd rather be caught stealin' sheep than to have folks remember I was your uncle. Git out. Git away from me 'fore I up and bust the toe of my boot on you."

Well, Chancy drew back a little, quite a little. He got clear out of range. Chet grinned at him provoking. But Chancy was a persistent sort of fellow; he tried Old Mose again.

"I don't see what for you hold anythin' agin me, uncle, I never done a thing to you."

"Don't you dast call me uncle," says Old Mose, and he takes a step forward, belligerent-like.

Chet put in his oar. "That's right, Mr. Miller. I'd hate to own he was a relative of mine—him and his curly hair."

Old Mose turned his head slow so he could look at Chet, and says:

"One more peep out of you and I'll take you acrost my knee and fix you like your ma ought to fix you often. I calc'late you figger you're growed up past spankin's. Huh! You yaller-haired slinkum!"

Things looked pretty discouraging for Chet and Chancy when in came Mrs. Bloom, all out of breath. Right at her heels was Mrs. Peterson, panting like all-git-out. Up they rushed to Old Mose.

"Why, Mr. Miller," says Mrs. Bloom, almost putting her arm around him, "I just heard you was in town. My! I'm that glad to see you! You're a-goin' to come and take dinner with us, hain't you?"

Old Mose blinked. He didn't know what to make of it, and before he decided what was going on Mrs. Peterson wedged herself in and got him by the other arm.

"Mr. Miller's comin' to *our* house to dinner," says she. "We're a-goin' to have chicken and biscuits in gravy and punkin-pie. You're a-comin' to our house, hain't you?"

Old Mose wagged his head and scowled, and wagged his head some more, and opened his mouth to say something, and shut it again. He had to try three times before he could get out a word.

"Hey!" he yelled, "you lemme be. You git away from me. What's the matter with these here wimmin? Say! Dinner! Naw, I hain't goin' to dinner with nobody. Me set and listen to female gabble! Whoo! You leggo my arms. Hear me? Has this whole consarned town up and went crazy? Eh? Or what?"

Well, right on top of all that three young women came pushing in and rushing up to Old Mose. I knew what they were after—it was votes for School-Principal Pilkins.

"Why, Mr. Miller," they says all at once, "as soon as we heard you was in town we come right down to see you. How be you? My! it seems nice to see you again!"

"Come right down to see me, did you?" Old Mose was about as mad as he could get by this time. "Well, now you've saw me. Here I be from boots to bald spot. I'm well. But I'm gettin' worse. I'm gettin' worse quick. In a minnit I'm goin' to git vi'lent." He backed off and got around the end of the counter where nobody could reach him. "Keep off'n me, the whole dod-gasted passel of you. I hain't no idee of the cause of these goin's-on, and I hain't no hankerin' to find out. But I hereby issues a warnin' to all and sundry—keep off'n me! I'm a-goin' to git into my buggy and make for home. I'm a-goin' to git out of this townful of lunatics. When I come ag'in I'm a-goin' to fetch my dawg. He's the meanest dawg in the county. And I'm a-goin' to sic him on to the first man, woman, or child that comes gabblin' and flitterin' around me. Take warnin'. Now git out of my way, for I'm a-comin'."

At that he began waving his arms and started pell-mell for the door. The folks opened up a way for him and he scooted through like the way was greased. Just a second he stopped in the door to shake his fist. Then he made a jump into his buggy, whipped up his horse, and went tearing for home.

Mark Tidd had stood watching the whole thing as solemn as an undertaker's sign. Not even a little twinkle in his eye! When Mose was gone he says:

"Don't seem like Old Mose was in g-good humor to-day."

"He's a rip-roarin', cross-grained, pig-headed, rat-minded old coot," says Mrs. Peterson, "but I'm a-goin' to git them votes of his'n yet."

"Think you be, do you?" snapped Mrs. Bloom. "Well, Mis' Peterson, you'll have to git up earlier in the mornin' than you do on wash-days if you beat *me*. So there."

"P-prob'ly," says Mark, "it would be b-better to see Old Mose out at his house of an evenin'. Maybe he'd be more reasonable."

"We'll see him of an evenin', all right, and we'll see him of a mornin'," says one of the young women that were after votes for Pilkins. "And we hain't after his votes for ourselves, neither," she says with a sarcastic look at Chet and Chancy.

"Ladies," says Mark, breaking right in on them, "have you seen the new p-patent hooks and eyes we just got in from New York? Finest thing of the kind ever was in Wicksville. Lemme sh-show you how they work."

He set in and described those hooks and eyes and told what they would do, and showed how they did it. "And," says he, "we give votes with th-these just like with anythin' else. How many cards, Mis' Peterson?"

"Gimme a quarter's worth," says she. "Sich things always come in handy."

Mrs. Bloom, she bought a quarter's worth, and each of those young women bought a card for a dime. That was eighty cents sold that wouldn't have been sold but for Mark taking advantage of

things. But he was the sort that took advantage. Maybe there wouldn't be much in it every time, but add up a dozen or so times and it was quite a bit. He was business from front to back.

"Mark," says I, when the folks were all gone, "I'm beginnin' to b'lieve maybe we'll pull through and pay off Skip's mortgage."

"Hum!" says Mark. "You be, eh? Remember we got to raise five hundred d-dollars and pay expenses and keep sendin' money to your f-folks. 'Tain't so easy as it looks. Comes perty clost to bein' impossible, I'd say."

"Not gittin' discouraged?" I says, frightened-like.

"No," says he, "but I h-hain't gittin' over-confident, neither. Maybe we'll pull through if somethin' don't hit us an extra wallop. But we'll keep a-tryin'."

"You bet," says I. "How do we stand now?"

"There's ninety-six d-dollars in the bank," says he, "that we can figger on for the mortgage."

"Fine," says I; "most a fifth of it."

"But we've had l-luck. There was sellin' that phonograph. Twenty dollars clear. Don't happen every day."

"But our daily sales are keeping up pretty well."

"If we d-depend on our daily sales to pull us through," says he, "Jehoshaphat P. Skip 'll be foreclosin' his mortgage. We g-got to keep a-thinkin' up schemes. We got to crowd the business and keep crowdin' it. Then, if somethin' we d-don't foresee now don't happen, we got a chance. But if somethin' does happen—" He stopped and shrugged his fat shoulders as much as to say that would be the end of the Bazar.

But I was feeling pretty good. Ninety-six dollars in the bank! That seemed like a lot; and we had put it there ourselves. It seemed to me we were coming along fine.

That night I got a telegram from mother. It says:

Father must have operation. Cost hundred dollars. Can you send money?

I just sat down limp in a chair with all the stiffening gone out of my backbone. There was the extra wallop Mark Tidd was afraid of. I ran right over to his house and showed him the telegram.

"Hum!" says he. "L-lucky we got that money in the bank. Send it to-morrow."

"Course," says I. "But it licks us."

He stuck out his jaw and his eyes got sort of hard and sparkly.

"D-does, eh?" says he. "Well, Mr. Plunk, we hain't licked yet. I felt in my bones bad luck was comin'—and here it is. But we're a-goin' to stick to it, you can bet. Skip hasn't put us out of b-business yet."

There you were. That very day he'd said something like this would dump our apple-cart for us—and now that it had happened he was as much for keeping on as ever. Looked like he didn't know when he was licked. But that was Mark Tidd all over. He wouldn't let on he had the worst of it till the sheriff had come and closed up the Bazar. And then, maybe, there'd be something else he'd think up to try as a last resort.

Next morning we sent mother the ninety-six dollars in the bank with four dollars besides. It left us with only enough money in the till to make change with.

Mark looked at it and scowled.

"Got to m-make it grow," says he, "and grow quick."

"All right," says I; "but how?"

"I'm goin' b-back to whittle," says he. "In an hour we'll start somethin' goin'."

CHAPTER XIII

In half an hour Mark came up to the front of the store and we stopped talking to listen to him.

"We n-never can raise five hundred dollars just by s-sellin' things over the counter—not in the time that's left to us before Jehoshaphat P. Skip's chattel mortgage is due. Even sales and schemes for makin' folks buy more won't be enough."

"That's as good as sayin' we're busted," says I.

"C-close to it," says Mark.

"Be you givin' up?" I says.

"No. And what's more I hain't goin' to give up till Jehoshaphat P. wishes he never heard of Wicksville. But just ordinary retailin' won't save our b-bacon. We've got to get in a lump of money somehow."

"Let's be gettin' at it then," says I.

"If this man Skip only had p-played fair," says Mark. "But he hasn't. Fellers, he's the right-down meanest man I ever heard of.... And that's the only excuse we g-got for makin' use of the scheme I've got ready. We got to use every way that's honest—even if it is sort of m-mean. Maybe it hain't right for me to feel that way, but the meaner the thing is the better I like to do it to him."

"Same here," says I.

"I was hopin' to save up this scheme," says he, "and maybe not use it at all. But we g-got to. So come on."

"Where?" says I.

"Lawyer Sturgis's," says he.

Mark and I went across the street and climbed up to Mr. Sturgis's office. He was one of those dignified men that always wear silk hats and long coats that flop around their knees, and he talked like he'd been exposed to grammar and rhetoric and had caught them both so bad he couldn't be cured. He made speeches at election-times and at any other times when there was any excuse. For

that matter, everything he said came close to being a speech. My, my, but he was a talker! He knew words that the man who made the dictionary hasn't heard of yet. But folks said he was a good lawyer and honest and dependable. They said other things about him, too—that he was *good*. In spite of the high-and-mighty way he carried himself, and the way he barked at folks, he was said to be the kind of man who goes out of his way to do folks a favor. Heaps of poor folks had got law from him without paying a cent. Everybody in Wicksville laughed at him a little—and liked him a heap. Wicksville folks could laugh at him if they wanted to, but you let a man from Sunfield come over and start to make fun of Lawyer Sturgis and there'd be a fight in a second. It makes a heap of difference who does the laughing.

Well, we knocked at his door and he yelled to come in so loud people could have heard it across the street. We went right in. He was sitting in front of his desk, with one hand shoved through the front of his vest and the other on his hip—just like pictures of the signing of the Declaration of Independence; and he was frowning like pictures of Daniel Webster.

"Ah-ha!" says he, "what have we here? To what, if I may be permitted to inquire, do I owe the honor of this call? Ha! Marcus Aurelius Fortunatus Tidd, is it not? Indeed! And young Smalley. Will you enter and be seated?"

We entered and were seated.

"Now," says Lawyer Sturgis, "let us to business, laying aside all our several and conflicting employments. You have, I judge, come to consult me professionally. Am I right?"

"You are r-right," says Mark. "It's about Jehoshaphat P. Skip."

"Ah, indeed! Jehoshaphat P. Skip! Extraordinary individual."

"It's about that lease, Mr. Sturgis, the one you h-helped me get the other day."

"To be sure. I recall the circumstance. And now, may I ask, what do you desire concerning this so-called lease?"

"I want to shoot it off," says Mark.

"What?" says Mr. Sturgis. "You want—what do you want to do to it? Shoot it off, did you say?"

"Yes, sir. Don't you remember sayin' it was a regular gun pointed at Jehoshaphat P. Skip's head? Well, sir, I want to sh-shoot it off."

"Hum! Figure of speech, eh? I did not follow you. I did not recall my own metaphor. Good. Your wit is nimble, my young friend."

"We've g-got to have some money—a chunk of it," says Mark. "We had quite a bit in the bank, but we had to send it to Plunk's father for an operation. I th-thought maybe we could use that lease to raise quite a bit—maybe more'n a hundred dollars."

"How? What method did you contemplate?" says Mr. Sturgis.

At this I broke into the talk. "What's this all about?" I asked. "I'm hearin' about leases and sich-like, but I don't know what leases nor nothin'."

"Remember the d-day I went into the country?" says Mark.

"Yes."

"I drove out to see Sheridan Mogford, who owns the store Skip is in. I f-found out Skip didn't have a lease. He just rents it by the month. If he had a lease we couldn't do anything. A lease is a kind of a written agreement that says how long a man can rent a p-piece of property at so much a month. If Skip had a lease for a year he could keep on s-stayin' in that store a year and we c-couldn't interfere with him. But he didn't have. He said he didn't want to get tied up to any lease till he found out how business was. So he just rents by the m-month."

"All right," says I, "but what of it?"

"Why, I w-went out to see Mr. Mogford and I talked to him and told him how Skip had acted to us—and I got him to make out a lease of Skip's store to Mr. Sturgis, here. Only, really, it was to us. Mr. Sturgis has his name there in our place like. He's our—what-d'you-call-it?"

"Attorney-in-fact," says Mr. Sturgis. "In simpler language—your agent."

"Hum!" says I. "Pretty mixed up for me."

Mark grunted. "Why," says he, "when we got that lease we were entitled to move into the store. But we'd have to give Skip a m-month's notice. We could force him out—and there isn't another store in Wicksville f-for him to go to. See?"

"Let's do it," says I. "That'll fix everything."

Mark shook his head. "That wouldn't f-fix anythin'," says he. "What'd happen? We'd have Skip out of b-business, but we'd still owe him f-five hundred dollars on that chattel mortgage. And we'd be stuck for the rent of two stores, because we'd have to pay rent where the Bazar is now and for Skip's store, too. Be worse off'n ever."

"Then what good is your old lease, anyhow?"

"I g-got it in the beginning because I knew it would come in handy. I d-didn't know just how I'd use it. But I know now."

"How?"

"I'm g-goin' to make Mr. Skip pay himself part of that five hundred dollars. Wish I could make him pay himself all of it."

