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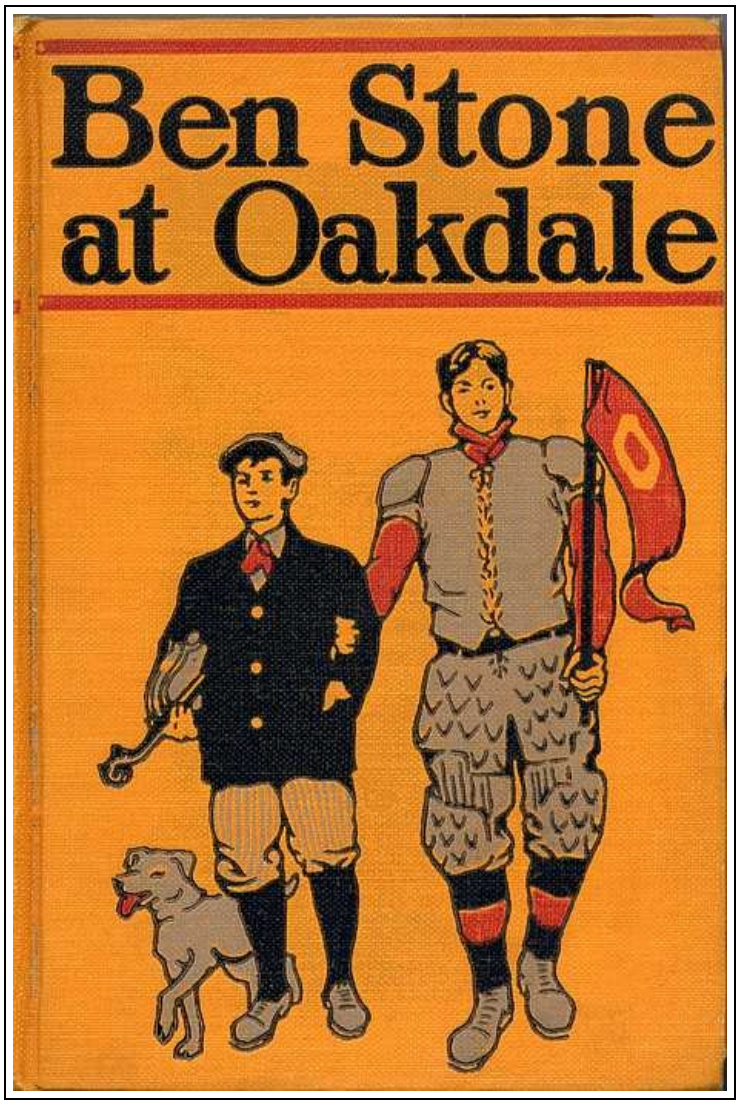

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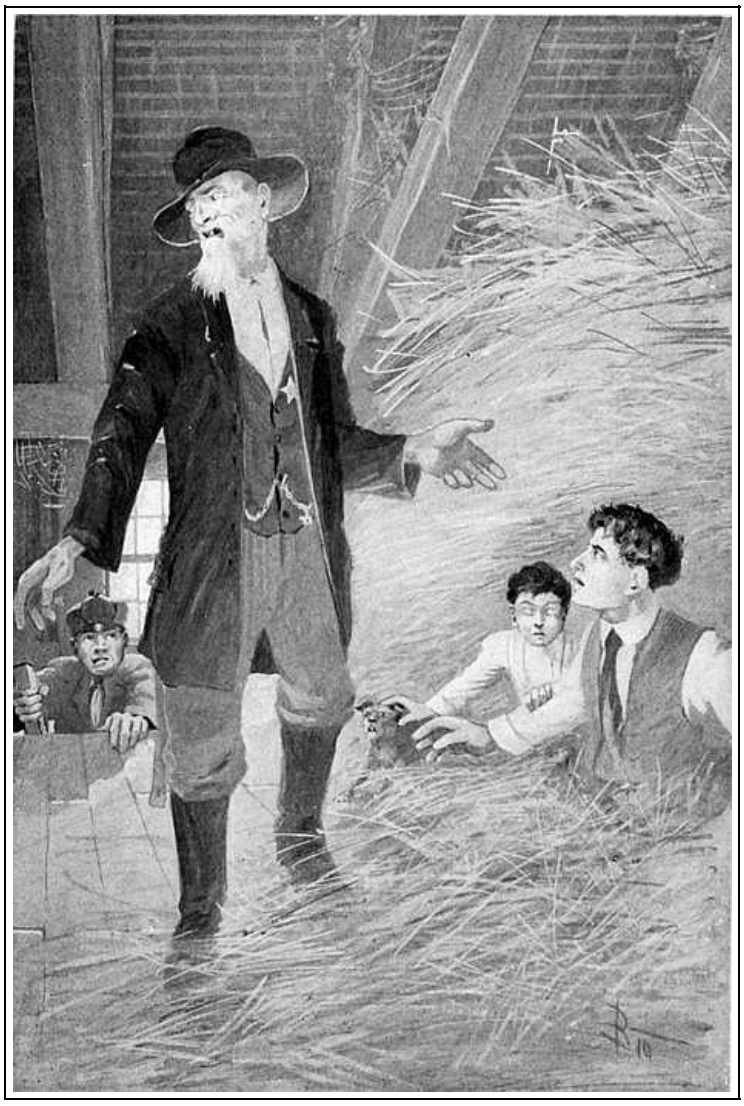

“HERE THEY BE!”—PAGE 260.

BEN STONE AT OAKDALE

By MORGAN SCOTT

Author of

"Boys of Oakdale Academy," "Rival Pitchers of Oakdale," "Oakdale Boys in Camp," "The Great Oakdale Mystery," "The New Boys at Oakdale," etc.

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CONTENTS

CONTENTS

BEN STONE AT OAKDALE.

CHAPTER I.

"BEN STONE."

As he was leaving the academy on the afternoon of his third day at school in Oakdale, Ben Stone was stopped by Roger Eliot, the captain of the football team. Roger was a big, sturdy chap, singularly grave for a boy of his years; and he could not be called handsome, save when he laughed, which was seldom. Laughter always transformed his features until they became remarkably attractive.

Compared with Ben, however, Roger appeared decidedly comely, for the new boy was painfully plain and uncouth. He was solid and stocky, with thick shoulders and rather big limbs, having a freckled face and reddish hair. He had a somewhat large nose, although this alone would not have been detrimental to his appearance. It was his square jaw, firm-shut mouth, and seemingly sullen manner that had prevented any of the boys of the school from seeking his acquaintance up to this point. Half of his left ear was gone, as if it had been slashed off with some sharp instrument.

Since coming to Oakdale Ben had seemed to shun the boys at the school, seeking to make no acquaintances, and he was somewhat surprised when the captain of the eleven addressed him. Roger, however, was not long in making his purpose clear; he took from his pocket and unfolded a long paper, on which were written many names in two extended columns.

“Your name is Stone, I believe?” he said inquiringly.

“Yes, sir,” answered Ben.

“Well, Stone, as you are one of us, you must be interested in the success of the football team. All the fellows are, you know. We must have a coach this year if we expect to beat Wyndham, and a coach costs money. Everybody is giving something. You see, they have put down against their names the sums they are willing to give. Give us a lift, and make it as generous as possible.”

He extended the subscription paper toward the stocky boy, who, however, made no move to take it.

Several of the boys, some of them in football clothes, for there was to be practice immediately after school, had paused in a little group a short distance from the academy steps and were watching to note the result of Roger’s appeal to the new scholar.

Ben saw them and knew why they were waiting there. A slow flush overspread his face, and a look of mingled shame and defiance filled his brownish eyes. Involuntarily he glanced down at his homespun clothes and thick boots. In every way he was the poorest-dressed boy in the school.

“You’ll have to excuse me,” he said, in a low tone, without looking up. “I can’t give anything.”

Roger Eliot showed surprise and disappointment, but he did not immediately give over the effort.

“Why, of course you’ll give something,” he declared, as if there could be no doubt on that point. “Every one does. Every one I’ve asked so far has; if you refuse, you’ll be the first. Of course, if you can’t afford to give much——”

“I can’t afford to give a cent,” interrupted Ben grimly, almost repellantly.

Roger slowly refolded the paper, looking the other over closely. He took note of the fellow’s well-worn clothes and poverty-touched appearance, and with dawning comprehension he began to understand the meaning of the flush on Ben’s cheeks. Instead of being offended, he found himself sorry for the new boy.

“Oh, all right!” he said, in a manner that surprised and relieved Stone. “You know your own business, and I’m sure you’d like to give something.”

These words, together with Eliot’s almost friendly way, broke down the barrier of resentment which had risen unbidden in the heart of the stocky lad, who suddenly exclaimed:

“Indeed I would! I’m powerful sorry I can’t. Perhaps—by an’ by—if I find I’m going to get through all right—perhaps I’ll be able to give something. I will if I can, I promise you that.”

“Well, now, that’s the right stuff,” nodded Roger heartily. “I like that. Perhaps you can help us out in another way. You’re built for a good line man, and we may be able to make use of you. All the candidates are coming out to-day. Do you play?”

“I have—a little,” answered Ben; “but that was some time ago. I don’t know much about the game, and I don’t believe I’d be any good now. I’m all out of practice.”

“Never you mind that,” said the captain of the team. “Lots of the fellows who are coming out for practice have never played at all, and don’t know anything about it. We need a good lot of material for the coach to work up and weed out when we get him, so you just come along over to the field.”

Almost before Ben realized what was happening, Roger had him by the arm and was marching him off. They joined the others, and Roger introduced him to “Chipper” Cooper, Sile Crane, Billy Piper, and the rest. He noticed in particular the three named, as each was characteristic in his appearance to a distinct degree.

Cooper was a jolly chap, with mischievous eyes and a crooked nose. He had the habit of

propounding ancient conundrums and cracking stale jokes. Crane was a long, lank, awkward country boy, who spoke ungrammatically, in a drawling, nasal voice. Piper, who was addressed as “Sleuth” by his companions, was a washed-out, colorless fellow, having an affected manner of keenness and sagacity, which were qualities he did not seem to possess to any great degree.

They passed down the gravel walk to the street, and crossed over to the gymnasium, which stood on the shore of the lake, close behind the fenced field that served for both a football and baseball ground.

The gymnasium was a big, one-story frame building, that had once been used as a bowling alley in the village. The man who built it and attempted to run it had failed to find business profitable, and in time it was purchased at a low price by Urian Eliot, Roger’s father, who moved it to its present 11
location and pledged it to the academy as long as the scholars should continue to use it as a gymnasium.

Inside this building Ben was introduced to many more boys, a large number of whom had prepared or were making ready for football practice. There was Charley Tuttle, called “Chub” for short, a roly-poly, round-faced, laughing chap, who was munching peanuts; Tim Davis, nicknamed “Spotty,” even more freckled than Ben, thin-legged, sly-faced, and minus the two front teeth of his upper jaw; Sam Rollins, a big, hulking, low-browed fellow, who lost no opportunity to bully smaller boys, generally known as “Hunk”; Berlin Barker, a cold blond, rather good-looking, but proud and distant in his bearing; and others who did not impress the new boy at all with their personalities.

Few of these fellows gave Ben any attention after nodding or speaking to him when introduced. They were all busily engaged in discussing football matters and prospects. Stone heard some of this talk in the big dressing-room, where Eliot took him. The captain of the eleven opened a locker, from 12
which he drew a lot of football clothing.

“I have my regular suit here, Stone,” he said; “and here are some other things, a lot of truck from which you can pick out a rig, I think. Take those pants and that jersey. Here are stockings and shoes. My shoes ought to fit you; I’m sure the rest of the stuff is all right.”

Ben started to object, but Roger was in earnest and would not listen to objections. As he was getting into the outfit provided by Eliot, Ben lent his ear to the conversation of the boys.

“We’ve got to beat Wyndham this year,” said one. “She buried us last year, and expects to do so again. Why, they have a regular Harvard man for a coach over there.”

“Beat her!” cried another. “You bet we will! Wait till we get our coach. I say, captain, how are you making it, gathering the needful?”

“First rate,” answered Roger, who was lacing his sleeveless jacket. “I’ll raise it all right, if I have to tackle every man, woman and child in town with that paper.”

“That’s the stuff!” whooped Chipper Cooper. “Being captain of a great football team, you are 13
naturally a good man to *tackle* people. Rah! rah! rah! Cooper!” Then he skipped out of the dressing-room, barely escaping a shoe that was hurled at him.

“Bern’s home,” said a boy who was fussing over a head harness. “Came on the forenoon train with his folks. I saw him as I came by. Told him there’d be practice to-night, and he said he’d be over.”

“He’s a corking half-back,” observed a fellow who wore shin guards. “As long as we won’t have Roger with us next year, I’ll bet anything Bern is elected captain of the team.”

“Come on, fellows,” called Eliot, who had finished dressing in amazingly quick time. “Come on, Stone. We want to do as much as we can to-night.”

They trooped out of the gymnasium, Ben with them. A pleasant feeling of comradery and friendliness with these boys was growing upon him. He was a fellow who yearned for friends, yet, unfortunately, his personality was such that he failed to win them. He was beginning to imbibe the 14
spirit of goodfellowship which seemed to prevail among the boys, and he found it more than agreeable.

Fortune had not dealt kindly with him in the past, and his nature had been soured by her heavy blows. He had come to Oakdale for the purpose of getting such an education as it was possible for him to obtain, and he had also come with the firm determination to keep to himself and seek no friends; for in the past he had found that such seeking was worse than useless.

But now circumstances and Roger Eliot had drawn him in with these fellows, and he longed to be one of them, longed to establish himself on a friendly footing with them, so that they would laugh and joke with him, and call him by his first name, and be free and easy with him, as they were among themselves.

“Why can’t I do it?” he asked himself, as he came out into the mellow afternoon sunshine. “I can! I will! They know nothing about the past, and they will never know.”

Never had the world looked more beautiful to him than it did as he passed, with his schoolmates 15
about him, through the gate and onto the football field. Never had the sky seemed so blue and the sunshine so glorious. He drank in the clear, fresh air with his nostrils, and beneath his feet the springy turf was delightfully soft and yet pleasantly firm. Before him the door to a new and better life seemed flung wide and inviting.

There were some boys already on the field, kicking and passing a football. One of these—tall, handsome, supple and graceful—was hailed joyously as “Bern.” This chap turned and walked to meet them.

Suddenly Ben Stone stood still in his tracks, his face gone pale in an instant, for he was face to face with fate and a boy who knew his past.

16

CHAPTER II.

THE PARIAH.

The other boy saw him and halted, staring at him, astonishment and incredulity on his face. In that moment he was speechless with the surprise of this meeting.

Ben returned the look, but there was in his eyes the expression sometimes seen in those of a hunted animal.

The boys at a distance continued kicking the football about and pursuing it, but those nearer paused and watched the two lads, seeming to realize in a moment that something was wrong.

It was Roger Eliot who broke the silence. “What’s the matter, Hayden?” he asked. “Do you know Stone?”

The parted lips of Bernard Hayden were suddenly closed and curved in a sneer. When they parted again, a short, unpleasant laugh came from them.

“Do I know him!” he exclaimed, with the utmost disdain. “I should say I do! What’s he doing here?” 17

“He’s attending the academy. He looks to me like he might have good stuff in him, so I asked him out for practice.”

“Good stuff!” cried Hayden scornfully. “Good stuff in that fellow? Well, it’s plain that you don’t know him, Eliot!”

The boys drew nearer and gathered about, eager to hear what was to follow, seeing immediately that something unusual was transpiring.

Not a word came from Ben Stone’s lips, but the sickly pallor still clung to his uncomely face, and in his bosom his heart lay like a leaden weight. He had heard the boys in the gymnasium talking of “Bern,” but not for an instant had he fancied they were speaking of Bernard Hayden, his bitterest enemy, whom he felt had brought on him the great trouble and disgrace of his life.

He had come from the gymnasium and onto the football field feeling his heart exulting with a new-found pleasure in life; and now this boy, whom he had believed so far away, whom he had 18 hoped never again to see, rose before him to push aside the happiness almost within his grasp. The shock of it had robbed him of his self-assertion and reliance, and he felt himself cowering weakly, with an overpowering dread upon him.

Roger Eliot was disturbed, and his curiosity was aroused. The other boys were curious, too, and they pressed still nearer, that they might not miss a word. It was Eliot who asked:

“How do you happen to know him, Hayden?”

“He lived in Farmington, where I came from when we moved here—before he ran away,” was the answer.

“Before he ran away?” echoed Roger.

“Yes; to escape being sent to the reformatory.”

Some of the boys muttered, “Oh!” and “Ah!” and one of them said, “He looks it!” Those close to Stone drew off a bit, as if there was contamination in the air. Immediately they regarded him with disdain and aversion, and he looked in vain for one sympathetic face. Even Roger Eliot’s grave features had hardened, and he made no effort to conceal his displeasure.

Sudden rage and desperation seemed to swell Ben’s heart to the point of bursting. The pallor left 19 his face; it flushed, and from crimson it turned to purple. He felt a fearful desire to leap upon his enemy, throttle him, strike him down, trample out his life, and silence him forever. His eyes glared, and the expression on his face was so terrible that one or two of the boys muttered their alarm and drew off yet farther.

“He’s going to fight!” whispered Spotty Davis, the words coming with a whistling sound through his missing teeth.

Ben heard this, and immediately another change came upon him. His hands, which had been clenched and half-lifted, opened and fell at his sides. He bowed his head, and his air was that of utter dejection and hopelessness.

Bern Hayden observed every change, and now he laughed shortly, cuttingly. “You see, he doesn’t deny it, Eliot,” he said. “He can’t deny it. If he did, I could produce proof. You’d need only to ask my father.”

“I’m sorry to hear this,” said the captain of the eleven, although to Ben it seemed there was no 20 regret in his voice. “Of course we don’t want such a fellow on the team.”

“I should say not! If you took him, you couldn’t keep me. I wouldn’t play on the same team with the son of a jail-bird.”

“What’s that?” cried Roger. “Do you mean to say his father——”

“Why, you’ve all heard of old Abner Stone, who was sent to prison for counterfeiting, and who was shot while trying to escape.”

“Was that his father?”

“That was his father. Oh, he comes of a fine family! And he has the gall to come here among decent fellows—to try to attend the academy here! Wait till my father hears of this! He’ll have something to say about it. Father was going to send him to the reformatory once, and he may do it yet.”

Roger’s mind seemed made up now. “You know where my locker is, Stone,” he said. “You can

leave there the stuff I loaned you."

For a moment it seemed that the accused boy was about to speak. He lifted his head once more and looked around, but the disdainful and repellant faces he saw about him checked the words, and he turned despairingly away. As he walked slowly toward the gate, he heard the hateful voice of Bern Hayden saying:

"Better watch him, Eliot; he may steal those things."

The world had been bright and beautiful and flooded with sunshine a short time before; now it was dark and cold and gloomy, and the sun was sunk behind a heavy cloud. Even the trees outside the gate seemed to shrink from him, and the wind came and whispered his shame amid the leaves. Like one in a trance, he stumbled into the deserted gymnasium and sat alone and wretched on Roger Eliot's locker, fumbling numbly at the knotted shoestrings.

"It's all over!" he whispered to himself. "There is no chance for me! I'll have to give up!"

After this he sat quite still, staring straight ahead before him with eyes that saw nothing. Full five minutes he spent in this manner. The sound of boyish voices calling faintly one to another on the football field broke the painful spell.

They were out there enjoying their sport and football practice, while Ben found himself alone, shunned, scorned, outcast. He seemed to see them gather about Hayden while Bern told the whole shameful story of the disgrace of the boy he hated. The whole story?—no, Ben knew his enemy would not tell it all. There were some things—one in particular—he would conveniently forget to mention; but he would not fail to paint in blackest colors the character of the lad he despised.

Once Ben partly started up, thinking to hasten back to the field and defend his reputation against the attacks of his enemy; but almost immediately he sank down with a groan, well knowing such an effort on his part would be worse than useless. He was a stranger in Oakdale, unknown and friendless, while Hayden was well known there, and apparently popular among the boys. To go out there and face Hayden would earn for the accused lad only jeers and scorn and greater humiliation.

"It's all up with me here," muttered the wretched fellow, still fumbling with his shoestrings and making no progress. "I can't stay in the school; I'll have to leave. If I'd known—if I'd even dreamed Hayden was here—I'd never come. I've never heard anything from Farmington since the night I ran away. I supposed Hayden was living there still. How does it happen that he is here? It was just my miserable fortune to find him here, that's all! I was born under an unlucky star."

All his beautiful castles had crumbled to ruins. He was bowed beneath the weight of his despair and hopelessness. Then, of a sudden, fear seized him and held him fast.

Bern Hayden had told the boys on the football field that once his father was ready to send Stone to the reformatory, which was true. To escape this fate, Ben had fled in the night from Farmington, the place of his birth. Nearly two years had passed, but he believed Lemuel Hayden to be a persistent and vindictive man; and, having found the fugitive, that man might reattempt to carry out his once-baffled purpose.

Ben thrust his thick middle finger beneath the shoestrings and snapped them with a jerk. He almost tore off Eliot's football clothes and flung himself into his own shabby garments.

"I won't stay and be sent to the reform school!" he panted. "I'd always feel the brand of it upon me. If others who did not know me could not see the brand, I'd feel it, just as I feel——" He lifted his hand, and his fingers touched his mutilated left ear.

A few moments later he left the gymnasium, walking out hurriedly, that feeling of fear still accompanying him. Passing the corner of the high board fence that surrounded the football field, his eyes involuntarily sought the open gate, through which he saw for a moment, as he hastened along, a bunch of boys bent over and packed together, saw a sudden movement as the football was passed, and then beheld them rush forward a short distance. They were practicing certain plays and formations. Among them he caught a glimpse of the supple figure of Bern Hayden.

"I'd be there now, only for you!" was Ben's bitter thought, as he hastened down the road.

Behind him, far beyond Turkey Hill, the black clouds lay banked in the west. They had smothered the sun, which could show its face no more until another day. The woods were dark and still, while harsh shadows were creeping nearer from the distant pastures where cowbells tinkled. In the grass by the roadside crickets cried lonesomely.

It was not cold, but Ben shivered and drew his poor coat about him. Besides the fear of being sent to a reformatory, the one thought that crushed him was that he was doomed forever to be unlike other boys, to have no friends, no companions—to be a pariah.

CHAPTER III.

ONE RAY OF LIGHT.

As he passed, he looked up at the academy, set far back in its yard of many maple trees, and saw that the great white door was closed, as if shut upon him forever. The leaden windows stared at him with silent disapproval; a sudden wind came and swung the half-open gate to the yard, which closed with a click, making it seem that an unseen hand had thrust it tight against him and held it barred.

Farther along the street stood a square, old-fashioned, story-and-a-half house, with a more modern ell and shed adjoining, and a wretched sagging barn, that lurched on its foundations, and was only kept from toppling farther, and possibly falling, by long, crude timber props, set against its side. The front yard of the house was enclosed by a straggling picket fence. As well as the fence, the weather-washed buildings, with loose clapboards here and there, stood greatly in want of paint and repairs.

This was the home of Mrs. Jones, a widow with three children to support, and here Ben had found a bare, scantily-furnished room that was within his means. The widow regarded as of material assistance in her battle against poverty the rent money of seventy-five cents a week, which her roomer had agreed to pay in advance.

For all of her misfortune and the constant strain of her toil to keep the wolf from the door and a roof over the heads of herself and her children, Mrs. Jones was singularly happy and cheerful. It is true the wounds of the battle had left scars, but they were healed or hidden by this strong-hearted woman, who seldom referred to them save in a buoyant manner.

Jimmy Jones, a puny, pale-faced child of eight, permanently lamed by hip disease, which made one leg shorter than the other, was hanging on the rickety gate, as usual, and seemed to be waiting Ben's appearance, hobbling out to meet him when he came along the road.

"You're awful late," cried the lame lad, in a thin, high-pitched voice, which attested his affliction and weakness. "I've been watchin'. I saw lots of other fellers go by, but then I waited an' waited, an' you didn't come."

A lump rose in Ben's throat, and into his chilled heart crept a faint glow. Here was some one who took an interest in him, some one who did not regard him with aversion and scorn, even though it was only a poor little cripple.

Jimmy Jones had reminded Ben of his own blind brother, Jerry, which had led him to seek to make friends with the lame boy, and to talk with him in a manner that quickly won the confidence of the child. This was his reward; in this time when his heart was sore and heavy with the belief that he was detested of all the world, Jimmy watched and waited for him at the gate, and came limping toward him with a cheery greeting.

Ben stooped and caught up the tiny chap, who was pitifully light, swinging him to a comfortable position on his bent left arm.

"So you were watching for me, were you, Jimmy?" he said, in a wonderfully soft voice for him. "That was fine of you, and I won't forget it."

"Yep, I waited. What made you so late? I wanted to tell you, I set that box-trap you fixed for me so it would work, an' what do you think I ketched? Bet you can't guess."

"A squirrel," hazarded Ben.

"Nope, a cat!" laughed the little fellow, and Ben whistled in pretended great surprise. "But I let her go. We don't want no cats; we got enough now. But that jest shows the trap will work all right now, an' I'll have a squirrel next, I bet y'u."

"Sure you will," agreed Ben, as he passed through the gate and caught a glimpse of the buxom widow, who, hearing voices, had hastened from the kitchen to peer out. "You'll be a great trapper, Jimmy; not a doubt of it."

"Say, if I ketch a squirrel, will you help me make a cage for him?" asked Jimmy eagerly.

"I don't know," answered Ben soberly. "If I can, I will; but——"

"Course you ken! Didn't you fix the trap? I expect you know how to make ev'ry kind of thing like that."

"If I have a chance to make it, I will," promised Ben, as he gently placed the boy on the steps and forced to his face a smile that robbed it in a remarkable way of its uncomeliness.

"I don't s'pose we ken begin now?"

"It's too late to-night, and I'm in a hurry. We'll have to put it off, Jimmy."

The smile vanished from his face the moment he passed round the corner of the house on his way to the back door. "Poor little Jimmy!" he thought. "I can't help you make your squirrel-cage, as I'm not going to stay here long enough to do it."

He ascended the narrow, uncarpeted stairs to his small, uncarpeted room over the kitchen, where a loose board rattled beneath his feet, and the dull light from a single window showed him the old-fashioned, low-posted, corded bedstead—with its straw tick, coarse sheets and patchwork quilt—pushed back beneath the sloping rafters of the roof.

Besides the bed, there was in the room for furniture a broken-backed rocking-chair; a small table with a split top, on which stood a common kerosene hand-lamp; a dingy white earthen water pitcher and bowl—the former with a circular piece broken out of its nose—sitting on a washstand, made of a long box stood on one end, with a muslin curtain hanging in front of it. His trunk was pushed into

a corner of the room opposite the bed.

Another part of the room, which served as a wardrobe, or was intended for that purpose, was set off by a calico curtain. The kitchen chimney ran up through one end of the room and served to heat it a little—a very little.

Such a room as this was the best Ben Stone could afford to pay for from his meager savings. He had been satisfied, and had thought it would do him very well; for Mrs. Jones had genially assured him that on evenings when the weather became colder he would be welcome to sit and study by the open fire in the sitting-room, a concession for which he had been duly grateful.

But now he would need it no more; his hopes, his plans, his dreams were ended. He sat down 32
dumbly on the broken chair, his hard, square hands lying helpless in his lap. The shadows of the dingy little chamber crept upon him from the corners; and the shadows of his life hovered thick about him.

Finally he became aware of the smell of cooking, which came to him from below, and slowly the consciousness that he was hungry grew upon him. It did not matter; he told himself so. There was in his heart a greater hunger that might never be satisfied.

It had grown quite dark and he struck a light, after which he pulled out his small battered trunk and lifted the lid. Then, in a mechanical manner, he began packing it with his few belongings.

At last the craving of his stomach became so insistent that he took down a square tin box from a shelf behind the calico curtain and opened it on the little table. It had been full when he came on Monday, but now there was left only the end of a stale loaf of bread and a few crumbs of cheese. These, however, were better than nothing, and he was about to make the best use of them, when there sounded a step outside his door, followed by a knock that gave him a start.

Had it come so soon? Would they give him no more time? Well, then, he must meet them; and, 33
with his face gray and set, he opened the door.

With a long, nicked, blue platter, that served as a tray, Mrs. Jones stood outside and beamed upon him. On the tray were a knife, a fork, pewter spoons, and dishes of food, from one of which—a steaming bowl—came a most delightful odor.

“Land sakes!” said the widow. “Them stairs is awful in the dark, an’ I didn’t darst bring a lamp; I hed my han’s full. I brought y’u somethin’ hot to eat; I hope y’u don’t mind. It ain’t right for a big, growin’ youngster like you to be alwus a-eatin’ cold vittles, ’specially when he’s studyin’ hard. It’s bad f’r the dejesshun; an’ Joel—my late departed—he alwus had somethin’ the matter with his dejesshun. It kep’ him from workin’ reg’ler an’ kinder sp’iled his prospects, poor man! an’ left me in straightened circumstances when he passed away. But I ain’t a-repinin’ or complainin’; there is lots 34
in this world a heap wuss off’n I be, an’ I’m satisfied that I’ve got a great deal to be thankful f’r. If I’d thought, I’d a-brought up somethin’ f’r a tablecloth, but mebbe you can git along.”

She had entered while talking, bringing with her, besides the odor of food, another odor of soapsuds, which clung to her from her constant labor at the washtubs, where, with hard, backaching toil, she uncomplainingly scrubbed out a subsistence. For Mrs. Jones took in washings, and in Oakdale there was not another whose clothes were so white and spotless, and whose work was done so faithfully.

Ben was so taken aback that he stood speechless in the middle of the floor, watching her as she arranged the dishes on the table.

“There’s some beef stew,” she said, depositing the steaming bowl. “An’ here’s hot bread an’ butter, an’ some doughnuts I fried to-day. Joel alwus uster say my doughnuts was the best he ever tasted, an’ he did eat a monst’rus pile of ’em. I don’t think they was the best thing in the world f’r his dejesshun, either. Mis’ Collins give me some apples this mornin’, an’ I made a new apple pie. I 35
thought y’u might like to try it, though it ain’t very good, an’ I brought y’u up a piece. An’ here’s a glass of milk. Jimmy he likes milk, an’ I hev to keep it in the house f’r him. He don’t eat much, nohow. I saw you with Jimmy when you come in, an’ I noticed you looked kinder tired an’ pale, an’ I says to myself, ‘What that boy needs is a good hot supper.’ Jimmy he’s bin talkin’ about you all day, an’ how y’u fixed his squirrel trap. Now, you jest set right up here, an’ fall to.”

She had arranged the dishes and placed the old chair at the table, after which, as had become habitual with her on rising from the wash-tub, she wiped her hands on her apron and rested them on her hips, her arms akimbo. She was smiling at him in such a healthy, motherly manner, that her whole face seemed to glow like the genial face of the sun when it appears after a dark and cloudy day.

To say that Ben was touched, would be to fail utterly in expressing the smallest degree of his feelings, yet he was a silent, undemonstrative fellow, and now he groped in vain for satisfactory 36
words with which to thank the widow. Unattractive and uncomely he was, beyond question, but now his unspeakable gratitude to this kind woman so softened and transformed his face that, could they have seen him, those who fancied they knew him well would have been astonished at the change.

“Mrs. Jones,” he faltered, “I—I—how can I——”

“Now you set right down, an’ let the victuals stop y’ur mouth,” she laughed. “You’ve bin good to my Jimmy, an’ I don’t forgit nobody who’s good to him. I’d asked y’u down to supper with us, but you’re so kinder backward an’ diffident, that I thought p’raps y’u wouldn’t come, an’ Mamie said she knowed y’u wouldn’t.”

Ben felt certain that back of this was Mamie’s dislike for him, which something told him had developed in her the moment she first saw him. She was the older daughter, a strong, healthy girl of seventeen, who never helped her mother about the work, who dressed in such cheap finery as she could obtain by hook or crook, who took music lessons on a rented melodeon paid for out of her 37
mother’s hard earnings, who felt herself to be a lady unfortunately born out of her sphere, and who was unquestionably ashamed of her surviving parent and her brother and sister.

“Set right down,” persisted Mrs. Jones, as she took hold of him and pushed him into the chair. “I want to see y’u eatin’. That’s Mamie!” she exclaimed, her face lighting with pride, as the sound of the melodeon came from a distant part of the house. “She’s gittin’ so she can play real fine. She

don’t seem to keer much f’r books an’ study, but I’m sartin she’ll become a great musician if she keeps on. If Sadie was only more like her; but Sadie she keeps havin’ them chills. I think she took ’em of her father, f’r when he warn’t ailin’ with his dejesshun he was shakin’ with a chill, an’ between one thing an’ t’other, he had a hard time of it. It ain’t to be wondered at that he died with debt piled up and a mortgage on the place; but I don’t want you to think I’m complainin’, an’ if the good Lord lets me keep my health an’ strength, I’ll pay up ev’ry dollar somehow. How is the stew?”

“It—it’s splendid!” declared Ben, who had begun to eat; and truly nothing had ever before seemed 38
to taste so good.

As he ate, the widow continued to talk in the same strain, strong-hearted, hopeful, cheerful, for all of the ill-fortune that had attended her, and for all of the mighty load on her shoulders. He began to perceive that there was something heroic in this woman, and his admiration for her grew, while in his heart her thoughtful kindness had planted the seed of affection.

The warm bread was white and light and delicious, and somehow the smell of the melting butter upon it made him think vaguely of green fields and wild flowers and strawberries. Then the doughnuts—such doughnuts as they were! Ben could well understand how the “late departed” must have fairly reveled in his wife’s doughnuts; and, if such perfect productions of the culinary art could produce the result, it was fully comprehensible why Mr. Jones’ “dejesshun” had been damaged.

But the pie was the crowning triumph. The crust was so flaky that it seemed to melt in the boy’s 39
mouth, and the apple filling had a taste and flavor that had been imparted to it in some magical manner by the genius of the woman who seemed to bestow something sweet and wholesome upon the very atmosphere about her.

With her entrance into that room, she had brought a ray of light that was growing stronger and stronger. He felt it shining upon him; he felt it warming his chilled soul and driving the shadows from his gloomy heart; he felt it giving him new courage to face the world and fight against fate—fight until he conquered.

CHAPTER IV.

A BRAVE HEART.

"There," said the widow, when Ben finished eating and sat back, flushing as he realized he had left not a morsel before him, "now I know y'u feel better. It jest done me good to see you eat. It sort of reminded me of the way Joel used to stow victuals away. He was a marster hand to eat, but it never seemed to do him no good. Even when he was in purty good health, which was seldom, he never could eat all he wanted to without feelin' oppressed arterwards an' havin' to lay down and rest. He was a good one at restin'," she added, with a slight whimsical touch.

Once more Ben tried to find words to express his thanks, and once more Mrs. Jones checked him.

"It ain't been no trouble," was her declaration, "an' it was wuth a good deal to me to see you enjoy it so. What're y'u doin' with your trunk pulled out this way?"

This question reminded him again of his determination to leave Oakdale directly; and, knowing the good woman had regarded the room as engaged by him for the time of the fall term of school, and also feeling that to leave her thus and so deprive her of the rent money she expected to receive for weeks to come would be a poor return for her kindness, he hesitated in confusion and reluctance to tell her the truth.

"What's the matter?" she asked, noting his manner. "Has anything happened? I noticed you was pale, an' didn't look jest well, when you come in. Is there anything wrong?"

"Yes, Mrs. Jones," he forced himself to say; "everything is wrong with me."

"At the academy? Why," she exclaimed, as he nodded in answer to her question, "I thought y'u passed the exammernation all right? Didn't y'u?"

"It's not that; but I must leave school just the same."

"Land of goodness! Do tell! It can't be possible!" Mrs. Jones was completely astounded and quite shocked.

"It is not because I have failed in any of the requirements of the school," Ben hastened to say. "I can't explain just why it is, Mrs. Jones. It's a long story, and I don't wish to tell it. But I have an enemy in the school. I didn't know he was here; I saw him for the first time to-day."

This explanation did not satisfy her. "Why," she said, "I was thinkin' y'u told me when y'u took this room that you didn't know a livin' soul in this place."

"I did tell you so, and I thought at the time that it was the truth; but since then I have found out I was mistaken. There is one fellow in the school whom I know—and he knows me! He will make it impossible for me to attend school here."

"I don't see how," said the widow, greatly puzzled. "How can anybody make y'u leave the school if y'u don't want to?"

"He hates me—he and his father, too. I am sure his father is a man of influence here."

"Now I don't want to be curi's an' pry inter nobody's affairs," declared the widow; "but I do think you'd better trust me an' tell me about this business. I don't b'lieve you ever done no great wrong or bad thing to make y'u afraid of nobody. Anybody that can be good an' kind to a little lame boy, same as you've been to my Jimmy, ain't bad."

"Perhaps if you knew all about it you would change your opinion of me," said the boy a trifle huskily, for he was affected by her confidence in him.

She shook her head. "No I wouldn't. I b'lieve you're makin' a mountain out of er molehill. You're deescouraged, that's what's the matter. But somehow you don't look like a boy that's easy deescouraged an' quick to give up. Now, you jest tell me who your enemy is. You ain't got no mother here to advise y'u, an' perhaps I can help y'u some."

Her insistent kindness prevailed upon him, and he yielded.

"My enemy's name is Bernard Hayden," he said.

"Land! You don't tell! Why, he's the son of Lemuel Hayden, who come here an' bought the limestone quarries over south of th' lake. He ain't been here a year yet, but he's built buildin's an' run a branch railroad from the main road to the quarries, an' set things hummin' in great shape. Next to Urian Eliot, who owns 'most all the mill business in the place, he's said to be the richest man in town."

"I knew it!" cried Ben; "I knew he would be a man of influence here. I knew him in Farmington, the place where I was born. Mrs. Jones, if I do not leave the school and Oakdale at once, Lemuel Hayden will try to make me do so."

He could not bring himself to disclose to her his fear that Mr. Hayden might again seek to commit him to the State Reformatory. That secret was the shame of his soul, and when he was gone from Oakdale he was certain it would be a secret no longer. Already Bern Hayden had told the boys on the football field, and in a small place gossip of such nature flies quickly.

"Now let me talk to you a little," said Mrs. Jones, sitting down on the trunk, which threatened to collapse beneath her weight. "I stick to it that I don't b'lieve you ever done northing very bad, an' if you're poor that ain't your fault. You've got a right to have an eddercation, jest the same as Lemuel Hayden's boy has. Jest because, mebbe, you got inter some foolish boy scrape an' got this Hayden boy down on you, be y'u goin' to let him keep y'u from gittin' an eddercation, to make a man of y'u, an' take you through the world?

"As I said before, you don't look like a boy to be scart or driv easy, an' I shall be disapp'inted in

you if y'u are. I ain't goin' to pry inter the affair; if y'u want to tell me about it some time, y'u can. But I'm goin' to advise y'u to stay right here in this school an' hold your head up. Joel, my late departed, he alwus said it warn't no disgrace to be poor. That passage in the Bible that says it's harder f'r a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven then f'r a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, alwus was a great conserlation to Joel.

"An' there's rich people in this very town that should be ashamed to hold their heads up, knowin', as ev'rybody does, how they come by their riches; but to-day I'd ruther be a-earnin' my daily bread by sweatin' at the wash-tub than to be in their shoes an' have on my mind what they must have on their minds. Ev'ry day I live I thank the Lord that he's been so good to me an' let me have so many pleasures an' enjoyments." 46

Here she paused a moment to take breath, having digressed without intending to do so; and once more Ben found himself wondering at her splendid courage and the cheerful heart she maintained in spite of troubles and afflictions that might well have crushed and broken the spirit of an ordinary woman. She laughed in the face of misfortune, and she positively refused to be trampled on by bitter fate.

She was right in thinking Ben was not a weak boy nor one to be easily frightened; but had she known that over him hung the dark, chilling shadow of the reformatory, she could not have wondered at the course he had contemplated pursuing, and she might have hesitated about so freely giving him advice. Knowing nothing of this, however, she continued to urge him to reconsider his determination to give up school and leave Oakdale.

"Now promise me that you'll stay till y'u have to leave school," she entreated. "An' I don't b'lieve you'll have to at all." 47

"Mrs. Jones, I'll think it over," he said. "I have almost decided to take your advice and stay, no matter what comes."

"That's what I like to hear!" she laughed, rising from the trunk. "Don't you never back down an' run f'r nobody nor northin'. If Joel hed had more of the stand-up-an'-stick-to-it sperrit, I'm sartin it would 'a' been better f'r us all—but I ain't complainin', I ain't complainin'.

"Goodness! I've been spendin' a lot of time here when I've jest got loads of things to do before I can git a blessed wink of sleep this night. I've got to go. But you jest make up your mind to stick, enermies or no enermies. Good night."

She had gathered up the dishes and was going. Ben held the lamp, to light her down the stairs, calling a grateful good night after her.

For two hours, at least, he walked the floor of that poor little room, fighting the inward battle with himself. Finally he paused, his hands clenched and his head thrown back. His square jaw seemed squarer and firmer than ever, and the determination on his plain face transfigured it. 48

"I am going to stay, Bernard Hayden!" he said quietly, as if speaking face to face with his enemy. "Whatever happens, I'll not show the white feather. Do your worst!" He felt better when he had fully settled on this resolution.

Opening his window, he looked out on the quiet village that seemed winking sleepily and dreamily with its twinkling lights. Even as he lifted his eyes toward the overcast sky, the pure white moon burst through a widening rift and poured its light like a benediction upon the silent world. Still with his face upturned, his lips moving slightly, the boy knelt at the window, and the hush and peace of the night filled his heart.

CHAPTER V.

ONE MORE CHANCE.

Although he was certain he would be compelled to undergo an unpleasant ordeal at school the following day, he did not falter or hesitate. With determination in his heart, and his face grimly set, he turned in at the gate shortly after the ringing of the first bell, and walked up the path.

Several boys in a group near the academy steps saw him approaching. He distinctly heard one of them say, “Here he comes now”; and then a hush fell upon them as they watched him draw near. In spite of himself, he could not refrain from giving them a resentful and defiant glance. In return they looked on him in silent scorn, and he felt that not one of them held an atom of sympathy in his heart.

In the coat-room, where he went to hang his hat, he found Roger Eliot, who saw him, but did not speak. Ben’s lips parted, but Roger’s manner chilled him to silence, and he said nothing.

Bernard Hayden looked in. “Hey, Roger,” he called. “I want to see you a moment.” Then his eyes fell on Ben, and his proud lips curled a bit.

“All right, Bern,” said Eliot, walking out. Hayden took his arm, and they turned toward the outer door, talking in low tones.

As Ben entered the big lower room, a little gathering of girls just inside the door suddenly stopped chattering, looked at him in a frightened way, and hastily drew aside, one or two of them uttering low exclamations. His freckled face flushed, but it suddenly grew white as he saw a tall, spare man, who was talking earnestly with Professor Richardson, near the latter’s desk.

The tall man was Lemuel Hayden, and Ben knew what had brought him to the academy that morning.

The principal saw Ben come in, and said something that caused Mr. Hayden to turn and look toward the unfortunate boy, who, chilled and apprehensive, was seeking his seat. Ben felt those cold gray eyes upon him, and suddenly his soul seemed to quiver with anger. A sense of injustice and wrong seized him, filling him with a desire to confront his enemies and defend himself as best he could.

“No use!” an inward voice seemed to whisper. “They are too powerful. Who will believe your word against that of Lemuel Hayden?”

Mr. Hayden was a man who had placed fifty years of his life behind him, and his appearance and manner seemed to indicate that during the greater number of those years his stern will had dominated the acts and enforced the obedience of nearly every one who chance to have dealings with him. His shaved upper lip exposed a firm, hard, almost cruel, mouth. His carefully trimmed whiskers, like his hair, were liberally besprinkled with gray.

“That’s the boy,” Ben distinctly heard him say. Then Prof. Richardson said something in a low voice, and once more they fell to talking earnestly in subdued tones.

Ben sat down and waited, feeling certain that the very worst must happen. After a few moments, he heard the principal say:

“I shall give the matter my immediate attention, Mr. Hayden. It is very unfortunate, and I may be compelled to take your advice.”

The second bell was ringing as Lemuel Hayden passed down the center aisle and out of the academy. In passing, he looked at Ben, and his lips were pressed together above the edge of his whiskers until his mouth formed a thin, hard line.

Boys and girls came trooping in and sought their seats. Ben paid no attention to any of them, although he was sure that many eyed him closely. His deskmate, however, a little chap by the name of Walker, found an opportunity amid the bustle and movement of the scholars to lean toward Ben and whisper:

“My! I bet you’re going to get it! Look out!”

Ben paid no heed. His nerves were strained, and he waited in grim silence the coming crash, fully believing it was Prof. Richardson’s purpose to open the forenoon session in the regular manner and then denounce him before the assembled scholars.

When the opening exercises were over, Ben’s heart strained and quivered in the conviction that the trying moment had come. He was surprised and temporarily relieved when the first class was called in regular order and a few of the lower room scholars left to join a class in the upper room.

After a short time, however, he concluded that the time of trial had simply been postponed, and this conviction brought upon him a sort of slow torture that was hard to bear. He tried to study, but could not fix his mind on his book. His eyes might stare dully at the page, and his lips might keep repeating words printed there, but his thoughts persistently dwelt on the desperate strait into which he had fallen, and he speculated on the probable course that would be pursued by Lemuel Hayden.

His fancy pictured Mr. Hayden as hastening from the academy to consult with the town authorities and inform them about the dangerous character who had boldly entered the village for the purpose of attending school there. Ben felt that Mr. Hayden’s words would create a profound impression, and he was certain the man would then demand that the “dangerous character” of whom he spoke should be taken into custody at once and sent without delay to the State Reformatory.

The tortured lad further pictured Mr. Hayden and the authorities as making out certain papers and placing them in the hands of the village constable, urging him at the same time to do his duty without delay.

The boy fell to listening for the footsteps of Mr. Hayden and the constable at the door. Once he started and turned, but the door opened to admit returning scholars who had been to a recitation in the upper room.

Suddenly Ben heard his name sharply called by the principal, and he started to his feet with the conviction that at last the moment had arrived and that Prof. Richardson was about to arraign him before the school. Instead of that, his class in arithmetic had been called and was already on the front seats. He hastened down the aisle and joined the class.

Knowing he was wholly unprepared in the day's lesson, he inwardly prayed that he might not be 55
called to the blackboard. He was chosen, however, as one of five pupils to work problems on the board and demonstrate them to the rest of the class.

When the others had finished and taken their seats, he still remained before the board, chalk in hand, an unprepossessing figure as he frowned hopelessly over his task. At last, seeing the boy had failed, the principal told him to be seated. Although his face was burning and he was shamed by his failure, he could not repress a glance of defiance at some of his slyly-grinning classmates.

Prof. Richardson did not reprove him, but dismissed him with the rest of the class when the successful ones had demonstrated their problems.

"He thinks I won't be here much longer, and so it's not worth while bothering with me," concluded Ben.

The forenoon wore away. At intermission Ben did not leave his seat, not caring to mingle with the 56
boys and give them an opportunity to insult or anger him.

As the mid-day hour approached, the boy's suspense grew greater, for he was still confident that he was not to escape. Thinking Prof. Richardson meant to speak of his case before dismissing the scholars at noon, his dread of the ordeal grew as the short hand of the clock behind the desk drew nearer and nearer to twelve.

Finally the hands of the clock stood upright, one over the other. Prof. Richardson closed his desk and locked it, after which he turned and faced the scholars. His eyes found Ben Stone and stopped. The time had come!

"Stone," said the professor quietly, without a trace of harshness or reproof, "I should like to have you remain after the others are dismissed. I wish to speak with you."

For a moment a feeling of relief flashed over Ben like an electric shock. So it was to be done privately, and not before the whole school! He was grateful for that much consideration for his feelings. When they were by themselves in that big, empty room, with no one else to hear, the professor would tell him quietly but firmly that it was quite out of the question to permit a boy of his 57
bad reputation to remain in the school. He would be directed to leave the academy, never to return.

With many backward glances at the lad who remained behind, the scholars filed out. The door had closed behind the last of them when Ben was told to come down to the principal's desk. There was no accusation, nothing but kindness, in Prof. Richardson's eyes, as he looked on the boy who stood before him.

"Stone," he said, in that same self-contained tone of voice, "I find it necessary to speak of an unpleasant matter relative to yourself. You came here to this school as a stranger, and it has ever been my practice to judge a boy by his acts and to estimate his character by what he proves himself to be. This is the course I should have pursued in your case, but this morning there came to me a gentleman who is well known in this town and highly respected, who knew you well before settling in Oakdale, and he told me many disagreeable things about you. I cannot doubt that he spoke the 58
truth. He seemed to regard you as a rather dangerous and vicious character, and he expressed a belief that it was not proper for you to associate with the scholars here. I am not, however, one who thinks there is no chance of reform for a boy or man who has done wrong, and I think it is a fatal mistake to turn a cold shoulder on the repentant wrongdoer. I have given some thought to this matter, Stone, and I have decided to give you a chance, just the same as any other boy, to prove yourself here at this school."

Ben was quivering from head to feet. In his heart new hope and new life leaped. Still in some doubt, he faltered:

"Then you—you are not going to—to expel me, sir?"

"Not until I am satisfied that you deserve it; not until by some act that comes under my observation you convince me that you are not earnestly seeking to reform—that you are not worthy to remain in the school."

"Oh, thank you—thank you!" choked the boy, and that was all he could say. His voice broke, and 59
he saw the kind face of the professor through a blurring mist.

"I hope I am not making a mistake in this, Stone," that same soothing voice went on. "I hope you will try to prove to me that I am not."

"I will, sir—I will!" Ben eagerly promised.

"That is all I ask of you. If you have a vicious disposition, try to overcome it; if you have a violent temper, seek to control it. Learn to be your own master, which is the great lesson that every one must learn in case he wishes to become honored and respected and successful in life. Prove to every one that you regret any mistakes of your past, and that you may be thoroughly trusted in the future. In this manner you will rise above your mistakes and above yourself. I don't think I need say anything more to you, but remember that I shall watch you with anxiety and with hope. That is all."

Ben felt that he could have seized the professor's hand and kissed it, but he knew he would quite break down, and the thought of such weakness shamed him. All he did was to again huskily exclaim:

"Thank you, sir—thank you!" 60

The September air seemed again filled with mellow sweetness as he hurried in happy relief from the academy. With the touch of a passing breeze, the maple trees of the yard waved their hands

gayly to him, and in the distance beyond the football field Lake Woodrim dimpled and laughed in the golden sunshine.

"One chance more!" he exultantly murmured. "One chance more, and I'll make the most of it."

CHAPTER VI.

INTO THE SHADOWS.

As he hastened from the yard and turned down the street, he saw several boys assembled beneath a tree in a fence-corner near the roadside. They were laughing loudly at something that was taking place there. On the outskirts of the little gathering he saw the thin-legged figure of Spotty Davis, who was smoking a cigarette and grinning as he peered over the heads of those in front of him.

Ben would have hurried past, but he suddenly stopped in his tracks, checked by the shrill, protesting voice of a child in distress. At the sound of that voice, he turned quickly toward the boys beneath the tree and forced his way among them, pushing some of them unceremoniously aside.

What he saw caused a fierce look to come to his face and his freckled cheeks to flush; for in the midst of the group was Hunk Rollins, a look of vicious pleasure on his face, holding little Jimmy Jones by the ear, which he was twisting with brutal pleasure, showing his ugly teeth as he laughed at the tortured lad's cries and pleadings.

"Oh, that don't hurt any!" the bullying fellow declared, as he gave another twist. "What makes ye holler? It's only fun, and you'll like it when you get used to it."

A moment later Ben reached the spot and sent the tormentor reeling with a savage thrust, at the same time snatching the sobbing cripple from him.

"You miserable coward!" he cried, hoarse with anger.

The cripple gave a cry and clung to him. "Don't let him hurt me any more, Ben!" he pleaded. "He's pulled my hair an' my nose, an' 'most twisted my ear off. I was comin' to meet you to tell you I ketched a squirrel in the trap."

In sullen silence the watching boys had fallen back. Ben was facing Hunk Rollins, and in his eyes there was a look that made the bully hesitate.

"Now you'll see a fight," said one of the group, in an awed tone. "Hunk will give it to him."

Rollins had been astonished, but he knew what was expected of him, and he began to bluster fiercely, taking a step toward Stone, who did not retreat or move.

"Who are you calling a coward? Who are you pushing?" snarled the low-browed chap, scowling his blackest, and assuming his fiercest aspect, his huge hands clenched.

"You!" was the prompt answer. "No one but a coward and a brute would hurt a harmless little cripple."

"You take care!" raged Hunk. "I won't have you calling me names! I want you to understand that, too. Who are you? You're nothing but the son of a jail-bird!"

"Go for him, Hunk!" urged Spotty Davis, his voice making a whistling sound through the space left by his missing teeth. "Soak him a good one!"

"I'll soak him if he ever puts his hands on me again," declared Rollins, who was desirous of maintaining his reputation, yet hesitated before that dangerous look on Stone's face. "I don't care to fight with no low fellow like him."

"Hunk's scared of him," cried one of the boys, and then the others groaned in derision.

Stung by this, the bully roared, "I'll show you!" and made a jump and a swinging blow at Ben. His arm was knocked aside, and Stone's heavy fist landed with terrible violence on his chin, sending him to the ground in a twinkling.

The boys uttered exclamations of astonishment.

With his fists clenched and his uncomely face awesome to look upon, Ben Stone took one step and stood over Rollins, waiting for him to rise. It was thus that Prof. Richardson saw them as he pushed through the gathering of boys. Without pausing, he placed himself between them, and turned on Ben.

"It has not taken you very long, Stone," he said, in a manner that made Ben shrink and shiver, "to demonstrate beyond question that what Mr. Hayden told me about you is true. I told you it is my custom to judge every boy by his acts and by what he proves himself to be. For all of your apparently sincere promise to me a short time ago, you have thus quickly shown your true character, and I shall act on what I have seen."

"He hit me, sir," Hunk hastened to explain, having risen to his feet. "He came right in here and pushed me, and then he hit me."

Ben opened his lips to justify himself. "Professor, if you'll let me explain——"

"I need no explanations; I have seen quite enough to satisfy me," declared the professor coldly. "You have not reformed since the time when you made a vicious and brutal assault on Bernard Hayden."

Involuntarily, Ben lifted an unsteady hand to his mutilated ear, as if that could somehow justify him for what had happened. His face was ashen, and the hopeless look of desperation was again in his eyes.

Upon the appearance of Prof. Richardson, many of the boys had lost no time in hurrying away; the others he now told to go home, at the same time turning his back on Ben. The miserable lad stood there and watched them depart, the academy principal walking with Rollins, who, in his own manner and to his own justification, was relating what had taken place beneath the tree.

As Ben stood thus gazing after them, he felt a hand touch his, and heard the voice of little Jimmy at his side.

“I’m sorry,” said the lame boy, “I’m awfully sorry if I got you into any trouble, Ben.”

“You’re not to blame,” was the husky assurance.

“Mebbe I hadn’t oughter come, but I wanted to tell y’u ’bout the squirrel I ketched. He’s jest the handsomest feller! Hunk Rollins he’s alwus plaguin’ an’ hurtin’ me when he gets a chance. My! but you did hit him hard!”

“Not half as hard as he ought to be hit!” exclaimed Ben, with such savageness that the lame lad was frightened.

With Jimmy clinging to his hand, they walked down the road together. The little cripple tried to cheer his companion by saying:

“You warn’t to blame; why didn’t you say you warn’t?”

“What good would it have done!” cried Ben bitterly. “The professor wouldn’t listen to me. I tried 67
to tell him, but he stopped me. Everything and every one is against me, Jimmy. I have no friends and no chance.”

“I’m your friend,” protested the limping lad. “I think you’re jest the best feller I ever knew.”

To Jimmy’s surprise, Ben caught him up in his strong arms and squeezed him, laughing with a choking sound that was half a sob:

“I forgot you.”

“I know I don’t ’mount to much,” said the cripple, as he was lifted to Stone’s shoulder and carried there; “but I like you jest the same. I want you to see my squirrel. I’ve got him in an old bird cage. I’m goin’ to make a reg’ler cage for him, an’ I thought p’raps you’d show me how an’ help me some.”

Ben spent the greater part of the noon hour in the woodshed with little Jimmy, admiring the squirrel and explaining how a cage might be made. Mrs. Jones heard them talking and laughing, and peered out at them, her face beaming as she wiped her hands on her apron.

“Land!” she smiled; “Jimmy’s ’most crazy over that squirrel. You don’t s’pose it’ll die, do y’u?” 68

“Not if it can have a big cage with plenty of room to exercise,” answered Ben. “It’s a young one, and it seems to be getting tame already.”

“Well, I’m glad. Jimmy he’s jest silly over pets. But I tell him it ain’t right to keep the squirrel alwus shut up, an’ that he’d better let him go bimeby. Goodness! I can’t waste my time this way. I’ve got my han’s full to-day.”

Then she disappeared.

“Mother she thinks it ain’t jest right to keep a squirrel in a cage,” said the lame boy, with a slight cloud on his face. “What ju think, Ben?”

“Well,” said Ben, “it’s this way, Jimmy: Yesterday this little squirrel was frolicking in the woods, running up and down the trees and over the ground, playing with other squirrels and enjoying the open air and the sunshine. Now he’s confined in a cramped cage here in this dark old woodshed, taken from his companions and shut off from the sunshine and the big beautiful woods. Try to put yourself in his place, Jimmy. How would you like it if a great giant came along, captured you, 69
carried you off where you could not see your mother or your friends, and shut you up in a narrow dungeon with iron bars?”

Jimmy sat quite still, watching the little captive vainly nosing at the wires in search of an opening by which he might get out. As he watched, the squirrel faced him and sat up straight, its beautiful tail erect, its tiny forefeet held limp.

“Oh, see, Ben—see!” whispered the lame lad. “He’s beggin’ jest like a dog; he’s askin’ me to let him go. I couldn’t keep him after that. I sha’n’t want no cage f’r him, Ben; I’m goin’ to let him go back to the woods to find the other squirrels he uster play with.”

Together they carried the cage out into the old grove back of the house, where Jimmy himself opened the door. For a moment or two the captive shrank back in doubt, but suddenly he whisked through the door and darted up a tree. Perched on a limb, he uttered a joyful, chittering cry.

“He’s laughing!” cried the lame boy, clapping his hands. “See how happy he is, Ben! I’m awful 70
glad I didn’t keep him.”

The first bell was ringing as Ben turned toward the academy.

“Why, you ain’t had no dinner!” called Jimmy, suddenly aware of that fact.

“I didn’t want any,” truthfully declared Ben, as he vaulted a fence. “So long, Jimmy.” He waved his hand and hurried on.

He did not return to the academy, however. As the second bell began ringing, he paused on the edge of the deep, dark woods, which lay to the north of Turkey Hill. Looking back, he could see the academy, the lake and the village. The sound of the bell, mellowed by the distance, seemed full of sadness and disappointment. When it ceased, he turned and strode on, and the shadowy woods swallowed him.

71

CHAPTER VII.

A DESPERATE ENCOUNTER.

All that long, silent afternoon, he wandered through the woods, the fields and the meadows. The cool shadows of the forest enfolded him, and the balsamic fragrance of spruce and pine and juniper soothed his troubled spirit. He sat on a decaying log, listening to the chatter of a squirrel, and hearing the occasional soft *pat* of the first-falling acorns. He noted the spots where Jack Frost had thus early begun his work of painting the leaves pink and crimson and gold. In a thicket he saw the scarlet gleam of hawthorne berries.

Beside Silver Brook, which ran down through the border of the woods, he paused to listen to the tinkle and gurgle of the water. There the blackberried moonseed clambered over the underbrush. When he crossed the brook and pushed on through this undergrowth, his feet and ankles were wet 72
by water spilled from many hooded pitcher plants. Near the edge of the woods, with a sudden booming whir of wings that made his heart jump, a partridge flew up and went diving away into the deeper forest.

At the border of the woods, where meadow and marshland began, he discovered clusters of pale-blue asters mingling with masses of rose-purple blazing star. Before him he sent scurrying a flight of robins, driven from their feast of pigeon berries amid the wine-stained pokeweed leaves.

The sun leaned low to the west and the day drew toward a peaceful close. He seemed to forget for brief periods his misfortune and wretchedness, but he could not put his bitter thoughts aside for long, and whenever he tried to do so, they simply slunk in the background, to come swarming upon him again at the first opportunity. At best, it was a wretched afternoon he spent with them.

He had escaped facing disgrace and expulsion by declining to return to the academy that 73
afternoon; but his trunk and clothes were at Mrs. Jones' and he must get them, which led him, as night approached, to turn back toward the village.

On the southern slope of Turkey Hill he lingered, with the valley and the village below him. The sunshine gilded a church spire amid the oaks, and in its yard of maples he could see the roof and belfry of the academy.

The afternoon session was over by this time, and from that elevation Ben could look down on the fenced football field, where he beheld the boys already at practice. Once the still air brought their voices to him even from that distance. His heart swelled with a sense of injustice and wrong, until it seemed to fill his chest in a stifling manner.

Of course Bern Hayden was there with the boys who had so joyously hailed his return to Oakdale. But for Hayden he might also be there taking part in the practice, enjoying that for which his heart hungered, the friendly companionship of other lads.

The shadows were thickening and night was at hand as he crossed the fields and reached the 74
road to the north of the academy. He hoped to avoid observation and reach Mrs. Jones' house without encountering any one who knew him.

As he quickened his steps, he suddenly realized that he must pass the wretched little tumble-down home of Tige Fletcher, a dirty, crabbed, old recluse, who hated boys because he had been taunted and tormented by them, and who kept two fierce dogs, which were regarded as vicious and dangerous. Beyond Fletcher's house there was a footpath from High street to the academy yard, and this was the course Ben wished to follow.

Knowing he might be set upon by the dogs, he looked about for a weapon of defense, finally discovering a thick, heavy, hardwood cudgel, about three feet in length. With this in his hand, he strode on, grimly determined to give the dogs more than they were looking for if they attacked him.

He was quite near the house when, on the opposite side, there suddenly burst forth a great uproar of barking, with which there immediately mingled a shrill scream of terror.

Unhesitatingly, Ben dashed forward, instinctively gripping his stout cudgel and holding it ready 75
for use. The barking and the cry of fear had told him some one was in danger from Old Tige's dogs.

Immediately on passing the corner of the house, he saw what was happening, and the spectacle brought his heart into his mouth. The dogs had rushed at a little girl, who, driven up against the fence, faced them with her blue eyes full of terror, and tried to drive them back by striking at them with her helpless hands.

Giving a shout to check the dogs and distract their attention from the girl, Ben rushed straight on. He saw one of the dogs leap against the child and knock her down. Then he was within reach, and he gave the animal a fearful blow with the club as it was snapping at the girl's throat.

A moment later Ben found he had his hands full in defending himself, for the second dog, a huge brindle mastiff, having a protruding under-jaw and reddish eyes, leaped at his throat, his teeth gleaming. By a quick, side-stepping movement, the boy escaped, and with all his strength he struck the dog, knocking it down, and sending it rolling for a moment on the ground.

The first dog was a mongrel, but it was scarcely less ferocious and dangerous than the mastiff. 76
Although Ben had seemed to strike hard enough to break the creature's ribs, it recovered, and came at him, even as the mastiff was sent rolling. The yellow hair on the back of the dog's neck bristled, and its eyes were filled with a fearful glare of rage.

The boy was not given time to swing his club for another telling blow, but was compelled to dodge as the dog sprang from the ground. His foot slipped a little, and he flung up his left arm as a shield.

The teeth of the dog barely missed his elbow.