"What method of procedure have you chosen?" asked Mr. Sturgis.

"I f-figgered it out you could get Skip over here and tell him about the lease and make him pungle over. You can sell the lease, can't you? Can't you sell it to him like it was a horse or cow or a p-piece of property?"

"A lease, my young friend, is a piece of property and is so recognized by law. We can follow your suggestion. How much do you consider your lease to be worth?"

"H-haven't any idee, but we want to git all we can. Hundred dollars at least."

"I am confident we can secure a greater sum than that. Possibly two hundred dollars."

"F-fine," says Mark, and his eyes glistened. "We won't let him know we have anything to do with it—not now. But won't he be hoppin' mad when he finds out he's gone and bought that chattel mortgage and then has had to p-pay it himself? Won't he, though? Oh, my!"

The scheme hadn't been very clear to me, but I saw it now. Mark could make Skip move out of his store, and Skip would lose a lot of money if he had to move, because there wasn't any place else for him to go in Wicksville. The only way he could stay and run his store was to buy that lease from Mark. Well, sir, I don't know how Mark thinks up schemes like that, but he does. This was such a bully scheme, because it couldn't help working. I made up my mind I'd ask him how he came to think of it, because a fellow his age hasn't business understanding about leases and law and such things.

"I g-guess you'd better send for Mr. Skip and break the news to him," says Mark, "and," says he, "I wish Plunk and I could be in the next room where we c-could hear it."

Mr. Sturgis almost smiled. I bet he would have smiled right out if he hadn't practised being dignified so many years his face wouldn't work the way it used to. But his eyes smiled and the corners of his mouth wiggled a little.

"To be sure," said he; "right in there. Leave the door ajar and you can hear perfectly. I can—I can readily appreciate your desire to witness the demeanor of Mr. Skip in the circumstances you have arranged for him. I'll send my boy over for him at once."

Mark and I went into the next room as soon as we saw Jehoshaphat P. Skip coming down the street, but we left the door open about an inch so we would be sure to hear. Mark got down on all-fours and put his ear to the crack. I stood over him. Mark was heaving and rolling all over him, he was so tickled. It was one of those laughs of his without any noise to it. I felt pretty tickled myself.

In a minute Skip came into Mr. Sturgis's office and said good afternoon and wanted to know why he was sent for.

"It is in reference to the store you occupy at present," said Mr. Sturgis. "You have no lease, as the facts come to me, but only rent from month to month."

"Exactly," says Skip. "What of it?"

"The store has been leased to another party," says Mr. Sturgis.

"Leased? How can they lease it? Hain't I occupyin' it? Say, what you talkin' about, anyhow?"

"Other parties approached Mr. Mogford, owner of the building; he has granted them a lease for a period of two years. The next proceeding on the part of my client will be to notify you to leave the premises in thirty days."

Well, sir, you should have seen Skip! His long neck looked like it stretched six inches to get his head closer to Mr. Sturgis, and his pinkish hair bristled, and his little squinty eyes snapped and glittered. Then he caught hold of his nose like he always does when he is excited and began bending it back and forth till I thought likely he'd crack it off.

"Who's gone and sneaked behind my back and got that lease? Hey? What slinkin', underhanded, sheep-stealin' pirate did me sich a mean trick? It's agin the law, I tell you. 'Tain't honest. I'll git me a lawyer and show you. That's what I'll do."

"As far as that point is concerned," says Mr. Sturgis, "my client is amply protected by the laws of this state. As for any action you may take with reference to keeping possession of this property, my client will be perfectly able to meet you and, if I may say so, to cause you to regret such a waste of time and money. The lease belongs to my client. If he wishes to force you out in thirty days, he will be able to do so."

"But where'll I go? What'll I do? I got money invested here. There hain't another store to move to."

"That, Mr. Skip, does not, so to speak, worry my client. Indeed, if I be not wrongly informed, my client would not object to causing you a trifle of annoyance."

"Who is your client? Who is he?"

"I am not at liberty to state."

"He's a skinflint, that's what he is. What kind of a way of doin' business is this, anyhow? 'Tain't fair. 'Tain't just. No business man would treat another like this."

"H'm! I'm not so sure, Mr. Skip. While we're on that subject I might say I've heard of dealings of your own that might have been more upright. I have been informed, Mr. Skip, that you have resorted to means which are, to say the least, reprehensible. I, sir, have been practising law in Wicksville for thirty-five years. I can assure you, sir, that, had I not considered my client justified in the course he follows in this matter, I should have declined to act for him. I do believe him justified. I believe, sir, that it will do you no harm, sir, to have, so to speak, a dose of your own medicine."

Skip got up out of his chair and paced up and down and waggled his nose and craned his neck. He just didn't know what to do. He was scared and excited and mad—my! my! but he was mad! He was caught, and he knew it. You could tell by his face he knew it, and you could see he was pretty wrought up with himself for not getting a lease in the beginning. The more he walked up and down and thought it over the more scared he got—scared of losing some money. Pretty soon he stopped before Mr. Sturgis and says:

"I can't move, Mr. Sturgis. I've *got* to stay in that store. Won't you see your client and find out if we can't make some sort of an arrangement? Say, won't you do that, Mr. Sturgis?" He was all worked up and his voice sounded like he was going to break down and cry.

I looked down at Mark. His face had an expression I never saw on it before—sort of *grim*. He didn't look like he was enjoying the misery Skip was in. That wasn't his expression at all. But he did look like he was doing something he knew he ought to do, and was getting satisfaction out of it. I suppose maybe a general looks like that when he catches one of his officers being a traitor and orders him to be executed. Yes, that's the sort of look it was.

"I have full authority to deal with you," says Mr. Sturgis. "Though my client may think you deserve to be ejected, he will not object if I take less severe measures. What, if anything, would you suggest?"

"Can't—can't I buy the lease? Won't he sell it to me?"

"Well, now, Mr. Skip, possibly something of that sort could be arranged. How much, for instance, would you be willing to pay for the lease?"

"Fifty dollars."

"A-hem! Fifty dollars. Ah, you consider the lease worth fifty dollars, do you? I, on my part, believe it is worth more than that to my client. I think I do not make a misstatement when I say my client would

rather keep his lease than sell it for that amount."

"Seventy-five."

"Mr. Skip, if it is going to mean a severe money loss to you to move, if there is no other store building in Wicksville, it seems to me your offer, considering the circumstances, is low—too low."

"What do you want, then? How much? If it's too high I may as well move. I'd rather lose my money moving than to give it to a man that rigged up a scheme to hold me up, anyhow."

That sort of scared me and I nudged Mark, but he shook his head for me to be quiet.

"Two hundred dollars is the price, Mr. Skip. That is final. You can take it or leave it. My time, I may say, is of value. You have used considerable of it. Two hundred dollars. Is it yes or no?"

Skip thought a moment, and wriggled like there was a burr inside his shirt, and groaned, but he came around.

"It's a skin game," says he, "and a hold-up, but I'll pay it."

"All right," says Mr. Sturgis. "Pay it, then."

That was the shortest and most businesslike speech I ever heard him make. He pulled the lease out of his pocket and waited. Skip, still muttering and mumbling and groaning, took out his check-book and wrote a check. Then Mr. Sturgis signed the lease over to him.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Skip," says Mr. Sturgis. "I hope you will ponder over this transaction. You will find material for thought in it, I am certain. In Wicksville we believe in competition, in fair competition. We believe in doing by others as we would like to have others do by us. An old saying, Mr. Skip. In this instance you have had done to you what you have done to others.... It is not, I believe I am safe in saying, particularly pleasant. Good afternoon, Mr. Skip."

Skip grabbed the lease and plunged out of the door and down the stairs. As soon as it was safe Mark and I came out. I was almost busted open with curiosity.

"Say, Mark," says I, "how in tunket did you think up that scheme? How'd you ever hear about leases and sich? And law?"

"I d-dun'no's I know much about 'em," says Mark. "When I went to see Mr. Mogford I wasn't more'n half sure what a lease was. It all come from readin' the papers. There was a big lawsuit in Detroit about leases, and I read accounts of it. It told consid'able. Then I asked around some. Perty soon I come to the conclusion there was somethin' to it.... And that's all."

"Um!" says Mr. Sturgis. "Um!... Young man, have you chosen a profession? Have you, if I may put it so, chosen the walk of life you will follow?"

"Why," says Mark, "don't b'lieve I have. I've got to g-go to college first."

"I advise you, my young friend, to consider the law. I do. Should you decide to enter this most dignified and pleasant profession and return to Wicksville to practise, I shall be glad, exceedingly glad, to have you in my office—with a view to partnership at an early date. You are young, my friend, but years soon pass. How old might you be?"

"Almost s-s-sixteen," says Mark.

"In six or seven years you will be ready.... Think it over."

"Thank you, sir," says Mark. "I'll think about it, but I guess, so far's I can see, I sort of l-like business. I calc'late to go into business, buyin' and sellin'. I hain't sure, yet, but that's how I've been figgerin'."

We talked a minute more with Mr. Sturgis, and then went back to the store. It was time, for it was Saturday and things were beginning to liven up.

CHAPTER XIV

When I told Tallow and Binney how we'd harpooned Mr. Skip for two hundred dollars they were so tickled they almost jumped out of their shoes. Tallow wanted to go over and stand in front of the Five-and-Ten-Cent Store to gibe at Jehoshaphat, but Mark wouldn't have it. He said Skip didn't know who was at the bottom of the scheme, and wasn't going to find out yet. Mark had his reasons, and, because he owned the scheme, so to speak, we did as he said.

Two hundred dollars! That made up for the hundred we had to send mother and gave us an extra hundred into the bargain—and about a million dollars' worth of satisfaction. It beats all how you can make money if you happen to know how. Mark Tidd didn't spend more than a couple of hours earning this—but I suppose he did two hundred dollars' worth of thinking, or he wouldn't have made a go of it. He says if you want to make money you've either got to do the money's worth of work or the money's worth of figuring. I expect he's right.

Business was pretty fair the rest of the day. We didn't close until half past ten, and we were good and tired, I can tell you. Our beauty contest was getting along fine. Nobody forgot to ask for votes when they bought a dime's worth, and the big talk of the day was about Old Miller and his thousand votes. I don't suppose there was anybody in that contest who didn't hope to pry those votes away from Old Mose, and everybody was looking for a hint about how to go at it. Mark Tidd was the chief hinter. He told every one the same thing.

"If I was you," says he to everybody that asked his advice, "I'd w-w-wait till sometime when Mose was likely to be alone. Sometime like Sunday afternoon. Then I'd go out to his place like I was j-just makin' him a call. 'Twouldn't do any harm to talk about cats. Just mention cats casual-like. It'll s'prise you how it'll strike him. Then you might edge along and m-mention that you got a kitten. Tell him you hate to spare that kitten, but, seein' who he is and what a high regard you got for him, you'll fetch it out for him. Don't mention votes yet. See if you can't git him to m-mention 'em himself. Yes, sir, if I was you I'd go out about half past two; he'll be through dinner then and feelin' perty good."

That's the answer Mark had for everybody. Cats! We found out a couple of months ago how Old

Mose hates cats—hates 'em and is afraid of 'em. He'd rather pet a rattlesnake than a cat.

That night as we were walking home Mark says:

"Guess we b-better meet about two o'clock and slide out to Old Mose's. Shouldn't be s'prised if there was somethin' there to see that 'u'd be worth watchin'."

We wouldn't be surprised, either, and you can bet we agreed to meet him.

Sunday morning everybody in Wicksville went to church and the young folks stayed to Sunday-school. I hurried through my dinner and was at Mark's house before he was through. *He* didn't hurry his dinner. Not much! Anybody that finds Mark Tidd slighting a meal wants to report it, for it'll be one of the wonders of the world. No, he wasn't through yet and Mrs. Tidd made me come in and eat a piece of apple-pie. Mark was just finishing up his second piece and was looking covetous-like at the third, but his mother put her foot down and wouldn't let him have it. So he finished off with an apple and a banana and a bit of rice-pudding left from yesterday and then said he guessed he'd put half a dozen cookies in his pocket to eat on the way.

By that time Tallow and Binney came along and we started out the river road to Old Mose's.

We began going cautious before we got in sight of the farm, because we didn't want Mose to see us and we didn't want anybody from Wicksville to know we had put up a joke on them—that would be bad for business. So we turned off the road and dodged closer, all the time keeping out of sight behind shocks of corn in the field that was next to Old Mose's farm-yard. We crept up behind a clump of lilac-bushes and then craned our necks to see where we could find a good place to hide and watch what went on.

Old Mose was out on his porch, playing his phonograph. He had one of those talking-records going—we could hear it plain as could be.

All at once we heard him yell:

"Shut up! Shut up! I tell you. Hain't you been jawin' enough? Say! Hain't you goin' to give a man no peace?"

Then he jumped up and shut off the machine. Of course the talking stopped. Old Mose grinned proud-like, just as if he'd done something worth while.

"Haw!" says he, "you will, eh? You will set there and jaw and jaw! I'll show you. Jest like all folks, hain't you? Want to keep wagglin' your tongue all the time. But I kin shut you up. Old Mose is the feller that kin turn you off."

He sat down and chuckled and talked to himself and paid his respects to the way folks like to talk for quite a spell. Then he got up and started off another talking-record. He let it run about two minutes and then up and began yelling at *it*.

"Whoa-up! You've talked enough, mister. Close your mouth and give a body a chance to think." And up he jumped to turn off the machine again. He acted just as tickled this time as he did before. I never saw anybody get so much pleasure out of anything.