Quickly though Ben recovered and whirled, he was none too soon. This time, however, the mongrel was met by a well-directed blow on the nose, and the terrible pain of it took all the fight out of him and sent him slinking and howling away, with his tail curled between his legs.

The mastiff was not disposed of so quickly; for, although it had been knocked down by the first blow it received, it uttered a snarling roar, and again flung itself at the boy the moment it could regain its feet. 77

Against the fence the white-faced little girl crouched, uttering wild cries of fear, as, with terror-filled eyes, she watched the desperate encounter.

Knowing he would be torn, mangled, perhaps killed, if the teeth of the great dog ever fastened upon him, Ben fought for his very life. Three times he beat the creature down with his club, but for all this punishment the rage and fury of the animal increased, and it continued to return to the attack with vicious recklessness.

The boy set his teeth and did his best to make every blow count. Had his courage and nerve failed him for a moment, he must have been seized and dragged down by the frothing dog. He kept his wits about him, and his brain at work. Repeatedly he tried to hit the mastiff on the nose in the same manner as he had struck the mongrel, but for some moments, which seemed like hours, every attempt failed.

Once Ben's heart leaped into his mouth, as his foot slipped again, but he recovered himself on the instant and was fully prepared for the big dog's next charge. 78

At last he succeeded in delivering the blow on which he believed everything depended. Hit fairly on the nose by that club, which was wielded by a muscular young arm, the raging beast was checked and paralyzed for a moment.

Seizing the opportunity, Ben advanced and struck again, throwing into the effort every particle of strength and energy he could command. The dog dropped to the ground and lay still, its muscles twitching and its limbs stiffening; for that final blow had broken its neck.

Quivering and panting with the excitement and exertion of the struggle, Ben stood looking down at the body of the dog, giving no heed for the moment to the hoarse cries of rage which issued from the lips of Old Tige Fletcher, who was hobbling toward him with his stiff leg. Nor did he observe three boys who were coming along the path from the academy at a run, having been led to quicken their steps by the cries of the girl and the barking of the dogs.

Of the trio Roger Eliot was in the lead, and he was running fast, the sound of the frightened girl's screams having filled him with the greatest alarm. He was followed closely by Chipper Cooper, while Chub Tuttle brought up the rear, panting like a porpoise, and scattering peanuts from his pockets at every jump. 79

These boys came in sight soon enough to witness the end of the encounter between Stone and the huge mastiff. They saw the dog beaten back several times, and Roger uttered a husky exclamation of satisfaction when Ben finally finished the fierce brute with a blow that left it quivering on the ground.

By that time Eliot's eyes had discovered the girl as she crouched and cowered against the fence, and he knew instantly that it was in defense of her that Ben had faced and fought Fletcher's dreaded dogs.

Even before reaching that point Roger's heart had been filled with the greatest alarm and anxiety by the sounds coming to his ears; for he believed he recognized the voice of the child whose terrified cries mingled with the savage barking and snarling of the dogs. His little sister had a habit of meeting him on his way home after football practice, and he had warned her not to come too far on account of the danger of being attacked by Fletcher's dogs. That his fear had been well-founded he saw the moment he discovered the child huddled against the fence, as it was, indeed, his sister. 80

"Amy!" he chokingly cried.

Reaching her, he caught her up and held her sobbing on his breast, while she clung to his neck with her trembling arms.

"Drat ye!" snarled Tige Fletcher, his face contorted with rage as he stumped forward, shaking his crooked cane at Ben Stone. "What hev ye done to my dorg? You've killed him!"

"I think I have," was the undaunted answer; "at any rate, I meant to kill him."

"I'll hey ye 'rested!" shrilled the recluse. "That dorg was wuth a hundrud dollars, an' I'll make ye pay fer him, ur I'll put ye in jail."

Roger Eliot turned indignantly on the irate man.

"You'll be lucky, Mr. Fletcher, if you escape being arrested and fined yourself," he declared. "You knew your dogs were vicious, and you have been notified by the authorities to chain them up and never to let them loose unless they were muzzled. You'll be fortunate to get off simply with the loss of a dog; my father is pretty sure to take this matter up when he hears what has happened. If your wretched dogs had bitten my sister—" Roger stopped, unable to find words to express himself. 81

The old man continued to splutter and snarl and flourish his cane, upon which Tuttle and Cooper made a pretense of skurrying around in great haste for rocks to pelt him with, and he beat a hasty retreat toward his wretched hovel.

"Don't stone him, fellows," advised Roger. "Let's not give him a chance to say truthfully that we did that."

"We oughter soak him," said Chub, his round face expressive of the greatest indignation. "A man who keeps such ugly curs around him deserves to be soaked. Anyhow," he added, poking the limp body of the mastiff, "there's one dog gone."

"Ain't it a dog-gone shame!" chuckled Chipper, seizing the opportunity to make a pun. 82

Roger turned to Ben.

"Stone," he said, in his kindly yet unemotional way, "I can't thank you enough for your brave defense of my sister. How did it happen?"

Ben explained, telling how he had heard the barking of the dogs and the screams of Amy Eliot as

chance led him to be passing Fletcher's hut, whereupon he ran as quickly as possible to her assistance.

"It was a nervy thing to do," nodded Roger, "and you may be sure I won't forget it. I saw some of it, and the way you beat that big dog off and finished him was splendid."

"Say, wasn't it great!" chimed in Chub, actual admiration in his eyes as he surveyed Ben. "By jolly! you're a dandy, Stone! Ain't many fellers could have done it."

"I won't forget it," repeated Roger, holding out his hand.

Ben flushed, hesitated, then accepted the proffered hand, receiving a hearty, thankful grip from Eliot.

83

CHAPTER VIII.

A RIFT.

Ben came down quietly through the grove behind the house, slipped round to the ell door and ascended to his bare room without being observed by any one about the place. It did not take him long again to draw out his battered trunk and pack it with his few possessions.

He then found before him an unpleasant duty from which he shrank; Mrs. Jones must again be told that he was going away.

It is not remarkable that he hesitated over this, or that as the shadows once more thickened in that room he sat for a long time on his trunk, his elbows on his knees and his chin on his hands, gazing blankly at the one leaden window.

To his ears came the sound of wheels, which seemed to stop before the house. A few minutes later Jimmy's voice called from the foot of the stairs:

"Ben, Ben, you up there?"

84

He opened the door. "What's wanted, Jimmy?"

"I didn't know you was home," said the lame boy, in some surprise. "I didn't see y'u come, an' I was watchin'. They's somebody down here wants to see y'u."

"Wants to see me?" he exclaimed, unable to repress a feeling of apprehension. "Who is it?"

"It's Roger Eliot," answered the boy below, "an' he's jest got a dandy hoss an' carriage. He said you must be here, but I didn't think y'u was."

"Roger Eliot!" muttered Ben, descending at once. "What can he want?"

"I dunno," admitted Jimmy, limping after him as he left the house. "He jest tole me to tell y'u to come out."

"Hello, Stone!" called Roger from the carriage in front of the gate. "Come, get in here and take a little drive with me."

Greatly surprised by this invitation, Ben hesitated until the boy in the carriage repeated his words urgently, but with a touch of that command which had made him a leader among the boys of the village and captain of the football team.

"I—I haven't much time," faltered Stone; but he wonderingly took his place at Roger's side and

85

was whirled away, regretfully watched by Jimmy, who hung on the sagging gate and stared after the carriage until it turned the corner under the street-light opposite the post office.

In front of the post office Chub Tuttle was munching peanuts and telling Sile Crane and Sleuth Piper of the wonderful manner in which Stone had defended Amy Eliot from Tige Fletcher's dogs. He had reached the most thrilling portion of the tale when the carriage containing Roger and Ben turned the corner.

"Jinks!" exclaimed Crane. "There he is naow with Roger. Where d'you s'pose they're going?"

"The mystery is easily solved," declared Piper at once. "My deduction of the case is as follows: Eliot has a sister; this sister is attacked by the vicious dogs of one Fletcher; Stone rushes to her defense; he beats off the said dogs and kills one of them; the before-mentioned Eliot takes his before-mentioned sister home; he relates to his folks how she was rescued from dire peril and a

86

fearful fate by the before-mentioned Stone; at once her parents wish to see and thank the said Stone; Roger is dispatched post haste for the hero of the thrilling and deadly struggle; said hero is carried off in triumph to the palatial residence of the before-mentioned parents. I'll stake my professional reputation on the correctness of the deduction."

"Guess you're right, Sleuth," said Chub. "Roger thinks an awful lot of his sister, and he choked and couldn't seem to find words to say when he tried to thank Stone."

"Say," drawled Crane, "perhaps this Stone ain't such an awful bad feller after all. Jack Walker tol' me he pitched into Hunk Rollins hammer an' tongs 'cause Hunk was plaguing Jimmy Jones, and he said he was a-going to tell the professor the whole business. Bern Hayden is pretty top-lofty, and he's down on Stone for somethin', so he wants to drive Stone outer the school. I tell you fellers right here that I hope, by Jinks! that Stone don't go."

"'Sh!" hissed Sleuth mysteriously, glancing all around, as if fearful of being overheard. "Draw

87

back from this bright glare of light, where we may be spied upon by watchful and suspicious eyes."

When they had followed him into the shadow at the corner of the building and he had peered and listened some moments, he drew them close together and, in a low, hoarse voice, declared:

"It is perfectly apparent to my trained observation that there is more in this case than appears on the surface. I have struck a scent, which I am working up. I pledge you both to secrecy; betray me at your peril. Between Hayden and Stone there is a deadly and terrible feud. Sometime in the dark and hidden past a great wrong was committed. I feel it my duty to solve the problem and right the wrong. I shall know neither rest nor sleep until my task is accomplished and justice is done."

"Well," said Sile, in his quaint, drawling way, "you may git allfired tired an' sleepy, Sleuth; but I agree with Chub in thinkin' it pritty likely Roger is a-takin' Stone up to his haouse."

The boys were right in this conviction, although Ben did not suspect whither he was being carried

88

until they were passing the Methodist church and approaching Roger's home.

"I am taking you to dinner," said Roger, in answer to Ben's questioning. "Mother asked me to bring you in order that she may thank you for your brave defense of Amy against old Fletcher's dogs; and father wishes to see you, too."

Ben was filled with sudden consternation.

"Oh, say, Eliot," he exclaimed, "I can't go there!"

"Why not, old man? My mother is an invalid, you know, and she can't come to you. It will be a pleasure to her to meet you, and she has few enough pleasures in life."

"But—but," stammered Ben, remembering that Urian Eliot was known to be Oakdale's richest man and lived in the finest house in the village, "I am not prepared—my clothes——"

"Nonsense!" heartily returned Roger. "You will find us plain people who do not go in for ceremony and style. Your clothes are all right. Just you be easy and make yourself at home."

89 Little did Roger know of his companion's inward quaking and apprehension, but it seemed too late to get out of it then, and Stone was compelled to face the ordeal.

A stableman took charge of the horse and carriage, and they were met at the door by Amy Eliot, who had been watching for them.

"Here he is, Sis," said Roger. "I captured him and brought him off without letting him know what was up, or I'd never got him here."

Amy shyly, yet impulsively, took Ben's hand.

"You were so good to come and save me from those dreadful dogs!" she said. "I was nearly frightened to death. I know they would have eaten me up."

As Ben's chained tongue was seeking to free itself a stout, square, bald-headed, florid man, with a square-trimmed tuft of iron-gray whiskers on his chin, appeared in the doorway of a lighted room off the hall, and a healthy, hearty voice cried:

"So this is the hero! Well, well, my boy, give me your hand! I've heard all about it from Roger and Amy. And you actually killed old Fletcher's big dog with a club! Remarkable! Amazing! For that 90 alone you deserve a vote of thanks from every respectable, peaceable citizen of this town. But we owe you the heaviest debt. Our Amy would have been mangled by those miserable beasts but for your promptness and courage. Lots of boys would have hesitated about facing those dogs."

"This is my father, Stone," said Roger, as Urian Eliot was earnestly shaking the confused lad's hand.

Ben managed huskily to murmur that he was glad to meet Mr. Eliot.

From the adjoining room a woman's low, pleasant voice called:

"Why don't you bring him in? Have you forgotten me?"

"No, mother," answered Roger, taking Ben's cap from his hand and hanging it on the hall tree.

"No, indeed!" declared Mr. Eliot, as he led the boy into a handsome room, where there were long shelves of books, and great comfortable leather-covered chairs, and costly Turkish rugs on the hardwood floor, with a wood fire burning cheerfully in an open fireplace, and a frail, sweet-faced 91 woman sitting amid piled-up cushions in an invalid's chair near a table, on which stood a shaded lamp and lay many books and magazines. "Here he is, mother."

"Yes, here he is, mother," said Roger, smiling that rare, slow smile of his, which illumined his face and made it seem peculiarly attractive and generous; "but I'm sure I'd never made a success of it in bringing him if I had told him what I wanted in the first place."

"My dear boy," said Mrs. Eliot, taking Ben's hand in both her own thin hands, "mere words are quite incapable of expressing my feelings, but I wish I might somehow make you know how deeply grateful I am to you for your noble and heroic action in saving my helpless little girl from those cruel dogs."

At the sound of her voice Ben was moved, and the touch of her hands thrilled him. Her tender, patient eyes gazed deep into his, and that look alone was a thousand times more expressive of her gratitude than all the words in the language, though chosen by a master speaker. He thought of his own kind, long-suffering mother, now at rest, and there was a mist in his eyes.

"Believe me," he managed to say, "I didn't do it for thanks, and I——" 92

"I am sure you didn't," she interrupted. "You did it just because it was the most natural thing for a brave boy like you to do."

It was quite astonishing to him to have any one regard him as brave and noble, for all his life until now everybody had seemed to look on him as something quite the opposite; and, in spite of what he had done, he could not help thinking he did not deserve to be treated so kindly and shown so much gratitude.

"Sit down, Stone, old man," invited Roger, pushing up a chair.

"Yes, sit down," urged Mrs. Eliot. "I want to talk with you."

In a short time she made him feel quite at ease, which also seemed surprising when he thought of it; for to him, accustomed to poverty all his life, that library was like a room in a palace. And these people were such as circumstances and experience had led him to believe would feel themselves in every way his superiors, yet they had apparently received him as their equal and made no show of holding themselves far above him.

Urian Eliot, who stood on the hearth-rug, with his back to the fire and his hands behind him, 93 joined freely in the conversation, and Ben could not help wondering if this was really the rich mill-owner whom the greater number of the people of Oakdale regarded with an air of awe. He was very free and easy and plain-spoken, yet he had the reputation of being a hard business man, close-fisted to the point of penuriousness in all his dealings.

Amy came and stood close beside Ben, while Roger sat on the broad arm of a chair, gravely satisfied in his demeanor.

They talked of many things, and there was no suggestion of idle curiosity on the part of Mrs. Eliot when she questioned the visitor about himself.

Ben told of his home with Jacob Baldwin, an unsuccessful farmer, who lived some ten miles from Oakdale, explaining how he had done his best to carry on the little farm while Mr. Baldwin was 94 down with rheumatism, how he had planned and saved to get money to attend school, and how he had finally set by a small sum that he believed was sufficient to carry him through a term at the academy by strict economy.

Listening to this, Urian Eliot nodded repeatedly and rubbed his square hands behind his broad back with an atmosphere of satisfaction. When the boy had finished, Mr. Eliot surprised him by saying:

"That's the right sort of stuff—it's the kind that real men are made of. I like it. I was a poor boy myself, and I had a pretty hard time of it cutting cordwood and hoop-poles in winter and working wherever I could earn a dollar in summer; but I stuck to it, and I managed to pull through all right. You stick to it, my boy, and you'll win. I admire your grit."

Such complimentary words from a man like Urian Eliot meant a great deal, and they sent a glow over Ben. For the time he forgot the cloud hanging over him, forgot Bernard Hayden and the blighting past, forgot that he was an outcast who could never again cross the threshold of Oakdale academy save to face disgrace and expulsion.

Finally dinner was announced, and Roger carefully wheeled his mother in her chair from the library to the dining room, while Urian Eliot followed, offering advice and calling to Ben to come.

Amy's little hand stole into Ben's, and she pressed close to his side, looking up at him.

"I'm going to sit by you," she said. "I like you, Ben. I think you're just the best and bravest fellow in the world—except Roger," she finished, as an afterthought.

It was a happy hour for Ben.

CHAPTER IX.

PROFFERED FRIENDSHIP.

That dinner was one never forgotten by Ben. The softly, yet brightly, lighted table, with its spotless napery, shining silver, fine china and vase of flowers, caused him to feel suddenly overcome as he thought of his own poor, plain clothes and natural awkwardness. On the sideboard facets of cut glass sparkled and gleamed with many diamond colors. Above the wainscoting a few tasty pictures hung on the dark red walls.

Never before had the boy dined in such a room and at such a table, and the fear that he might do some awkward thing to make him blush with shame was painful upon him. By resolving to watch the others and follow their example he got along very well, and by the time the second course had disappeared their pleasant chatting and perfect freedom had loosened the strain so that he was once more somewhat at ease.

If he was awkward with his fork, no one noticed it, and finally he quite forgot his embarrassment in the realization of the, to him, remarkable fact that he was among friends, none of whom were seeking to discover his shortcomings that they might laugh over them and ridicule him behind his back.

Without an apparent effort to induce him, Ben was led to join in the conversation. He observed that Roger was very tender and considerate toward his mother, and he did not fail to note the glances of love and admiration which the invalid bestowed upon her stalwart son.

Little Amy was light-hearted and happy as she sat near the visitor and talked to him in her artless way, while Urian Eliot appeared to be one of those rare men who leave all their uncompromising grimness and stiff business manners out of doors when they enter their own homes.

When the dinner was finished they lingered a little over the coffee, all seeming keenly to enjoy this time of relaxation and pleasant converse. Turning to his son, Mr. Eliot asked:

"How are you coming on with your subscription scheme to raise funds to hire a football coach for your team, Roger?"

"Pretty well," was the answer. "But I must have twenty-five dollars more, at least. I think we have the material to make a good team this year, but it takes a coach who knows his business to get the very best result out of an eleven on which there is bound to be several absolutely green players. Wyndham means to beat us again this year, and we understand she has a Harvard man as a coach."

"I suppose you've got your eye on a good man you can secure for that business?"

"Yes; Dash Winton, of Dartmouth. He is one of the finest full-backs in the country, and was chosen last year for the All-American Eleven, picked from the leading colleges. Winton is the very man for us."

"Are you sure you can get him?" inquired Mr. Eliot.

Roger nodded. "I've taken care of that. I have corresponded with him, and I can have him here two days after I raise the money."

"Well," said Mr. Eliot, rising, "go ahead and raise all you can. When you can't get any more, come to me and I'll see what I can do for you."

"Thank you, father!" exclaimed Roger.

When they had returned to the library Roger asked Ben to come to his room, and Stone followed up the broad stairs.

Roger's room, like the rest of the house, was a wonder to Ben. In its alcove the white bed was partly hidden by portières. The rich carpet on the floor was soft and yielding to the feet. On a table were more magazines and books, part of a jointed fishing-rod, and a reel over which Roger had been puttering, as it did not run with the noiseless freedom that was necessary fully to please him. The pictures on the walls were such as might be selected by an athletic, sport-loving boy. Supported on hooks, there was also a rifle, while crossed foils adorned the opposite wall. In a corner was a tennis racket, and Ben observed dumb-bells in pairs of various sizes.

"Take the big chair, Stone," urged Roger. "You'll find it rather comfortable, I think. I like it to lounge in when I'm reading or studying."

Ben found himself wondering that this fellow who had so many things—apparently all a boy's heart could desire—should be so free-and-easy and should mingle every day without the least air of priggishness or superiority with other lads in much humbler circumstances.

This view of Roger's domestic life, this glimpse of his home and its seeming luxuries, together with a knowledge of his unassuming ways, led Stone's respect and admiration for him to increase boundlessly.

"Do you box, Stone?" asked Roger, as he removed from another chair a set of boxing gloves and tossed them aside before sitting down. "I suppose you do?"

"No," answered Ben, shaking his head; "I know nothing about it."

"So? Why, it's a good thing for a fellow to know how to handle the mitts. I thought likely you did when they told me how you biffed Hunk Rollins. Rollins is a scrapper, you know, although it is a fact that he usually picks his fights with smaller chaps."

"I hate fighting!" Stone exclaimed, with almost startling vehemence; and Roger noted that, as he uttered the words, he lifted his hand with a seemingly unconscious motion to his mutilated ear.

"But a fellow has to fight sometimes, old man. You gave Rollins what he deserved, and it may

teach him a lesson. By the way, Stone, I asked you out for practice yesterday, and something happened that caused you to leave the field. I am sorry now that I let you go, and I want you to come out to-morrow with the rest of the fellows. You ought to make a good man for the team, and we're going to need every good man this year."

Ben managed to hide his emotions, but Roger fancied there was a set expression on his face and a queer stare in his eyes. Thinking it probable Stone resented the treatment he had met on the field and the attitude of the boys on hearing Hayden's accusation, the captain of the eleven hastened to add:

"I hope you're not holding anything against me. I didn't know just how to take it when Hayden came at you that way. He's rather popular here, you know, and there's a chance that he'll be captain of the team next year. I'll be out of the school then; I'm going to college. Don't you mind 102
Hayden or anything he says; I'm captain of the team now, and I've asked you to practice with us. You will, won't you?"

There followed a few moments of silence, during which Ben was getting full command of himself. The silence was finally broken when he quietly said:

"I can't do it, Eliot."

"Can't?" exclaimed Roger, sitting bolt upright in astonishment. "Why not?"

"Because I shall not be at school to-morrow." Then, before Roger could ask another question, Ben hurried on, apparently anxious to have it quickly over and done with. "I thank you for again inviting me out for practice, and I want you to know that I appreciate it; but I can't come, because I have left the school for good."

This astonished Roger more than ever.

"Left school for good?" he echoed. "You don't mean that, Stone."

"Yes I do," declared Ben, almost doggedly.

"Left school? Why have you left school?"

"Because I am compelled to," explained the questioned lad, still resolutely keeping his emotion in 103
check. "I can't help it; I am forced out of school."

Eliot rose to his feet.

"What's all this about?" he asked. "You didn't come to school this afternoon. Was it because Prof. Richardson caught you thumping Rollins when the fellow was bullyragging that lame kid? Is that it, Stone?"

"That had something to do with it; but that's only a small part of the cause. That convinced the professor that I am all that's low and mean and vicious, just as Bernard Hayden's father told him. Hayden is behind it, Eliot; he is determined that I shall not attend school here, and he'll have his way. What can I do against Bern Hayden and his father? I am alone and without influence or friends; they are set against me, and Lemuel Hayden is powerful."

Although the boy still spoke with a sort of grim calmness, Roger fancied he detected in his forced repression the cry of a desperate, despairing heart. With a stride, he placed his hands on Ben's shoulders.

"Look here, Stone," he said urgingly, with an air of sincere friendliness, "take me into your 104
confidence and tell me what is the trouble between you and Bern Hayden. Perhaps I can help you some way, and it won't do any harm for you to trust me. You saved my little sister from old Fletcher's dogs, and I want to do something for you. I want to be your friend."

Ben could not doubt the honest candor of his companion, but he shrunk from unbosoming himself, dreading to narrate the unpleasant story of the events which had made both Bern Hayden and his father his uncompromising enemies and had forced him to flee like a criminal from his native village in order to escape being sent to the State Reformatory.

"Trust me, Stone," pleaded Roger. "I don't believe you'll ever regret it."

"All right!" exclaimed Ben suddenly; "I will—I'll tell you everything."

105

CHAPTER X.

STONE'S STORY.

"That's right," cried Roger, with satisfaction, resuming his seat. "Tell me the whole business. Fire away, old man."

As Ben seemed hesitating over the beginning of the story, Roger observed that, with an apparently unconscious movement, he once more lifted his hand to his mutilated ear. At that moment Eliot was struck with the conviction that the story he was about to hear was concerned with the injury to that ear.

"At the very start," said Ben, an uncomfortable look on his plain face, "I have to confess that my father was always what is called a shiftless man. He was more of a dreamer than a doer, and, instead of trying to accomplish things, he spent far too much time in meditating on what he might accomplish. He dreamed a great deal of inventing something that would make his fortune, and this 106
led him to declare frequently that some day he would make a lot of money. He was not a bad man, but he was careless and neglectful, a poor planner and a poor provider. The neighbors called him lazy and held him in considerable contempt.

"Although we were very poor, my father was determined that I should have an education, and I attended the public school in Hilton, where we lived. I know I'm not handsome, Eliot, and could never be much of a favorite; but the fact that we lived in such humble circumstances and that my father seemed so worthless caused the boys who dared do so to treat me with disdain. Naturally I have a violent temper, and when it gets the best of me I am always half crazy with rage. I always was pretty strong, and I made it hot for most of the boys who dared taunt me about my father or call me names. It seems to me now that I was almost always fighting in those times. I hated the other boys and despised them in a way as much as they despised me.

"My only boy friend and confidant was my little blind brother, Jerry, whose sight was almost 107
totally destroyed by falling from a window when he was only four years old. Although I always wished for a boy chum near my own age, I never had one; and I think perhaps this made me all the more devoted to Jerry, who, I am sure, loved me as much as I did him.

"Jerry's one great pleasure was in fiddling. Father had a violin, and without any instructions at all Jerry learned to play on it. It was wonderful how quickly he could pick up a tune. I used to tell him he would surely become a great violinist some day.

"Of course my temper and frequent resentment over the behavior of other boys toward me got me into lots of trouble at school. Once I was suspended, and a dozen times I was threatened with expulsion. But I kept right on, and after a while it got so that even the older and bigger boys didn't care much about stirring me up. If they didn't respect me, some of them were afraid of me.

"There was a certain old woman in the village who disliked me, and she was always saying I 108
would kill somebody some day and be hanged for it. Don't think I'm boasting of this, Eliot, for I'm not; I am heartily ashamed of it. I tell it so you may understand what led me into the affair with Bernard Hayden and made him and his father my bitter enemies.

"I suppose it was because I was strong and such a fighter that the boys gave me a chance on the school football team. Hayden opposed it, but I got on just the same. He always was a proud fellow, and I think he considered it a disgrace to play on the team with me. But I was determined to show the boys I could play, and I succeeded fairly well. This changed the bearing of some of them toward me, and I was beginning to get along pretty well at school when something happened that drove me, through no fault of my own, in shame and disgrace from the school and cast a terrible shadow on my life."

Here Stone paused, shading his eyes with his square, strong hand, and seemed to shrink from the task of continuing. Roger opened his lips to speak a word of encouragement, but suddenly decided that silence was best and waited for the other lad to resume.

"For some time," Ben finally went on, "my father had been working much in secret in a garret 109
room of our house. Whenever anything was said to him about this he always declared he was working out an invention that would enable him to make lots of money. I remember that, for all of our great poverty, he was in the best of spirits those days and often declared we'd soon be rich.

"There was in the village one man, Nathan Driggs, with whom father had always been on intimate terms. Driggs kept a little shop where he did watch and clock repairing, and he was noted for his skill as an engraver. Driggs was also rather poor, and it was often remarked that a man of his ability should be better situated and more successful.

"One dark night, near one o'clock in the morning, I was aroused by hearing someone knocking at our door. My father went to the door, and, with my wonder and curiosity aroused, I listened at an upper window that was open. The man at the door talked with my father in low tones, and I fancied he was both excited and alarmed.

"I could not hear much that passed between them, but I believed I recognized the voice of Driggs, 110
and I was sure I heard him say something about 'friendship' and 'hiding it somewhere.' When the man had gone I heard father climb the stairs to the attic. I wondered over it a long time before I fell asleep again.

"The following day my father was arrested and the house was searched. Concealed in the attic they discovered a bundle, or package, and this contained dies for the making of counterfeit money.

In vain father protested his innocence. Appearances were against him, and every one seemed to believe him guilty. On learning what the bundle contained, he immediately told how it came into his possession, stating it had been brought to him in the night by Nathan Driggs.

"Driggs was likewise arrested, but he contradicted my father's statement and positively denied all knowledge of the bundle or its contents. Several members of an organized body of counterfeiters had been captured, but these men did not manufacture their dies, and the Secret Service agents had traced the latter to Fairfield.

"Both father and Driggs were held for trial in heavy bonds. Neither of them was able to find 111
bondsmen, and so they went to jail. There were those in Hilton who fancied Driggs might be innocent, but everybody seemed to believe my father guilty. It was the talk of the town how he had shut himself in his garret day after day in a most suspicious manner and had often boasted that some day he would 'make a lot of money.'

"At the regular trial I was a witness. I told how Driggs had come to our house in the night, and I repeated the few words I had heard him say. The prosecutor did his best to confuse me, and when he failed he sarcastically complimented me on having learned my lesson well. You can't understand how I felt when I saw no one believed me.

"Again Driggs denied everything, and he had covered his tracks so well that it was impossible to find him guilty; but my father was convicted and sentenced to a long term in prison. It was a heavy blow to my poor mother, and she never recovered from it.

"I now found myself an outcast in every sense of the word, despised and shunned by all the boys 112
who knew me. Under such conditions I could not attend school, and I tried to do what I could to help my mother support the family; but no one seemed willing to give me work, and we had a pretty hard time of it.

"The worst was to come. Two months after being sent to prison my father attempted to escape and was shot and killed. Mother was prostrated, and I thought she would surely die then; but she finally rallied, although she carried a constant pain in her heart, as if the bullet that slew my father had lodged in her breast."

Once more the narrator paused, swallowing down a lump that had risen into his throat. He was a strong lad and one not given to betraying emotion, but the remembrance of what his unfortunate mother had suffered choked him temporarily. When he again took up his story he spoke more hurriedly, as if anxious to finish and have it over.

"It isn't necessary to tell all the unpleasant things that happened after that, but we had a hard 113
time of it, Eliot, and you can understand why it was that I just almost hated nearly everybody. But most I came to hate Bern Hayden, who was a leader among the village boys, and who never lost a chance to taunt and deride me and call me the son of a jail-bird. I don't know how I kept my hands off him as long as I did. I often thought I could kill him with a will.

"My little brother could get around amazingly well, even though he was blind, and he had a way of carrying father's old fiddle with him into a grove not far from our house. One day I came home and found him crying himself sick over the fiddle, which had been smashed and ruined. He told me Bern Hayden had smashed the instrument.

"That night Hayden visited another boy, with whom he was very chummy. This other boy lived some distance outside the village, and I lay in wait for Hayden and stopped him as he was crossing lots on his way home. It was just getting dark, and the spot was lonely. It was light enough, just the 114
same, for him to see my face, and I knew from his actions that he was frightened. I told him I was going to give him such a thumping that he'd remember it as long as he lived. He threatened me, but that didn't stop me a bit, and I went for him.

"Hayden wasn't such a slouch of a fighter, but he couldn't hold his own with me, for I was bursting with rage. I got him down and was punishing him pretty bad when somehow he managed to get out his pocket knife and open it. He struck at me with the knife, and this is the result."

Roger gave a cry as Ben again lifted a hand to his mutilated ear.

"He cut part of your ear off?" gasped Eliot.

Ben nodded. "Then I seemed to lose my reason entirely. I choked him until he was pretty nearly finished. As he lay limp and half dead on the ground, I stripped off his coat and vest and literally tore his shirt from his body. I placed him in a sitting posture on the ground, with his arms locked about the butt of a small tree, and tied his wrists together. With his own knife with which he had 115
marked me for life, I cut a tough switch from a bush, and with that I gave it to him on his bare back until his screams brought two men, who seized and stopped me. I was so furious that I had not heard their approach. I was all covered with blood from my ear, and I sort of gave out all at once when the men grabbed me.

"I tell you, that affair kicked up some excitement in Hilton. My ear was cared for, but even while he dressed the wound the doctor told me that Lemuel Hayden would surely send me to the reform school. My mother fainted when she heard what had happened.

"I believe they would have sent me to the reform school right away had I not been taken violently ill the following day. Jerry told me that Bern Hayden was also in bed. I was just getting up when mother fell ill herself, and in three days she died. I think she died of a broken heart. Poor mother! Her whole life was one of hardships and disappointments.