"He d-didn't buy that phonograph to run," says Mark. "He bought it to sh-sh-shut off."

Yes, sir, that was it. The thing he wanted that machine for was to have something that talked that he could shut up whenever he wanted to. The satisfaction he got out of ordering wax records to keep quiet and then making them mind him was a caution.

About a dozen feet to our right was a shed with a roof that sloped back toward the fence. The front of it wasn't over eight feet from the porch. A clump of sumach grew toward the road and would hide anybody who was of a mind to lie on top of it, and a maple-tree grew right up behind. It was the bulliest kind of a hiding-place. We made for it one at a time, and in three minutes and a half we were all up there, lying in a row, overlooking Old Mose and his porch and his phonograph. We could see and hear everything that went on without a bit of danger of anybody seeing us.

"Most t-time the folks were comin'," says Mark in a whisper.

"Yes," says I. "Here comes a buggy up the road now."

Sure enough, there was a buggy, only there were two of them, and they were coming pell-mell for election. It was a race. We could hear the drivers yelling at their horses and leaning over the dashboards to larrup them with their whips. Side by side they came, rolling and pitching and looking for all the world as if they were going to bang into each other or turn bottom side up any minute. At first we couldn't see who was in them for the dust they kicked up, but pretty soon they came near enough so we could tell it was Chet Weevil and Chancy Miller.

They galloped their horses right up to Old Mose's front gate and then pulled them in so quick they almost busted the lines. Neither one waited to tie up, but just jumped over the wheel and made for the gate. It wasn't a very wide gate, and it opened outward. Chet got there just a tenth of a second ahead, but before he could get the gate open Chancy banged into him and began clawing at him and pushing to get past. Chet hung on to the gate and Chancy hung on to Chet. Old Mose got up and stood looking at them with his jaw dropped down and his eyes big as turnips. He was so surprised he couldn't even move.

Chet kept on hanging to the gate and fumbling for the catch. Chancy tugged and jerked and braced his feet—and all at once the gate swung open and down they went, with Chancy on the bottom. Chet's elbow went kerplump into his stomach, and Chancy let loose a yell that was mournfuler than a cow mooing when she's lost track of her calf. Chet jumped up quick to make a dash into the yard, but Chancy reached out and grabbed his foot, and down he went on his nose. Then it seemed like both of them forgot just why they came. For a while votes and Old Mose left their minds entirely, and they set themselves to the job of pulling each other to pieces.

By this time Old Mose was coming to a little, but hadn't got so he could talk much yet. But his mad was getting up. First he began to step up and down like the porch was too hot for his feet. Then he began waggling his head and working his jaw. Then he began sawing the air with his arms. All that exercise cleared out his throat so it could be used, and out came a yell. It wasn't a word and didn't mean anything; it was just a yell, but it was a mad yell. I've heard a lot of yells at one time and another, but I don't remember any one of them that beat this one of Mose's much.

He went hobbling down the path to the gate and slammed it shut. Outside in the sand Chet and

Chancy were wallowing and clawing around and pulling hair and kicking and trying to rub each other's faces in the dirt. Old Mose leaned over the gate and watched them. All of a sudden he chuckled. It wasn't a good-natured chuckle, by any means, but the sort of a chuckle a mean man gives when he sees something disagreeable happening to somebody he doesn't like. He leaned over farther and began yelling at Chet and Chancy.

"Give it to him. That's the way. Come squabblin' around my gate, will you! Git a holt on to his nose, there. Whee!... Shove his face in the dirt. Who! Consarn ye—both of ye! Hope ye git them dude clothes fixed for once. Grab him by the collar. Ya-aah! Whoop!"

He was going on at a great rate when another buggy stopped and out climbed Mrs. Bloom. She looked for a minute, and then swooped down on Chancy and Chet like a mad turkey hen and grabbed each of them by the handiest part she could get a hold of.

"Git right up," says she. "Hain't you ashamed of yourselves, fightin' like two roosters—and on Sunday afternoon! Where's the town marshal? Git right up out of a body's way. I want to git through that gate. Git up, I say, and let a body by."

"Want to git through this gate, do ye?" says Old Mose. "I got somethin' to say about that. What d'ye want to git through this gate for? I don't want ye. Hain't got no use for wimmin folks, anyhow, and special I hain't got no use for gabblin' wimmin folks. You jest git into that buggy of yourn and go away from here."

"Why, Mr. Miller!" says she, sweet as honey all of a sudden. "I didn't see you standin' there. How be you this afternoon?"

"Sick," says Old Mose, "and gittin' worse fast."

Before Mrs. Bloom could say anything back two more buggies came to a stop and out got Mrs. Peterson and two young women that were after votes for Professor Pilkins. By this time Chet and Chancy got untangled, and two such looking critters you never saw. Dirty! And their clothes were torn, and their collars were half off, and they were daubed and scratched and red and panting and pretty close to crying. All they could do was lean on the fence and glare at each other and try to get back their breath. The three last women started for the gate. Old Mose looked at them and began backing off. All of a sudden he started on a run for the house and slammed inside. In just a minute he came back with a pail of steaming water. He was getting ready to defend his fortification. He went down close to the gate and held the pail threatening-like, and says:

"Don't ye open that gate, not any of ye. The fust one to set foot on my land gits this b'ilin' water. Git, now! Git right out of here 'fore I send for the sheriff of this here county. Git!"

But nobody got. Instead of that more folks began arriving. As far as I could see down the road buggies were coming—more than a dozen of them. There were men and women and kids, and they all congregated in a knot outside of the gate. But nobody offered to go in—not with that pail of boiling water to face.

Mrs. Peterson spoke up.

"Why, Mr. Miller," says she, "what's the meanin' of this? Here I drive 'way out here of a Sunday afternoon just to fetch you this punkin-pie, and this is how I git treated." She glowered at the rest of the crowd. "What's these folks doin' here? They ought to be ashamed of themselves—pesterin' a poor old defenseless man."

"Poor old defenseless man, eh? Jest you stick a foot this side of my gate and you'll see how defenseless I be. Jest stick a *toe* inside!"

Everybody began to talk at once. They crowded up to the gate and sassed each other and tried to be polite to Old Mose at the same time. 'Most everybody had brought him a pie or a cake or something. The old man was so mad he just hopped up and down and raved at them.

Right there Mark Tidd made a noise like a cat. He could imitate a kitten so it sounded more natural than the kitten doing it himself. Old Mose straightened up and cocked his ear. Mark let him have it again.

"Scat!" he yelled, looking around scared-like. "Scat!"

Well, that reminded folks of the cat. Mrs. Bloom spoke up and says:

"Mr. Miller, I got the cunnin'est kitten to home. I set a heap of store by it, but knowin' how fond you be of cats I dun'no' but I'd be willin' to give it to you—"

She never got any farther because everybody in the crowd—and there were twenty if there was one—set up a yell about *their* kittens. A couple of folks actually had brought cats along and held them up in the air for Old Mose to see.

The old man just took one look and let his pail of water go swoosh right into the crowd. Pretty lucky it had time to cool, but it was just as wet as ever. You never saw such a mess! Chet and Chancy got first choice of it, but everybody got all he had any use for. Those two young fellows, though, looked like they had taken their Sunday baths with their clothes on. Nobody waited. Everybody decided he wanted to be somewhere else, and they scattered like a bunch of quail when you walk into the middle of them.

Old Mose began yelling after them. Then he charged through the gate in pursuit, and first off he grabbed Chancy.

"Hey, you," says he, giving him a shake that must have loosened his curly hair, "what's this about, anyhow? What's the reason everybody in Wicksville's pesterin' around my front door? Eh? What's the reason?" He gave Chancy another shake. "Out with it. What's fetched this gang of lunatics here? Tell me 'fore I shake the ears off'n you."

Chancy choked and coughed and got his voice.

"Votes," says he in a sort of husky whisper.

"Votes?" says Old Mose. "What votes?"

"Beauty contest," says everybody, crowding around. "You got them thousand votes and nobody to vote 'em for.... Handsomest man in Wicksville—"

"Huh!" says Old Mose. "And you lunatics come out here hopin' to pry them votes out of me, eh? Thought you'd fool Old Mose Miller with pies and cakes, eh? Votes.... I'll vote ye. If this here was the

homeliest-man contest, nobody'd git them votes, I can tell ye. Vote 'em myself, then. Take study, though. Homeliest man in Wicksville. There'd be a contest! Everybody could git into it. Hain't much to choose. Votes.... Jest stand there a minute, and don't a one of you dast step on to my premises."

He turned and went into the house. In a couple of jiffies he was back with his hands full of votes. The folks drew a long breath and crowded closer.

"Ye want votes, eh?" says he as he got to the fence. "Well, then, help yourselves."

At that he began chucking handfuls of them into the faces of the crowd, and chuckling. Handful after handful he threw—and everybody began a scramble. It was the worst mix-up that ever happened within a hundred miles of Wicksville. Everybody was in it—and in it to get votes. I never saw such a tangle of human beings. I bet there wasn't one of them could have sorted himself out and got his own arms and legs to save his life. And noise! It's lucky it was so far out in the country. Squealing and gouging and kicking and scratching. My! my! And all the time Old Mose leaned over the fence to sic them on and chuckle. The air was full of votes and arms and legs and noises!

That sort of thing can't keep up long, but it's fine to watch while it keeps on. In two or three minutes folks began to feel around to find if they were all there and to scramble out of the mess. It didn't take them long to get separated—and there they stood, everybody clutching a few votes in his hand and glaring at everybody else. Then all of a sudden it seemed like everybody got ashamed. A scurry for the buggies set in, and the whole crowd, still as anything and, I expect, wishing they hadn't come, started off for town. The only folks who were pleased all the way through were Old Mose Miller and us fellows on top of the shed.

Mark Tidd was laughing that still laugh of his till I was afraid he'd roll off the roof.

"B-b-beauty contest!" says he.

"Don't seem like folks would make such idiots of themselves over a contest that don't make any difference to anybody!" I says.

Mark chuckled again.

"'Tain't the reason for the c-c-contest that counts," he says, "it's that it *is* a contest. The whole idee of the thing is that nobody likes to have anybody else b-b-beat them at anything."

"That's so," says I. "Seems like I'd be sorrier to have Jehoshaphat P. Skip beat us than I would be to lose the Bazar."

"Um!" says Mark. "Neither of these things is l-l-likely to happen."

And then we sneaked back home.

CHAPTER XV

In spite of all we could do, business fell off. It was just as I had argued from the very beginning—there wasn't enough trade in Wicksville for two stores like ours and Jehoshaphat P. Skip's. Even if we got half or more than half, it wouldn't keep us running. Of course I know as well as anybody else that Mark Tidd's schemes had made folks buy more than they usually did, and for a couple of weeks we sold more than my father generally sold in that much time, but pretty soon everybody was stocked up with the sort of stuff we had and things were about as bad as ever.

The week after the rumpus at Old Mose Miller's things started out pretty fair, but along about Wednesday it got dull, and from then on there weren't enough customers to pay to keep the doors open. It seemed like we just couldn't draw them in, and I expect it was as bad at Skip's. In fact, I *know* it was, for we kept watch on him pretty close. If things kept on like they were going, neither one of the stores could last. Skip would put us out of business, but he would put himself out of business doing it. I said so to Mark and he told me to keep thinking about it if I got any particular satisfaction out of it, which I didn't.

Saturday came along, and though we advertised and trimmed our windows and fixed up special-bargain-tables, it didn't do a bit of good. And right there, that very morning, along comes Jehoshaphat P. with an announcement that with every dollar's purchase he would give a ticket to the moving-picture show that had started up in the opera-house.

Mark Tidd was so mad at himself he could have taken a bite out of his own ear if he could have got hold of it.

"Sh-should have thought of that myself," he says, and went sulking to the back of the store and wouldn't have anything to do with anybody for a couple of hours. There he sat, scowling and whittling—and we kept away from him as far as we could. I know just how bad he felt.

For once he didn't have a scheme. Yes, sir. Right there he seemed to go dry. We expected him to come up with a new idea that would stand Skip and his moving-picture show on their heads, but he didn't. He never said a word. I guess he'd been thinking up so many plans that he was about run dry. And I don't blame him. I'd have run dry long before.

But just the same it was the most discouraging thing that had happened to us yet. So long as Mark Tidd kept going there was hope, but if he began to slip we might just as well close the doors and give the Bazar to Jehoshaphat.

That day we did a little business, and for the next week we sold enough so there was something to send mother at the end of the week, but we didn't lay a cent aside. We paid expenses and a little over. If there had been clerks to pay we would have come out behind. Most of the time Mark sat back on a packing-box and whittled. We left him alone. He was as worried as we were, and we knew he was trying, trying every minute.

I guess the only thing that kept our heads above water was that beauty contest. Folks kept right on being interested in that and watched for results every time we put up names. Principal Pilkins, with a lot of young ladies working for him, was climbing up pretty fast. Mr. Peterson was coming strong, too.

His wife stirred up a lot of votes for him, and so did Mrs. Bloom for her husband. One week one of them would be ahead, and the next week the other would shoot into the lead. Then there were Chet and Chancy! I guess those two gave up everything else to run down votes. They begged them and borrowed them and worked for them and traded for them. Yes, that is a fact. Votes got to be a sort of money among the boys. You were always sure you could swap them for something. Most of the time there was a boy or so hanging around the front of the Bazar to ask everybody that came out for the votes they'd got. Some people weren't interested a bit, and would toss them over. So the boys managed to get a stock. Those five were in the lead a little. You never could tell which one would come out ahead until there was a count. But at least a dozen more men were up where they had a chance. So everybody was interested, and almost everybody was mad at somebody else. That's all that kept us going.