"Uncle Asher, mother's brother, arrived the day after mother died. He took charge of the funeral, 116
but almost as soon as he stepped off the train in Hilton he heard what a bad boy I was, and he looked on me with disfavor.

"After the funeral Jerry came to me in the greatest excitement and told me he had heard Lemuel Hayden and Uncle Asher talking, and uncle had agreed that I should be sent to the Reformatory, as Mr. Hayden wished. Uncle said he would look out for Jerry, but I was to be carried off the next morning.

"That night I ran away. I whispered good-by to Jerry and stole out of the house, with only a little bundle of clothing and less than a dollar in money. I managed to get away all right, for I don't

believe any one tried very hard to catch me. I fancy the people of Hilton thought it a good riddance.

"For a long time I was afraid of being taken. I found work in several places, but kept changing and moving until Jacob Baldwin took me to work for him. Both Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin have been awfully good to me, and sometime, if I ever can, I'm going to pay them back for it. They encouraged me to save money to come here to school. I came and found the Haydens here, and now that's all over.

"I've told you the whole yarn, Eliot; I haven't tried to hide anything or excuse myself. I know I was to blame, but you might have done something yourself if you had been goaded and tormented and derided as I was. Then to have Hayden do such a mean thing as to smash my brother's fiddle!

"You're the first person I've ever told the whole story to, and I suppose, now that you know just the sort of fellow I am, you'll agree with Hayden that I'm no fit associate for other boys at the academy."

CHAPTER XI.

ON THE THRESHOLD.

"On the contrary," declared Roger earnestly, as he once more rose from his chair, "I hold quite a different opinion of you, Stone. You have had a tough time of it, and any fellow in your place with an ounce of real blood in his body might have done just what you did. Every chap is human, and if you had submitted to insults and injury without resentment you would have been a soft mark. Hayden marked you for life, and he might have killed you when he struck with that knife; in return you gave him just what he deserved. There is nothing in the world I despise more than a fighter who is a bully, and nothing I admire more than a fighter who fights for his rights. I don't believe there is the least atom of a bully about you, Stone. Put me in your place and I might have gone farther than you did."

"Thank you, Eliot—thank you!" exclaimed Ben huskily, as he also rose. "But I have learned by experience that any fellow can't afford to try squaring up scores with an enemy by fighting or any sort of personal violence; I've found out he only injures himself the most, and I believe there must be other and better ways of getting even."

"Perhaps that's right, too," nodded Roger; "but I am satisfied that it is your natural impulse to protect the weak and defend them from the strong and brutal. You do it without pausing to think of possible consequences to yourself. That's why you defended Jimmy Jones from Hunk Rollins, who, by the way, is a duffer for whom I have no particular use. That is why you faced the fangs of old Fletcher's fierce dogs to save my sister. Stone, I think you're all right, and I'm ready to tell anybody so."

Again Ben expressed his thanks in a voice deep with emotion.

"Now," Roger went on, "I think we understand each other better, and I am satisfied that a chap of your grit and determination will be a valuable addition to the Oakdale Eleven, for there are some fellows on the team who lack sand and can be well spared. Don't talk to me about leaving school!" he exclaimed, lifting a hand and smiling in that manner which made him so attractive. "That's all nonsense! You're not going to leave school."

"But—but I can't stay," faltered Stone. "I don't want to leave, but——"

"You shan't; I'll see to that. Prof. Richardson shall know just why you sailed into Hunk Rollins, I promise you. When he understands that you were simply protecting a helpless cripple from a bully who was tormenting him he'll be pretty sure to do you justice. He'll find out how you defended my sister, too. I tell you it's all right, old fellow, and you'll stay right here at school as long as you care to do so."

A flush came to Ben's freckled cheeks and his eyes gleamed with growing eagerness.

"That's fine of you, Eliot!" he exclaimed.

"Fine—nothing! Do you think that will be anything compared with what you did for me? I should say not! If I didn't do that much I'd be a poor flub."

"Hayden—he will——"

"Don't you worry about Hayden. This is not Hilton, and it's not likely Lemuel Hayden could succeed in making much out of that old affair if he tried. Besides, I fancy my father has about as much influence in Oakdale as Lemuel Hayden has. He has been here a great deal longer, and the mill business of the place is decidedly more important than the lime industry. I'll guarantee that father will stand by you like a brick, so, you see, you have some friends of consequence."

It was difficult for Ben to comprehend at once that the thing which had menaced him and threatened to drive him like a criminal from Oakdale was no longer to be feared. From the depths of despair he was thus lifted to the heights of hope, but the sudden change seemed to bewilder him.

Roger's arm fell across his shoulders and Roger went on talking to him quietly and convincingly, making it plain that his proper course was to return to school the following day exactly as if nothing had happened.

"Leave it to me; leave it to me," Roger persisted. "I'll guarantee to settle the whole matter for you. Say you'll let me take care of this affair, old chap."

"You—I—I——"

"Then it's settled, is it?" cried the determined boy. "You'll be there to-morrow? That's first rate! Give me your hand on it."

Ben found Roger shaking his hand, and he returned the warm, friendly grip, a mist in his eyes.

"I can't hardly believe I'm lucky enough to have such a friend," half whispered the boy whose starved heart had yearned all his life for friendship and comradery. "It's too good to be true."

"Perhaps I'm a bit selfish about it, too," said Eliot. "I have my eye on you for the eleven, as we're bound to do up Wyndham this year. You ought to be a stiff man in the line. I want you to come out for practice to-morrow night. We'll have our coach next week, and then we'll have to settle right down to business and get into trim. He'll make us toe the scratch."

Later, on the way back to his bare room at Mrs. Jones', Ben wondered if he had not been dreaming. It did not seem possible that such good fortune could come to him at last, just when, to all appearances, his hard luck had culminated in blighting disaster.

As he thought of his visit to Roger Eliot's home, of his reception by Roger's family, of that dinner in the handsome dining room, and of Roger's earnest pledge on hearing his story to stand by him

and be his friend, a strange and wonderful feeling of lightness and exuberant happiness possessed him and made him long to shout and sing. An inward voice seemed whispering that he had left behind him all the dark shadows, and now stood on the threshold of a brighter and better life.

Still it was not wholly without a feeling of dread and misgiving that he approached the academy the following morning, and the fear that somehow things might not go right after all left his face pale, although his heart beat tumultuously, as he came up the gravel walk.

As usual at such an hour on warm and pleasant days while school was holding there was a group 124
of boys near the academy steps. Chipper Cooper had just finished telling for the thirteenth time that morning how Stone had defended Amy Eliot and "knocked the stuffing out of Fletcher's dogs," his every statement having been confirmed by Chub Tuttle, who was making a sort of after-breakfast lunch on peanuts.

Every boy in the gathering turned to look at Ben as he drew near, and had he observed he must have seen there was nothing of unfriendliness in their faces. When he would have passed them to enter the academy Chipper called to him.

"Hey, Stone!" he cried; "hold on a minute, will you? Where did you hit Old Tige's big dog when you knocked him stiff? We fellows have been wondering how you did it."

"I hit him on the back of his neck," answered Ben, pausing a bit.

"Well, that was a dandy trick!" declared Cooper. "You ought to have a reward of merit for that."

Chub Tuttle approached Ben and held out a handful of peanuts.

"Have some," he urged, his round face beaming. "Fresh roasted. Got 'em at Stickney's store." 125

"Thank you," said Ben, feeling his face flush as he accepted two or three of them.

At that moment Roger Eliot came from within the building, saw Ben and seized him immediately, saying:

"Just the fellow I'm looking for! Prof. Richardson wants to see you before school begins. Come in."

Then, with his arm about Ben, he drew him into the academy.

"By Jinks!" exclaimed Sile Crane; "I guess that pretty nigh settles things. When Roger Eliot takes up with a feller like that, Bern Hayden nor nobody else ain't goin' to down him much."

"'Sh!" hissed Sleuth Piper, assuming an air of caution and mystery. "I have been piping things off this morning, and I'll stake my reputation on it that Eliot has been fixing it for Stone. He has revealed to the professor the whole tragic tale of that encounter with Fletcher's dogs, and, besides that, the professor has been questioning some of the fellows who were on the scene of action when 126
the go between Stone and Rollins took place. My deduction is that Stone will come out of this affair with flying colors."

"You're almost too knowing to live, Sleuth," said Cooper sarcastically. "As for me, I rather hope Stone does come out all right, for if he stays in the school he may play football, and I reckon a stocky chap like him will just about fill an aching void in the right wing of the line."

"An aching void!" sneered Piper, who had not relished Cooper's words or manner. "Will you be good enough, Mr. Smarty, to tell us how a void can ache?"

"Why, sure," grinned Chipper promptly. "You have a headache sometimes, don't you?"

"Smarty! smarty!" cried Sleuth, as he fled into the academy to escape from the laughter of the boys.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SKIES BRIGHTEN.

Having opened school that morning in the usual manner, Prof. Richardson rose beside his desk, on which he tapped lightly with his knuckles, and surveyed the scholars over his spectacles, which seemed to cling precariously to the tip of his thin, aquiline nose. There was a slight bustle of expectancy all over the room, and then the scholars settled themselves down almost breathlessly to hear what the principal would say.

Having cleared his throat, Prof. Richardson began speaking slowly and distinctly, as if weighing every word. He did not look at first in the direction of Stone, who sat there flushed and chilled by turns, keeping his eyes on an open book which lay before him. There was sternness as he expressed his sentiments regarding the person with a bullying inclination who took pleasure in abusing those physically weaker than himself; and, although Sam Rollins' name was not mentioned, every one knew at whom those open remarks were directed.

Hunk knew, and in an effort to appear unconcerned and a trifle defiant he was openly brazen. Soon, however, his eyes drooped before the accusing gaze of the old professor.

The principal continued by commending with some warmth the individual whose impulses led him, regardless of personal danger or the chance of being misunderstood, to stand up in defense of one who was being mistreated and abused. He went on to say that such a thing had occurred upon the previous afternoon, and that through undue haste on his own part, which he now regretted, he had been led to misunderstand the situation and condemn the wrong person. He even displayed his own moral courage by offering an apology.

Ben Stone's cheeks were burning now, and his heart pounded so heavily that he fancied every one near him must hear it. He did not move as his grinning little seatmate reached over slyly to pinch him, whispering:

"That's for you, old feller."

Prof. Richardson was still speaking, and now he was telling of the remarkable heroism of a lad who had rushed to the defense of a little girl beset by two huge and vicious dogs. The principal's words were simple and straightforward; he made no effort at eloquence, and yet his language was singularly graphic and effective. He made them shiver at the picture he drew of little Amy Eliot besieged by Tige Fletcher's ugly pets. He caused them to see in imagination the dauntless defender of the child rushing to the spot and beating the brutes off.

"It was a very fine thing to do," said the professor, who was at last looking straight at the lad whose eyes remained fixed upon that open book. "It was something not a few men might have hesitated about doing, or, at least, might have done in fear and trepidation. It is really marvelous that the heroic lad escaped untouched by the fangs of those snarling beasts. By this deed he established beyond question the fact that he is a boy of fine courage, possessing the instincts which lead him unhesitatingly to face gravest peril in defense of those who are unable to defend themselves. I have certainly learned a great deal concerning this lad, who apparently has been much misunderstood in the past, and I am proud of the fact that he is a student in this school. I am speaking of Benjamin Stone."

A sudden hand-clapping broke out all over the room, and the professor did not check them nor reprove them for it.

There was, however, at least one who did not join in the burst of applause. Bernard Hayden's face was pale and cold, but in his bosom there was a raging fire of wrath and resentment.

Ben was overcome. His head bent lower, and he blinked his eyelids rapidly to scatter the blurring mist which threatened to blind him. His effort to smile simply contorted his plain face a trifle, and there was nothing noble or heroic in the picture he made.

"Gee!" whispered Ben's seatmate. "I never knew the old Prof. to get so enthusiastic before."

As the regular routine of the day was taken up, Ben still sat there without daring to look around. He did not know when Bern Hayden, complaining of illness, asked permission to go home. Like one in a trance, he tried to study, and finally succeeded in forcing his attention upon his lessons. It truly seemed that the last shadow had been dispelled.

At intermission the boys came flocking around him, and some of the girls smiled upon him in a friendly manner. They found, however, that he disliked to talk of his exciting encounter with Fletcher's dogs.

"The town fathers orter present you with a medal for killin' old Tige's big cur," said Sile Crane.

"It may not oc-*cur* to them to do it," chuckled Chipper Cooper.

"Permit me," grinned Chub Tuttle, "as a token of my high appreciation and gratitude, to present you with a genuine fresh roasted, double-jointed California peanut."

Even Spotty Davis hung around and sought to be familiar and friendly. Seizing Davis by the elbow, Sleuth Piper drew him aside and whispered mysteriously behind his hand:

"Listen to the deduction into which I have been led by the present surprising turn of affairs," pleaded Sleuth. "Take it from me that this man Stone will become a member of the great Oakdale eleven, which will be much strengthened by his marvelous prowess and undaunted courage."

"Mebbe so," nodded Spotty; "but it ain't going to set well in Bern Hayden's crop."

Walker, Ben's seatmate, who had once felt it a sore affliction to be placed beside him, now

hovered near, seeking to enjoy a little irradiated glory.

It was all very strange and unusual for Stone, and in spite of his pleasure in it his natural shyness continued to make him appear distant and somewhat sullen.

When midday intermission arrived Ben hastened to leave the academy, rushing away before any of the boys could join him. That day his cold lunch tasted sweet indeed, and his little bare room looked strangely attractive and homelike.

He returned late to the academy, arriving barely in time to escape being tardy. All the afternoon he studied hard, and in his recitations he was well prepared. 133

School over for the day, he was not given time to get away before the others, Eliot capturing him on the steps.

"Come on over to the gym, old fellow," urged Roger. "This time you're going to practice. I know the place for you in the line."

"Come on, come on," called several others; "we must get at it early to-night."

Hayden was not with them; he had not returned to the academy since leaving on the plea of illness.

Again in the dressing room, Ben was supplied with football togs from Eliot's locker. He dressed silently, listening to the chatter of the boys around him. They were all talking football now.

"I wonder where Bern is?" said Berlin Barker. "I should think he would want to get out with us to-night."

"He was taken suddenly ill," grinned Chipper Cooper. "Wonder if he has had a doctor?"

Stone felt a chill at the mention of his enemy's name. He was congratulating himself over Hayden's absence when something like a shadow seemed to come over him, and he looked up quickly to discover the fellow in the open doorway. 134

"Eliot," called Bern, stepping into the room, "I want a few private words with you."

CHAPTER XIII.

HAYDEN'S DEMAND.

As he passed, the fellow cast a single malignant glance of hatred in Stone's direction. Through the door which opened into the big, long main room of the gymnasium he strode, grimly inviting Eliot to follow him.

"Gee!" sibilated Sleuth Piper. "I scent trouble. Bern is mounted on his high horse."

"Some folks who ride high hosses git a fall," drawled Sile Crane, making a wry face as he pushed his left foot into a cleated shoe. "Drat that corn! If it don't stop botherin' me purty soon, I'll whittle the whole toe off."

After hesitating a moment, Roger Eliot slowly followed Hayden, who had paused with an air of impatience to wait for him in the big room. Through the open doorway Ben saw them standing close together, Hayden beginning to speak in low tones in a manner of mingled demand and threat.

"Look here, Eliot," said Bern, "I want to know what you mean to do. I want an immediate understanding."

"What is it, Bern?" asked Roger. "What are you talking about?"

"About that son of a stripe wearer, Stone. Are you going to attempt to ram him down my throat?"

"Not at all. If you fancy you have any just reason for not wishing to be friendly with Stone, that's your business, and I'm not going to dip into the affair."

"Fancy!" grated Hayden resentfully. "There's no fancy about it. Friendly with him—friendly with such a low-bred, worthless cur? To suggest friendship between us is an insult to me."

"I have no wish to insult you, old fellow. Doubtless you believe you have honest reasons for your dislike toward Stone. Nevertheless, it's a fact that many persons hate others from no just cause."

"You're insinuating that I'm unjust and dishonest in this matter. Doubtless Stone has told you a clever lie, and now simply because he defended your sister when she was attacked by Fletcher's dogs you're ready to take sides with him against me."

"I don't propose to take sides at all unless compelled to do so."

"You've done so already."

"How?"

"By going to Prof. Richardson and interceding in Stone's behalf. You can't deny that. You certainly did it."

"Will you wait until I attempt to deny anything?" requested Roger coldly. "I did go to the professor and tell him a few plain facts which I happened to know."

"Facts!" sneered Bern. "Lies which Stone had poured into your ears. It's remarkable that you should take the word of a creature like that instead of mine."

"You don't know what you're talking about, Hayden. I spoke to the professor about the encounter between Rollins and Stone, and likewise told him of Stone's heroic defense of Amy. Prof. Richardson believed Ben had attacked Hunk without reasonable provocation; he was not aware that the affair had been brought about by Rollins' bullying abuse of little Jimmy Jones. I was not the only one who gave him the straightforward facts; an eye-witness of the whole thing had spoken to him about it before I mentioned it. Naturally, I am grateful toward Stone; I'd be a fine fellow if I wasn't."

"He's a cheap dog, and all your efforts to patch him up and make him appear decent won't succeed; his real nature can't help coming to the surface. Why, it's only necessary for one to take a look at him to size him up. What has he told you about me?"

"I prefer not to speak of any private conversation that may have taken place between Stone and myself."

"Oh, then he *has* told you a mess of stuff. I knew it. If you wish to know what people think of Stone in Hilton, I'll furnish evidence enough. His father was convicted of counterfeiting, sent to prison, and——"

"Do you believe that the errors of a parent should blight the life of his son?"

"'Like father, like son,' is an old saying, Eliot. Water won't run up hill. But Stone's own record is enough to ban him from decent company. His own uncle admitted that he ought to be sent to the reform school, and he would have been if he hadn't run away. The people of Hilton regard it as a good riddance, too."

"It's hard for a fellow when his own relatives turn against him."

"It's plain where your sympathies lie!" exclaimed Hayden resentfully. "You're ready and willing to take up for this fellow against me. You've brought him here to make him a member of the eleven. Go ahead, but let me repeat that I'll never disgrace myself by playing on the same team with him."

"Do you think that's the proper spirit, Hayden? You know the team is decidedly weak in several spots. We're particularly anxious to beat Wyndham this year, and in order to do so we've got to put our strongest team into the field. A fellow who is loyal to his school and his team puts aside personal prejudices and is ready for almost any sacrifice. If Stone becomes a member of the eleven you don't have to accept him as a friend, and it's not necessary that you should associate with him off the field. You're unreasonably angry now, Bern, but if you'll take time to cool off and think it over, I'm confident you'll perceive the mistake you're disposed to make."

Hayden lifted his clenched fist in a passionate gesture. "I tell you, Eliot, you can't ram him down my throat. You ought to know whether or not I'm of especial value to the team. If I was willing to

try, I couldn't play upon it and do myself justice with that fellow a member. You'll have to choose between us."

"I don't wish to do anything of the sort. I'm captain of the team, and, even though I disliked Stone as bitterly as you do, I'd accept him as a member if I knew he would strengthen our forces."

"Yes, you're captain of the team," sneered Bern, "and you're trying to work for your own advantage; but let me inform you that if you persist in this course it will be to your decided disadvantage. You'll find I'm not the only one who can't swallow Stone. If you want harmony on the team—and that's rather important—just send him scooting. He can't play football, anyhow. He's a big, lumbering, dull-witted creature who will be an incumbrance."

"I can't see how we can tell about that until he has been tried out."

Again the indignant lad made that passionate gesture with his clenched fist. "Try him out then!" he snarled. "Have your own way and see what comes of it, but you'll be sorry for your obstinacy." With which he stepped past Roger and walked swiftly back through the dressing room, his dark face pale with pent-up exasperation.

"I say, Bern," called Berlin Barker, "where are you going? Aren't you going to stay for practice?"

"Not to-night," Hayden flung over his shoulder, "nor any other night until Eliot comes to his senses."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BONE OF CONTENTION.

For a few moments the boys looked at one another in silence, their faces expressive of dismay. To a fellow, they understood what it meant, and presently some of them glanced toward Ben Stone. He likewise knew, and, rising, he stepped forward to meet the captain of the eleven.

"Eliot," he said in a low tone, "I think I'd better get out. I'm making a lot of trouble."

Before them all Roger placed a hand on Ben's shoulder. "Stone," he retorted, "the trouble is not of your making. I invited you to come out for practice, and I hope you won't go back on me now."

As long as he put it that way, it was impossible for Ben to quit.

Minus Hayden, the boys repaired to the field. They lacked their usual exuberance, however, and Ben detected some of them speaking together in low tones. In spite of everything, he felt that he was an intruder, and his self-consciousness made him particularly awkward and slow about the work he was given to perform. He fumbled punts, he fell on the ball in wretched form, and there seemed to be leaden weights in his shoes. Occasionally he detected some of the boys watching him in anything but a manner of approval.

Finally Eliot made up the team, filling Hayden's place in the backfield with a substitute and placing Stone at left guard.

"You're good and solid," smiled Roger, "and when you wake up you ought to strengthen this wing of the line. Remember to start low and quick at the signal."

But although the signals, which were very simple, had been fully explained to Ben, he could not grasp them quickly, and he was more or less confused when the time came to act. Roger, however, seemed to consider this very natural, and laughed at him in a good humored way.

"You'll get onto it all right in time," declared the captain. "Perhaps this code of signals won't be used at all after we get our coach. I'm just trying the fellows out to get them used to the formations."

"My deduction is—" began Piper; but no one listened to him.

Practice over, Ben returned to the gymnasium to change his clothes, feeling far from pleased with himself. His discomfiture was increased when he heard Berlin Barker telling some of the boys that he considered it a great misfortune that Hayden should become huffed and leave the team.

"I don't know how we're going to get along without him in the backfield," said Barker. "He's fast, and he knows the game right down to the ground. His place can't be filled."

"Oh, he'll get over it," prophesied Cooper cheerfully. "He will come round in a day or two."

"You don't know him," returned Berlin. "He'll never change his mind."

Ben sat alone in his room, thinking it all over. He felt that Barker was right in believing that as long as he remained on the team Bern Hayden would not return to it. That Hayden was a good player and a valuable man he had no doubt. What did it matter whether he himself played football or not? True, he would have enjoyed doing so, but, to a certain extent, he had triumphed over the fellow who had tried to drive him out of school, and might it not be best if that satisfied him? Discord on the team was a serious misfortune, and only for Eliot's persistence he would have taken himself away already.

"Roger is a fine fellow," he whispered. "He's a friend worth having. Still, in order to show his friendliness toward me, he should not produce disruption on the eleven. For the good of the school I must withdraw."

He went out for a walk in the open air. Passing the post office, he saw in the light which shone from the open door Berlin Barker and Bernard Hayden talking together.

"Barker stands by Hayden," he muttered, "and I suppose there are others."

He did not sleep well that night; he was disturbed by dreams, in which he lived over again that desperate struggle with his malignant enemy—the struggle that had brought upon him the great trouble of his life.

Saturday morning Ben sought Roger Eliot at the latter's home and was given a hearty welcome. Roger invited him in, but the visitor preferred not to enter, and they went into the garage, where Urian Eliot kept his big touring car.

"She's a beaut, Ben," said Roger, admiring the polished, glittering automobile; "but father is queer and won't let me drive it. He had to discharge our chauffeur; the man drank. It's a shame for the car to be hung up just now, with the roads in elegant condition. I can drive a car as well as any one, but I have to consider my father's whims. If we get hold of another chauffeur before the season is over, I'll take you out for a ride that you'll enjoy."

Ben flushed; there was no halfway business about Roger, who had taken his stand and was ready to let every one know that he regarded Stone as a worthy friend. Ben had never set foot in an automobile, and the promise of a ride in Mr. Eliot's fine car gave him a thrill.

"Thank you," he said; "I know I shall enjoy it."

He found it difficult to introduce the topic which had led him there, but presently he succeeded, and Roger listened calmly to his argument.

"Stone," said the captain of the eleven, "you're not looking at this matter from the proper angle. I've told Hayden what I think of a fellow who would allow personal prejudice to lead him into deserting his team. Hayden wants to be captain next year, and he will be if he stands by the team.

Otherwise, some one else will be elected. He'll think this over when he cools down, and I prophesy that he will come back. It would be a mistake for you to quit now, for it would weaken my authority. Why, Hayden would be the man who was running the team, not I. I want you out for practice this afternoon. By Monday, perhaps, Bern will come to his senses."

Roger was indeed a grim and determined fellow, and Ben was finally compelled to yield to his judgment.

That afternoon, however, Barker, as well as Hayden, failed to come out for practice. This made it 148
necessary to use two substitute half-backs, in neither of whom the boys had any confidence whatever. On the whole the practice was of the most unsatisfactory sort, and, if possible, Stone appeared at greater disadvantage than ever, something caused almost wholly by his knowledge that he was a "bone of contention" and his firm belief that the majority of the boys were greatly displeased by the trouble he had caused.

On his way home he was in a downcast mood when Spotty Davis overtook him. Spotty had suddenly betrayed an unwelcome inclination to extreme friendliness.

"Oh, cheer up," he said. "You ain't to blame. Of course Hayden's pretty sore, but Roger is bound to have his way, and he won't give in to anybody."

"That's it," said Ben; "I feel like an intruder. I feel that I'm doing positive harm to the team. Why didn't Barker come out?"

"Oh, he's one of Bern's friends, and I guess he's going to stand by him. It will be pretty hard luck 149
to lose 'em both. I dunno how Roger's ever going to fill their places."

"I'm breaking up the team," muttered Ben. "I'd like to play football, but——"

"Most of the fellers don't seem to think you'd ever be much of a player," grinned Spotty frankly. "Now if we was going to lose Bern and you could fill his place, it would be different. Anyhow, mebbe Hayden and Barker will come back when the coach gets here. Roger says he's going to wire for him to-night. He's got enough money pledged."

"It will give me no more pleasure than it will Hayden to play on the same team," declared Ben; "but I'd be willing to do anything for the good of the school. That's why I thought I hadn't better play. I'm not anxious to make trouble."

"Bern says you've always been a trouble maker. Oh, he's got it in for you, all right. But you've won a lap on him, the best he can do. It's bitter medicine for him to swaller. He tried to down you, and he'd done it, all right, if you hadn't put yourself on top by defending Amy Eliot. That was lucky for you. Urian Eliot has got about as much pull as anybody 'round these parts. You just better let 150
things simmer along, and they'll come out all right."

Nevertheless, Spotty's words added to Stone's disquietude of mind, for he also believed that the loss of Hayden from the team—to say nothing of Barker—could not be compensated for.

Sunday passed quietly. Not having a suit of clothes to satisfy him, Ben did not attend church. He spent much of the day with Jimmy, and was invited to supper by Mrs. Jones, who had heard all about his bravery and persisted in talking of it. Mamie, however, snubbed him mercilessly.

When Roger appeared at school on Monday morning he informed the boys that he had heard from Winton, who would arrive early enough in the afternoon to begin the work of coaching that day. He even took particular pains to tell Hayden.

"I'm not at all interested in your team, Eliot," said Bern repellently.

"My team," cried Roger—"*mine?* Why, you ought to be as much interested in it as I am. I took you 151
for a fellow who would be loyal and——"

Hayden cut him short. "I don't want to hear any more of that talk from you. You'll find me loyal enough to the team when you do what I ask of you. If you don't do it, I doubt if you'll have any team in another week."

That night in addition to Hayden and Barker there were two other deserters, Rollins and Sage. Eliot was compelled to explain the situation to the coach. Winton listened and asked a few questions. In the end he advised Roger to drop Ben Stone.

152

CHAPTER XV.

THE FELLOW WHO WOULDN'T YIELD.

Through the mail that night Roger received a letter from Jack Merwin, captain and manager of the Clearport eleven, which he read ere leaving the post office. The letter was as follows:

"Mr. Roger Eliot,
"Capt. Oakdale Academy Football Team,
"Dear Sir:—
"Replying to yours of the 13th regarding the scheduling of one or more games between Oakdale and Clearport, would say that we have an open date on next Saturday, the 29th, and will play you here in Clearport if you care to come. After the usual custom, we will, of course, defray the expenses of the visiting team. I trust you will inform me without delay whether or not this proposal is acceptable to you.
"Yours truly,
"John Merwin, Capt. Clearport Eleven."

With the letter still in his hand, Roger met Sam Rollins on the postoffice steps. Hunk would have hurried on into the building, but Eliot stopped him.

"Look here, Rollins," he questioned. "I want to know why you failed to come out for practice to-day?" 153

Hunk shrugged his thick shoulders. "Why, I had some work to do," he faltered.

"Did you, indeed? How long since you have become ambitious to work? You know, according to your reputation, you never lift a hand to do any labor if you can avoid it."

"Ho!" grunted Rollins. "That's all right. Sometimes a feller has to do some things."

"Why didn't you tell me you weren't coming out to the field? You should have given me notice, and you could have done so without any trouble at all."

"I didn't think of it," lied Hunk.

"You know better than that, Rollins. At any rate, you should have thought of it. You were told that our new coach would be on hand, and you knew well enough that I wanted every man out at the field."

"Was I the only one who didn't come?" asked the fellow, with a leer. 154

The grim expression of Roger's face did not change in the least. "I'm talking to you about what *you* did, and not speaking of the acts of any one else. I shall say what I have to say directly to them, as I do to you."

"Well, what are you going to do about it if I don't come out?" was Hunk's insolent question.

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do, Rollins, and you'd better pay close attention. You're not such a valuable man to the team that any one would think of chasing you up and coaxing you. Your place can be filled, and it will be filled if you play any more such tricks."

"Oh, perhaps you can fill the places of some other fellers."

"Perhaps so; but, as I just remarked, I'm telling you what will happen in your individual case. If you want to play on the academy eleven, you'll come out for practice regularly, or you'll give a good and sufficient excuse in case you can't appear—and give it in advance, too. If you're not at the field to-morrow afternoon when practice begins you'll be dropped for good."

"Say, you're a regular autocrat, ain't ye? You're going to try to run things your way with an iron hand, ain't ye? Mebbe you'll find out——" 155

"That's enough. You've heard all I have to say. Think it over. If you don't come out to-morrow night it won't be any great loss to the team." With which Eliot left Rollins there on the steps, muttering and growling beneath his breath.

At the very next corner Roger saw a fellow who had been coming toward him cross over suddenly to the opposite side of the street, which was darker. He recognized the figure and movements of Fred Sage, the quarter back, who had likewise absented himself without excuse or explanation of any sort.

"Sage," he called sharply, "I'm looking for you."

The fellow paused, and then slowly recrossed the street toward the determined captain of the eleven.

"That you, Roger?" he asked in pretended surprise. "I didn't recognize you." 156

Eliot despised him for the prevarication and was tempted to give him the same advice about lying that he had given Rollins. Instead of that, however, he asked:

"Have you decided not to play football this season?"

"Why—why, no," stammered Fred. "How'd you get that idea?"

“You weren’t at the field this afternoon, and I told you our coach would be there, for which reason I desired every man to be on hand. You are filling an important position on the team. Of course we have a substitute who can take your place if you are injured in a game, but that will make it necessary to shift the line-up. If you have any thought of quitting, I want to know it now.”

Sage shifted his weight from one foot to the other and twisted his heel into the ground. Twice he started to speak; twice he stopped; then he suddenly blurted:

“You’ll have trouble finding substitutes for all the fellows who didn’t come out to-day.” 157

“So that’s it,” said Roger. “I’m glad you didn’t make the same excuse as Hunk Rollins—didn’t claim you had work to do. Sage, the academy football team will not be broken up by the underhand work of any one, nor do I propose to knuckle to the man who is seeking by such contemptible methods to force my hand. Don’t pretend that you don’t know what I mean, for you do. If I yielded in this case, any fellow who had a grudge against another chap might try the same picayunish, selfish, discipline-wrecking trick. A chap who is so unpatriotic that he will quit his team because he had a personal grudge against some fellow on it is of no real value to the team anyhow; and when he seeks to lead others to follow his example he’s worse than a traitor. You have lived in Oakdale long enough to know that I have influence and a following, and I’ll tell you now that I’m not going to be whipped into line by the fellow who is trying to force me to yield to him. No matter how much the team is weakened by deserters, it will go ahead and play football—it will do so even if we don’t 158 win a game this season. I would like to see you at the field for practice to-morrow afternoon, but you’ll not be asked again to come out. Good night.”