The next week Mark managed to think up a couple of things to interest folks. One was a guessing-contest. He filled a big bottle with beans and put it in the window. Everybody who bought a nickel's worth could have a guess at how many beans there were, and the one who came nearest was to get a prize. If it was a lady she got a pair of gloves, and if it was a man he got a patent safety razor that looked like a cross between the cow-catcher on an engine and a hoe.

Wicksville was quite a place to guess, so we got in a little trade with that. That week we did better than the week before. But after we had sent mother what she needed we only put by five dollars in the bank. We were still nearly three hundred dollars away from having enough to pay Jehoshaphat P. Skip his five hundred dollars and get free from the chattel mortgage.

"Mark," says I, that Saturday night as we were closing up, "how about it? Of course we've got to hang on as long as we can for the folks' sake, but we're beat, hain't we? Jehoshaphat has sunk our ship."

Mark was mad in a minute. "S-sunk nothin'!" says he. "We got a couple of weeks more, and who knows what'll turn up? I'm a-goin' to think of somethin'. I know I am. It'll come. So don't you go gittin' any more downhearted than you can help. Jehoshaphat P. Skip isn't goin' to b-b-bust this business while I got a leg to stand on."

"All right," says I, "but your leg's gettin' sawed off fast."

He didn't say anything to that. I guess there wasn't anything to say. After a while he says:

"There's ways of makin' m-m-money—of makin' a lot of it at once. That's what I've been figgerin' on. If we could just pay off Skip I believe this business will go along. I don't b-believe two businesses like his and ours can make a living in Wicksville. But I do b-believe we'll be the one that's left. He can't afford to keep on, and we can't afford to quit. And there you are."

"Then," I says, sarcastic-like, "all we got to do is raise three hundred dollars in six or eight days."

He squinted at me, but didn't say anything.

"We've been tryin' to raise that money for five weeks," I says. "Five weeks! And what have we got to show for it? Two hundred dollars! That's how much. Just git out your pencil and figger it up: if it takes four boys five weeks to raise two hundred dollars, what chance have they got to raise three hundred in one week?"

Then we went home.

Sunday, just before dinner—I was invited over to Mark's for dinner that day—Zadok Biggs came driving his peddler's wagon into the yard. We could hear him coming for a block, his tin dishes rattling and his whistle going. "Marching Through Georgia" was what he whistled, and you should hear the way he can rip it out. There are trills and runs and wiggles and bird-calls and all sorts of things. I expect he's the best whistler in Michigan.

He sat on the seat looking down as important as a brand-new poll-parrot and didn't say a word for a minute. Then he put his hand on his hip and stuck out his chest and says:

"Opportunity. Have you heard Zadok Biggs mention that word before? Eh? I believe I have mentioned it. I am sure I have pronounced it in your hearing. Have I not?"

"You have," says I.

"Zadok Biggs has been thinking of you—of all four of you boys engaged in the mercantile enterprise—business is the more usual expression—of running Smalley's Bazar. I have thought of you often. I have asked myself if I could be of assistance to you. I have looked about me to discover an opportunity to offer you." He drew himself up again and cocked his head as if he'd done something to be mighty proud of. "It was not in vain, says I. I looked—and I saw. I come to-day bringing you an opportunity. What have you to say to that? An opportunity. I bring it to-day."

"I say," says Mark Tidd, "that it comes at a l-l-lucky time."

"Get down and come in," says Mrs. Tidd. "Dinner's all ready and there's chicken and biscuits in gravy and pumpkin-pie and—"

Zadok didn't let her finish.

"Don't repeat the bill of fare, ma'am. It is not necessary. What there will be I do not care. That I am to dine with the parents of Marcus Aurelius Fortunatus Tidd is enough. Any food prepared by the hand of Mrs. Tidd is better than a banquet. I will come down. I am coming down. See—I am down."

It was a fact. He was down, and went trotting ahead of us into the house.

"The opportunity—" he started in; but Mrs. Tidd cut him off.

"You can fuss around with your opportunity after dinner," she says. "I don't want these vittles to get cold. Set right down and 'tend to eatin'."

So we sat down, and you can bet we did 'tend to eating. I expect Mrs. Tidd is one of the reasons why Mark is so fat. Anybody would be that ate the kind of things she cooks every day. Why, Mrs. Tidd can take a cold potato and the hoop off a barrel and a handful of marbles and make a meal out of them that beats anything you can get even at a city hotel!

After dinner we went into the parlor and Mr. Tidd got down his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and started to read to us, but Mrs. Tidd stopped *him*. Mrs. Tidd was boss around there. "Now, pa," says she, "you put that book right up. Mr. Biggs has something he wants to tell the boys."

"Um!" says Mr. Tidd, "that's so. I was clean forgetting all about it. I guess the *Decline and Fall* will

wait a spell. But I would like to read 'em jest this leetle piece here—" He started to open up the book again, but Mrs. Tidd took it right out of his hand and put it on the table.

"Go on, Mr. Biggs," says she. "I'll see you don't get interrupted."

"Thank you, ma'am. Thank you a thousand times. A wonderful woman, boys. A remarkable woman. Also a remarkable man. Did he not invent a turbine that has made him rich? Eh? He did. Zadok Biggs knows well that he did. Did he not name his son Marcus Aurelius Fortunatus? Eh? He did. That was an achievement, boys. Where is another name like that? Where—"

"You're interruptin' yourself," says Mrs. Tidd.

"Um," says Zadok, making a little face. "Well, ma'am, I'm on the right track now.... I have an opportunity—an opportunity for anybody in the bazar business. Especially anybody who has to compete with a five-and-ten-cent store. The opportunity is in Sunfield. Where, you may ask, is Sunfield? It is a village not thirty miles from here." We knew that as well as he did. "It is a little village, a pretty village. It is a village you will always think of kindly when I tell you of the opportunity that is to be found there."

"Well, then," says Mrs. Tidd, "why don't you tell about it?"

Zadok swallowed hard, but he grinned and went on.

"There's a man in Sunfield who started up a five-and-ten-cent store. Pretty store. Good stock. Nice man. Then what did he do? Why, friends, he got sick. His doctor says he must go West. He is going West. What, then, becomes of the store? It is to be sold. The owner is even now looking for a purchaser—for somebody to buy it is the more common phrase." He stopped and beamed around at us. "There," says he, "is the opportunity."

Right along I'd been hoping. I thought maybe Zadok had hit on something that would help us out, but when I heard what it was my heart plopped right down into my boots. What good was the stock of a five-and-ten-cent store to us? We couldn't buy a postage-stamp to send a letter to Sunfield, let alone a stock of goods. I looked at Mark. He didn't look like he was disappointed. He didn't look happy, either, but he did look thoughtful. Right off I saw he thought he could see something in it.

"How m-much does he want for it?" Mark says.

"It can be purchased cheaply. The owner must have cash. He will sacrifice. That stock must be worth close to a couple of thousand dollars. I believe, and my belief is not without foundation, that you can buy it for half of that."

"Hum!" says Mark. "Hum!... Complete stock?"

"As fine a stock as you'd wish to see."

"We'll go over to s-see it to-morrow, Plunk," says Mark.

I shrugged my shoulders. "What's the use?" says I. "We can't buy it, and if we could, what would we do with it?"

"I dun'no'," says he. "Maybe we could figger on s-some way of buyin' it. I've seen sicker horses 'n that g-git well."

"But not on the kind of medicine we got to give 'em," says I.

"Anyhow," says Mark, "we'll go over t-to-morrow. You don't need to, though, Plunk, if you don't think it's worth while. But I'm goin'. I'm goin' to see that stock. I'm goin' to have a look at Zadok Biggs's opportunity."

"I knew it," said Zadok. "I knew Marcus Aurelius would not disappoint me. I knew he would see the possibilities of this opportunity. I do not blame you, Plunk Smalley, for failing to see them. It was not to be expected. There is only one Marcus Tidd. Only one."

"Yes," says I, "and that one has bit off a leetle more'n he can chaw comfortable this time."

Mark didn't even look at me. He was pinching his cheek and squinting up his eyes like he does when his mind is about as busy as it can be. Pretty soon he looked up at Zadok.

"Say," says he, "can you tell me, Zadok, what an option is, and how it works?"

Well, sir, Zadok jumped right up and danced. "I knew it," says he. "I knew Marcus Tidd would see the opportunity. I knew he would never miss it. What is an option? That's what he asks. You heard him. Now listen and Zadok Biggs will explain. He will make an option so clear to you that—that even Plunk Smalley will be able to make one with his eyes shut."

"Well," says Mrs. Tidd, "what *is* an option?"

"The man who wrote the dictionary," Zadok explained, "says an option is a right to make a deal or not to make it before a certain time. Not very clear, is it? I will enlighten you—make it plain to you is the customary way of saying it. Suppose I want to buy a cow from Mr. Tidd. I want that cow, and I don't want anybody else to get it before I do. But, alas! I haven't enough money to pay what Mr. Tidd asks. What do I do? I take an option. I go to Mr. Tidd and say, 'Mr. Tidd, I will give you a dollar if you will agree not to sell that cow to anybody else before next Tuesday, and if you will agree to sell it to me any time before Tuesday for forty-one dollars.'"

"That's too much for a cow," says Mrs. Tidd.

"This is an imaginary cow," says Zadok. Then he grinned all over. "That kind is more expensive, ma'am, because they don't eat up any fodder.... Well, that's an option. It's where somebody else agrees to sell you something on or before a certain day, and not to sell it to anybody else in the mean time. Understand?" He said that to me, because, I expect, he thought if I understood it it must be clear to everybody else.

"But," says I, "suppose you pay a dollar for the right to buy Mr. Tidd's cow on Tuesday, and then when Tuesday comes you haven't any money?"

"Why, then, Plunk, Mr. Tidd can sell his cow to anybody else he wants to."

"But don't it cost me anything?"

"Nothing but the dollar you paid him to wait till Tuesday for you."

"Huh," says I, "I understand options, all right, but for the life of me I can't see what good they're going to do us."

I looked over at Mark Tidd, expecting him to explain, but I guess he was a little provoked at me because I didn't think much of the whole scheme, whatever it was, and so he shut his mouth tight like

the lid of a trunk and wouldn't say a word.

"We'd better get an early start," says he, "and t-take no chances."

"Yes, indeed," says Zadok.

"Are you going to c-come, Plunk?" Mark asked.

"Sure," says I, "if I can be of any help."

"Well," says he, grinning a more cheerful grin than I'd seen on his face for weeks, "you can't do any harm, anyhow."

CHAPTER XVI

On my way home from Mark Tidd's house—where I left Mark and Zadok Biggs eating away at a big dishpanful of popcorn and about a peck of apples—I walked down-town and past the store just to see that everything was all right. It was, so I passed on by and crossed over to take a look at the Five-and-Ten-Cent Store. Just as I got to the door out came that clerk of Jehoshaphat P. Skip's. You should have seen him! Dressed up? Well, I should say he was! And there was *perfumery* on him. Now, honest, what do you think of a full-grown man that'll douse himself with smelly stuff? He looked like he'd just stepped out of a picture in a magazine advertising some sort of a collar or patent necktie or something.

"How'dy do?" says he. "How's the contest comin' along?"

"Good," says I. "It's anybody's race yet."

"D'you figger I got any chance?"

"Well," says I, looking him over careful, "if everybody in Wicksville was to get a look at you now I don't see how anybody else would have a chance."

"Most everybody's seen me," says he, smirking like a sick puppy. "I went to the Methodist church this mornin', and to the young folks' meetin' at the Congregational church this afternoon, and I'm goin' to the Baptis' church right now. I calc'lated I'd stir around consid'able so folks'd have a chance to judge me, so to speak."

"They'll see you, all right," says I, "unless they've all got cataracts in their eyes. The way you look right now, mister, it 'u'd be pretty hard to miss you."

"Think so?" says he, grinning again as pleased as could be.

"How's Jehoshaphat?" says I.

"Kind of crusty," says he. "He's always a-pickin' at me. I'm always glad when he goes off somewheres for a day. Then I git a minnit or so to myself. He's a-goin' off to-morrow," says he.

"Where?" says I, not out of curiosity, but just to say something.

"Sunfield," says he. "It's a leetle town nigh to twenty-five miles over."

"What ever's he goin' to Sunfield for?" says I, beginning to get interested.

"I don't really know exact, but from things he's said I guess he's calc'latin' on startin' up another five-and-ten-cent store there. There's a feller that wants to sell out, as near as I kin git the facts, and Mr. Skip is hankerin' to buy."

Well, sir, what do you think of that? It looked like we were bound to run up against this Skip man wherever we went and whatever we did. Now he was trying to buy the same stock of goods Mark Tidd had his heart set on buying.

I couldn't see what Mark wanted of that stock, for we had all we could look after, and, anyhow, we didn't have any thousand dollars to spend for it. It looked like a crazy notion to me, but just the minute I heard Skip was after it I felt different about it. I wanted to get there first. I was going to help Mark Tidd all I could. It didn't matter what we did with that store when we got it, I was for getting it so Skip couldn't. Maybe that was a mean way to feel—but Skip was the kind of man that makes you feel mean.

I got rid of Mr. Perfume-smelling Clerk as soon as I could and hurried up to Mark Tidd's. He and Zadok were still at the popcorn. I calculate that between them they'd eaten more of it than any two folks ever ate before in one afternoon. I didn't wait to knock, but went busting right in.

"Skip's after it," says I.

"After what?" says Mark.

"The Sunfield five-and-ten-cent store," says I.

"Oh!" says Mark, and he grinned at Zadok. "D-don't get excited, Plunk."

"Excited," says I. "We got to beat him, hain't we?"

"Yes," says Zadok, "you must beat him. You must arrive first on the scene."

"You act like you knew Skip was goin'," says I. I felt a little sore because they didn't seem to think my news was important.

"We didn't know," says Mark, "b-but we hoped."

"Hoped?" says I.

"Yes," says Mark. "We was hankerin' to have J-jehoshaphat start for Sunfield."

"But how come he to hear of it?"

Zadok stuck out his chest and looked important. "Zadok Biggs," says he. "It was Zadok Biggs that did it. Zadok Biggs told the man Skip about it."

You could have knocked me over with a feather. What in the world had Zadok told Skip for? I could see it was some sort of scheme Mark Tidd and he had cooked up, but it looked funny to me. They didn't offer to explain, though, so I says:

"Do we git an early start?"

"Yes," says Mark. "Five o'clock."

"But we weren't going to start till six."

"Didn't know for sure Jehoshaphat was goin' then," says he.

"Then my finding it out did amount to somethin'?" says I.

"You bet it did, Plunk," says he, and he got up and banged me on the back. "You can just b-b-bet it did."

Well, I felt some better after that, and went off, leaving Mark and Zadok to talk about their old plan that they were so close-mouthed about. I shouldn't have been put out, though, for I found out afterward that Mark hadn't told me because it would be such a big disappointment to me if it didn't come out right. I might have known there was a good reason. Mark Tidd was the sort of fellow who always thinks about other folks' feelings.

There wasn't any train that would take us from Wicksville to Sunfield, so there was nothing to do but drive. Mark brought along his father's horse and buggy. Since Mr. Tidd got rich he kept a horse. He could have afforded half a dozen automobiles if he'd wanted to, but he didn't have them. It wasn't because he was stingy, for he didn't care anything in particular about money. It was just because he was such a simple-minded, dreamy sort of man. And Mrs. Tidd was that sensible there wasn't anybody like her. They lived in the same house and lived in the same way they had lived when they were poor. It seemed like all their money hadn't made a cent's worth of difference in them.

Well, Mark drove up to my house just before five o'clock, and we started out. Binney and Tallow were around to see us off, and Mark told them to keep watch and telephone to the hotel in Wilkinstown as soon as Skip started and leave a message for us. Wilkinstown was nine miles over toward Sunfield. Then we started off.

You'd never believe it, but just as we were getting into Wilkinstown the horse went lame. We got out and looked him over, but we didn't know enough about horses to tell what the matter was, so we drove on slow and cautious to the livery barn.

The man there took a look at the horse and mentioned some kind of a thing that gets the matter with a horse's foot and said the horse mustn't be driven again for at least a week. Not for a week! That was a pretty kettle of fish.

"H'm!" says I to Mark. "Looks like we walk back."

"Back!" says Mark. "If we do any walkin' it'll be ahead."

"Sixteen miles to Sunfield," says I.

Mark turned around to the liveryman. "Got a good horse to rent us?"

"Nary horse," says the man. "Every rig I got's engaged. Travelin' men rented 'em last night."

"Anybody else r-rent horses here?"

"Nobody," says the man.

"We g-got to git to Sunfield," says Mark. "How'll we manage it?"

"Walk," says the man.

"Hain't there an automobile?" says I.

"Nary a soul in this burg owns one of them things," says he.

"Nine miles to Wicksville—sixteen miles to Sunfield," says I to myself.

"Come on up to the hotel," says Mark. "Let's see if the f-fellers have telephoned."

They had telephoned. The hotel man gave us the message.

"Skip left at seven-thirty in an auto," it says.

There you are! Skip had left in a machine—that could get to Sunfield three times as fast as a horse. We were in Wilkinstown without even a horse.

"I calc'late," says I, "that here's where Jehoshaphat gits to buy a five-and-ten-cent store."

Mark's little eyes were sparkling and his lips were pressed tight and his jaw was set.

"We're a-goin' to git to Sunfield," says he, "and we're a-goin' to git there f-f-first." My, how he stuttered it!

"Sure," says I. "I forgot all about my new airplane. You kin just as well use it as not."

He didn't say anything back, but in a minute he asked me, "Know anything about automobiles, Plunk?"

"They're contraptions," says I, "with four wheels—one at each corner—and they've got an engine in 'em, and a thing to steer 'em by. Sure I know about 'em."

He started talkin' to himself.

"It's fair," says he. "It's fair to d-do it. He's done things to us—and we *got* to win out. It won't do any d-damage. It won't h-hurt anybody.... It's f-fair, and I'm goin' to do it."

I could see he was arguing out something or other. Some scheme he had was a little doubtful to him. Now there's one thing about Mark Tidd, no matter how much he wants to win, or what it would mean for him to lose, he plays fair. He wouldn't use a scheme that wasn't honest and aboveboard, no matter how certain it was to win. That's the kind of a fellow he was.

"Plunk," says he, "we've got to stop that auto."

"All right," says I, "let's tie a rope across the road."

He knew I was joking and grinned a little.

"No," says he, "we got to stop it so Jehoshaphat won't know he's been stopped on purpose."

But before we had a chance to do anything we heard an auto coming up the road. I got up and looked. It was Skip and a fellow I didn't know in a little runabout.

"It's him," says I to Mark.

Mark didn't say anything, but his little eyes were sending off sparks and his face looked sort of set. It looked as though we'd never get a chance at the Sunfield store.

In another minute she went whizzing by. I looked at Mark and he looked at me. Somehow it didn't seem possible he'd gone right by and left us there. But then came a surprise. The car went right along to the hotel, and then it stopped. Skip went inside for something, and Mark and I sneaked down and hid behind a shed. We heard Skip telephoning inside.

He came out in about five minutes. Just as he was getting into the car he looked down and scowled and said something under his breath.

"You've got a flat tire, Clancy," says he, and then he up and expressed his opinion of flat tires in words and syllables and sentences. I gathered he didn't think much of them.

Clancy got out and looked.

"Flat tire," says he. "Three flat tires, mister. It's a regular epidemic," says he.

"Well," says Skip, "you might as well git at fixin' 'em. We can't spend all day on the road."

At that he turned around and went into the hotel again, and didn't come out till Clancy had the tires all fixed up and ready to go. But Clancy didn't hurry any. First he took off his coat and then he wiped his face, for the dust had been flying, and then he lifted the hood of the car and peked inside. There wasn't any reason for it in particular, I guess, but automobile men seem to like to look at their engines whenever they get a chance.

"I wonder," says he to himself, "if I can git some oil in this metropolis."

He started out to find if he could, and left the car standing.

"There's your chance," stuttered Mark.

"Good-by," says I, waving my hand. "Tell the folks I went agin the enemy as brave as a lion."

Then I went for the car. It was no trick at all to reach inside for a wire that would put the ignition out of business. I unscrewed it at both ends. Unscrewing one end would have stopped the machine, but there would have been a wire dangling, and any idiot would know that was what the matter was. But I took the wire clean out. It would take a pretty good repair-man to trace the trouble, especially when there wasn't any way for a wire to get out of the car, and when the car had been running along as nicely as possible.

I stuck the wire in my pocket and slid back where Mark was.

"I guess," says I, "that Mr. Skip'll stay put for a while, anyhow."

"C-come on, then," says he. "We'll light out for Sunfield."

"Sixteen miles," says I.

"We'll git to ride part of it, anyhow," says he.

"But," says I, "I want to stay and watch Jehoshaphat when that car won't start. I want to see that man Clancy crank. It'll be a reg'lar three-ring circus with a menagerie tent and a side-show."

He sort of hesitated a minute, for Mark enjoyed a joke as well as anybody else, but he shook his head and says:

"Nope, Plunk, we got to hoof it for Sunfield. We've g-got to git there first. We've *got* to, Plunk."

"All right," says I. "I don't see any sense in it, but here we go."

We started off through the fields, keeping out of the road so nobody would see us. There wasn't much to the village but the general store and the hotel and a couple of houses, so we were in the country again in a couple of minutes. We crossed a stubbled field and then started to cut through an orchard to the road. My! but that was a fine orchard! The trees were trimmed and the ground was not all grown up to grass the way most orchards are, but it was plowed and cultivated the way the government expert who lectured in Wicksville said it ought to be. And apples! You never saw such Spies as loaded half of the trees!

"Um-m-m!" says I.

"Leave 'em be," says Mark. "Most farmers d-don't mind if you take an apple to eat, but a lot of 'em are crusty as anything."

So I took it out in looking, and looking at a big red apple doesn't help the appetite much.

We were about half-way across the orchard when I felt as if a house had fallen on my shoulder. Something dropped and jerked me back off my feet. I just caught a glimpse of Mark out of the corner of my eye—and he was getting considerable of a jerk, too. Then a great big booming voice says:

"I got ye, consarn ye! Come a-sneakin' through a man's orchard, will ye? I'll show ye. Stealin' a man's apples, eh? Oh, he! Maybe yes and maybe no. Didn't calc'late Hamilcar Janes was a-layin' for you behind a tree, eh? Oh, he!" He didn't sound mad exactly, just sort of tickled with himself for being smart enough to catch us.

"Boys have been a-stealin' and a-stealin' my apples. Thought I wasn't goin' to do nothin', too. Didn't think Hamilcar Janes had git-up-and-git enough to catch 'em. Hasn't, eh? Oh, he! Just look at what Hamilcar Janes has up and done. He's caught two—a fat one and a lean one—and into the smoke-house they go. Oh, he!" He might have made a song of it if he'd been of a mind to.

We tried to talk to him, but he wouldn't listen to a word. He just grinned and bragged about how he'd caught us, and marched us along by the collars. I tried to squirm loose, but I might as well have tried to jump over the moon like the old cow in the poem. That Hamilcar Janes came close to being the biggest man I ever saw. And his hands! Those hands of his were as big as blankets.

"Into the smoke-house you go," says he. "I'll show ye. Won't I show ye? Well, I should guess!"

And he did that very thing. He dragged us along and kicked open the door to his smoke-house and pushed us in. Then he shut the door and we could hear him barring it.

"There," says he. "Try that a spell. Apples, eh? Oh, he!" Then we heard him walking off.

I didn't feel much like talking, and neither did Mark, but I couldn't help saying:

"Jehoshaphat'll have to be delayed consid'able if he don't git to Sunfield ahead of us."

Mark nodded doleful-like. "Seems like luck was d-dead against us," says he. "But," he says, "Skip hain't got there yet—and it's early in the mornin'."

CHAPTER XVII

We started right in to nose around, but that smoke-house was pretty nearly air-tight. Dark! Mister, but it was dark! And it was full of cobwebs and smell and dirt. There was just as much chance of getting out of there till Mr. Hamilcar Janes let us out as there would be of sawing a bar of steel with a chunk of cheese. There wasn't a thing to do but sit down and be as patient as we could—which wasn't very patient, when you come to consider all the circumstances. One thing that made me mad was that I

hadn't eaten some of Hamilcar's apples. We couldn't have been shut up a bit more if we'd eaten a bushel.

Time passes pretty slow when you're sitting in the dark. I don't know how long it was before we heard a sound outside, but it seemed like it must be the next week Tuesday. Then we heard somebody holler from the road:

"Hey, there, are you Mr. Janes?"

"That's me," roared back the man who had captured us. "Hamilcar Janes."

"Down to the hotel," says the voice, "they told me you had a horse you might rent for the day."

I nudged Mark and he nudged me all at once.

"Skip!" we both said.

That's who it was—Jehoshaphat P. Had got tired of trying to start up that automobile, and here he was trying to hire a horse. Luck was against us hard.

In a minute Hamilcar Janes spoke up and says:

"I've got a hoss, mister, and I calc'late I've rented her some. But that there hoss, mister, is a sort of friend of mine. Pertty good friend, too. I hain't rentin' her to every Tom, Dick, and Harry that comes along with feet that's too lazy to carry 'em. Kin you drive a hoss, mister, like a hoss ought to be drove?"

"I'll treat your animal all right," says Skip.

"Where'd you want to drive her?"

"Sunfield," says Skip.

"Sixteen mile, nearly," says Hamilcar. "Um! Ho, hum! Give her a good rest there, mister? See she gits water and feed? Eh?"

"Of course," says Skip.

"Come over here closer," says Hamilcar. "I want to git a better look at you. Hain't goin' to trust that hoss to nobody I don't like the looks of."

There was a little while when nobody said anything and I judged Skip was coming closer. Then Hamilcar says:

"You hain't much for looks, mister, and that's a fact. I dun'no's I'd care to send my hoss off under your care."

"How does that ten-dollar bill look?" says Skip.

"Good-lookin' bill," says Hamilcar. "Dun'no's I ever seen a nicer-lookin' bill—but that hain't got nothin' to do with it. If I didn't calc'late my hoss'd git used well you couldn't hire her, mister, not if you was a-goin' to paper my house with ten-dollar bills. No, sir. It's like I said. That hoss and me is friends."

"Plunk," says Mark to me, "I hain't very scared of Mr. Janes."

"No?" says I. "Why?"

"Hear what he s-says about his horse?"

"Yes," says I.

"Well," says he, "that kind of a man hain't very dangerous to boys.... He's all right, Mr. Janes is, whether he's l-locked us up or not."