Sage stood there looking after Eliot as the latter’s sturdy figure melted into the darkness.

“By Jove!” he muttered. “Roger means it, and when he makes up his mind in that fashion nothing in the world can change him. He has all of old Urian Eliot’s stubbornness. Bern never can make him bend.”

Eliot contemplated seeking Berlin Barker next, but suddenly he decided to go straight to Hayden himself. He arrived at the latter’s home just as Bern was bidding Barker good night. Berlin looked a trifle startled as the captain of the eleven appeared, but into Hayden’s eyes there sprang a light of satisfaction; for he fancied Eliot had come to temporize, possibly to plead.

“Good evening. Glad to see you, old fellow,” he said with pretended friendliness. “Berlin and I have just been having a little chat. Won’t you come up to my room?”

“Yes,” said Roger.

Once in Hayden’s room, the visitor did not beat about the bush in the least. He declined to sit 159 down. Facing the dark-eyed youth, who regarded him expectantly, he spoke deliberately and with a grimness that gave assurance of his unalterable resolution.

“Hayden, I can’t find words to express my contempt of the methods to which you have resorted. I’ve something to say to you, and I hope you’ll not interrupt me. You have succeeded in leading your friends and certain weak-kneed fellows to follow your lead in failing to come out for practice. There are four of you, all told. I doubt if there’s another fellow in Oakdale who can be induced to do such a thing, and I’m sure there can’t be more than one or two. I’m not asking anything of you; play your cards to the limit. However, I’m going to tell you precisely what will happen. When you have won all the followers possible, there will still be enough fellows left to make up a team, and that team will go ahead and play through the present season. Doubtless you will weaken it, and the record may not be one to be proud of; but your record will be still more shameful. I’m dead sure that the 160 majority of the fellows will back me up. You are looking to be chosen captain of the team for next season. What chance do you think you will stand if you persist in your dirty work? Yes, that’s what I call it—dirty work. Why, you won’t even be a member of the team, and it would be impossible to elect a man outside the team for captain next year.”

By this time Hayden’s face was pallid with rage and his eyes glowing. He trembled a little, and his voice shook as he retorted:

“You seem to fancy yourself a perfect czar, Roger. Have you got an idea that you alone can throw me off the team? Answer me that.”

“If you leave the team it won’t be necessary to throw you off; you’ll take yourself off by your own act.”

“You know why I refuse to play. You’re the one who is weakening the team by insisting on retaining that miserable——”

“It won’t do you any good to slur Ben Stone, and I don’t think you’d better call him names before 161 me. Of course I wouldn’t put a hand on you here in your own home, but——”

“Great Cæsar! you’re threatening me, Eliot.”

“Stone will remain on the team, Hayden; you may as well make up your mind to that. If you haven’t manhood enough to come back and work for the team, you’re not worthy to be on it. You’re going to find it a losing fight, my boy; you may hurt me, but you’ll hurt yourself far more. The poorer record the team makes without you and your friends, the more you’ll be blamed when the season is ended. Think that over. It’s all I have to say.”

Without even adding good night, Roger left the room, descended the stairs and passed out of the house.

CHAPTER XVI.

STONE'S DEFIANCE.

It is almost impossible to describe the mental condition of Bernard Hayden immediately after Roger's departure. Resentful wrath nearly choked him, and for a few moments he raged against Eliot like a lunatic. Even when he grew calmer outwardly, the fierce tumult in his heart continued.

"How dare that fellow come here and talk to me in such a fashion!" he snarled, pacing the floor of his room; "how dare he! So he's going to stand by Stone at any cost! Judging by what I've heard about him, he's just mule enough to do it, too. I presume he's right in believing he has pull enough with the fellows to carry the thing through. I've got to down Stone, and I will; but I can't afford to hurt myself while I'm about it, and, with Eliot taking the stand he vows he will take, it will be necessary for me to try other tactics. I hate to give in a whit, and I'll only seem to do so, in order that I may adopt some other plan—some plan that can't possibly fail. Perhaps you think you have me nipped, Mr. Eliot, but at any cost I'll win eventually."

The following morning, watched by Jimmy, Stone was mending a broken swing in the orchard behind Mrs. Jones' house when, looking up, he discovered Bern Hayden standing not twenty feet away. Their glances met and clashed, and, startled by the strange look on Ben's face, Jimmy glanced round, discovering the frowning, dark-faced intruder.

"Oh!" gasped the little chap nervously. "I didn't hear nobody coming."

Ben had straightened up to his full height. His stout shoulders were squared, his feet planted firmly, and he fronted his foe without a symptom of quailing. He had felt that this time must come, but now the dread of it passed from him instantly, and he was almost frightened by that feeling of eager fierceness and uncontrollable rage which had possessed him in the hour when he was led to wreak physical violence on Hayden for the destruction of little Jerry's fiddle. Slowly and unconsciously he lifted his hand and touched his mutilated ear.

Bern, seeing that movement, flushed until his face took on a purplish tinge.

"It would have been a good thing," he said in a harsh voice, "if in self-defense I had struck more effectively."

Every nerve in Stone's body seemed to vibrate. Without looking at the lame boy, who had begun to creep toward him, he said:

"Jimmy, you had better go into the house. I've some private business to transact with this person."

The little lad hesitated a few steps away. "Ben," he whispered, "oh, Ben, I'm afraid!"

"Go into the house, please," urged Stone; and, with many fearful backward glances, Jimmy limped away.

For yet some moments they continued to stare, those two who hated each other with all the intensity of their natures. If stabbing eyes could have killed, both would have sunk, mortally wounded, beneath the orchard trees.

"What do you want?"

It was Stone who asked the question. With a start, Hayden advanced a few steps, but he stopped while yet well beyond reach of the other lad's powerful hands. As he noted that Bern was disinclined to come nearer, something like a hideous smile momentarily contorted Stone's uncomely face.

"As I was passing I saw you here," said Bern, "and I decided to tell you just what you're doing. You're ruining the Oakdale football team, for there are a number of decent fellows who absolutely refuse to play on the same eleven with you."

"Decent fellows!" scoffed Ben. "Your friends! If they knew you for what you are, as I do, the least decent among them would have nothing to do with you."

"Eliot is mulish, and, having taken a stand, he dislikes to turn back; but I know—and others know—that he would rejoice to be rid of you. You would realize it yourself if you were not so dull. Of course he tells you he wants you to play, for since you protected his sister he feels that he can't do anything else. You saw last night that the fellows are quitting the team. It's because you're on it, and besides those who have already quit there will be others. I'm in a position to know just how they all feel about it, and unless you take yourself off it won't be long before Eliot will have no team behind him. You can't play football, anyhow."

It was this final taunt that brought Stone's retort. "I can play as well as you, Hayden, and I'll prove it, too. In Hilton you always had your own way, but you can't in Oakdale. You helped break my mother's heart; you disfigured me for life, and you drove me, an outcast, from Hilton. Here, assisted by your cold-blooded, heartless old father, you tried your best to get me turned out of school and to force me in disgrace from the town. You failed in that, just as henceforth you'll fail in all your vile schemes. I was compelled to run from you once, but I'll never do so again, Hayden. I'll never turn my back on you; I'll fight you to the finish, and may the best man win."

"By which, I presume, you mean that you're going to stick on the team?"

"I'm going to stick on the team; I'm going to stick in the school; I'm going to stick right here; and for all of you I'll come out on top."

It was a flat defiance, and at last Hayden realized that mere words alone would be quite as potent to move a mountain.

“Very well,” cried Bern, “then you’ll have to take the consequences, you—you son of a——”

“Stop! My father is dead—murdered—an innocent man. It will not be safe for you ever again to utter a slur against him in my hearing.”

The threat in the speaker’s face was far more effective than in his words, and Bern Hayden did not complete the interrupted sentence. Turning, he walked swiftly away, followed by the eyes of the lad he had failed to intimidate.

Spotty Davis, leaning on the orchard fence, had been watching them for some moments. Hayden scarcely noticed Spotty as he passed, and Davis grinned at Ben, to whom he called:

“Come on, Stoney, let’s toddle up to the acad. You’ll be late if you don’t come along now.” 168

A strange calmness had come over Ben Stone. This had taken the place of the wrath that had burned in his veins, and now he felt that he was indeed master of himself. And whoever masters himself may likewise master fate.

“You’n Bern are gittin’ kinder friendly, ain’t yer?” chuckled Spotty, as Ben came out. “Sorter surprised me to see him makin’ a mornin’ call on you.”

As he passed through the academy gate, Hayden glanced back and saw Stone and Davis coming. A strange look flashed swiftly across his face, and the words which he muttered no one save himself could have understood had they heard them.

That night Roger Eliot noted with satisfaction that Fred Sage was promptly on hand at the football field. Hunk Rollins likewise put in an appearance; and, to complete Eliot’s triumph, both Barker and Hayden arrived before practice began.

There were others who took notice of these things, and Sleuth Piper, whispering mysteriously in 169
Chub Tuttle’s ear, observed:

“My deduction is that Capt. Eliot has put on the screws and brought the delinquents to time. The before-mentioned delinquents have come trotting up to the dough dish as gentle as lambs, and——”

“Lambs don’t like dough,” said Chub. “Your figures of speech are shocking, Sleuth.”

“Mebbe so,” said Piper. “Gimme a peanut, will you?”

CHAPTER XVII.

AN ARMED TRUCE.

At practice that night Stone astonished everybody, even himself. All hesitation and doubt seemed to have left him, and at everything he attempted he was amazingly sure and so swift that not a few of the boys who had fancied him heavy and awkward gasped with astonishment and confessed to one another that they had “sized him up wrong.” Those who had fancied him dull of wit were also led to wonder over the rapidity with which he seemed to grasp and understand every suggestion of the coach. He was able to catch punts on the dead run; when he fell on the ball he got it cleanly, never once permitting it to bound away from him; and he could kick, too, his sturdy right leg sending the pigskin sailing far through the air.

Bern Hayden likewise practiced well, putting all his usual snap and dash into everything he did, his accomplishments plainly demonstrating why he had been generally singled out as the fellow who would certainly be chosen as captain of next year’s team. Of them all he was, perhaps, the only one who gave no attention to Stone; as far as he was concerned—outwardly, at least—Ben did not exist.

All this was most encouraging and stimulating to Capt. Eliot and the others. The coach, who on the previous night had felt greatly disappointed in the material from which he had hoped to build a clever high school eleven, betrayed his relief and satisfaction by the altered expression of his face and the change in his manner. In fact, every one seemed happy, and possibly, with the exception of Hayden, every one was.

With remarkable craft Bern masked his feelings. He did not even betray the wrath that stirred his soul when, standing a short distance away, he heard Dash Winton say to Eliot:

“I think I was mistaken about that chap Stone. I fancied he wasn’t much good, but I’ve changed my mind since watching him work to-night. He ought to make one of the most valuable men on the team.”

“I’m glad you think so,” returned the captain; “for we certainly need him to stiffen the line.”

“To-morrow night,” said Winton, “we must have enough fellows out here to make up a scrub team for a practice game. You’ll need all that kind of work you can get if you’re going to play next Saturday.”

Hayden and Barker left the field together. “Peace has spread itself like oil upon the troubled waters,” observed Berlin, with a faint smile. “Too bad you had to give in, but I suppose it was the only thing you could do.”

His companion’s dark eyes flashed him a look. “If you fancy I’ve given in you don’t know me. I’ve never yet been downed, Barker.”

“But you had to give up your plan for bringing Eliot to time.”

“That’s all right. A good general who sees one of his movements blocked changes promptly to another style of campaign.”

“Then you’ve another scheme in view?”

“I always believe in keeping a few cards up my sleeve.”

Bern betrayed no disposition to show these cards even to his friend, and Barker refrained from asking questions he felt might not be answered, being confident that in good time Hayden would let him into the secret.

To every one else, as the days slipped by and Bern made no move, it seemed that something like a truce had been mutually agreed upon. To be sure, it might be an armed truce in which both parties were patiently waiting the time when the certain course of events would again bring open warfare; for never in all that time did the two bitter enemies betray, even by a look, that either recognized the existence of the other. In football practice, when necessary, they worked together harmoniously enough for the accomplishment of the plays in which they were involved. It frequently happened that Stone, breaking through the line of the scrub, became a part of the interference which assisted Hayden in advancing the ball, and always he was an effective part of it. Both Winton and Eliot arrived at the conviction that one of the team’s best ground gaining plays would be that in which Stone and Piper opened a hole between the opposing guard and tackle to let Hayden through.

On Thursday the coach requested that the gate of the field should be closed and guarded to keep out the throng of spectators who were eager to watch the practice, and that night, having strengthened the scrub, he kept the regular team working constantly on the defensive; for he claimed that a good defensive game was fully as essential as an offensive one.

Saturday came at last, and at ten-thirty in the forenoon the players were at the railway station to take the train for Clearport. Quite a crowd gathered to see them off and cheer them heartily, while about a dozen of the scholars, including several girls, all bearing banners, accompanied them.

On the train Hayden and Barker sat together and took little part in the general conversation. Even when Clearport was reached and the arrivals were welcomed by Capt. Merwin and a delegation, this pair held themselves aloof, finally walking up to the hotel behind the rest of the crowd. And at dinner, coming late, Bern and Berlin sat at a separate table, having made arrangements in advance with the head waiter.

Eliot did not wholly hide his displeasure over this, for he had expected that the players, the substitutes and the coach would all sit at one long table. Nor did the distant pair betray any interest

in the jests and laughter of their teammates.

Dinner over, Winton had a private word with Roger. “As an exhibition of snobbishness,” he said disgustedly, “that was the limit. If you don’t look out, Eliot, those fellows will yet make trouble for you.”

“There’s only one,” returned the captain, “who is at all dangerous, and I have an idea he realizes he can’t afford to make any real trouble. Of course I don’t like the spirit he displays, but he’s such a valuable man that I presume we’ll have to put up with it.”

The hour for the game drew near at last. It was a bright, snappy day, with a strong westerly wind blowing, and when the Oakdale lads arrived at the field they found quite a crowd already assembled, while a steady stream of people came pouring in. Not a few persons from Oakdale had 176
come over the road in teams and automobiles, and the most of these were gathered in a group on the seats at the southern side of the gridiron. With a cheer they welcomed the appearance of Eliot and his followers.

That cheer gave Ben Stone a tingling thrill; he seemed to feel that a little of it was meant for him. This thrill was intensified as he heard them crying:

“There’s Roger!” “Good boy, Eliot!” “There’s Bern!”

“What’s your deduction about this game, Sleuth?”

“Got any peanuts, Chub?”

Then suddenly some one cried distinctly:

“Look at Stone! ’Rah for old Stoney!”

They shed their sweaters. A ball was tossed out, and immediately they began passing, punting and falling upon it. And now Stone, painfully self-conscious, fumbled. When, a moment or two later, the pigskin came bounding his way over the ground, he flung himself at it only to have it squirm out 177
of his grasp and spin off to one side. He rose, his face crimson, realizing that something was the matter.

A hand touched him lightly on the shoulder, and Eliot’s voice sounded in his ear.

“All right, Stone, old man; don’t mind the crowd. Forget it.”

That was the matter; he knew it in a twinkling. Getting a grip on himself, he became steady and sure.

Presently he found himself, with others, watching the two captains who had stepped aside to consult with the referee. For a moment his eyes roved over the scene. On one side of the field the seats were already well filled. A mass of blue banners indicated where the scholars of Clearport High were grouped. At the south the crowd was thinner and the crimson banners of Oakdale were not so plentiful. East and west the goal posts rose against the sky. Between those posts the regular white chalk marks made a huge checkerboard.

Oh, it was a fine thing to be living! And it was a marvel indeed to be there, a member of one of 178
those two teams of healthy, brown-faced lads who would soon be struggling for supremacy on that field.

His eyes came back to the two captains and the referee. He saw the latter toss into the air something that spun and glittered brightly. He saw all three stoop to observe how the coin had fallen. Then Eliot slapped Merwin on the shoulder, said something, turned and came trotting toward his comrades.

“Come on, fellows,” called Roger; “I won the toss. We’ll take the western goal and have both wind and sun at our backs.”

179

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE GAME.

Plunk! Clearport's full back, Ramsdal, kicked off, booting the ball into the teeth of the wind. Over the chalk marks sped the end men, Long and Stoker, closing in from either side as the huge yellow egg began to drop.

Bern Hayden was in position to receive the ball, and, without removing his eyes from it, he realized that one or both of those oncoming men would be at hand to tackle him if he attempted to run. Therefore he lifted his hand in the proper signal for a fair catch and took the pigskin cleanly. Turning it deftly in his hands, he let it drop; and an instant later it was sailing away from his toe on the return to Clearport's territory.

180 Buoyed by the wind, the ball soared on and on far past the center of the field, far over toward the eastern goal. It was immediately apparent that the home team, while defending that goal, could not afford to be led into a kicking game.

Cooper and Davis, playing ends for the visitors, followed the ball. Spotty was a really fast runner, being able to get over the ground with his thin legs in a way that should have given him a reputation as a sprinter. This fleetness put him in splendid position to tackle Boothby, Clearport's left half back, who took the ball; but Spotty seemed to hesitate a bit at the moment when he should have plunged, and Boothby got away like a flash, Davis missing miserably when he flung himself at the fellow. Cooper, the slower, displayed more nerve, tackling the fleet half back and bringing him down after the ball had been advanced ten yards. Chipper rose, gasping, when the whistle had sounded the signal that the ball was "down."

"Ja-jarred me some," he stammered, with a sickly grin; "but I got him."

"Ready—line up fast!" called Eliot, perceiving that the enemy were swiftly getting into position for the first scrimmage. "Stop 'em! Hold 'em!"

181 Ben Stone found himself crouching nose to nose with Barney Carney, called "the fighting Irishman of Clearport." He had been told about this fellow, and he recognized him instinctively.

"Arrh, me bucko! Good avening," grinned Carney. "It's a pleasure to meet yez."

Through Stone's mind flashed the instructions of Winton, "Stick by your man and get him every time."

Muzzle uplifted, Capt. Merwin, who played quarter for his team, bayed a signal. Stone saw the ball snapped to Merwin, and the moment it left the ground he leaped tigerishly at Carney. The Irishman had leaped at the same instant, and they came together with a crash which must have astonished the Clearport guard, for he was literally bowled aside, the Oakdale man hammering through like a battering-ram. Sleuth Piper, succeeding in keeping his man busy, aided Stone in getting through; and Ben was just in time to meet Boothby, who had received the ball from Merwin and was plunging at that very spot in the line. Boothby's rush was checked as if he had struck a wall of granite, and down to the turf he went, with Stone's arms locked around his thighs.

182 "Great luck!" cried Piper, releasing Morehead; but there had been little luck about it, for even as he lunged at Carney Stone had seen Boothby shooting across behind Merwin in a manner which seemed to indicate beyond doubt that he would take the ball. Having obeyed the instructions of the coach and disposed of Carney in a jiffy, Stone's natural impulse was to meet and grapple with Boothby.

At the southern side of the field the crimson banners were wildly agitated, and a sudden cheer arose—a cheer for Stone. Ben's ears were deaf to that sound, however; he was wholly unaware that his name came snapping forth at the end of that cheer like a cracker at the end of a whiplash. The fire of battle was in his veins, and the only thing he heard was the booming of his heart like the distant throbbing of heavy guns.

Checked with a slight loss, the Clearporters made ready again. Once more Ben found himself *vis à vis* with Barney Carney, in whose faded smile there was now a slight sickly tinge.

183 "It's a loively birrud ye are," observed Carney; "but your wings can be clipped." To which the grim-faced fellow opposite made no retort.

The signal came again, and again Stone and Carney met. This time, locked together, they struggled, neither gaining the slightest advantage. The tide of battle, however, swept to the far end of the line, toward which Oakes, the right half back, was racing with the pigskin.

It was Hayden who divined the play, and Hayden who came leaping to meet the runner. Tackling cleanly and handsomely, Bern stretched Oakes prone. As he rose he heard them cheering as they had cheered for Stone—and he had not missed that.

"That's the stuff, fellows!" cried Roger. "That's the way to hold them!"

Winton, watching from his position at the side of the field, permitted a crinkle of a smile to flit across his face, even though he realized that the splendid and surprising defense had been accomplished, almost unaided, by two players. At the very outset Clearport had succeeded in one thing, at least—had found the strong spots of the visiting team. Later certain weak spots which the coach was fearful of might be unmasked.

184 In desperation the locals made a furious slam into center, recovering, however, barely the distance lost; and then, forced to it, Ramsdal fell back to kick. Eliot was ready for this, and, seeming to gauge the distance the ball would travel, he took it cleanly and easily, shooting past the first man

who came at him, dodging the second, and bringing the spectators to their feet by a run that carried him to Clearport's thirty yard line ere he was forced out of bounds. And Winton smiled again, for another tower of strength had loomed through the smoke of battle.

The referee brought the ball out and placed it. The line-up followed, one or two anxious Clearporters being warned back ere the man in authority permitted the resumption of play.

Crouching before Carney, Stone heard Sage calling the signal. As his ears drank in the numbers, he gazed straight into the Irish lad's eyes without a flicker crossing his face, even though he knew directly that much would depend upon him. He knew Hayden would come across with the ball, looking for the opening he must assist in making.

In another moment they were straining, breast to breast. With all his strength he sought to thrust 185
Carney to one side. Cooper bucked Morehead handsomely, and the gap was made. Through it went Barker, with Bern at his heels. Barker sacrificed himself to Oakes, and before Ramsdal got him Hayden came within four yards of putting the ball over.

Four yards to go, and the first down! No wonder the crowd with the crimson banners seemed crazed; no wonder the blue banners were drooping on the northern side of the field.

"Like water through a sieve," chuckled Chipper Cooper; and barely had the words left his lips when Sage began calling a signal which sent Barker into the other wing of the line.

Crane did his duty there, but Davis was weak, and Berlin met Stoker, who had hurled Spotty aside. Not an inch was gained.

"Hold 'em," implored Merwin, "we've got to hold 'em!"

"Another chance, fellows," said Eliot. "We can make it." 186

Again that signal which told the visitors that Hayden would try the enemy's right wing. Sage varied the call, but the key number was distinctly heard, and with the snapping of the ball Ben Stone flung himself bodily at the fighting Irishman. Merwin had leaped in to support Carney, yet both of them were not sufficient to check Stone and the man who was hurled against him from the rear. The Clearport line buckled and broke, and Hayden lunged through headlong for a touchdown.

"My deduction is," panted Piper, "that it's a snap."

The Oakdale crowd cheered as the ball was punted out. Hayden was given the privilege of trying to kick a goal, and, absolutely confident of himself, he booted the ball against one of the uprights.

"Never mind," grinned Chipper Cooper, as the Oakdalers spread out on the field with their backs toward the eastern goal. "It would have been a shame to spoil the fun by taking all the sand out of them right away."

Indeed, it seemed that the visitors were too strong for the home team. Even when favored by the 187
wind and sun, the Clearporters could not carry the fighting far into Oakdale's territory, and they were soon compelled to surrender the ball by kicking.

Once more the lads from the inland town began bucking their way over the chalk marks, and frequently their best gains were secured through openings made by Stone and Piper. Barney Carney was livid with wrath, but his grim opponent remained outwardly unchanged. An end run by Barker again placed the visitors in a position to threaten Clearport's goal. It was followed by a trick play, in which Barker drew attention to himself while Eliot went romping and zigzagging through a broken field and crossed the line for the second touchdown.

This time Roger kicked, and he lifted the pigskin squarely over the center of the crossbar.

Even to Winton it had begun to seem as if Oakdale was too strong for the locals. He was glad 188
indeed that Clearport had not yet located certain weak spots of which he had entertained serious apprehension, but he knew they had not done this mainly on account of their half demoralized condition.

Following that second touchdown, Oakdale seemed to let up somewhat. This brought a frown to Winton's face, but he could do nothing until the half was finished.

Toward the end of the first half the visiting team took another spurt and seemed to have things pretty much its own way. Hayden was the principal ground gainer, and it was Stone who provided effective interference in assisting him to make his greatest distances. Twenty-five yards from the line, however, the locals stood firm. Then Sage called for a play by which Hayden was to pass the ball to Eliot just before dashing into the formation which had proved so effective. Eliot was to attempt to round the end.

This was carried through, Stone slamming into Carney in the regular manner. Hayden came at him from behind, while Eliot, having secured the ball, sought to race past Pete Long.

Something smote Ben with a terrific shock, and a sudden pall of darkness fell upon him. He sank 189
to the ground just as Eliot was tackled and dragged down and the referee's whistle shrilled the signal which told that the half was over.

190

CHAPTER XIX.

BETWEEN THE HALVES.

Stone recovered to find some one sopping his face with a cool, dripping sponge. They had carried him off the field, and he was lying on a blanket behind the tiered seats, over the upper tier of which bent a row of sympathetic faces. His teammates were around him, being kept back by one or two fellows who insisted that he should have air.

"What—what's matter?" he mumbled thickly, as he tried to sit up.

"Easy, old fellow," said the voice of Roger Eliot, who had been applying the sponge. "You were knocked stiff in that last scrimmage."

"Scrimmage?" echoed Ben uncertainly, vaguely fancying he had been in a fight with his bitter enemy. "Did Bern Hayden——"

191 "It wasn't Hayden. We tried to fool the Clearporters into thinking he'd again go through with the ball, but he passed it to me. They downed me, though, just as the half ended."

"Oh," said Stone, remembering at last, "we were playing football."

"That fightin' Irishman must have soaked ye," observed Sile Crane. "You had him crazy all right, the way you bucked him around."

"Carney did not hit me," declared Ben positively.

Winton, like Eliot, had been working to bring Stone round. "Well," he observed with satisfaction, "you seem to be all right now. I reckon you can get back into the game for the next half, can't you?"

"Sure thing," was the prompt answer. "I'm not hurt any."

"That's the stuff," applauded the coach, rising to his feet. "That's the spirit that wins. Some of you fellows need a little more of it. Rollins, you're bigger and heavier than that man Hutt, but he's walked through you four or five times. Brace up and stop him. Davis, you've got to show more nerve. Don't be afraid of cracking yourself when you try to tackle; you're not crockery. Look alive, 192 Tuttle, and get into the plays quicker. Sometimes you take root in your tracks."

"Great ginger!" gasped Chub in astonishment over this call-down. "I thought we were all doing pretty well."

"Give him a peanut, somebody, to brace him up," chuckled Chipper Cooper.

In another moment Chipper was shivering beneath the withering eye of the coach.

"You've got a whole lot to learn about football," said Winton. "Move your feet when you go down the field under a kick. Davis can run around you twice and be ahead of you at the place where the ball falls."

"Oh, jiminy crickets!" gasped Cooper. "I've got mine! Stop your grinning, Spotty."

"You all let up after that second touchdown," continued Winton. "Did you think you had points enough? Have you a notion that there's danger of overexerting yourselves? You should have had two more touchdowns, at least. Clearport was growing better toward the last of it, and you fellows 193 acted as if you had caught the hookworm. This kind of a football game is never won till it's finished, don't forget that. If you quit a little bit in the next half you're liable to get it put all over you. Those fellows are good; they're better than you are, but they don't know it. Let them wake up to the fact, and you'll be lucky if they don't play you off your feet. You've got to keep them so busy they won't find time to realize how good they are. Hayden, I'd like a private word with you."

With a look of surprise on his face, Bern followed the coach, who stepped aside from the others. In a moment Winton was talking to him in low tones.

"By gum!" said Sile Crane. "He sorter handed it right out to the whole of us, didn't he? I kinder thought he was goin' to praise us for our fine work."

Cooper poked a thumb into Piper's ribs. "He didn't say anything to you personally, did he, Sleuth? Wonder how you got by? Morehead had you groggy in that last smash."

"Yes," admitted Sleuth, "we butted our cocoanuts together, and my deduction is that he's got 194 *more head* than I have."

"Oh, you villain!" exclaimed Chipper. "You trespasser on my sacred preserves! I should have thought to say that myself. Look at Bern; he's getting excited. Wonder what Winton's drilling him for?"

Hayden was indeed showing traces of excitement, for his face was flushed, his hands clenched, and he shook his head with an air of angry denial.

"I saw you," said Winton, in a low, calm tone, "I saw you slug Stone on the jaw with your fist, Hayden; it's useless to deny it."

"It's very strange," sneered Bern, "that you were the only one who saw it. Where were the referee's eyes?"

"Following the ball, doubtless. Carney swung Stone round sidewise as you lunged into the scrimmage, for doubtless he thought you had the ball, and he was trying to block you. It gave you a chance to hit Stone squarely on the side of the jaw, and you smashed him. Perhaps I was the only person who observed it; I hope I was. You've played a brilliant game, Hayden, and you can't afford 195 to let your temper and your hatred of Stone mar your record. Only for the fine style in which he blocked off the opposing guard, you never could have made such good gains. He doesn't know you hit him, for he didn't see you; and he won't know unless I——"

"I deny that I did it," muttered Bern sullenly.

“And while you deny it you’re aware that I know you did. Settle your personal grudges off the football field; that’s the thing to do. Don’t think for a moment that I’m taking sides in this quarrel between you and Stone; I know nothing of the merits of the matter, and it’s no affair of mine. Nevertheless, if I should see you do another wretched trick of that sort I’d stop the game to pull you off the field.”

“You’re only the coach; the captain of the team would have something to say about that.”

Winton’s eyes flashed. “I’m the coach, and as long as I continue in that capacity I’ll exert my authority to pull any man out of the game. You have a nasty temper and a revengeful disposition, my boy, and it will be for your advantage to learn to curb yourself. Would you like to see Clearport win this game?”

“Certainly not.” 196

“I thought not.”

“Clearport can’t win. We’ve got them beaten now.”

“So that’s what you think. If you had seen as many football games as I have, and if you had watched this one from the side-lines, you would realize that there is not as much difference between these two teams as there seemed to be. If they ever discover our weak spots and get busy on them, they’ll make us go some yet. The line is none too strong, and the loss of Stone would weaken it frightfully. Furthermore, what do you imagine the fellows would think of you if they even suspected that you had tried to knock Stone out—and you might have succeeded if the half hadn’t ended just as you slugged him. I’m not going to say anything more; I think I’ve said enough. But don’t forget that I have my eyes on you.”

Not a word of this conversation had reached Stone’s ears, yet, sitting on the blanket and looking 197
toward Winton and Hayden, Ben somehow obtained a slight inkling of the truth. This suspicion was strengthened as Winton finished speaking and turned away; for, in spite of himself, Bern could not help glancing toward Stone, and his eyes wavered beneath the boy’s steady, questioning gaze.

Piper, having stretched himself on the ground near Ben, had likewise fallen to watching Hayden and his accuser.

“My deduction is——” began Sleuth.

Two short, sharp blasts from the referee’s whistle told that the intermission was over and the time for the second half to begin had arrived.

198

CHAPTER XX.

ONE WHO WAS TRUE.

In less than two minutes after the resumption of play the spectators perceived that a great change had taken place in the home team, for the Clearporters had returned to the field firmly resolved to redeem themselves, and they went into the struggle with a snap and dash that temporarily swept the visitors off their feet. Tricked by a crisscross in the second scrimmage, Oakdale permitted Oakes to get round the right end, Spotty Davis being effectively and easily blocked by Stoker, while Crane let Butters through, and the left tackle of the locals flung himself before Hayden, preventing a tackle.

The few shrill cries which had risen from the northern side of the field became a chorus of shouts, and those shouts swelled into a roar as Oakes got past Eliot and raced onward, with a few pursuers straggling out behind in a fruitless effort to overtake him.

199 Winton, who had lighted a cigar, chewed savagely at the weed and smote his knee with his clenched fist.

"Just what I was afraid of!" he muttered.