"I hope so," says I, "but if he keeps us here and then rents his horse to Skip he might as well be the meanest slinkin' scalawag in the state. It'll do us as much harm."

"I dun'no'," says Mark, and then shut up tight to listen.

Hamilcar was talking again.

"Come to look you over, mister, I dun'no's you look *bad*. 'Tain't that, I calc'late. But, mister, you're so mortal homely it raises doubts in a feller's mind. Maybe, mister, you're as good as George Washington, but you don't look it."

"I can't help what I look like," says Skip, as mad as a weasel. "What's that got to do with it?"

"Easy, mister, easy," says Hamilcar. "You're wantin' to rent a hoss—not me urg'in' you to take her. You won't git no place by r'ilin' yourself all up. Calm down, mister, calm down."

Skip said something I couldn't hear.

"Well, mister," says Hamilcar, "I'll take you back and show you to the hoss. If she don't make no objection, I guess maybe you can take her. But if she don't like you, mister, you couldn't have her if you was to offer me seven dollars a mile and a new buggy throwed in. Come on."

They started to come back our way. I could hear them coming closer and closer. Right in front of our door they stopped, and Hamilcar says:

"What d'you calc'late I got in here, mister?"

"Hams," says Jehoshaphat, sharp-like.

"No," says Hamilcar. "Boys."

"Boys!"

"Two of 'em. Fat one and thin one. Caught 'em stealin' apples. Grabbed 'em by the collars. Shoved 'em in the smoke-house. Good idee. Teach 'em a lesson. Scare 'em some. Bet they'll keep out of my orchard after this."

"Should have given 'em a lickin'," says Skip.

"Uh-uh, mister. Never licked a hoss nor a boy. 'Tain't good trainin'. Mister, I calc'late you hain't got no boy."

"No," says Skip, "and I hain't hankerin' after one."

"There, you see! Well, mister, I hain't got no boy, either, nor no wife, nor no folks of any kind. But I'd like a boy. Yes, sir, I'd like *two* of 'em. But I wouldn't lick 'em, mister. There's other ways and better ways.... Want to take a look at these fellers?"

Well, you can believe Mark and I pretty near jumped out of our skins. What if Hamilcar showed us to Skip and Skip knew us, which he would, and put two and two together? He'd smell a rat right off—and then the fat would splash over into the fire. We held our breath and waited.

"No," says Skip, "I hain't any desire to see 'em."

"They're bad ones," says Hamilcar, but his voice didn't sound like he thought we were so very bad.

"You never see a pair of worse ones."

"Haven't time," says Skip. "Let's fix up about the horse, because I'm in a hurry to get to Sunfield. I've got a big business deal on there."

Then they passed on by and we couldn't hear them any more, but in about ten minutes we heard carriage-wheels, and so we judged the horse hadn't shown any signs of disliking Skip. He'd got his carriage and was off for Sunfield while we were here, shut up in a smoke-house, with nothing but our legs even if we could get out.

But right away Hamilcar Janes came to the door and says, ferocious-like:

"Hello in there!"

"Mr. Janes," says Mark, "we want to t-talk to you."

"I'll bet you do," says he, and I could hear him chuckle. He came closer and unbarred the door and opened it.

"Come out," says he, in a voice that would have frightened the stripes off a tiger.

We came out as quick as we could, and it was fine to have decent air to breathe again.

"There you be," says Hamilcar. "A perty pair, eh? Hain't you, now? Apple-stealers!"

"We're not apple-stealers," says Mark. "We didn't go into your orchard to steal a-a-apples. We were just walking through."

"To be sure," says Hamilcar. "Just strollin' among the trees. Of course you were."

"We were tryin' to keep out of sight of that f-feller you just rented your horse to."

Hamilcar wrinkled up his forehead and frowned.

"Chasin' you, was he?"

"No. He didn't know we were here, and we d-didn't want him to."

Hamilcar scratched his head. "I dun'no's I ever had any boy tell me just that story. Them I've caught before has told me lots of things. Some walked in their sleep, and some didn't know they were in an orchard at all, and others was stealin' for a sick grandmother, but I don't call to mind any story just like yours."

"If you'll l-listen, Mr. Janes, I'll tell you about it," says Mark.

"Go ahead, young feller. I hain't got much to do just now. I calc'late it'll be int'restin'."

"It will," says Mark, and he started in from the beginning and told Mr. Janes all about the Bazar, and about father being hurt, and about Skip and the things he'd done to us, and how we'd fought back. He told him we were going to Sunfield now to get the best of Skip. There wasn't anything he left out. When he was through Hamilcar hit his big hands together and says:

"So you're Mark Tidd, eh? Ho, hum! Know Ike Bond?"

"Uncle Ike Bond?" says I. "Well, I should say we do know him."

"Him and my father was in the war together," says Hamilcar. "Comes to see me. Told me about you. Mark Tidd, eh? Ho, hum! And that scalawag has been tryin' to bust you up in business, eh? I sort of suspected him, he was so blamed homely. But the hoss she never let on, so I harnessed her and let him drive off.... Wish I'd 'a' knowed about this before."

"So do I," says Mark. "Now it's too late. Skip'll b-b-beat us to Sunfield and make the deal and—But what's the use? We're beat."

"Beat!" says Hamilcar. "You bet you hain't beat. Not by a long shot. One hoss hain't all Hamilcar Janes owns. He owns a faster hoss than that one, too. Just you wait a jiffy, Mark Tidd, and we'll be after this Skip. We'll make him skip, that's what we'll do. I'll hitch up and we'll take after him, and if he gits to Sunfield first you can take a bite out of my leg. There!"

We hurried back to the barn with him, and he hitched up a team—as fine-looking a team it was—to a two-seated rig. Then he got in the front seat and motioned us up behind.

"I'm a-goin' to drive myself. We'll pass that Skip in fifteen minutes."

"We mustn't pass him," says Mark. "He m-m-mustn't see us. We've got to get there first without his knowing we're anywhere around."

"All right," says Hamilcar; "we'll take the woods road. We can go right around him, and him never be the wiser. Giddap, there! Giddap! Earn your feed now, hosses. Dig in, for there's a man tryin' to git the best of two boys. We can't have that. No, siree, Bob. Not any."

"We won't get there much ahead of him," says I.

"Maybe ten minutes," says Hamilcar. "Maybe fifteen."

"Do you know Mr. Hoffer—the m-man that wants to sell his store?" Mark asked.

"Know him? To be sure. It's Sunfield we're a-goin' to, Mark Tidd, and if there's a man, woman, child, or critter in that town that don't know Hamilcar Janes, then I hope apples sells for fifty cents a barrel."

"We've got to get him away from his store," says Mark. "There ain't time to d-dicker with him there. Skip'd come bangin' right into the middle of it. And if he was to see Plunk and me the whole plate of soup 'u'd be spilled."

"Um!" says Hamilcar. "Calc'late we kin manage it. Leave it to Hamilcar Janes. He's your man." Then he started talking to himself. "Try to bust up a couple of boys, would he? Skip! I'll make him skip. If he's mistreated that hoss of mine he'll skip and he'll jump—and, b'jing! he'll holler, too."

It was a fine drive to Sunfield. The air was just a bit chilly, but it was a bright day and the woods were getting all colored up. It made me want to go nutting. I said so to Mark.

"If th-this deal goes through," says he, "you and I will go n-nutting Wednesday. We'll deserve a day off."

We drove along at a good clip and got to Sunfield before noon. Hamilcar Janes drove us right to Mr. Hoffer's five-and-ten-cent store and drew up his horses. I looked around where he said the other road came into town, and there, a quarter of a mile off, was a buggy coming along. There was one man in it, but it was too far off for me to see if it was Skip. Hamilcar took a look and banged his knee with his big fist.

"It's him," says he. "At any rate, it's my hoss. We'd better git a hustle on."

We jumped out of the carriage and went pell-mell into the store. There was a young woman and a

middle-aged man there. He was Mr. Hoffer, and he was German, and he looked pretty tired and sick.

"Hoffer," says Hamilcar, "you're a-goin' for a drive."

"*Nein*," says Hoffer. "Here must I stop. Business is business."

"You need a rest, Hoffer. You're a-lookin' peeked. And you're a-goin' for a drive. Hamilcar Janes says you're a-goin', and he can't afford to tell a lie. Git your hat, Hoffer."

Mr. Hoffer smiled, feeble-like, but shook his head.

"Where's his hat?" says Hamilcar to the young woman.

She pointed to it, and Hamilcar took it and tossed it to Mark. Then he walked right over to Hoffer and picked him up in his arms and carried him out of the store and set him in the back seat of the carriage.

"There," says he. "Now set there and enjoy yourself."

For a minute Mr. Hoffer looked a little upset and flustered and didn't appear to know what to make of it. But then he smiled, and it was a gentle, grateful kind of a smile that made me feel choky in the throat.

"Hamilcar," says he, "you are one goot friend to me. How I haff longed for to ride by the woods! *Ach*, but it wass impossible. Always must I sit in mein store and hope somebody comes to buy.... But you steal me, Hamilcar, und it iss that I cannot help myself, so I am glad. We will drive, Hamilcar, und for the day I will be happy."

Hamilcar didn't lose a minute. He started us up the street at a gallop. We went around the next corner on three wheels—just as Skip and his horse slackened up at the store. Then for a couple of minutes I saw some driving. Whee! but that was a team, and Mr. Janes was a driver! We went, and the cool air slashed past our cheeks and made water come into our eyes. I looked back at Mr. Hoffer—and choked again. He was so happy about it all that—well, that a fellow couldn't look at him without wanting to sort of pat him on the back and tell him it was all right and that kind of thing.

Pretty soon Hamilcar slowed down.

"I calc'late we've give him the slip," says he. "Now, Mark Tidd, you can git to business. Hoffer, this here is Mark Tidd, and this other kid is Plunk Smalley. You kin depend on 'em. I know 'em. What they say you kin put your faith in."

Now that was a pretty fine thing for him to say, and it made me feel considerable proud. It made Mark feel so, too. You could see him sort of stiffen up and his eyes gleam.

"Mr. Hoffer," says Mark, "we want to buy your stock."

"Veil, she iss for sale. Cheap, also. It is that I must go away for mein health."

"We have got to hurry. There isn't t-time to take an inventory, but we have an idea what you have on hand. A friend looked into it for us." He reached into his pocket. "Here's twenty-five dollars, Mr. Hoffer, to p-pay for an option on your stock till Thursday. We'll offer you eight hundred dollars."

"Option, eh? *Ja*, I understand option. Till Thursday. Twenty-fife dollar. *Ja*. But eight hundred dollar! *Nein*. It iss too little."

"How much d-do you ask?"

"T'irteen hundred," says Mr. Hoffer.

Mark shook his head, but didn't say a word. Neither did Mr. Hoffer, and we drove a mile without anybody's speaking. Then Mr. Hoffer said:

"Twelluf hundred."

Mark shook his head, and we all kept still for another mile. Then Mark says:

"Eight h-hundred and fifty."

Mr. Hoffer shook his head. We were almost through the big woods when Mr. Hoffer spoke up and says:

"Eleven hundred and fifty."

"Eight hundred and s-s-seventy-five," says Mark.

After that nobody said a word for twenty minutes; then Mr. Hoffer says:

"Eleven hundred, efen money."

Mark shook his head. "Mr. Hoffer," says he, "I'll make one more offer and that's my last. You'll have to t-t-take it or leave it. Nine hundred d-d-dollars. Not a cent more. N-not a cent."

Mr. Hoffer blinked and peered at Mark with a sort of twinkle in his blue eyes.

"Young man," says he, "you haff a head for business. If it iss that you can sell as well as you can buy, den you are one business man. For surely.... Vell, den, I take your offer. Nine hundred it iss, und a option till Thursday. Ve go py the lawyer for that option, eh?"

Mark shook his head. "No," says he, "I have it ready."

And would you believe me, but he pulled out of his pocket a paper all drawn up by our own lawyer in typewriting. It had even the right amount set down—nine hundred dollars!

Mr. Hoffer read it and chuckled. "Hamilcar," says he, "did you seen this? Ho! For nine hundred dollars! So sure wass he that he has the paper drawn. Ho! Nefer in mein life haff I such a boy seen. For nine hundred dollars. Ho! ... Veil, Mark Tidd, I sign this. *Ja*, I sign him for you."

Hamilcar stopped the horses so the buggy wouldn't jar, and Mark pulled out a fountain pen. He was ready for everything. Mr. Hoffer grinned some more and signed his name on a line at the bottom of the option, and Hamilcar signed as a witness. Then Mark sighed like he had something pretty heavy lifted off his mind.

"Plunk," says he, "chances are good. We're not out of the woods yet, b-but we can almost see the other side.... Mr. Skip, you should 'a' played fair.... Now drive us to the edge of town, Mr. Janes, and let us out where Skip can't see us. He'll be waiting at the store for Mr. Hoffer."

Hamilcar drew up just at the outskirts of Sunfield and we got out.

"Mr. Hoffer," says Mark Tidd, "when you g-get back to your store there'll be a m-man there by the name of Jehoshaphat P. Skip, who'll want to buy your stock."

"So?" says Mr. Hoffer.

"Yes," says Mark. "We've bought it ourselves just to b-beat him, and I'll tell you why."

Then he set to and told Mr. Hoffer all about it just like he had told Hamilcar Janes. When he was through Mr. Hoffer shook his head in that mild way of his and says:

"That wass not goot. He iss not a fair man. Me, I will haff no dealing with him whatever. So."

"M-maybe you'll help us a little?" says Mark.

"I vill help. *Ja*, I will do what I can."

"Well, then, just tell him nothing about this option. Tell him you have nothing to d-do with the sale, though, and he'll have to see— Who's your best lawyer here?"

"A young man, also a goot man, I think. He iss from college only a leetle while. His name it is Hamilton."

"Well, you tell Skip Hamilton is handling the deal and to go to him. D-don't tell him another word."

"*Ja*, so I will do. *Ja*.... Goot-by, mein young friend. To see you again I shall hope. Goot-by."

"Good-by, Mr. Hoffer, and we h-hope you get well and everything comes out fine."

"I will do mein best. But, Mark Tidd, if t'ings go not as I like to haff them, I shall not cry. No, I shall be patient, and not such a coward as I like not to be."

We shook hands all around and Hamilcar and Mr. Hoffer drove off. As soon as they were away Mark and I lit out for Mr. Hamilton's law-office. We hadn't had any dinner, but Mark didn't seem to mind, and I wasn't going to be the first to speak about it, you can bet. If he could stand it to starve to death, I guess I could, too.

We found Mr. Hamilton's office in a little one-story wooden building on Main Street. He was there, but he seemed a little surprised to see us.

"How d'you do?" says he. "Were you looking for a doctor or a lawyer?"

"L-l-lawyer," says Mark.

Mr. Hamilton sighed with relief. "I was sure you'd made a mistake. Didn't think you could possibly be looking for me. But come right in. Shall I bring out my trained law-book for you? Or would you rather watch a baseball game between the Compiled Statutes and the Court Rules?"

He laughed, pleasant-like. I took to him right away and so did Mark. He was middling big, and he looked like he was a lot of fun.

"We want a l-l-lawyer," says Mark.

"Um!... Criminal case, I expect. You're the miscreants that threw a bomb at the Czar of Russia?"

"No," says Mark. "But we want to th-th-throw a bomb at Jehoshaphat P. Skip."

"Say that again," says Mr. Hamilton. "Is it a name or something to eat from Sweden?"

"Name," says Mark; "and let's get down to b-business. I'll tell you what we want and you can say whether you want to d-do it or not."

"Let her go," says Hamilton, and we all sat down.

Mark went over all the things that had happened to us, and then for the first time I got an idea what the scheme was that brought us to Sunfield.

"Now," says Mark, when he'd brought things up to date, "we've got this option on Mr. Hoffer's stock. Skip wants to b-buy the stock. That stock's worth twice what we paid for it, and Skip knows what it's worth. What we want you to do is this: you dicker with him. The price we want is twelve hundred dollars, not a cent more, and not a cent less.... That is—maybe we'd b-better make him pay your fee. You charge him, however, much more than the three hundred dollars' profit you ought to be paid. Don't let on you're our *lawyer*. You don't need to mention any names. Just talk about clients, eh? How'll that do? He'll buy. No d-d-danger he won't, that I can see. Make him pay cash down for the option, and g-git the cash before you turn it over. He'll have it with him."

"H'm!" says Mr. Hamilton. "Who thought up this scheme?"

"I did," says Mark.

"Well," says Mr. Hamilton, "I hope you and I stay friends, that's all *I've* got to say about it. Do you have ideas like this often?"

"He has 'em in his sleep," says I.

"How about it?" says Mark. "Will you do what we want you to?"

"You bet," says Mr. Hamilton.

"We want to be around s-s-somewheres," says Mark, "where we can hear it. Where can we hide?"

"Smalley here might get in the closet," says Hamilton, with a grin, "but you weren't made to fit closets, Tidd. You'll have to have a room. Suppose we try the woodshed there—and leave the door open. I guess you'll be able to hear, all right."

"We'll go back there n-now," says Mark. "It wouldn't do for Jehoshaphat P. to catch a glimpse of us."

So back we went. We didn't have to sit around long, either, for along came Mr. Skip, looking as cross as all-git-out. He came stamping in and scowled at Mr. Hamilton.

"Are you the feller that's lookin' after this sale for Hoffer?" says he.

"Yes," says Mr. Hamilton.

"He hain't got much of a stock," says Skip, "and what he's got don't amount to much."

"Well," says Mr. Hamilton, "in that case I wouldn't bother about it if I were you."

"Oh," says Skip, "I figgered if I could pick it up at a bargain—junk prices—I could git some profit out of it. Use it for special sales and sich in my store over to Wicksville."

"You know pretty well what's in the stock, don't you?"

"Trust Jehoshaphat P. Skip for that. He hain't buyin' no pig in a bag. I hain't been hangin' around there three hours for nothin'."

"Do you want to make me an offer? Is that why you are here?"

"I calc'late I wanted to talk price some. Hoffer's got to sell. He ought to be willin' to let it go cheap for ready cash."

"He is willing to sell cheap. What'll you offer?"

"Five hundred dollars," says Skip, and clamped his thin lips together like he was afraid a breath would git out for nothing.

"Good afternoon," says Mr. Hamilton, getting on to his feet. "I'm pretty busy. When you get ready to talk business, come around again."

Skip looked sort of startled, but he didn't get up. "I might raise that offer a mite," says he.

"Yes," says Mr. Hamilton, "you'll raise it a whole swarm of mites. There's one price on that stock and one price only. Twelve hundred and twenty-five dollars is the price, and you can take it or leave it. I haven't any time to dicker. Just think that over. It's so cheap I'm ashamed to handle the deal. Now think it over. It's yes or no to that price. No use talking anything else."

"Twelve hundred and twenty-five dollars!" says Skip. He sat there and twiddled his fingers and waggled his nose and worked his Adam's apple up and down so I nearly busted right out laughing. He didn't say a word for a quarter of an hour, and Mr. Hamilton pretended he wasn't there at all. Hamilton worked away at his desk and didn't so much as look at Skip once. It was nearly four o'clock when Skip caved in.

"Sure that's the best price?" says he.

"Certain."

"Then," says Skip, hesitating a bit like it hurt him to say the words—"then I'll—I'll take it. What terms?"

"Three hundred and twenty-five dollars *now*, and the balance Thursday," says Hamilton. "I'll deliver a legal option to you now and a bill of sale when you pay down the balance."

Skip pulled a wallet out of his pocket and counted out the money—three hundred and twenty-five dollars. My! but it looked like a lot. He put it on the desk. Then Mr. Hamilton pushed over our option. The option was in my name, James Smalley, because we knew Skip never would recognize it. Father's name is Mortimer Smalley, so Skip wouldn't think of any connection. He didn't suspect a thing. That was Mark Tidd's idea, too.

Mr. Hamilton had made me sign the option over, so it was all ready to deliver to Skip. He took it and Mr. Hamilton took the money.

"You've got a good deal," says Mr. Hamilton.

"Not so good as I calc'lated on gittin'," says Skip, sour as vinegar. "But I guess I won't lose no money on it."

He got up to go out.

"Good afternoon," says Mr. Hamilton as pleasant as pie.

"Huh!" grunts Skip. "G-by, mister." And out he went.

I almost jumped out of my skin. Three hundred dollars! It was ours, and we'd made it as honest as could be. We had to have three hundred dollars, and there was old Mark Tidd with a way to do it. I just looked at him and couldn't say a word. He was looking at me out of the corner of his eye to see how I took it, and he was looking pretty well satisfied with himself, too. I guess it was plain for him to see what a great man I thought he was, for he grinned as pleased as could be.

"Guess that fixes Skip and his chattel m-m-mortgage," says he.

"Yes," says I, "and it fixes other things. It fixes it so the Smalley family has something to live on when my dad comes out of the hospital, and it fixes it so my mother will think you're the greatest man that ever lived. I hain't goin' to say thank you, Mark, not me. I couldn't do it right; but you wait till I tell mother. She'll know what to say. Don't forget that a minute. She'll know...." I quit talking right there because I was afraid I'd choke up and have to quit and act foolish.

We went into the office and Mr. Hamilton handed us the money. He kept shaking his head all the time and looking at Mark.

"Tidd," says he, "if I ever get a big case, one that takes more brains than most men have got to win it, I'm going to send over to Wicksville for you, I am. Will you come and help me out?"

Mark knew he was fooling, but all the same it was pretty complimentary fooling.

"Glad to come," says he, "any time."

"What are you going to do now?" asked Mr. Hamilton.

"Find Hamilcar Janes," says Mark, "and thank him, and then see how we can get back home."

"Any hurry?"

"L-l-like to get there to-night if we can."

"Tell you what I'll do," says Mr. Hamilton. "You take supper with me, and I'll drive you over in father's automobile to-night. How about that?"

"Fine," says I. I began to chuckle. It was the first good, satisfying laugh I had laughed in weeks. "I wonder," says I, "if Skip's man Clancy has found out why his car wouldn't run."

"I hope not," says Mark, and his face set with that sort of a stern look he got every time he thought about Skip. "I hope Skip has to walk from Janes's farm every inch of the w-w-way home."

That's just what I hoped myself.

CHAPTER XIX

I don't know how Jehoshaphat P. got back to Wicksville, but he did get back, because I saw him next noon—passed him so our elbows touched. I couldn't help looking right in his eye and grinning. I expect it was pretty impudent, but—well, it was a special case. If he'd known what I was grinning about he'd probably have taken me apart and put me together wrong—but he didn't know. All he knew was that he had a chattel mortgage on the Bazar that was due Friday, and that there wasn't any chance for us to pay it. One of the worst things a man can do is to know facts that aren't so.

Skip scowled at me and says, "You won't have much grinnin' to do after Friday, young feller."

"Um!" says I. "You can't tell about grins. They grow promiscuous like Canada thistles. Never can tell where one'll spring up."

"What you goin' to do about that chattel mortgage? Goin' to turn over the stock without a fuss, or have I got to fetch in the constables and dep'ty-sheriffs and court officers? Eh?"

"Well," says I, "if we're goin' to git busted up we might as well have all the trimmin's. Can't you call out the militia, too?"

"Who's boss of your store, anyhow? You or that fat boy?"

"I calc'late," says I, "that Mark Tidd's in command."

"Guess I'll see him, then. Maybe I can git him to let go peaceable."

"He'll be glad to see you," says I, with another grin.

Jehoshaphat turned around and made for the Bazar. Mark was waiting on a couple of customers and there were three other folks in the store. That was unusual, but I says to Skip:

"Things is perty dull with us. Only five customers in the store."

He grunted, but didn't say a word. Mark looked up and saw him, but his expression never changed.

"Mr. Skip wants to see you when you get time," says I.

He nodded, and in a minute he came over. The woman he'd been waiting on didn't go out, but hung around to listen, I guess. Folks in Wicksville was right on hand when curiosity was being handed out.

"What can I d-do for you?" says Mark to Jehoshaphat.

"Chattel mortgage 's due Friday. What you goin' to do about it?"

Mark got on the dolefullest, mournfulest look I ever saw.

"Mr. Skip," says he, good and loud, so everybody could hear him, "can't you give us a l-little time?"

"Not a day," says Skip, snapping his jaws shut.

"I know we owe the money," says Mark, "but we didn't git it of you. You went out of your way to buy up that chattel mortgage. You did it just so as to bust up this b-b-business." He didn't say it mean, but just like he was almost ready to cry. Skip's eyes was blinking with satisfaction.

"We can p-pay you part of it," says Mark. "Won't you give us time on the rest?"

"Not a minute," says Skip.

"But, Mr. Skip, think about Mr. Smalley. He's hurt and in the hospital. Think about Mrs. Smalley. This store is all they've got. Nobody knows what'll h-happen to 'em if you don't give us time." He was saying this loud so everybody in the store could hear.

Skip looked around uneasy and says: "There hain't no use hollerin'. This is private talk."

"Maybe it is," says Mark, but he didn't lower his voice. "But what're you g-goin' to do? Like as not the Smalleys would have to go to the p-poor-farm or somethin'. You'll git your money, Mr. Skip, if you'll let us have a little time."

"Not a minute," says Skip, beginning to get mad.

"Then," says Mark, "you want to hurt Mr. Smalley in the hospital, and fix it so his wife hasn't got a cent to buy a meal? Do you want to do that, Mr. Skip?"

"I hain't got nothin' to do with that. The money's due me and I need it. If you hain't got it to pay I'm goin' to take the stock."

"You won't take part and wait f-for the rest?"

"No," says Skip.

"All right, then," says Mark. "Friday's the day, I expect. It's perty hard on the Smalleys, though."

Well, sir, you should have seen the customers that were hanging around with their mouths open. They were eying Skip like they thought he was the meanest man alive, and I could hear them saying things to each other under their breath. Skip was getting some fine advertising.

"What I want to know," says Skip, "is, will you turn over the stock without a lot of officers and papers?"

"I don't b-believe we can," says Mark. "If you take this stock you got to take it the way the law says.... Now good-by, Mr. Skip. This store is ours till Friday, and if you so much as step a foot in it again till you c-come with the sheriff somethin' will happen to you that'll make you wish you'd fallen down a well."

At that he turned his back and went behind the counter. Skip sneaked a look at the women and slunk out as fast as he could go.

When he was gone you should have heard those five women sail into him. My! the things they said about him! In another hour Wicksville would know just what had been said and just what those five women thought about it. Mark winked at me solemn. When the folks were gone he says:

"P-public opinion, Plunk. Ever hear of it?"

"Yes," says I.

"I'm s-sickin' it on Jehoshaphat. He'll be a popular feller in Wicksville. Won't he be popular, though!"

"What's the idea?" says I. "Why didn't you pay him his money and kick him out?"