Over the goal-line went Oakes for a touchdown, cheered wildly by the delighted crowd beneath the blue banners. The ball was punted out and caught, and Oakes held it for Ramsdal to lift it with a sure and handsome kick over the crossbar.

"We can't afford to let them repeat that performance," said Eliot regretfully.

But the locals, retaining the ball after the kick-off, carried it fifteen yards in a swift dash before they were stopped. Having their courage restored and being spurred on by Merwin, they lined up and lunged into the scrimmage before the visitors were wholly prepared, and a gain of nine yards through center might have developed into another sensational run had not Eliot himself nailed the man with the pigskin.

200 Cheer after cheer was flung across from the northern side of the field. The visitors on the southern side answered bravely, yet not wholly without a note of distress and alarm.

"Got yez going, me bhoy," grinned Barney Carney into the face of Ben Stone. "Oi belave it's our turrun now."

He was not the only one who believed this; the whole team believed it. And when a body of contestants in any game get the idea that they are bound to succeed, it is doubly difficult to stop them. The Clearporters had talked it over; they had decided that the left wing of the visitors was stronger than the right. Stoker had told them that Spotty Davis was "soft as mush." Nevertheless, they were crafty enough not to betray immediately their plan to batter at that right end, and by shifting their movements rapidly, they kept their opponents guessing. Round Davis and through the line between him and Crane they occasionally shot a runner for good gains, which carried them on again and again just when it seemed that they had been checked.

201 Eliot entreated Davis; he begged, and then he scolded. Spotty, feeling the weight of the battering hurled upon him, swiftly lost heart; and when in a sort of blind despair he finally tackled a runner head on, he was the one who remained stretched on the hard ground after the ball was down.

"Come, Davis—come," called Eliot, "get up and get into the game. For goodness' sake, take a brace!"

Spotty groaned dolefully. "I can't," he whimpered, with a choke in his voice. "I can't; I'm done up."

Roger turned toward Winton, who lifted his hand in a signal, to which the Oakdale captain replied with a nod. Walker, Stone's seatmate at school, was promptly sent out by the coach; and the little fellow came running without hesitation, trembling with excitement, delighted because he was to have a chance in the game.

His head hanging, Davis staggered off the field and fell prostrate upon the ground, hiding his face on his curved arm. "I was getting the whole of it," he mumbled chokingly. "They were bound to do me." But no one paid any heed to his muttering or to the tears he shed.

202 Stoker laughed at Walker, but the little chap soon demonstrated that he was on the field to do his handsomest as long as he lasted; and, despite the greater weight of the opposing end, he was able to keep the fellow busy. For a time this change seemed to put a little new life into the Oakdalers; but even though they got the ball, they could not hold it long, and, checked near the center of the field, they found themselves compelled to surrender the pigskin by kicking.

Clearport came back again with the dash and go which had so surprisingly altered the run of the game. Merwin made a successful quarterback run; Boothby gained a little ground through center; and then Stone, breaking through Carney, slammed a runner down for a loss. Right on top of this the locals were penalized for holding, but the rising courage of the visitors was dampened when the home team pulled off a handsome forward pass that yielded double the distance needed.

203 Even though Oakdale fought every inch of the ground, being at last fully aroused to the danger, Clearport repeatedly worked the crisscross with good effect and brought into play still another well-executed forward pass that landed them up against the goal-line, where, after being held for two downs, they finally pushed the ball over by barely six inches.

Apparently the tide had turned most decisively, and it was not strange that some of the easily discouraged Oakdalers felt that they were surely beaten. If the captain thought so, however, he

succeeded marvelously well in hiding his feelings, trying his best all the time to brace his teammates up, encouraging the equally staunch, chiding a few who showed symptoms of wavering, and entreating one or two who apparently had lost heart.

There was a hush as Ramsdal prepared to try for goal. The defenders, lined up behind the posts, crouched, ready to charge; and as Clearport's full back booted the ball Hayden leaped forward and upward, his open hands stretched high above his head. His fingers barely grazed the leather, but did not check the flight of the ball; if anything, they lifted it a trifle and aided in shooting it over the bar.

The home crowd was still making a terrific uproar as the two teams once more spread out upon 204
the field, and there was every reason why that portion of the spectators should rejoice; for Clearport had won the lead by a single point, and the course of the game in the second half seemed to promise beyond doubt that this lead could be held.

The moment the ball came again into the possession of the locals they retained it and resumed their rushing tactics. Pounding their way into Oakdale's territory, they marched on by short but sufficient gains toward yet another touchdown, the line of the visitors being pierced at almost every point save that defended by Ben Stone, which had been found practically invulnerable. Again and again it was the players in the backfield, Eliot, Hayden or Barker, who checked the assaults and prevented still larger gains. Winton's fears that Oakdale would prove weak in defense had surely been well grounded. To add to the dismay of the visitors, they were penalized for fowling on their own thirty yard line, and the distance thus lost made the situation seem absolutely hopeless. Almost every spectator believed Clearport destined to add further points to her score.

In the darkest moment, however, with the locals beating Oakdale back against the goal-line, Fred 205
Merwin fumbled. The ball, snapped to him by Corbin, twisted out of his fingers and bounded off to one side. Even as he flung himself at it he saw a figure that had cut through Barney Carney flash before him. The ball was scooped from the ground in a marvelous manner, and Merwin, having miscalculated, clutched at the heels of the fellow who had secured the pigskin—clutched but could not hold fast, even though his fingers touched the stocky ankles of Ben Stone.

How it was that Ben got that ball up from the ground and kept his feet no witness could tell. For two or three strides it seemed that he must plunge headlong with it, and then he regained his equilibrium and brought a gasping chorus of cries from the southern side of the field as he ran on toward Clearport's goal. Nevertheless, he had given his left ankle a wrench, and every step hurt like the jab of a knife. With his teeth set, he hugged the ball beneath one arm, the other thrown out 206
stiffly to fend off a dark figure he saw coming at him; and he left the would-be tackler jarred, dazed and knocked to his knees.

Once more every spectator was standing, and from opposite sides of the field came cries of dismay and wildly palpitant shouts of joyous encouragement.

It was Boothby, the swift left half back of the locals, who slowly but surely cut down the man with the ball. Had Ben found it possible to run barely a trifle faster, he could have carried the pigskin over the line. As it was, he made a thrillingly sensational run, and Boothby, shooting at him from behind, brought him down less than fifteen yards from Clearport's goal. Slammed to the ground, Stone held fast to the huge yellow egg, and the next he knew Eliot was patting him on the back and telling him how good he was.

With the two teams preparing for the scrimmage, the Oakdale captain moved up and down behind the line, touching first one and then another of his comrades as he urged them to get into the play like fiends.

"We've got to do it right now," said Roger, "and we can." 207

Panting, Stone heard Sage calling the signal, and at the sound of the key number every nerve in his body went taut as a bow-string; for it was the play by which the most effective gains had been made in the first half—Hayden was to go through Clearport's right wing with the ball. Ben knew he was expected to make the opening for the runner. If the work was well done, there was a chance that Bern might cover the remaining distance and secure a touchdown.

The remembrance of what had happened at the very finish of the first half struck Stone like a blow between the eyes. He doubted not that it was Hayden who had slugged him, yet now he was expected to assist that fellow in a play which might give him the glory of winning the game.

Winning the game—that was it! that was everything! Nothing else counted. The fellow who would 208
let a personal grudge interfere was not worthy to wear an Oakdale uniform.

Tuttle snapped the ball, and Stone went at Carney like a thousand of brick. Already the Irishman had been led to respect his opponent, and, even though his backbone had weakened not a whit, he could not withstand the charge which swept him from his pins and spun him aside.

Sleuth Piper did his part by taking care of Morehead, and, his teeth set, Hayden came through that opening. It was Oakes who had seemed to anticipate the play, and Oakes who flung himself at Hayden; but it was Stone, interfering for the runner, who was brought down by the right half back of the locals. He had leaped forward in the tackler's path just in time to save Bern.

What a shriek of joy went up from those who bore the crimson banners! How those red flags waved! For Hayden had crossed the line, and the touchdown was made.

209

CHAPTER XXI.

A SURPRISING MEETING.

The game was over; after the third touchdown by Oakdale it had not lasted long enough for Clearport to recover and accomplish anything. The visitors had won, and they were being congratulated by their overjoyed admirers. Hayden was applauded, and his hand was shaken until he repulsed the exuberant crowd that surged around him. Stone likewise came in for his share of applause and praise, and, although his heart was happy, his unfortunate manner might have led many to fancy him stolid and almost sullen. Nevertheless, when, with a hand on Ben's shoulder, Winton told him that he was the man who had saved the day and won the game, he smiled a little, and there was a blurring mist in his eyes.

Roger Eliot, his face lighted by that rare smile of his, praised them all.

210 "I see my father is here with his touring car," he said. "I wish the car were large enough to take you all back to Oakdale, boys; but it isn't, and so by the way of company I'll take one of you. Come on, Stone, old chap."

Ben flushed, surprised because he had been singled out.

"He's the feller," cried Chipper Cooper generously—"he's the feller to take, Roger. Give him a good ride; he deserves it."

Hayden said nothing; he had not expected to be invited, yet he was angered because Roger had selected Stone.

The boys had left their regular clothes in a room at the hotel, and to this they repaired to shed the dirty, sweat-stained garments of the game. Stone took no part in their light-hearted chatter; when they congratulated him, he simply said he had tried to do his best. Finally, bearing his bundle of football togs, he descended with Roger and found Mr. Eliot's car waiting at the door. Little Amy was in the car with her father, who sat beside the driver. The child laughed and clapped her hands as her brother and Ben appeared.

211 "I'm going to ride on the back seat between you," she called.

Mr. Eliot beamed on the boys. "You pulled out of that game pretty well, Roger," he said. "I saw only the last of it, for I couldn't get here sooner. I thought you were done for, son, but Ben saved you with that great run. That was really what won the game, as it gave you a chance to make the touchdown you needed."

Roger's father had called Ben by his Christian name, and Stone felt his heart swell. Seated in the tonneau of the automobile with Amy beside him, he was borne out of Clearport and away over the brown, winding road that led to Oakdale. Often he had longed to ride in an automobile and wondered if he would ever have the privilege. The sensation of gliding softly along as he lay back against the tufted leather cushions brought him a feeling of great satisfaction and peace. The sun, peeping redly over the western rim of the world, smiled upon him, and nowhere in all the sky was there a cloud, even as large as a man's hand.

212 Amy talked gaily; she told how excited she had been as she watched Ben running with the ball, and, although she did not understand the game, she knew he had done a splendid thing.

"It would have been a frightful calamity for us if you had been knocked out at the finish of the first half, Ben," said Roger. "I was afraid of it, and we never could have won that game without you."

Stone recalled his suspicions, and a shadow fell athwart his face, but his lips remained silent. If Hayden had really perpetrated that foul trick, he had failed in his purpose, and Ben, triumphant, had no desire to speak of it.

A soft, tingling, cold twilight came on with the setting of the sun. At their bases the distant hills were veiled in a filmy haze of blue. The engine beneath the hood of the car purred softly as it bore them over the road with the power of fifty horses. As, with a mellow warning note of the horn, they swept around a gentle curve, they came upon a small, dusty human figure trudging slowly in the 213 direction they were traveling. It was a boy, ahead of whom trotted a little yellow dog, held by a line attached to its collar. Over the back of the little lad a violin was swung by supporting strings.

The dog turned aside, pulling at the line, and the boy followed him, as if led and guided in this manner.

Ben Stone uttered a sudden shout. "Stop," he cried wildly—"stop quickly! Please stop!"

"Stop, Sullivan," commanded Mr. Eliot; and the chauffeur responded by bringing the car to a standstill as soon as possible. Even before the wheels ceased to revolve Stone had vaulted over the side door of the tonneau and was running back toward the boy they had passed. "Jerry!" he called. "Jerry! Jerry!"

The little yellow dog barked at him, but, paying no heed to the animal, Ben swooped down on the lad who held the line and scooped him up in his arms.

"Who is it, Roger?" asked Urian Eliot in surprise.

214 "Jerry," said Roger—"he called him Jerry. Why, father, it must be Ben's own brother."

"His brother? Why, I didn't know——"

"He told me about his brother," explained Roger. "They were separated after Ben's parents died. Jerry is blind."

"Oh!" murmured Amy. "Isn't that just dreadful! Blind and walking all alone with only a dog for

company! We must take him in the car, papa."

"Certainly," said Mr. Eliot, opening the door and stepping out. "This is a most remarkable occurrence."

In the meantime, Ben and Jerry—for it was indeed Ben's unfortunate younger brother—were transported by the joy and surprise of the unexpected meeting. They clung to each other, laughing, crying and talking brokenly and incoherently. The little dog, who had at first seemed to fear some harm threatened its master, frisked back and forth before them, barking frantically, finally sitting up on its haunches with its forward paws drooping, its mouth open and its protruding tongue quivering; for at last it appeared to comprehend that there was really no danger, and this affair was one over which even a small yellow dog should laugh and be happy. 215

Roger had left the automobile likewise, and he came back to them, waiting near at hand until they should recover from the distracting excitement of the moment.

"Oh, Jerry!" choked Ben. "To find you here—I don't understand it, Jerry."

"I'll tell you all about it, Ben, as soon as I can. I've been searching for you everywhere, but I was afraid I'd never, never find you."

"Stone," said Roger, "take him into the car."

Jerry shrank against his older brother. "Who—who is it, Ben?" he whispered.

"A friend—the best friend—besides you, Jerry—that I've ever known. We've been playing football, and we're going back to Oakdale now—going back in a big, fine automobile. This is Roger Eliot, Jerry."

Roger stepped forward and took one of the little lad's soiled hands. "I'm very glad to meet Ben's brother," he declared with such sincerity that Jerry's alarm was instantly dispelled and his sympathy won. "My father's auto is waiting, and there's room to spare."

"You never rode in an automobile, Jerry," said Ben. "It's corking." 216

Through the dusk Roger saw the smaller lad's sightless eyes turned upon him.

"But—but my little dog, Pilot?" said Jerry questioningly. "I must take him. I know he's tired, the same as I am, and I wouldn't leave him for——"

"Certainly we'll take him," assured Roger. "Come on."

To the sightless wayfarer it was a marvel beyond words, almost beyond comprehension. He heard them speak of Roger's father and felt the reassuring touch of Urian Eliot's strong but gentle hands, while the voice of the man sounded in his ears. He was lifted into the tonneau of the car, the dog whining nervously at the end of the line until bidden follow, upon which, with a single sharp yap of thankfulness, he sprang up. He heard also the voice of a child, who spoke softly and seemed glad to welcome him. It was not strange that his head swam with the wonderment of it.

While waiting, the chauffeur had lighted the gas lamps of the car, and, with the machine again under way, they blazed a golden path through the deepening autumn darkness. The sharp, cold air whipped Jerry's cheeks, but the strong arm of the brother he loved was about him, and his heart beat with happiness so intense that it was like a keen, sweet pain. 217

CHAPTER XXII.

A SYMPATHETIC SOUL.

Both Roger and his father urged Ben and Jerry to come home with them for dinner, but the older brother declined, saying that they had many things to talk over between them. Already Ben had found that Jerry was disinclined to answer his eager questions in the presence of the strangers, and he was consumed with curiosity to know what singular chance had brought the blind boy thither.

When the automobile stopped in front of the house, Jimmy Jones, his eyes big with wonderment, peered forth through the darkness and saw the two boys alight and the little dog hop out after them. Then good nights were called, the big car swung slowly round and rolled away, and Jimmy came hopping forth, palpitant to know about the game.

"Did you play, Ben—did you play?" he asked. "Who won?"

"We did, and I played, Jimmy."

"Oh, good! I wish I could 'a' been there to see it. Mother she's kept some hot bread for you and some coffee. She said you'd be hungry."

"That's right," confirmed Mrs. Jones, her ample figure appearing in the doorway. "You're young and strong, and I don't b'lieve hot bread will do no damage to your dejesshun. Joel, my late departed, he was a master hand for hot bread and presarves. We had baked beans for supper, an' I've left the pot in the oven, so they're piping hot. Joel, he used to eat about four heapin' plates of beans, an' then he'd complain because every little morsel he put into his stummick disagreed with him. Who's that with ye?"

"This is my brother, Mrs. Jones—my brother Jerry. We haven't seen each other for a long time, and he's been walking far to-day, so he's very tired. Step up, Jerry."

Ben grasped the little chap's arm and guided him as the steps were mounted. In an aside he whispered for the ear of Mrs. Jones, "He's blind."

"Land sakes!" breathed the good woman, putting up both hands. "Come right in and set down to the table. Mamie, she's gone out somewhere, an' Sadie's having one of her chills. Don't stumble on the doorstool. Right this way."

Gently but firmly she swept them into the room, where the table still sat with the white cloth and some dishes upon it. Jerry clung to the line, and now the little dog followed at his heels.

"This is a surprise," said the widow, as she hastened to place another plate and another chair. "Y'u never told me about your brother, Ben; fact is, y'u never told me much about y'urself, nohow. I s'pose y'u'll want to wash up. There's the sink an' soap an' water an' a clean towel. Did y'u come all the way from Clearport in Mr. Eliot's automobile? My goodness! that must 'a' been grand. I don't cal'late I'll ever have no opportunity to ride in one of them things, an' I guess I'd be scat to death if I did, 'cause they go so fast. Don't it 'most take a body's breath away?"

"Not quite as bad as that," answered Ben, smiling; "but it's splendid, and I enjoyed it."

"So did I," said Jerry. "It 'most felt like I was kind of flying through the air. I hope I ain't making nobody a lot of trouble, coming so unexpected this way."

"Trouble!" beamed Mrs. Jones. "My gracious! I should say not! Why, Ben he's gittin' to be 'most like one of my fambly, though sometimes it's hard work makin' him come down to eat with us when I ax him. I ain't like some folks, thank goodness, that's put out and upsot over every little thing that happens; an' if I'd been so, livin' so many years with an ailing husband, they'd had me dead an' buried long before him. I never can endure folks that's always complaining about the hard time they have to get along, when there's so much to enjoy in this world an' so much to be thankful for. Every time I git sorter billious and downcast an' dejec'ed I look 'round till I find somebody that's wuss off than I be, an' then I take holt an' try to give them a lift, an' that cheers me up an' makes me feel thankful an' content with my lot."

As she talked she brought forth the beans and poured them, steaming, upon a huge platter. Hot bread, fresh butter and a dish of preserves were likewise placed on that table, after which the coffee was poured.

"Now," said the widow, "I want to see y'u two youngsters make a hole in the vittles."

"I think we can," laughed Ben. "I know I'm mighty hungry, and I expect Jerry is, too."

Jerry was hungry, indeed; really, the little fellow was almost starved, and it was with no small difficulty that he repressed the eager desire to gulp his food. Watching him, the widow understood, and covertly, even while she talked in the same cheerful, optimistic strain, she wiped her eyes more than once with the corner of her apron. There was something about these two boys that appealed to her big, motherly heart, and the thought that the thin, weary-looking little chap was doomed never to enjoy the precious privilege of sight gave her a feeling of regret and sorrow that she found difficult to disguise.

"You see," said Ben suddenly, thinking it courteous and necessary to make some explanation —"you understand, Mrs. Jones, that if I'd known Jerry was coming I'd told you about it. He gave me a regular surprise. I hope you won't mind if he stops with me to-night, for there's plenty of room, and——"

"Land sakes! what be y'u talkin' about, Ben?" interrupted the widow protestingly. "Mind—'course I don't mind! I'm glad he's come. I'm glad y'u have got some comp'ny to cheer y'u up, for sometimes y'u do sort of seem to need it, an' I know I can't just fill the bill; for old folks never do

jibe in proper an' sympathetic with young folks. Then I'm so busy I don't have the time to look arter y'u the way I'd like to."

"You've been very good indeed to me, Mrs. Jones—almost like a mother," returned Ben. "I don't know how I'll ever be able to repay you."

"Now don't talk that way. Goodness gracious! ain't y'u fussed 'round amusin' Jimmy, a-fixin' squirrel traps an' swings an' things for him? That's more'n squared any little thing I could do for y'u to make y'u comf'table."

"Look!" cried Jimmy. "The little dog is hungry. See him begging. He's hungry, mom. Can't I feed him?" 224

Pilot was sitting on his haunches, his forward paws drooping as he turned his head to look from one to another beseechingly.

"'Course y'u can feed him," said the widow quickly. "I sorter forgot about him. Lemme look, an' I'll see if I've got a bone in the pantry."

She found some bones and scraps, which she brought forth on a plate, and Jimmy, begging the privilege, was permitted to feed Pilot, who expressed his appreciation by a sharp bark and such frantic wagging of his tail that his whole body was shaken from side to side all the way to his forward shoulders.

When supper was over, to satisfy Jimmy, Ben was compelled to tell about the football game, and this he did with such modesty that the listeners, who had not witnessed the contest, were given no inkling as to how conspicuously he had figured in it. He was even fair and generous enough to accord Hayden all the credit the fellow deserved.

At the first mention of Bern's name the blind lad uttered a cry of astonishment and alarm, reaching out a trembling hand to touch his brother. 225

"Ben! Ben!" he exclaimed. "It's not Bern Hayden who—who used to live in Hilton—not that fellow?"

"Yes, Jerry, it's the same fellow. He lives here in Oakdale now."

"But, Ben, he—why, you know what he did. You know——"

"I'm not likely to forget it, Jerry."

"He hates you."

"There's not an atom of love lost between us," was the grim retort.

"He made you go away from Hilton."

"And he tried to drive me out of Oakdale, but he failed in that, Jerry. He came mighty near it, it's true, and only for the good friends I made here he would have succeeded. His old father even went to Prof. Richardson, at the academy, and tried to poison his mind."

"Oh, I'm afraid of them, Ben! I know Bern Hayden would do anything to hurt you—anything."

"You needn't be afraid. Roger Eliot is my friend; his father is, too, and Mr. Eliot has fully as much strength and influence in Oakdale as Lemuel Hayden." 226

"That's right," confirmed Mrs. Jones, "and he's lived here lots longer. Everybody knows Urian Eliot 'round these parts; an', even if he is a rich man and rather tight and close in business dealin's, they do say he's honest an' just. 'Course he's got his enemies, same's anybody has; but even the wust on 'em can't point out no crooked thing he's ever done."

Nevertheless, it was no easy matter to calm and reassure the agitated blind boy. Presently, after they had talked for a time, Mrs. Jones lighted a small hand-lamp and gave it to Ben, saying:

"I won't keep y'u up no longer, for I know y'u must be tired an' want to go to bed—anyhow, I'm dead sartain your brother is plumb pegged out. But to-morrer is the day of rest, an' y'u can sleep jest as late as y'u want to."

Good nights were said, and the brothers mounted the narrow back stairs, Ben assisting Jerry while the little dog scrambled up behind them. When at last they were in the privacy of Ben's room, he questioned Jerry. 227

"I didn't want to ask too many things before people," he said, "because I thought perhaps there might be something you wouldn't care to answer; but I don't understand how it was that I found you, tired and worn out, tramping to Oakdale. How did Uncle Asher happen to let you leave his home?"

"Uncle Asher is dead," said Jerry.

228

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE BLIND FUGITIVE.

Ben was startled. “Dead,” he cried, aghast—“Uncle Asher dead?”

“Yes,” answered Jerry, sitting on the edge of the bed, “he was took off sudden, Ben. He didn’t live much more’n an hour after he was struck down. It was apoplexy or something like that. The doctor, he couldn’t do anything. Uncle, he never spoke but once, and that was just before he went. Of course I was awful scat, Ben, but I was in the room, and I heard him whispering my name. I went to the bed and felt for his hands. One of them didn’t have any strength, and it was stone cold. The other was cold, too, but I felt it grip my wrist, and then, sort of husky and choky, Uncle Asher said, ‘The will, it’s in’—and that was all. He never finished; he couldn’t. I don’t believe it was ten minutes after that when they told me he was gone.”

229 Ben seemed to be stupefied by the intelligence of this tragedy. “Uncle Asher dead!” he repeated, apparently finding it difficult to comprehend the situation. “He was good to you, wasn’t he, Jerry?”

“Always. He wouldn’t talk about you, Ben; all he’d say was that nobody knowed what had become of you. But he was good to me, and he said I’d always be taken care of.”

“I’m sorry,” said Ben simply, brushing away the tears which welled into his eyes. “As long as he was good to you, I don’t mind what he thought about me, for I suppose he had reasons to believe I was bad.”

“I wanted to tell you all about it when we met back there on the road,” said Jerry; “but I thought perhaps it wasn’t best to talk too much before other people. I was afraid to talk, Ben, and I’ve got good reasons to be afraid. Listen, Ben; I ran away.”

“You—you what?” gasped the older lad in great astonishment.

“I ran away, Ben. I didn’t even wait till the funeral was over.”

230 “What made you do that?”

“Because—because they were going to send me off to some institution for poor and helpless children. I heard them talking about it, the doctor and the lawyer and one or two of the neighbors. They didn’t know I heard them, but I couldn’t help listening. The lawyer had come, and he said he’d drawn up Uncle Asher’s will four years ago. It was in a safety deposit vault at the bank. I heard him telling that there wasn’t no provision made for me in that will. Something was left to the housekeeper and one or two distant relatives, and all the rest went to benevolent institutions; I was left out.

“Of course I thought of you, Ben, the very first thing, and I wanted to let you know; but there wasn’t nobody who could tell me where you were. It was pretty hard to think mebbe I’d be shut up in some institution and kept there and never, never find you again. When I thought about that all alone in my room I got desperate, Ben. All that was left to me was my little dog, Pilot, that uncle had bought for me and trained to lead me round; and I was afraid they’d take Pilot away from me, 231 too. So that night I packed up a few things, and took the violin Uncle Asher had given me, and took Pilot, and we stole out of the house and ran away.

“I told Pilot just what I was going to do, and, honest and true, I believe he understood what I said. I told him Uncle Asher was gone, and that if we didn’t run away mebbe folks would separate us and we couldn’t be together no more. He’d never been outside that town before, Ben, but when we took to the road in the night he just kept going straight ahead without once trying to turn back. Needn’t nobody ever tell me some dogs don’t understand as much as human folks.

“I’d took along some bread and doughnuts out of the pantry, and, when it come morning and I could feel the sun shining, we had breakfast side of a little brook, after which we crept into the bushes and hid all day long. I heard people going by on the road, but I told Pilot to keep still, and he minded. There was enough food left for supper, and the next night we tramped it again all night long, stopping only two or three times to rest. In the morning I had breakfast off some apples I 232 found in an orchard. Pilot he left me, and I thought mebbe he’d deserted for good, and I guess I cried, Ben; but he hadn’t gone far, and after a while he come back with an old bone he’d found, and that served him for breakfast. We got into a shed and slept there till it was dark and we could travel some more.”

“Oh, Jerry,” cried Ben sympathetically—“oh, Jerry, it must have been terrible!” He seated himself beside the blind lad, about whose shoulders his arm was tenderly flung. The little dog, half dozing on the floor, rolled a contented, satisfied eye toward them and closed it again.

“I can’t tell you all we did and all we went through, Ben,” the blind lad continued; “but we managed to get along somehow, though I was always scat for fear they’d catch me and take me back. I played on the violin and sometimes I sang, and Jerry he would sit up on his haunches and beg, and people gave us some money. That’s how we were able to live and buy food.”

“It was a marvel you were not caught, Jerry. Perhaps no one searched for you.”

233 “Oh, yes, they did,” declared the blind boy quickly—“yes, they did, Ben. It was three nights ago I was stopping at a house in a little village where some kind folks agreed to put me up when I heard somebody knocking at the door. It gave me a start, and I listened. I heard a man talking to the man of the house, and he was asking about me. He described me—a little blind boy with a fiddle and a dog. I hadn’t undressed for bed, and that was lucky. I called Pilot softly, and somehow we got down the back stairs and out of the house before they came up to that room to look for me. Again we

tramped it all night long, though it was awful cold and I shivered and almost froze every time we stopped to rest. Everywhere I went I asked for you, and I kept praying to find you, Ben, though it didn't seem that there was any chance. I guess, though, that prayer was heard."

"It was, Jerry; it must have been. Something led you to me, and something guarded you from capture until you had found me."

"But what if they find me now, Ben—what can we do?"

The older lad meditated a moment. "I can take care of you, Jerry," he said. "I'm strong, and I can work. I'll have to give up school for a time and find work again."

"But you know, Ben—you know they think you're bad. They might separate us on that account. I'm sure they would."

"And only for Bern Hayden," exclaimed Ben bitterly, "I'd never have such a reputation! We'll do the best we can, Jerry; don't you worry. Fortune has seemed to favor me here in Oakdale, and I feel sure everything is bound to come out all right in the end. We won't be separated, little brother; we'll stick together."

235

CHAPTER XXIV.

CLOUDS GATHER AGAIN.

Again Ben Stone found himself confronted by a problem that demanded immediate solution. It disturbed his pillow long after Jerry, wearied to the extreme, was sleeping soundly; and when at last he slept it gave him troubled dreams.

He was first to waken in the morning, and, when he would have slept still longer, the great question swooped upon him and tore away the last shred of slumber. The little dog welcomed him with wagging tail as he crept softly out of bed that he might not disturb his sleeping brother. He was nearly dressed when Jerry awoke with a startled cry, sitting up on the bed and thrusting out his thin arms, his hands spread open as if to hold away some fearsome thing. In a twinkling Ben was at the bed, speaking reassuringly to Jerry.

236 "Oh—oh, is it you, brother?" gasped the blind boy, as he felt himself gathered into the embrace of Ben's strong arms. "I thought they had caught me. I thought they were going to take me back."

"You were only dreaming, Jerry. You're quite safe with me." Tenderly he caressed the little lad, who, trembling, clung to him.

"You won't let them take me away, will you, Ben?"

"No, Jerry, they shall not take you away."

Mrs. Jones would have had them down to breakfast, but when she came to call them they had eaten from Ben's small store of apples and sandwiches, and they seemed quite happy and contented, so that she had no glimpse of the threatening shadow which hovered near.

During the greater part of that Sunday the brothers remained in the little room, having many things to talk about and being unwilling to advertise for the general public the fact that Jerry was in Oakdale. Late in the afternoon, however, they walked out together, turning westward to avoid the main part of the village and passing the academy. Before reaching Turkey Hill they left the road and 237 set off across the fields toward a grove of pines upon the shore of Lake Woodrim. Pilot, unleashed, frisked before them. On the shore of Bear Cove they found a seat beneath one of those pines where the ground was carpeted with soft brown needles.

They were sitting there, talking, when a small, flat-bottomed punt containing a single occupant rounded Pine Point in full view and was paddled toward them. The person in the boat was Spotty Davis, who, despite the fact that it was Sunday, had been fishing. He discovered them almost immediately, and, recognizing Ben, called loudly:

"Hello, Stoney, old fel; what ju doin'? Thought mebbe I could ketch a pick'rel or two here in the cove."

Although Ben had not found Spotty's friendship wholly unwelcome, he was now far from pleased by the chap's appearance. It was too late to get away, however, and so he waited until Davis, paddling straight in, grounded the punt upon a bit of gravelly beach and sprang out. Pilot regarded the stranger doubtfully, growling a little.

238 "Say, who's your friend, Stoney?" inquired Spotty, advancing unhesitatingly. "Gee! what an ugly lookin' dog!" he added, with a derisive grin. "Don't let him chaw me up, will ye?"

"Down, Pilot! Be still!" commanded Jerry. And, although he obeyed, the dog continued to regard Davis with suspicious eyes.

"This is my brother Jerry," explained Ben. "He arrived in Oakdale last night. Jerry, this is one of my friends, Tim Davis."

"Your brother, hey?" said Spotty, taking the thin hand Jerry held forth. "Say, what's the matter with his blinkers? They look awful funny."

"He's blind," explained Ben in a low tone.

"Sho! Can't see nothin'? Jerusalem! that's tough. Can't he really see nothin' at all?"

"As far as sight is concerned, he can't distinguish daylight from darkness."