"Because," says he, "I want to make folks love him. I want to fix it so f-f-folks will go out of their way to buy from him. Do you think this fight's over when the mortgage is paid? No, siree. We have got to get the business of this town and keep it away from Skip. When I'm through with Jehoshaphat Wicksville's goin' to think he's about the meanest man that ever pinched a p-penny."

"What next?" says I.

"A l-little advertisin'," says he.

That afternoon he painted a lot of signs, big and little. Some were for the wagon, and Binney and Tallow were to drive it around town, banging on the drum. Others were for our windows and others were to tack up on fences. The one in our window says:

Jehoshaphat P. Skip holds a chattel mortgage on this stock. He bought it just to bust this business. He won't give us time. Friday he's going to seize the Bazar. Everybody come. At two o'clock. Come to see Jehoshaphat P. Skip foreclose his mortgage.

That was one sign, others were like it, but every one said something different and something that wasn't calculated to make folks fond of Skip. All day Wednesday and all day Thursday we kept them going, inviting folks to be on hand to see the end of the Bazar.

"How do you know it'll be at two o'clock?" says I.

Mark grinned. "I saw the sheriff," says he, "and f-fixed it up."

Wouldn't that beat you? He'd thought of everything.

Friday came along just as the calendar said it would, but it seemed to us it took quite a while to do it. When you've got a surprise in your pocket all ready to spring, it always takes the right minute a long time to get there. In the mean time we went along just as if nothing was going to happen, and we didn't let on to a soul what we had in pickle for Jehoshaphat. We just kept advertising the foreclosure at two o'clock Friday afternoon like it was some sort of bargain sale. It was a novelty, all right. Folks don't usually brag about being busted, so folks took quite an interest, and we were certain to have a good crowd on hand. I guess they figured something out of the ordinary would happen. That was on account of Mark Tidd and his reputation.

Lots of folks stopped in to tell us how sorry they were and to tell us their opinion of Jehoshaphat P. Sympathy doesn't cost a cent, so you can always get more of it than you need. But it did show that Mark had fixed things so Skip wouldn't be the best-loved man in our county, which was something, anyhow.

Friday morning seemed like it could have held all the seven days of the week. We took lunch in the Bazar. At a quarter to two Mark had us put a big sign in each window that said:

ALL READY FOR THE FORECLOSURE
EVERYBODY WELCOME

There was a good crowd there—probably fifty or sixty people—when Skip and the officer came in. The officer went over to Mark and says:

"I've come to take charge of this stock, young feller."

"But," says Mark, "d-don't you have to give folks a chance to pay up before you seize the store?"

"Yes," says the officer, "but I understood there wasn't any chance of that."

"Um!" says Mark, and he scrambled up on top of the counter. "Folks," says he, as calm and cool as a chunk of ice, "here's Jehoshaphat P. Skip and the officer to put us out of business. They've got a chattel mortgage for f-five hundred dollars, and if we can't pay it the Bazar is b-busted. You know about Mr. Smalley. You've all been friends of his for years. What d'you think of a man who'll take away everything Mr. Smalley's got, just out of m-meanness?"

"Here," says the officer, "none of that, now. Git off'n that counter and keep quiet."

Mark looked down at him and says:

"I've talked this thing over with my lawyer, and I know what I can do and what I c-can't. I can keep possession of this store till twelve o'clock to-night if I want to. So, if you want to have your f-foreclosure to-day just hold your horses till I get through talkin'."

The officer scowled a bit and then grinned and said to go ahead with the celebration.

"Mr. Smalley didn't borrow this f-five hundred dollars from Mr. Skip. But what does Mr. Skip do? He sneaks around and finds out about it, and b-buys up the mortgage so he can use it to put the Bazar out of business. He knew there wasn't room for his store and this one in Wicksville, so he started in to git rid of us. He's been m-mean and underhanded from the start. He tried to get our credit cut off with the wholesale houses, and whatever he could d-do to hurt us he's gone ahead and done it."

Skip stood and scowled and wobbled his nose back and forth, but he didn't say a word.

Mark went on: "We had to m-make money for Mr. Smalley in the hospital, and we had to keep the business running. That took all we could make. So if we paid this chattel mortgage up we'd have to get the money some other way.

"Well, folks, it happened that Mr. Skip didn't know how long he'd last here, so he didn't t-take a lease of the store he's in. We found that out. Then, folks, we went and got a lease of it ourselves. We could 'a' kicked Skip out of it, but we didn't want to do that. We wanted to p-pay off the mortgage."

He stopped and looked down at Skip and grinned. Folks all looked at Skip, too. He was white, he was so mad, and if all the folks hadn't been there I don't know what he'd have done, but he didn't dare wiggle. Mark started in again.

"We wanted Skip to pay himself the f-five hundred dollars. That's what we wanted. Right there, folks, he paid part of it. We made him p-pay two hundred dollars to stay in his store. He didn't know he was payin' it to us, but he was." He reached in his pocket and pulled out a bundle of bills. "There's the very identical money he paid us. Two hundred d-dollars of it.... There, Mr. Skip, is t-two hundred dollars on account. It's from you to yourself." And Mark tossed the money down to the officer. I thought Skip would choke.

"But that wasn't enough," says Mark. "There was three hundred dollars more. It seemed like we couldn't raise that much, but this week we arranged to have Mr. Skip p-pay that to himself, too. We did it this way: over in Sunfield was a man named Hoffer who had a f-f-five-and-ten-cent store. He wanted to sell cheap. We knew about it and we fixed it so Skip heard about it, too. He started over to buy. We started the same day—and we beat him there. But we didn't have any m-m-money to buy with. That's where Skip came in handy again. We went to Mr. Hoffer and got him to give us an option on his stock at nine hundred d-dollars. Then we went to a lawyer to handle it for us. Skip came to see the lawyer, not knowin' we had anything to do with it, and the lawyer sold him the stock we had bought at nine hundred dollars for twelve hundred and twenty-five dollars—givin' us a p-p-profit of three hundred d-dollars and payin' our lawyer for his services. Perty kind of Skip, wasn't it? Eh, Mr. Skip? And, Mr. Skip, there's the three hundred dollars. The same b-bills you gave us. That squares us, Mr. Skip. You've p-paid yourself what we owed you and we're much obliged. 'Tain't every man would be so kind." Here he tossed over the three hundred.

You should have seen Skip. He couldn't say a word. I don't believe he could think. He just stood and

trembled, he was so furious, and waggled his nose, and his Adam's apple went up and down like an elevator in a busy building. And the folks yelled. It wasn't a cheer; it was a laugh. They hollered. Men and women threw back their heads and laughed like I've never seen folks laugh before. And the things they said to Skip! I wouldn't have had folks poke fun at me like that for seven times five hundred dollars. Mark held up his hand.

"I advertised this f-foreclosure," he said, with a grin, "so all Wicksville would know what kind of a man Skip is. I wanted Wicksville to appreciate how generous he is. I hope after this f-folks won't bother to trade here at the Bazar. We don't deserve it, for all we do is give an honest bargain for every cent you spend here. Go to Skip.... And now, Mr. Skip, you've got your money. I calc'late you and the officer hain't got anythin' more to d-do here, and I'll bet you've got business somewheres else. So good afternoon, Mr. Skip; and, Mr. Skip, you might carry off the thought that competition in business is all right, but that folks that tries to squeeze and won't play f-fair is apt to git into a pinch themselves.... Good afternoon, Mr. Skip."

Skip and the officer started for the door, with folks jostling them and making funny remarks and laughing at them fit to bust. I'll bet he was glad to get to the door, and the way he shot out into the street and dodged toward his own place was enough to make you laugh if you had a sore tooth.

Then folks crowded around Mark, and he stood and let them admire him, and enjoyed it to beat everything. Mr. Bloom got up on a chair and says:

"Fellow-townsmen, that there man Skip hain't the sort of citizen we want here. There's some way to git rid of him. You know what that is."

"You bet," says Chet Weevil, "just keep away from his store."

"That's the ticket," says Mr. Bloom. "Now, folks, see what you can do. It won't take long."

"Jest you watch us," says Mr. Hoover. "We'll 'tend to Skip."

Mark stood up again. "Now, folks," he says, "the place is ready for business again. You'll find us behind the counters, and we'll be there six days a week, ready to g-g-give you your money's worth and a little more every time."

The crowd hung around a spell, gabbling and talking and buying a few things, but they finally left and we four were alone.

"Mark," says I, "I'm goin' to write mother now. Whatever else there is to do can wait. And when her letter comes back I'm goin' to give it to you. She'll say in it the things that I hain't got any idea of how to say right."

"There don't need to anybody say anything," says he, but all the same I knew he'd be pretty disappointed if nobody did, and I knew he'd want mother's letter to keep always. There was Mark's little weakness. He could do big things and fine things and he was honest and the sort of fellow you could downright admire—but he did like to be admired. I don't know as I blame him. I'd like to be admired myself if I could find some way of making folks do it.

CONCLUSION

That's about all there is to it. Skip stuck it out two weeks, then he moved over to Sunfield into Mr. Hoffer's store where he couldn't bother us any more. And that was the last of him.

The business was a little slack at first, but it began to pick up in a day or two, and just before the Saturday when the announcement of the result of the beauty contest was to be made there was quite a rush. Mark Tidd had stirred it up with advertising. The last time we put up the names before the final count the contestants stood:

Mr. Pilkins, 967 votes.

Mr. Bloom, 958 votes.

Chet Weevil, 947 votes.

Chancy Miller, 941 votes.

Of course there were others, but these men were at the top and nobody was near them.

Well, sir, on Saturday morning in came young Mr. Hopkins, whose father owns the bank, and bought a phonograph just like Old Mose Miller's, and a lot of records. It gave him eleven hundred votes.

"You can v-vote 'em for yourself," says Mark, with a grin, "and elect yourself the handsomest m-man in town."

Mr. Hopkins, who was a bully fellow, grinned back. "What'll I do with 'em?" says he.

Mark's eyes twinkled. "It wouldn't be f-f-fair for me to suggest anything," says he, "but if those votes were mine I'll bet I'd have some f-f-fun with 'em."

Mr. Hopkins thought a few minutes and then began writing a name on every ballot. It took him quite a while. I couldn't see who it was, but all of a sudden Mark started to grin and I knew there was a joke on somebody.

"Who is it?" says I.

"Peabody," says Mark. "Jupiter Peabody."

"Don't know him," says I. I didn't, either. I'd never heard of such a man. "Who is he?"

"Oh, he's been living here a long time," says Mr. Hopkins. "Maybe you never happened to meet him, though."

I racked my brains, but for the life of me I couldn't catch on to who he was.

At half past two the list was to go up, and there was a crowd on hand. Everybody was anxious, especially Chet and Chancy and some of the women. The men mostly pretended it was a joke, anyhow, and they didn't care how it came out—but they did care, all the same.

Prompt on the minute Mark stepped into the window and pasted up the list. For a minute the folks were quiet; then there was a hubbub. Everybody was astonished. Here, at the last minute, somebody had come in and beaten everybody.

"Peabody," says a man, "who's Jupiter Peabody? I know Sam Peabody, but he hain't got no relatives named Jupiter that I know of."

"Me, neither," says Mr. Bloom. "Anyhow he's handsomer'n I be. I'd like to git a look at him."

Chet and Chancy both looked like they wanted to cry.

"Who is it?" says Chet.

"Never heard of him," says Chancy, "but I'll bet he's homelier'n you be."

"Anyhow," says Chet, "he probably hain't got curly hair."

It looked for a minute like there might be a scrimmage, but just then an old man came along, driving a dump-cart filled with pumpkins.

"There," says Mr. Bloom, "is Sam Peabody. Let's ask him if he knows this Jupiter."

So they stopped the old fellow, and Mr. Bloom says:

"Got any relatives livin' here?"

"No," says Mr. Peabody, "nary relative."

"Any other Peabodys hereabouts that you know of?"

The old man shook his head slow and allowed he didn't know of any.

"Well," says Mr. Bloom, "this here is a mystery, all right. Here's a Jupiter Peabody that's won the handsomest-man contest, and nobody knows him."

"What?" says the old fellow. "What's that? Won the handsomest-man contest? Got most votes for bein' the handsomest man in Wicksville? Ho!" He threw back his head and roared. "Handsomest man! Whee! Think of that, now." He sat a minute laughing like all-git-out; then he reached out with his whip and touched his mule. "Giddap, Jupiter!" says he. "Giddap!"

It was a minute before folks caught on—and then you should have heard the laugh. Jupiter, Jupiter Peabody—a mule. And he'd been elected the handsomest man in Wicksville. Everybody, including even Chet and Chancy, roared so hard they almost choked, and they pounded each other on the back and danced up and down and shrieked. It was the funniest joke that ever happened in Wicksville.

Maybe if a real man had won the losers would have been mad, but nobody won but a mule! And everybody saw the joke. I guess it was about the best way the thing could have come out.

So that was the end of the beauty contest.

In another two weeks father came home, a little lame, but so he would be all right in no time, and mother came with him. I'll never forget the way she took Mark Tidd by the hand, nor what she said to him. It made him blink his eyes, I can tell you.

"Mark," she says, "it's a fine thing to have brains that you can scheme with, and it's fine to be brave, and it's fine to be able to stick to things to the very end, but when you add to that a heart that's willing to do things for other folks, and that is happiest when it's helping somebody that needs help, you've got about the finest kind of a man there is. And that's the kind of man you're going to be, Mark. I'm glad my son is your friend."

I felt the same way about it myself.

THE END

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