"Whew!" breathed Spotty, sitting down and staring at Jerry. "I never see nobody like that before. You never told me about him, Ben; you've never said much of anything about your folks."

239 "I thought possibly you had heard some stories from Bern Hayden."

"Well, not much; he just sorter knocked you, and I s'posed that was 'cause he was sore on you. Say, I guess you proved that you could play football yesterday. Bern didn't have much on you in that game. Wasn't it tough I got knocked out? Them fellers kind of picked me out and soaked me. They've always had a grudge against me, them Clearporters. Last time I played baseball against them Harry Hutt spiked me, and that put me out of the game, too. Eliot he was mad, 'cause he said I wasn't hurt so bad I couldn't play; and I s'pose he was mad yesterday, too. He's awful stiff-necked sometimes; but you certainly got on his soft side through what you done for his sister, and I guess he'd back you up in anything. He brought Hayden to terms all right when Bern tried to force you off the team by gettin' the fellers to quit. I wish you'd heard a few things Bern had to say yesterday 'cause Roger invited you to ride home in the automobile."

240 "I'm decidedly glad I didn't hear them," returned Ben. "All I ask is that Bern Hayden keeps away from me and lets me alone."

"He didn't like it much when some of the fellers said we couldn't ever won that game only for you. That was a hard pill for him to swaller. He's always used me all right, in a way, though I know he thinks he's better'n I am 'cause his father's got the dough. I don't think it's right, either, for some

folks to have so much money and other folks to have so little. Now there's lots of things I'd like if I only had the chink to buy 'em. Look a' the rotten old fishin' tackle I've got in that bo't; if I had money I'd buy an elegant jointed rod, a triple action reel, a silk line, and any amount of hooks and flies and baits. How long is your brother goin' to stay?" Spotty concluded suddenly with that question.

"I—I don't know about that," faltered Ben. "We haven't quite decided. Isn't it pretty late in the season for fish to bite?" he asked, seeking to turn the drift of conversation.

"Guess 'tis," admitted Davis. "I ain't had a bite. We can generally ketch pick'rel pretty late, though." 241

Ben rose and assisted Jerry to his feet. "I think we'll go back," he said.

"What's your hurry?" asked Davis. "It's kinder comf'table here. The wind don't cut into this cove, and the sun's warm."

But they left him, and, after they had passed through the grove and were recrossing the open field beyond, Jerry said: "Somehow, I don't like your friend, Ben. There's something about his voice and the way he talks that I don't like."

"Oh, I reckon he's a harmless fellow, and he was one of the first in Oakdale to be really friendly toward me; I can't forget that."

When they reached the house they learned that Roger Eliot had been there asking for them.

"He seemed real disapp'inted," said the widow. "P'raps y'u'd better walk 'round to his house an' see him."

But it was late and growing dark, and Ben decided not to call on Roger that night.

Stone appeared at school the following day wearing a gravely troubled face, which led Eliot to question him, and he was on the point of telling Roger everything and asking his advice when several other boys came up and the opportunity was lost. All day long Ben's mind dwelt on the perplexing problem, and gradually he came to believe there was only one solution; he must give up school, leave Oakdale, and find a job of some sort by which he could support himself and Jerry. It meant the shattering of all his plans, but he faced the alternative bravely, and even became a bit more relieved and cheerful when he had decided to accept it as the only thing that could be done. 242

When the boys came out for practice that afternoon neither Stone nor Hayden was with them. Spotty Davis was on hand, however, and, after a consultation with the coach, Roger called Spotty aside for the purpose of telling him as kindly as possible that he would be no longer needed upon the team.

Davis instantly showed his resentment and anger. Hayden, coming up, heard him shrilly saying:

"That's all right, Mr. Eliot, you can fire me. I've seen other fellers knocked out in football games, and they wasn't fired. Mebbe you'll need me yet, and mebbe you won't get me if you do." With which he walked away and sat down alone on one of the lower rows of seats, his sly face wearing a sour expression of resentment and anger. 243

Practice was begun without Stone. In the midst of it he appeared, wearing his plain, homespun clothes, and called to the captain.

"Roger," he said, "I can't play football any more."

Eliot uttered an exclamation of surprise. "Why not, Ben? What's the matter now?"

"I told you my story some time ago; you're the only one who has ever heard it from me. Uncle Asher, who took my blind brother to care for, is dead, and now someone must look after Jerry. I haven't money enough to attend school and take care of him too, so I'm going to leave school. I must find work; I've settled on that."

"Oh, say, that's too bad, Stone, old chap! Now don't be hasty; let's think this matter over. Perhaps my father will do something for Jerry."

Ben shook his head. "I couldn't permit my brother to accept charity, Roger; I thank you very much for the generous thought, but I've made up my mind. I've left the suit you loaned me, and everything else, in the gym. Perhaps I'll see you again to-morrow before we leave Oakdale. I couldn't practice to-night if I wanted to, for Jerry is all alone. I went to see him after school was over and tell him my decision; that's why I wasn't here promptly. Don't say anything to the rest of the fellows now. I'd like to bid them all good-by, but I don't want to do so here at this time." 244

Roger found it useless to advance argument, and finally Ben departed, watched by the eyes of Hayden, who had sauntered past in time to catch a few words of the conversation.

Five minutes later Hayden excused himself and left the field in the wake of Spotty Davis, who was finally going away in a sullen and resentful frame of mind.

Stone went down into the village to purchase a pair of shoes for Jerry, whose footwear was almost wholly gone to the uppers. In his timidity the blind boy had remained all day long in that room at Mrs. Jones', again beset by fear that the pursuers he dreaded might find him; and he was even unwilling to be seen in the village with his brother. 245

Ben spent some time selecting the shoes, for he wished to get a stout and serviceable pair at a moderate price, which was no easy matter. Having made the purchase at last, he was on the point of leaving when the shopkeeper said:

"There was a man here in town a while ago asking for a boy by your name, only the front part of his name was Jerry instead of Ben, and the man said he was blind."

For a moment Ben's heart ceased to beat. "How long ago was that?" he asked huskily.

"Oh, less than an hour, I guess. He'd just struck town, and he's gone over to the hotel for supper."

Ben ran all the way back to Mrs. Jones' house. At the door he met Spotty Davis, who had just come down the back stairs.

Davis seemed a trifle startled. "Hello, Ben!" he exclaimed. "I just dropped round to see ye. Found your brother all alone. Saw you wasn't practicin' to-night, and sorter wondered what the matter was. You know, Eliot he's fired me. What do you think of that? I didn't believe he'd do it." 246

"I can't stop to talk with you, Spotty," said Ben; "I'm in a great hurry. Excuse me, will you?"

"Sure," said Davis, with great willingness, as he passed on.

At the gate Davis paused an instant to glance back; but Ben had disappeared, and Spotty scudded away into the gathering twilight.

247

CHAPTER XXV.

FLIGHT.

Ben mounted the stairs in haste. “Here, Jerry,” he said, “let me try these shoes on you. Let’s see if they fit.” His hands trembled a bit as he removed the remnants of the shoes the blind boy had worn and tried the others upon Jerry’s feet. “How do they feel?” he asked, as he hastened to lace them.

“All right,” was the answer. “But what’s the matter, Ben? You’re panting and excited. Has anything happened?”

“I’ve been hurrying,” said Ben evasively.

But even the little yellow dog seemed to realize that something was wrong, for he moved about uneasily, eying the brothers and whining.

“I’ve decided we had better leave Oakdale at once—right away,” said Ben, as he rose to his feet. “Sit still, Jerry, while I gather up the things I must take.”

248 “Ben,” said the younger lad, with conviction, “something has happened. You’re nervous and alarmed; I know it by your voice. Why don’t you tell me, Ben—why don’t you tell me?”

At any rate, it would be necessary to tell him in a few moments, and so, seeking to frighten the blind boy as little as possible, Ben did so at once. The moment Jerry learned a man had appeared in Oakdale asking for him he became panic-stricken; his face grew pallid and he trembled in every limb.

“They will take me away from you, brother—they will separate us!” he exclaimed.

“They shall not!” cried the older lad fiercely. “I had decided already to leave Oakdale to-morrow; we’ll leave to-night—we’ll slip away at once. Keep still, Jerry, and I’ll make all the preparations.”

“But what if that man should come—what if he should come before we can start?”

“He’ll have to get here in a hurry to find us.”

249 Indeed, it did not take Ben Stone long to make a bundle of the few belongings he felt he must take. A great deal of his poor personal property he had resolved to abandon for the time being, confident that Mrs. Jones would take care of everything for him. Sometime when there was no longer danger he could recover it all.

“We’ll get out of the house without saying a word to anybody,” said Ben. “That’s the best way, although I hate to do it, for we seem to be running away like criminals.”

At the last moment, smitten by regret because fancied necessity seemed to compel him to leave without bidding the kind widow good-by, he seized a piece of brown paper and the stub of a pencil and sat down to write a few words of farewell—Jerry urging him to hasten even while he was scribbling. This was what he wrote:

“My Dear Mrs. Jones:—

“I’ll never be able to thank you enough for all
your kindness to me and to my little blind brother.
I’m forced to do what I am doing, though I
regret it very much. I wish I might say good-by
to you and to Jimmy, but I do not dare. I
know I shall always be ashamed and sorry for
this last thing I have done, but I couldn’t help it.
I hope you’ll forgive me and always think as well
of me as you can, no matter what you may hear
about me.”

250 At this point Jerry’s impatient pleading could be no longer resisted, and, hastily signing his name, Ben left the note of farewell where it could not be overlooked by Mrs. Jones. With all possible stealth they descended the stairs and got softly out of the house.

The night had come on overcast and dark, heavy clouds veiling the moon. A raw wind, chill and dank, came from the east, soughing fitfully through the bare limbs of the trees and sending fallen leaves scurrying along the ground. Just outside the gate Ben turned to look back at the lighted windows. Mamie, accompanying herself on the melodeon, was singing, and there was a choking sensation in Ben’s throat as he listened.

“An exile from home, splendor dazzles in vain;
O! give me my lowly thatch cottage again;
A charm from the skies seems to hallow us there,
Which, seek through the world, is ne’er met with elsewhere.
Home, home, sweet, sweet home!
Be it ever so humble, there’s no
place like home.”

251 “Come,” entreated Jerry; and they fled on past the silent academy, the gym and the athletic field

—on into the bleak night. The blind boy had brought his violin, and it was swung by the cord over his back.

With the village behind them, Ben paused once more to look around. The lights of Oakdale twinkled far down the road. It was there he had dreamed pleasant dreams; it was there he had fought his fight until victory seemed within his grasp; but those dreams were over, and he had been conquered by cruel fate in the hour of his triumph. Fear, which frequently perverts the soundest judgment, had forced him, without reasoning or sober thought, into this flight by night.

They went on, and soon a barren shoulder of Turkey Hill shut out those lights and they were alone on the highway that led to the northwest.

“We’ll be followed, Ben,” said Jerry apprehensively. “What can we do?”

“If you, blind and alone, save for Pilot, could avoid pursuers so long, surely together we must find it a simpler matter. Trust me. This is not the first time I have been forced into running away.”

“I know—I know; but they didn’t try to catch you, Ben. They let you go and thought it good 252
riddance. Now it’s different.”

“I don’t understand why they should put themselves to so much trouble and expense to find you, Jerry, and shut you up in an institution. Perhaps they’ll give it up after a while.”

Hand in hand they went on through the black night. At times Pilot, having trotted a short distance ahead, would pause to peer at them through the blackness, and whine. The wind moaned across the open spaces and crashed the limbs of trees together while they were passing through strips of woods. The dampness in the atmosphere added to the penetration of the chill, and Jerry’s teeth chattered.

They came to Barville, ten miles from Oakdale, and were in the outskirts of the dark and silent village before they were aware of it. They were tempted to try to circle round the place, fearing someone might see them, but only two or three dim lights gleamed faintly from windows, and not a 253
soul did they encounter on the streets of the town. Once a dog barked in a house they were passing, but Jerry was swift enough in bidding Pilot be still to prevent the little animal from answering.

Beyond Barville they paused to rest, and Ben, hearing Jerry’s teeth chatter, persisted in pulling off his coat and buttoning it about the blind lad’s shoulders. In this manner the violin on Jerry’s back was protected when, later, a fine, drizzling rain began.

“But you’ll be wet through, Ben, and you’ll catch cold,” said Jerry. “I wish you’d take your coat.”

“I’m all right,” laughed the elder brother. “I’m tough, and there’s never anything the matter with me. Perhaps we can find shelter somewhere.”

The rain, driven in the teeth of the wind, soon drenched him through; and when at last he perceived near the road an old barn with no house at hand, even Ben was more than willing to stop.

“I think the house must have burned down,” he said, “for there isn’t any to be seen. It’s a good 254
place, Jerry. We must be eighteen or twenty miles from Oakdale. We can stop here and keep out of sight all through the day, if necessary.”

So they tried the door of the barn and found it unfastened. In the black darkness they felt their way cautiously, at last climbing upon a haymow, where Jerry sank down exhausted.

“Perhaps they’ll give it up when they find we’re gone, Ben,” said the blind boy, shivering. “Maybe they won’t try to follow us.”

“Maybe not. We’ll hope so, anyway. Bern Hayden will be glad when he finds out. He’ll rejoice over it.”

They burrowed into the hay and talked for a time of various plans, while gradually, in spite of their drenched condition, the heat of their bodies as they snuggled close together warmed them through. Pilot crept up against Jerry and contented himself. The wind swept against the old barn and moaned through cracks, while the rain beat unceasingly upon the roof.

Ben thought of Bern Hayden’s fine home, and he had a wrestle with the bitter resentment against 255
fate which sought to claim him. At first it seemed that everything in the world was wrong and that those who least deserved it, or did not deserve it at all, were most favored by fortune; but then he remembered Roger, to whose home he had been welcomed, and he knew that some who were worthy were privileged to bask in prosperity’s sunshine.

Finally the mournful sweep of the wind and the fitful beating of rain lulled his senses, and he slept —slept to dream of Hayden leering triumphantly upon him. In his sleep he muttered:

“Wait—wait; my time will come!”

256

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE ARREST.

A lance of sunshine, piercing a crack in the old barn, struck squarely into Ben Stone's eyes and awoke him. For a few moments he lay still without comprehending, the odor of the haymow in his nostrils; his head alone was uncovered by the hay into which the fugitives had burrowed. High up in the peak of the barn the morning light streamed in through a broken, dusty, cobwebby window; with the passing of the night the storm had passed also, and the new day was bright and fair.

Ben turned his head slowly, softly, and saw his brother sleeping beside him, which sight brought back with a rush the memories of recent events leading up to and including the flight by night from Oakdale. They were fugitives, he and Jerry—fugitives and wanderers upon the face of the earth.

257 Jerry awoke; the sightless eyes unclosed and a faint smile crept over his face. "Ben," he called, moving a hand to touch the lad at his side—"Ben, is it you?"

"Yes, Jerry. Did I wake you up? I didn't mean to do so."

"Oh, I'm glad you did; I'm glad to know we're together again. It is morning."

"Yes, it is morning; the sun is shining."

"I'm warm and dry and comfortable now. I was so wet and cold when we found this place last night!"

"It was a mean old night. If it hadn't stormed, we'd got a much bigger start—we'd be lots further away from Oakdale now."

"We'd better stay here all day long, Ben, for anyone won't be likely to find us. That's the way I did at first—hid in the daytime and traveled at night."

"But we brought no food, and we must have something to eat. I'm afraid you're hungry now, Jerry."

258 "Oh, not a bit," was the assurance. "It ain't so hard for a feller to go all day without eating if he only tries; I know, for haven't I done it lots of times! Perhaps when night comes again we'll be able to find something to eat somehow."

"I have money," said Ben. "I can buy food."

"But if you try it now somebody who sees you may send word back to Oakdale. Please don't try it now, Ben, for truly I'm not hungry. Where's Pilot?"

For the first time they thought of the little dog, and, to their surprise and dismay, he was gone. Ben, however, was far more concerned than Jerry over this.

"He'll come back," declared the blind boy. "He's gone to hunt for his breakfast, and I know he'll come back; he always does."

They lay there for some time, talking of the past and planning for the future. The ray of sunshine that had aroused Ben crept on across the mow, leaving them in shadow, and presently Jerry once more betrayed tokens of drowsiness, slumber again claiming him at last.

259 "Poor little chap!" murmured Ben with infinite tenderness. "You've had a hard time of it, but I'm going to stick by you now and take care of you always. I can do it, and I will."

The silence in the barn was so profound that he could hear crickets fiddling in the thickets of brown, rain-washed grass outside. With a clatter of hoofs and a rumble of wheels, a horse and carriage passed on the road near by. Ben listened till the sounds died out in the distance, and then after a time he likewise slept once more.

It was the barking of Pilot that next aroused the brothers, and the little dog came scrambling up onto the low mow and sniffed around them, whining strangely. He barked again, a short, sharp note, whereupon Jerry clutched his brother with both hands, whispering excitedly:

"Danger, Ben—danger! Pilot is trying to tell us."

Even as these words were uttered they heard the voices of men and the tramp of heavy feet. One of Jerry's hands found Pilot's collar, and beneath that touch the dog crouched upon the hay and was still.

260 There seemed to be two men. "The critter sartainly come right in here," said one of them. "Mebbe 'tain't the same dorg, but he answers the deescription the Widder Jones give; and it's mighty queer a dorg should be hookin' it round here, where there ain't no houses nigher than a quarter of a mile."

"Where's the beast dodged to, sheriff?" questioned the other man. "I heared him bark arter he skipped in through the open door."

Sheriff! Ben Stone's heart leaped into his throat at that word, and a shuddering sickness overcame him. He felt Jerry trembling violently at his side. Both lay perfectly still, scarcely breathing, but unable to repress the heavy beatings of their hearts. The men searched below, and after a time one of them climbed upon the mow. In a few moments he nearly trod upon them, halting to utter a shout:

"Here they be!"

As the other man came scrambling to the mow, Ben threw aside the hay and sat up.

"What do you want?" he asked huskily.

One man, tall and thin, with a bunch of tobacco-stained whiskers on his chin, answered immediately:

"We want you, and, by hokey, we've got ye!"

261

“Oh, Ben!” sobbed Jerry, likewise sitting up. “Oh, Ben!”

In a moment Pilot bristled and barked savagely at the men, who, however, betrayed no shade of alarm over this demonstration.

“If I hadn’t spied that yaller cur,” said the shorter man of the two, “we might never located them to-day. Nobody we questioned ’round here had seen anything of ’em. You’ve got to give me the credit, sheriff.”

“That’s all right, Hubbard; you’ll git all the credit that’s comin’ to ye, don’t worry.”

Ben had seen both men in Oakdale. The taller was William Pickle, a deputy sheriff; the other Abel Hubbard, a constable. The deputy stooped and fastened a strong hand on Ben’s shoulder.

“Come on,” he ordered. “You took a long walk last night; we’ll give ye a ride to-day.”

“What are you going to do with me?”

“Goin’ to take ye back to Oakdale, of course.”

“What for? What have I done?”

“I ruther guess you know. You’re a slippery rascal, and you’ve left a record behind ye everywhere you’ve been. Gimme the irons, Hubbard.”

There was a clanking, rattling sound as the constable brought forth a pair of handcuffs, at sight of 262
which all the resentment in Ben Stone’s outraged soul rose.

“Don’t you put those things on me!” he shouted furiously. “I haven’t done anything.”

Both men held him, and, in spite of his struggles, the manacles were snapped upon his wrists; while Jerry, still sitting on the mow, pleaded and sobbed and wrung his hands, the little dog vainly seeking to soothe him by trying to lick his face.

“He’s a desp’rate character, sheriff,” said the constable. “’Twouldn’t be safe not to iron him.”

“I ain’t takin’ no chances,” declared William Pickle grimly. “I had one prisoner break away once, and that learnt me a lesson. Now it’s no use to raise sech a fuss, young feller; you might jest as well take your medicine quiet. You ought to know what alwus comes to them that plays the tricks you’ve been up to.”

“I haven’t done anything to be arrested,” protested Ben wildly. “I have a right to take care of my 263
own brother, for he’s blind and can’t look out for himself.”

“Purty good bluffer,” grinned Abel Hubbard.

“That’s all right; ’twon’t do him no good,” returned the deputy sheriff. “Course he’s got sense enough to know anything he owns up to may be used as evidence against him.”

Again and again Ben protested that he knew not why he had been placed under arrest. “Why don’t you tell me?” he cried. “What’s the charge?”

“Robbery,” said Pickle; “and there’s sartainly evidence enough to put ye behind the bars. You might jest as well come along quiet, for it won’t do ye no good resistin’. We’d better be movin’, Hubbard.”

They dragged him down from the mow, Jerry following, dumb with anguish. At a distance from the barn a horse, attached to a carriage, was hitched beneath a roadside tree, and toward this conveyance the manacled prisoner was marched between the two officers. His brain was in a whirl, for he could not understand the meaning of this hideous accusation against him.

“Unhitch the hoss, Hubbard,” directed the deputy sheriff. “I’ll put this feller inter the wagon.” 264

“Take me with my brother!” pleaded Jerry, who had followed to the spot.

“We ain’t got no orders to take only jest him,” said William Pickle. “The wagon ain’t roomy enough to carry you, too, and so we can’t bother with ye. Mebbe ’twas an oversight we wa’n’t give’ orders to fetch ye, for you might serve as a witness against him; but, having neither authority nor room, we won’t cumber ourselves with ye.”

With the captive between himself and Hubbard, William Pickle took the reins and turned the horse toward Oakdale. Looking back, the manacled lad saw Jerry standing there, his face hidden in his hands, the yellow dog gazing up sympathetically at him, a spectacle never to be forgotten; and the frightful injustice of fate seemed to crush and smother the last spark of hope and strength in Ben’s soul.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE DARKEST HOUR.

The Oakdale lockup was beneath the Town Hall, and into that cage for culprits Stone was thrust. Curious and unfriendly eyes had seen him brought back into the village. As the post office was passed, one of a group of men lounging on the steps called out: “I see you got the critter, Bill.”

“Yep,” answered the deputy sheriff, with a grin of triumph; “we ketched the rascal all right, Eben.”

The afternoon session had begun at the academy, and therefore Ben’s plight was not witnessed by any of the scholars, for which he was doubly thankful. When they were inside the lockup Pickle removed the handcuffs from the boy’s wrists.

“There,” he said, “I don’t guess you’ll break out of here. There’s a chair and a bunk, and you better make yo’rself as comf’table as ye can. Hubbard will have charge of ye now till you’re brought to trial.” The door closed heavily behind the departing officer, the bolt grating harshly in the lock.

On the journey back to Oakdale Ben had tried in vain to learn the particulars of the crime with which he was charged. While avoiding or refusing to answer his questions, the two men had craftily sought to lead him into compromising statements; failing in which, they disappointedly told each other that his attempt at “slickness” would do him no good.

The boy sat on the heavy, broken-backed chair, resting his elbows on his knees and bowing his face in his hands. There he sat motionless for a long time, trying to divine by what baleful freak of circumstances he had been brought to this wretched plight; but, without knowledge of the facts to work upon, he found himself floundering helplessly and blindly in a mire of uncertainty.

He was aroused by voices outside the door, above which an iron-barred window admitted light and air.

“I say it’s just inhuman to treat the poor boy in sech a fashion! You ain’t fed him, y’u say; y’u ain’t even found out if he’s hongry an’ starvin’. I’ve brung him some vittles, an’ the least y’u can do is feed him. I don’t b’lieve he ever stole nothin’, an’ I’ll never b’lieve it till it’s proved ag’in’ him. He’s a good boy, an’ a kindhearted boy. He was good to my little Jimmy, an’ I’ll never forgit it as long’s the Lord lets me live.”

Ben thrilled, for it was the voice of Mrs. Jones; and here was one, at least, who still had faith in him.

“That’s all right, Mis’ Jones,” said Abel Hubbard. “Your sympathetic heart sartainly does you credit, but in this case it’s a dead sure thing you’re a-wastin’ your sympathy on an undeservin’ objec’. Why, there ain’t no doubt in the world but he’s the thief, for wasn’t the watches and the rings and some of the money found hid under the straw tick of his bed right in your own house? That’s proof enough, Mis’ Jones, and there ain’t no gittin’ round it.”

“I don’t b’lieve he put them things there, Abel Hubbard—no, siree! I dunno how they come to be there, but that boy never stole ’em.”

“He’s been up to things wuss’n that, and his father before him was a jailbird. Blood will tell, Mis’ Jones—blood will tell. I s’pose he orter have somethin’ to eat, but we’ve been so busy we ain’t got ’round to feed him yet. I’ll give him the grub you’ve brung. Yes, I’ll give it to him now, Mis’ Jones; but you better stand back from the door, ’cause he’s a desperate critter, and there’s no tellin’ what he may try. He’ll never play no snigdums on me, though; he’ll find me ready if he tries ’em.”

When the heavy bolt was shot back and the door opened cautiously by the constable, Ben was seen standing at a distance, showing no disposition to attempt anything desperate. The widow was there, bearing in her hands a large dish covered by a napkin, snowy white, though somewhat frayed. Her broad, kindly face was softened with sympathy and sorrow.

“Oh, my poor boy!” she said. “I’ve brung y’u something to eat to keep y’u from starvin’, for these heathen ’round here don’t seem to have no thought about that. I’ve brung the best I had in the house, which, goodness knows, is poor enough—cold beans left over from Sunday, an’ bread an’ butter an’ doughnuts an’ a piece of blueb’ry pie. I’ll fetch y’u a warm supper by and by, for I bought a piece of lamb to stew a-purpose, an’ Sadie is tendin’ it. You must be awful hongry, an’ I know cold beans won’t hurt your deejeshun, though they alwus sot monstrous hard on Joel’s stummick. You jest keep up your pucker, Ben, an’ don’t lose courage; for you’ve got some friends left, an’ they’re goin’ to do everything they can for y’u. I wisht the constable would let me in to see y’u, but he says no, an’ so I can’t come.”

Ben had advanced slowly toward the door, closely watched by the suspicious eye of Abel Hubbard. He had fought back his emotions until once more he seemed to be the stolid, indifferent fellow who had won so little sympathy when he first appeared in Oakdale. Nevertheless, there was a catch in his voice as he took the dish and sought to express his gratitude. The door closed upon him, and he was again alone.

He had eaten some of the beans and one of the doughnuts when Hubbard reopened the door on a crack and thrust in a pitcher of water, which he left standing upon the floor.

The time passed with leaden feet. He had ceased trying to understand; he waited dumbly. Far away a bell clanged, sending a slight shudder through him; it was the academy bell, telling that mid-afternoon intermission was over. Doubtless his schoolmates knew all about it by this time; they had heard of his arrest and imprisonment in the lockup, and they had told one another what they

thought of it. Hayden was rejoicing and his friends were satisfied, while probably still others had said they knew all along it would come to something like this. It was the darkest hour of Ben Stone's life.

He did not think wholly of himself, however; indeed, his thoughts dwelt far more upon his helpless blind brother, whom he had promised to stand by and to protect, but from whom he had been ruthlessly and unfeelingly separated. His soul was heavy and faint with the weight laid upon it, when again there were voices at the door and again the lock grated harshly. 271

Roger Eliot entered, followed by a smooth-faced, middle-aged man; and the constable, stepping inside, relocked the door and stood grimly on guard.

Ben had risen. His eyes met those of Roger squarely, and in a moment the latter rushed forward with his hand outstretched.

"Stone, old fellow," said Eliot, "this is tough luck."

Their hands met, and there was strength and reassurance in the grip Roger gave.

"I didn't hear what had happened to you until intermission time, Stone," said the football captain apologetically; "if I had, you'd seen me before this. My father sent me word. He has engaged Lawyer Marsh to defend you. This is Mr. Marsh, Ben."

The lawyer likewise took the hand of the accused boy, looking earnestly into his face. "Mr. Eliot," he said, "seems to think there must be some mistake. He is unwilling to believe you are guilty, my lad."

Ben's face, which had been quite pale, flushed deeply; for, of a sudden, his heart sent the blood leaping through his body. So Urian Eliot did not believe him a thief! Roger had faith in him and was ready to stand by him! After a moment he spoke with strange calmness: 272

"I am not guilty."

"I knew it!" cried Roger. "I would have staked my life on it."

"As your counsel," said the lawyer, "I have come to talk the matter over with you, that I may prepare to defend you when the trial is called at ten o'clock to-morrow. I shall ask you some questions, and you must answer them frankly, fully and truthfully."

"You shall have a truthful answer to every question you ask, sir."

"I suppose you know the circumstances which have led to your arrest?"

"I only know that I am charged with robbery. I have been told nothing more."

"Then you may not be aware that two lockers at the gymnasium were broken open, that of Roger and of Bernard Hayden." 273

"I know nothing about it, sir."

"They were broken open and pilfered while football practice was in progress last night. Roger's watch and some money belonging to him were taken; Hayden likewise lost a watch, two rings and some money. These watches, the rings and a part of the money were found after you had disappeared, concealed beneath the straw tick of the bed in your room. That is the evidence against you, and to most people it must seem decidedly convincing."

"I never touched any of those stolen articles, sir. I did not hide them in my room. If I had stolen them why did I leave them there when I ran away?"

"That's it!" cried Roger. "The very question I asked."

"But why did you run away?" interrogated the lawyer, watching Ben intently.

Stone answered that question without hesitation. In doing so, he went back to the cause of Jerry's flight from the home of his dead uncle, explaining how the blind lad had been pursued even to Oakdale, and how while purchasing that pair of shoes Ben had learned that a man had arrived in the town and made inquiries for the fugitive. 274

"They told me the man was at the hotel getting supper," concluded Ben. "I knew he would have no trouble in finding Jerry after that, and so we lost not a minute in getting away."

"This clears up that point, which I could not understand," smiled Roger in great satisfaction. "I knew there must be some other explanation than that Ben had fled to escape arrest. The man arrived at Mrs. Jones' house while Deputy Sheriff Pickle was searching Ben's room. He was intensely disappointed when he found he had delayed just long enough to baffle himself."

"Where is he now—where is he?" asked Stone eagerly.

"He left this morning, after doing a lot of telephoning. I think he fancied he had a clew to the course you had taken. I doubt if he has yet learned of your arrest."

"He will catch Jerry!" said Ben dejectedly.

"Which doubtless will be the best thing that could happen," was the lawyer's opinion. "We must bring the man and your brother back to Oakdale. We'll need them both at the trial to establish the motive for your flight. It's really unfortunate that the officers who arrested you didn't bring Jerry along also." 275

"But we'll find them both—we'll find Jerry and the man," declared Roger. "The telephone will do it, and my father's car will bring them to Oakdale in a hurry."

"My boy," urged the lawyer, "tell me your exact movements on leaving the academy yesterday afternoon."

"I went directly to my room, where I knew Jerry was waiting all alone. I hurried away from the academy without saying a word to anyone. We had a talk, Jerry and I, and I told him I had made up my mind at last to leave school and take him away to some place where I could find work; for what money I had was not enough to support us both while I finished the term at the academy. When we had talked it all over, I took some things Roger had loaned me and left them in the gymnasium, after which I crossed over to the field that I might let Roger know. From the field I came straight back into town and purchased a pair of shoes for Jerry at Mr. Doyle's store. It was there I heard of the arrival in town of a man who had made inquiries about a blind boy and a little yellow dog. I knew what that meant, and I ran back to Mrs. Jones', where as soon as possible I made up a bundle of things most needed, fearing every moment that the man would appear. We slipped out of the house and got away on the road to Barville. That's all I can tell you, sir, and every word is true." 276

He had spoken in a convincing manner, and the lawyer nodded his head slowly. “A straightforward statement, my lad; but how that stolen property came to be concealed in your bed is a staggering question.”

“Someone must have placed those things there—some enemy of mine. I have a bitter enemy.”

“He means Bern Hayden,” said Eliot; “but Hayden could not have done it—that’s out of the question. Nevertheless, Bern is determined to push this matter. I have refused to press it, for which Hayden has been pleased to sneer at me.”

“Oh, he thinks he’s got me now!” cried Stone. “He’s glad, and he’ll make me suffer, if he can.” 277

“We’ll do our best to get this business straightened out and cleared up,” promised the lawyer; “and, in order that we may make all possible haste, I’ll have to telephone right away and try to locate the man who gave his name as Henry Bailey—the man who was trying to catch your brother. Keep up your courage, my boy, and we’ll talk this matter over again when there’s more time to go into the minutest details. You have a loyal friend in Roger, and one in his father, who will stand behind you and fight it out to a finish. If you’re innocent—and since hearing your statement I myself believe you are—we’ll leave no stone unturned to establish that fact.”

“That’s right, old fellow,” assured Roger, his face lighted by that rare smile as he placed his hands on Stone’s shoulders. “A man is never down and out till he loses heart and gives up. I’ve seen you play football, and you’re a good fighter at that; be a good fighter at this, and you’ll win.”

Their hands met again, and once more Eliot’s firm, friendly grip imparted some of his own 278
optimism and strength. They left Ben feeling greatly heartened and encouraged.

“Roger is right,” he said after a time; “the fellow who knows he’s right and quits isn’t worthy to come out on top.”

As night was coming on Mrs. Jones brought a huge steaming bowl of lamb stew, and with it more words of cheer. Ben ate the stew, every bit of it. The window above his prison door he left open to admit air when he finally lay down upon the hard bunk. Occasional sounds from the village drifted in upon him. Once he heard some of the boys calling to one another. He had uttered a prayer for Jerry, and the sleep that came to him at last was full and peaceful, unbroken by dreams.

Nevertheless, he awoke suddenly, fancying that he was dreaming; for to his ears floated the sound of a violin, on which someone was playing the tune that had so moved him as he was beginning his flight from Oakdale, “Home, Sweet Home.” For a few moments he lay listening like 279
one in a trance. Then he leaped up, stumbled against his chair, seized it, felt his way in the darkness to the door, placed the chair and mounted it, till, grasping the iron bars above, he could peer out through the grating.

A thin, pale moon was in the sky, and by its light he saw beneath his door the little lad who was drawing that plaintive melody from the old fiddle. At the feet of the player sat a small dog.

“Oh, Jerry,” cried Ben—“Jerry, Jerry!”

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ON TRIAL.

The trial of Ben Stone had begun. It was held in the Town Hall, which proved none too large to hold comfortably the surprising number of curious persons who flocked thither; for in any small country town that is somewhat removed from larger places those inhabitants who can spare the time to do so seldom fail to attend such an affair, which provides for their more or less uneventful lives a certain sort of entertainment and a topic out of the ordinary for discussion. On this occasion they had almost completely filled the seats in the hall, staring at the judge, the lawyers, the witnesses and the prisoner, and filling the room with a suppressed hum of comment until called to order.

The clerk had done his part, the case had been stated, and Lawyer Frances, representing the prosecution, had made his opening, telling plainly and concisely what he would attempt to prove. A part of the stolen property—all that had been recovered—together with some other articles in evidence, could be seen on a table at the judge's elbow. The prisoner sat at one side, with his counsel, Lawyer Marsh, near him. His face was calm; but it was not an attractive face, and more than one, gazing at it, had whispered to a neighbor that he *looked* like a thief. It is remarkable how quickly most persons may fancy they can perceive criminal indications in the features of any one charged with crime and placed under arrest.

Not far from Ben—as near as they would permit him—sat his blind brother, Jerry; and beside Jerry was seen Henry Bailey, the man from whom the afflicted boy had hidden repeatedly in his flight, after his uncle's death. Bailey was a harmless, kindly-appearing person, who showed the greatest interest in every move of the trial, and who more than once was seen to speak a few low words in a seemingly reassuring manner into the ear of Jerry Stone. Pilot, the faithful, lay on the floor at Jerry's side.

Of course Bern Hayden was on hand, and his father also. Bern was with the witnesses, but Mr. Hayden sat back, watching and listening in cold and distant satisfaction. The other witnesses were William Pickle, Roger Eliot, Sleuth Piper, and Spotty Davis, the last mentioned displaying a great deal of uneasiness, which at times amounted almost to fear.

The first person called upon was the deputy sheriff, who, questioned by Lawyer Frances, stated that upon the previous night he was at Stickney's store shortly after supper, where Bern Hayden found him and told him that there had been a robbery, adding the request that he should at once find Ben Stone, whom Hayden suspected, and search him. In company with Bern, Pickle had gone to the house of Mrs. Jones and obtained admission to the room of the suspected lad, only to discover that the room was empty, and, from indications, that Ben and his brother had made hasty flight.

"Go on, officer," urged Lawyer Frances. "What did you do then?"

"At young Hayden's request I searched the place," said Pickle. "Under the straw tick of the bed I found two watches, two rings, and some money, amounting to purty nigh ten dollars."

"Are these the watches and the rings?" questioned the lawyer, handing the articles to the witness for inspection.

"Yep," nodded Pickle positively, "them's they. I looked them over, and I'm reddy to swear they're the ones."

"And the money here——"

"I wouldn't swear to that; but they was a five dollar bill, a two dollar bill, and quite a lot of coin."

"Did you find anything else?"

"Yep; a letter—that is, a sort of a letter, writ in lead pencil and apparently scratched off in a mighty hurry."

"Is this it?" The sheet on which Ben had written his hasty farewell to Mrs. Jones was taken from the table and handed to the deputy sheriff for inspection.

"Sartin, that's it," declared the officer. "I read the most of it, though part was scrawled so that I couldn't make it out."

"Your Honor," said the prosecuting attorney, "the chirography is that of a person writing in great haste, and therefore somewhat difficult to read. I am sure, however, that I can read it; and with your permission I will do so."

The judge gave consent, and Mr. Frances read the note slowly and distinctly, placing particular emphasis on certain phrases. Listening, Ben Stone was astounded and almost appalled as he realized that to most persons that brief note must sound like a confession of guilt.

Pickle went on to tell how, urged by Bern Hayden and his father, he had set out at once to trace the fugitives, and had finally succeeded, through the discovery of the blind boy's little dog, in apprehending Ben some miles beyond Barville.

"Course," concluded the officer, "we give the feller warnin' that anything he said might be used as evidence ag'in' him, and I ruther guess he kept it in mind; for, 'though we talked with him considerable on the way back to Oakdale, he didn't make no slip-ups, and he pertended all the time not to know nothin' at all 'bout the robbery. I says to Constable Hubbard, says I, 'He's a slick critter, an——'"

"Never mind that," interrupted Judge Trueworthy. "Your opinions of the prisoner's conduct are not desired."

"'Scuse me, Your Honor," said William Pickle.

That was all; with a gesture Lawyer Marsh signified that he did not wish to cross-question the officer, and Pickle sat down.

Bern Hayden was called next, and as he rose Ben Stone's hand involuntarily went up to his mutilated ear, while his pale face became, if possible, a shade more pallid. He kept his eyes unflinchingly on Bern, who, after a single look in his direction, turned his gaze aside.

Bern told his story without hesitation. Chancing to overhear Stone bidding Eliot good-by at the football field, an impulse had led him to leave the field and follow the fellow. Having seen Ben 286
proceed directly into the village, however, he had returned to the field and practiced with the team until it became too dark for further work. With the others he had gone into the gymnasium, where two lockers, his and Eliot's, had been discovered broken open and rifled. He had lost his watch, two rings, and some money, nearly eight dollars, which he had left in his own locker. He then identified one of the watches and both of the rings as belonging to him, further stating that the money left by him in his locker was a five dollar bill, a two dollar bill, and change which must have amounted to nearly a dollar and a half. Knowing Ben Stone as he did, he had suspected him at once, and therefore he went in search of the deputy sheriff, whom he had some difficulty in finding. He had been on hand when Pickle searched Stone's room, and had seen the officer uncover the stolen property and take possession of Ben's note of farewell to Mrs. Jones.

Bern having finished, Lawyer Marsh cross-questioned him.

"Hayden," said the lawyer, "you were acquainted with Benjamin Stone ere you came here to 287
Oakdale, were you not?"

"Yes, sir."

"You knew him, I believe, in Hilton, his native town?"

"I did, sir."

"And, if I am not misinformed, you had some trouble with him there, did you not?"

"Yes."

"Was not this trouble of a somewhat serious nature—a personal encounter between you and Stone, which led you to entertain the most intense feelings of animosity toward him?"

"I object, Your Honor," cried Lawyer Frances. "I can't see what this has to do with the present case."

"Your Honor," beamed Marsh placidly, "I propose to establish that this feeling of animosity which young Hayden entertained toward Stone has a great deal to do with the case. I propose to show a motive on Hayden's part which might lead him into an effort to injure my client."

"Go on," said the judge. "Objection overruled." 288

The lawyer repeated the question, and, after a bit of hesitation, Hayden answered:

"We had a fight in Hilton, but even before that I had no use for Stone. He was a cheap, ruffianly fellow, and nobody thought anything of him in that town. His father——"

"Never mind that," interrupted Marsh sharply. "Answer my questions, that's all. You admit a feeling of dislike for Stone?"

"Nobody ever liked him—before he came here; and he wouldn't have had any friends here if, by accident, he hadn't——"

"We'll cut that out also. Is it not true that on finding Stone in this town you exerted your utmost efforts to turn your schoolmates against him and to force him out of school? Did you not induce your father to go to Principal Richardson of the academy for the purpose of urging him to turn Benjamin Stone out?"

Unable to restrain himself longer, Lemuel Hayden sprang up, crying:

"Look here, I want to know if it's my son who is on trial." 289

"Not yet, sir—not yet," answered Lawyer Marsh serenely.

The judge rapped sharply for order and requested Mr. Hayden not to interrupt the proceedings.

Having led Bern into acknowledging he had done his best to force Ben out of Oakdale Academy, Lawyer Marsh seemed satisfied. Lawyer Frances, however, was far from it; and immediately, by various questions, he tried to show that Bern, knowing the dangerous and desperate character of Stone, had tried to get him dropped from the school because he did not believe he was a fit person to associate with the academy scholars. At this Lawyer Marsh simply smiled.

Roger Eliot came next, identifying one of the watches as belonging to him, and stating he had lost a little over two dollars in coin, which had been taken from his locker.

These were all the witnesses against the prisoner, and Marsh, after a brief opening address, began by calling those who had been summoned for him. Henry Bailey, the first, was requested to 290
explain his business in Oakdale. Mr. Bailey stated that, following the death of Asher Rand, Jerry Stone, the blind boy, had disappeared ere the funeral could take place or Mr. Rand's will be read. Bailey had been engaged to learn whence the blind boy had gone and bring him back. In endeavoring to do this he had been led a hard chase, failing more than once by the smallest margin in getting his hands upon the elusive boy, and in the end the pursuit had brought him to Oakdale.

At this point Lawyer Frances interrupted. "Your Honor, I fail to see what this has to do with the case."

"Your Honor," smiled Marsh, "we are seeking to establish the motive for the sudden flight of Ben Stone from this town, and we hope to show beyond doubt that he did not run away because he had committed theft, but because he knew this pursuer of his brother had arrived and feared—unreasonably, doubtless—that it boded harm to the blind lad."

Ben was next called upon, and after a moment of faltering he told his story in a slow, distinct 291
manner, making it straightforward and simple. And as he proceeded the unfavorable impression that had prevailed concerning him was gradually dispelled; for surely he did not speak like a desperate character or a thief; nor was Lawyer Frances, by his sternest and most accusing cross-questioning, able to confuse the lad or shake him in his statements. When at last Ben was permitted to sit down, not a few of the listeners in that room were looking at one another questioningly and

doubtfully.

Spotty Davis came next. He trembled visibly as he rose, and his parted lips, revealing the space of the two missing teeth in his upper jaw, seemed to quiver. Glancing furtively from side to side, but never once looking straight toward Stone, he finally let his gaze rest upon the floor.

"Young man," said Lawyer Marsh, "you were at the football field when Stone appeared last evening and spoke to Roger Eliot, were you not?"

"Ye-yes," faltered Spotty faintly.

"Speak a bit louder, witness," commanded the judge.

"When Stone left the field you followed him, didn't you?" asked Marsh. 292

"I—I dunno; I guess so. I never noticed."

"Do you mean to say that you did not see Stone when he departed from the field?"

"Why, nun-no; I saw him. I guess 't'wa'n't long after he left before I got out. There wa'n't no use hangin' round longer, for Eliot had tole me he didn't want me on the team any more."

"On leaving the field, whither did you go?"

"To the gym."

"Did you find Stone there?"

"Nope—no, sir. There wa'n't nobody there."

"Why did you go to the gym?"

"To peel off my togs. I was in a playing suit, you know. It didn't belong to me; it belonged to the team, so I left it in the gym."

"How long were you in the gymnasium?"

"Can't tell; not a great while. It didn't take me no longer than was necessary to git off my football suit, git into my own rags and leave. There wa'n't nothing for me to hang round there for."

"After leaving the gymnasium where did you go?" 293

"Lemme see," hesitated Spotty as if in doubt. "I don't seem to remember just where I did go."

"Come, come, young man; of course you remember. You must remember. You'll find it best to remember, I think. Where did you go?"

"Oh, I sort of poked along into the village."

"Into the village? Where did you go in the village?"

"Oh, I remember now," said Spotty suddenly. "I thought there was something wrong with Stone—thought it was queer he didn't stay for practise; so I just run in to Mrs. Jones' house to see him."

"You went to Stone's room, did you?"

"Yep—I mean yes, sir."

"Was Stone there?"

"No; his brother was, though."

"The blind boy?"

"Yes, he was there."

"How long did you stay in Stone's room?"

"Oh, lemme see. I'd have to guess at it, for I ain't got no watch, and I didn't take no notice of time, anyhow. Mebbe I was there five minutes or so." 294

"What did you do while you were there?"

"Talked with Ben's brother."

"Did you sit down?"

"Don't b'lieve I did. Yes, come to think of it, I set on the edge of the bed while I was talkin' to him. What are you askin' me all these questions for? I don't know anything about this business. I can't tell anything that will do no good." Spotty was perspiring freely, even while he continued to shiver occasionally.

"We're simply trying to get at the facts," said Lawyer Marsh quietly. "It's always best to tell the exact truth."

"I hope you don't think I'm lyin'," protested the disturbed witness. "I ain't got nothing to lie about."

"Did you see Ben Stone at all?"

"Yep; he was just comin' in as I was leavin'. He was in an awful rush."

"Did you stop to speak with him?"

"No; I was goin' to stop, but he was in such a hurry I didn't. He acted mighty queer to me—sort of scat like." 295

"That's all, young man," said the lawyer suddenly; and Spotty sank down with a breath of relief.

Then came a surprise as the lawyer said:

"The next witness for the defense will be William Piper. Piper, stand up."

Sleuth rose to his feet, and there was a stir among those boys of the academy who had absented themselves from school to attend the trial.

What did Piper know about it?

296

CHAPTER XXIX.

SLEUTH'S CLEVER WORK.

Beneath the battery of wondering eyes turned upon him Sleuth bore himself proudly, for he felt that at last his hour had come—the hour in which he would demonstrate to the confusion of those who had sneered at him that he really possessed the keen, penetrating, analytical mind of a great detective. He had long yearned for this opportunity, and at last, circumstances providing it, he was confident he had risen to the occasion. Indeed, there was an expression of dignity and sagacity in Piper's face which surprised those who knew him best and led more than one to fancy it possible he had underrated the lad.

Having been sworn, Sleuth cast a reassuring glance in the direction of Ben Stone, who was watching him intently, following which his eyes wandered to Spotty's face, who once more suddenly fell to shivering, touched by the chill hand of apprehension and dread.

297 Silence fell on the room. Bernard Hayden leaned forward a trifle, that he might watch the witness the better, and anyone looking at him must have fancied that in his eyes there was an expression of anxiety which he could not wholly conceal, even if he sought to do so.

"Piper," said Lawyer Marsh, "I wish you to tell His Honor in your own language, and as concisely and clearly as possible, what you know about this case. Go on, my lad."

Sleuth cleared his throat. "Your Honor and gentlemen of the jury," he began; and then he stopped short, realizing there was no jury. The slight titter that ran through the room did not disturb him, however. "Your Honor," he commenced once more, "being personally acquainted with the parties of the first part and the parties of the second part involved in this case——"

"I presume," interrupted the justice, repressing any inclination to smile that he may have felt, "you are referring to the prisoner and the plaintiff."

298 "Yes, Your Honor," bowed Sleuth; "in the language of the law, they are the parties under consideration. Being personally acquainted with the before-mentioned parties, what was more natural than that, on hearing that this heinous crime had been committed, I should become profoundly interested in the case and should resolve to give it my earnest attention with the determination of solving the deep, dark mystery appertaining thereunto?"

In the silence following Sleuth's pause at the end of this rounded period Chipper Cooper was distinctly heard as he whispered in the ear of Charlie Tuttle:

"Say, Chub, old Sleuthy is slinging English some, isn't he?"

The judge rapped for silence, requesting the witness to endeavor to tell his story in the simplest language he could command. Still unruffled, Piper proceeded:

"Unfortunately, Your Honor, I was not present at the time the apartment of Benjamin Stone was searched by the representative of the law. Had I been present, doubtless, witnessing the discovery of the loot and the message penciled by the agitated hand of the unfortunate prisoner at the bar 299 would have aided me greatly in drawing a correct and accurate deduction. Nevertheless, upon learning something of what had taken place I set forth to obtain precise knowledge as far as possible of every detail. I sought the fountain head of knowledge, our esteemed and highly efficient deputy sheriff, Mr. Pickle, but found him unwilling to accept my assistance upon the case, even though I gave him my generous assurance that I would solve the mystery. He was in a hurry; he wouldn't talk about it; he told me to get out and stop bothering him.

"I then proceeded to interview my fellow schoolmate, the plaintiff, Bernard Hayden; but he likewise received me with extreme ungraciousness, informing me that I had better mind my own business. Although thus repulsed, I was in no whit discouraged and I vowed I would not be baffled.

"It was later in the evening that I fell in with one Timothy Davis and drew him into conversation 300 concerning the topic which was then upon every tongue. The said Davis seemed more than willing to discuss the matter and was surprisingly well informed upon certain points I desired to know. Up to that time I had not met anyone who had even dropped a furtive word concerning the discovery of the seemingly self-accusing missive penned by the hand of the before-mentioned defendant. The before-mentioned Davis knew about it, and, upon being closely interrogated, he declared he had obtained his information direct from the before-mentioned plaintiff. To me it seemed very remarkable indeed that the latter—by which, if you please, I refer to Bernard Hayden—should impart such information to Spotty Davis, with whom he had never been on terms of close comradeship, while withholding the desired knowledge from me. Upon my making further inquiries in a careless, offhand manner, Davis told me how the loot had been found hidden beneath the mattress—two watches, two rings, and the exact sum of nine dollars and sixty-eight cents, including a five dollar bill and a two dollar bill."

301 "Your Honor," interrupted Lawyer Frances, "what bearing can all this rambling, second-hand information have upon the case? I think we are wasting valuable time."

"May it please Your Honor," said Sleuth loftily, "I have been requested by the attorney for the defense to tell my story in my own way, and ere I have finished I will demonstrate to your satisfaction and the satisfaction of every person present that every word I speak has a bearing upon the matter and is necessary to explain the reasons which led up to my deduction involving the before-mentioned Timothy Davis in a network of his own weaving, from which I think he will scarcely escape with ease."

At this Davis betrayed such consternation that even the least acute could perceive beyond question that he was intensely alarmed.

"Go on, Piper," instructed Judge Trueworthy; "but do try to cut out some of the big words."

"As far as I could learn," proceeded Sleuth, "not another person outside of those who were present at the time of the discovery of the swag knew exactly what sum of money had been found hidden beneath the straw mattress in the room of the defendant. It is true that, by comparison of 302
their losses, Bern Hayden and Roger Eliot had stated the amount of money stolen; and here comes the discrepancy which set me at work upon a clew of vast importance. Unless the before-mentioned Hayden and Eliot were mistaken, the amount stolen from them failed to correspond by the sum of twenty cents to the amount recovered by the representative of the law, Deputy Sheriff Pickle. A trifling matter, perhaps you will say. Certainly it is true that the thief might have retained the missing sum, but does it not seem remarkable that he should have done so and left behind him in his flight the larger amount hidden in that room? It is likewise true that the beforesaid Davis might have learned from the before-mentioned Hayden just what sum of money was recovered, but, being nonchalantly questioned regarding this, he denied it. Therefore my deduction was that Timothy Davis, knowing precisely where the plunder was concealed, knowing accurately the amount recovered by the officer of the law, knew also more than he had revealed unto me. I spent some hours in meditating on this matter. Indeed, sleep scarcely visited my eyes during the night but lately passed.

"At break of day I rose and hastened to the gymnasium, to which I obtained admittance by a key 303
similar to that provided every member of the football team. At the gymnasium I made a close inspection of the pilfered lockers, being there to obtain a clew of some sort, a desire which was amply rewarded. Within the locker of the plaintiff, Bernard Hayden, I discovered, attached to the end of a protruding nail, a shred of cloth apparently torn from the coat-sleeve of some person who had reached into that locker. I seized upon it with avidity, for I was assured it would prove of vast importance in the solution of the dark and baffling mystery."

"Is this the shred of cloth you found there, Piper?" questioned Lawyer Marsh, as he took a tiny three-cornered piece of fabric from amid the exhibits on the table and passed it to the witness.

"That is the identical shred," declared Sleuth positively, handing it back. "Close examination led me to the conclusion that that piece of cloth could possibly have come from the garment of only one 304
person in Oakdale. In order, however, that I might make no error, I again sought Timothy Davis immediately after breakfast, and, without arousing his suspicions by letting him become aware of my motive, I perceived that a small patch of cloth, corresponding in every particular with the one before the court, had been torn from the right sleeve of his coat."

Again all eyes were turned on Davis, who sat huddled upon his chair, his right arm held across his lap.

"Davis," called Lawyer Marsh sharply, "will you please stand up."

Shaking like a leaf, Spotty lifted himself upon his pins.

"Hold up your right hand," requested the lawyer, stepping quickly toward him and seizing his wrist. "Here, Your Honor, you may see the torn place in this lad's coat-sleeve, and you may also perceive beyond question that the shred of fabric discovered by Piper clinging to the nail in Bernard Hayden's locker corresponds with the material of this garment."

"I never——" began Spotty chokingly; but the lawyer released him, and the judge, rapping his 305
desk, sternly ordered him to sit down and be silent.

Triumphantly Piper proceeded. "By this time, Your Honor, I was absolutely convinced that I was on the right trail, and thenceforth I shadowed the suspect with the persistence of a bloodhound, never once letting him escape from beneath my hawklike eye. About an hour before court opened Davis entered the store of one Theodore Welcome, who is proprietor in this town of a bazaar at which tobacco in its various forms may be purchased. I was at his heels, lingering at a little distance in a careless, insouciant manner; and from the open doorway of Mr. Welcome's store I saw Davis purchasing a pack of cigarettes, for which he tendered a piece of silver money.

"Then arose some discussion over the silver piece, which the proprietor of the store stated amounted only to the value of twenty cents, but which the before-mentioned Davis had apparently fancied was a quarter. The instant Davis departed I hurried to Mr. Welcome and asked the privilege 306
of examining that piece of money, which he kindly showed me. The moment my eagle eye fell upon it I knew it was a coin on which there was a premium, as it bore the date of 1878. This piece of money I secured from Mr. Welcome, giving him fifty cents for it, and it is here among the exhibits as evidence in this case. There is upon it a mutilation, a tiny cross cut or scratched by some sharp instrument.

"Your Honor, I knew the moment my eyes fell on that mark that I had previously seen that twenty-cent piece in the possession of my highly esteemed friend, Roger Eliot, who carried it as a pocket piece. Therefore I was assured beyond doubt that it must be a part of the plunder, the sum missing when the money was recovered from its place of concealment. I had often heard Eliot refuse to part with that silver piece, upon which he stated in my hearing that there was a premium of two dollars."

By this time there was a profound sensation in the courtroom. As he proceeded, the somewhat extravagant language of Piper was overlooked by all, and now, with this climax, the judge was 307
compelled to rap repeatedly to restore quiet and order in the room.

Lawyer Marsh, grave but well satisfied, took the piece of money from the table and requested Piper to identify it, which he did. Roger Eliot likewise examined the coin, and stated that it belonged to him and had been stolen, with the rest of his money and his watch, from his locker.

"Your Honor," said Sleuth, eager to proceed, "having learned from the lips of the said Davis that, after leaving the football field last night, he visited the room of the defendant while the said defendant was absent, I immediately arrived at the deduction that——"

"Never mind your deductions, young man," interrupted the justice. "If you have reached the end of your story you may sit down."

This Piper did with evident great reluctance and disappointment; and, Theodore Welcome being present, he was called to the stand, where he corroborated the statement of the last witness and also identified the coin as the one he had received from Davis.

“Your Honor,” said Lawyer Marsh, “the defense, having no further witnesses and desiring none, rests here, with the request that the deputy sheriff be instructed to keep a close watch upon Timothy Davis until a warrant may be sworn out for his arrest.”

A sob broke the silence; it came from Davis, who suddenly cried in a husky, choking voice:

“Don’t arrest me—please don’t! I’ll confess! I’ll tell everything! I took the stuff from the lockers. I was sore on Eliot ’cause he fired me off the eleven. I was sore on everybody, I guess—Stone, too, ’cause he had made good. But I’d never done it if it hadn’t been for Bern Hayden. He come to me when I was changing my togs in the gym. He told me to do it, and he promised to git me back onto the team and give me ten dollars to boot. He’s more to blame than I be.”

“It’s a lie,” shouted Hayden, who had risen to his feet, “a dirty lie, and I——”

“Order in the court!” thundered the judge, pounding the desk with his gavel.

309

CHAPTER XXX.

CLEAR SKIES.

The case against Ben Stone broke down right there. Lawyer Frances held a hurried consultation with Lemuel Hayden and his son, and on his advice the charge against Ben was withdrawn and Stone was dismissed, exonerated.

The demonstration which followed was remarkable. People crowded around Ben and Jerry and insisted on shaking the former's hand and telling him how pleased they were because his innocence had been established. His schoolmates thumped him on the back and would have carried him on their shoulders from the hall had he not fought against it. Mrs. Jones forced her way through the crowd, with Jimmy hobbling on his crutches behind her, and, sobbing her joy, clasped Ben in her arms.

"I knowed he wa'n't no thief!" she cried happily. "Nobody that could be good as he was to a little 310
lame boy would steal. You've had a heap of troubles, Ben, but they're all over now. I don't s'pose y'u have et anything since y'u was locked up; but I cal'lated you'd git off, an' I've got Sadie tendin' a big roast, an' we'll have a feed that'll give y'u injunjesshun, which I guess y'u can stand once if Joel, my late departed, could endure it all his born days. Land! but I'm so happy I feel like cryin' my eyes out."

"With your permission, madam," said Henry Bailey, "I would like to accompany these two lads to your house, having a matter of great importance to talk over with them."

"Come right along, mister," invited the widow. "There'll be plenty of vittles for y'u, too."

Mr. Bailey was not the only one who accompanied them. Leaving the courtroom, Ben and Jerry were escorted by a triumphal procession all the way to Mrs. Jones' gate, where twenty boys cheered the acquitted lad, who paused upon the steps to look back at them, his plain face illumined by an expression of joy which made it seem actually comely.

"Thank you, fellows," he said, holding out his open hands to them. "It's good of you, and I'll never 311
forget it."

Sleuth Piper started to make a speech.

"My deduction was——" he began.

"Your deduction was all right, Sleuth," laughed Roger Eliot, giving him a slap on the shoulder. "You've established your reputation as the greatest detective of modern times, Sherlock Holmes not excepted."

Even after the house was entered those boys were heard cheering for Stone as they marched back into the village.

"Set right down, everybody," invited the widow. "Make yourselves to home while I take a look at the roast an' git the potatoes to bakin'."

"It is very fortunate, boys," said Henry Bailey, "that this affair terminated as well as it did. This is my first opportunity to talk with you both together, and I'll tell you now that much more good fortune is in store for you. Jerry put himself to needless trouble by running away ere his uncle's will was read; for in that will, which was drawn up barely two months before Asher Rand's death, and 312
which was found in Mr. Rand's small private safe, a legacy was left to you both—a legacy that will place you beyond need.

"It seems that your father, in those years while he worked so privately in his home, was engaged upon a very clever invention, which he had practically perfected at the time of his unfortunate arrest. That invention fell into the hands of Asher Rand, who, on learning its value, was sorely tempted and kept its existence a secret, finally disposing of it to a concern that pays a royalty upon it of three thousand dollars yearly. Your uncle's conscience must have been pricked to a point which led him to draw up that last will, in which he provides that the income from this invention shall be divided equally between you both.

"But since Mr. Rand's death there have been disclosures of still greater importance. Nathan Driggs, the man who caused all your father's trouble and calamitous misfortune, has been ill for some months, and recently he passed away. Ere he died, being satisfied beyond doubt that there 313
was no hope for him, he made a confession which fully exonerates your father and clears his name of the stigma upon it. Driggs confessed that your father's testimony concerning him at the trial was absolutely true—that he did bring the packages of dies for making counterfeit money to your father, and, having deceived him regarding the contents of those packages, induced him to conceal them in his house, where they were found. Therefore Abner Stone was unjustly convicted of the crime and died an innocent man through the effects of the wound he received while trying to escape from prison."

All this was so marvelous that it left the two boys breathless.

The widow had listened with speechless delight; and now, her eyes again filled with tears of joy, she cried:

"Lands to mercy! Now ain't that jest amazin'! Here I've been entertainin' under my roof a couple of heirs to wealth! Three thousand dollars! Fifteen hundred dollars apiece! Why, it puts y'u both beyond the touch of the tooth of avarice. I guess folks 'round this town will set up an' take notice 314
when they hear about it."

Ben gave his blind brother a hug. Everybody laughed. The little yellow dog, sitting on his

haunches and gazing at them, barked sharply, then, with his mouth open, wrinkled his nose and bobbed his tongue.

"Look," cried Jimmy—"look at Pilot! He's laughing, too."

Every cloud was gone from the sky, swept away to return no more. Ben Stone, whose appearance in Oakdale had been so unfavorable, whose days there had been so filled with trouble and strife, found himself the hero of the village and the coveted friend of those lads who had once regarded him with doubt and aversion. When he and Jerry and Pilot departed, with Henry Bailey, who took the boys away until such time as Asher Rand's affairs should be definitely settled and a guardian appointed for them, nearly every lad in the village, together with a number of the girls and not a few of the older citizens, accompanied them to the railway station.

"Ben," said Roger Eliot, speaking for the party on the station platform, "we're proud of you, and we hate to see you leave us. We need you on the eleven. It's too bad you're going away now."

"My deduction is," interrupted Sleuth Piper, "that he will come back."

"Yes, boys," promised Ben, with his hand grasping the iron rail of the passenger coach, "I shall come back if I can. I have talked about it with Mr. Bailey, and he thinks there will be no trouble in making the arrangements. I have had something of a scramble in Oakdale, but I like the place; for here at last I have found more friends that I ever knew before. Oh, yes, I'm coming back if I can."

Then the train bore him away.

He did come back. In less than two weeks he returned to finish his course at the academy, stopping, as before, at the home of the Widow Jones, but now having the best room in the house.

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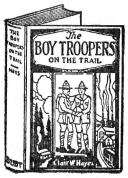

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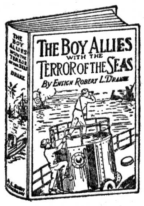

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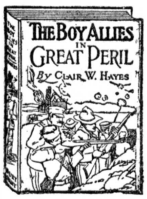

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Transcriber's Note

page 157 - changed "picyunish" to "picayunish"
...same picyunish, selfish...

no page number - ad - The Boy Allies with the Navy
changed "JUTLND" to "JUTLAND"
THE BOY ALLIES AT JUTLND

no page number - ad - The Boy Allies with the Army
changed "ALIES" to "ALLIES"
THE BOY ALIES WITH THE GREAT ADVANCE

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