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Success in the Far West, by Jr. Horatio Alger**

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Title: A Debt of Honor: The Story of Gerald Lane's Success in the Far West

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Release date: April 19, 2016 [EBook #51792]

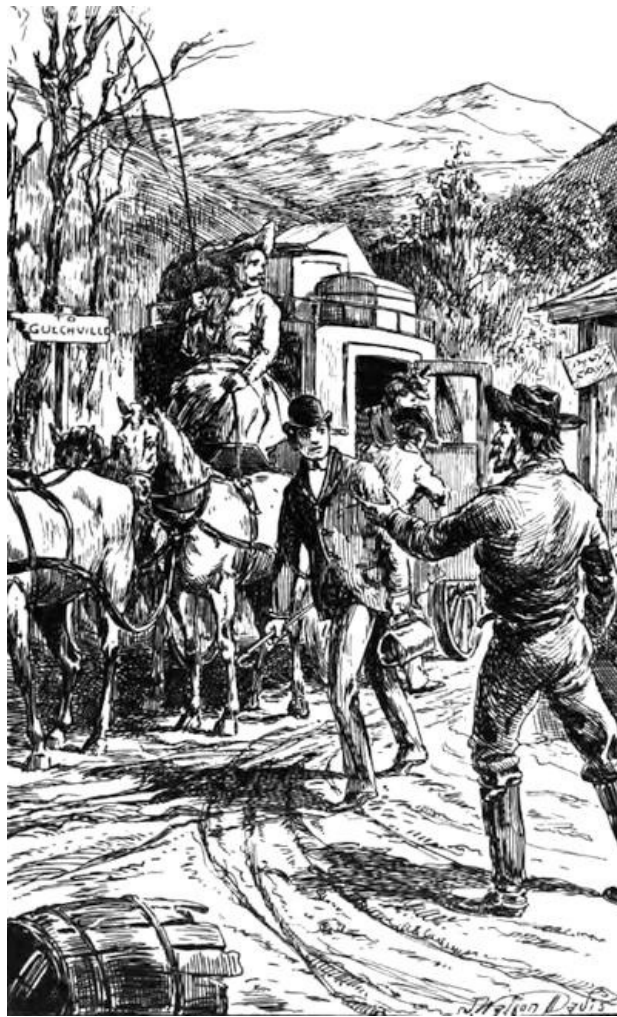
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"Glad to see you, Gerald," said Jack Amsden as the boy descended from the stage.—Page [289](#).

A DEBT OF HONOR.

THE STORY OF
GERALD LANE'S SUCCESS IN THE FAR WEST.

BY HORATIO ALGER, JR.,

*Author of "Joe's Luck," "Tom the Bootblack," "Dan the
Newsboy," "The Errand Boy," etc., etc.*

With Five Page Illustrations by J. Watson Davis.

A. L. BURT COMPANY, PUBLISHERS,
52-58 DUANE STREET, NEW YORK.

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BY HORATIO ALGER, JR.

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[1]

A DEBT OF HONOR.

CHAPTER I.

THE CABIN IN THE FOOTHILLS.

OUR story opens in a cabin among the foothills of Colorado. It was built of logs, and was not over twelve feet in height. In the center was a door, with a small window on each side. Through the roof rose a section of funnel, from which issued a slender cloud of smoke.

Let us enter.

The interior of the cabin is a surprise—being comfortably furnished, while a carpet covers the floor. On one side is a bureau, a few portraits are on the walls, a pine bedstead and an easy-chair, in which is reclining a man of middle age whose wasted form and hollow cheeks attest the ravages of consumption. From time to time he looked wistfully toward the door, saying in a low voice: "Where is Gerald? He is gone a long time."

[2]

Five minutes later the sound of hoofs was heard outside, and a boy of sixteen galloped up from the canyon on the left, and, jumping off at the portal, tethered his pony and pushed open the door of the cabin. He was a marked contrast to the sick man, for he was strongly made, with the hue of health in his ruddy cheeks, and a self-reliant, manly look upon his attractive face.

"How do you feel, father?" he asked gently.

The sick man shook his head.

"I shall never be any better, Gerald," he answered slowly.

"Don't look on the dark side," said Gerald.

"See, I have brought you some medicine."

He took from the side pocket of his sack coat a bottle, which he placed on the table.

"There, father, that will do you good," he said in a cheerful tone.

"It may relieve me a little, Gerald, but I am past permanent help."

"Don't say that, father!" said the boy, much moved. "You will live a long time."

"No; I shall deceive myself with no such expectation. Don't think I fear death. It has only one bitterness for me."

The boy looked at his father inquiringly, anxiety wrinkling his brow.

[3]

"It is," resumed the sick man, "that I shall leave you unprovided for. You will have to fight the battle of life alone."

"I am young and strong."

"Yes, but I would like to have left you in better condition. It is possible I may do so. I wrote some time since to a man who is rich and prosperous, and is under great obligations to me, telling him about you and asking him, as I had a right to ask him, to befriend you."

Gerald looked surprised.

"Why has he never helped you?" he asked.

"Because—well, I have not perhaps urged the matter sufficiently," he said.

"You say you did this man a service," said Gerald.

"Yes. I think the time has come when I should tell you what that service is. Let me say in the outset that I saved his reputation at the expense of my own. It was, I am afraid, a mistake, for it ruined my life. But I was strongly tempted!"

He paused. Gerald listened with painful interest.

"You never told me much of your early life, father," he said.

"You have wondered, no doubt, why I left civilization and buried myself—and you—in this out-of-the-way place?"

[4]

"Yes, father, I have wondered, but I did not like to ask you."

"It is the fault of one man."

"The man whom you expect to befriend me, father?"

"Yes."

"I don't think I should like to be indebted to such a man," said Gerald, and a stern expression settled on his young face. "I should not wish to accept any favors at his hands."

"Nor would you. It would not be a favor, but the payment of a sacred debt. It would be reparation for a great wrong."

"But, father, the reparation ought to have been made to you, not to me."

"You are right, Gerald, but it is too late now."

"Why did you not take steps before to have this wrong righted?"

"Because the world has misjudged me, and might misjudge me yet. This man should have needed no prompting. He should have saved me all trouble, and when he saw my life ruined, and my health shattered, he ought to have done what he could to pay me for the great service I did for him. I am afraid I was weak to yield to the temptation to help him in the first place."

[5]

"Don't say that, father," put in Gerald.

"Yes, I will not try to disguise the truth from you," went on the old man. "I was too pliant in this man's hands. To be sure I committed no crime, but then I allowed a false impression about myself to get abroad, and I sometimes think that—that all that has happened since has been my punishment."

"No, no, that cannot be true, father," broke in the son. "I am sure all the fault was on the other side. But have you never seen the man since?"

"No, Gerald."

There was silence in the little cabin for a brief while then. The boy was desirous to hear more, but the father seemed absorbed in meditation.

"Father," finally said Gerald.

"Yes, my son," rejoined the sick man, turning his gaze back to the boy by his side.

"Do you think the person of whom you speak is likely to befriend me?"

"I do not know. He has behaved so ungenerously about the whole matter. That is what makes me anxious."

"Will you tell me the name of this man, father?"

[6]

"His name is Bradley Wentworth, and he lives in the town of Seneca, Illinois, where he has large investments, and is a prominent man."

"Do you mind telling me how he injured you, father?"

"That is my wish and my duty while I yet live. Fifteen years ago, when we were both young men, we were in the employ of Dudley Wentworth, the uncle of Bradley. We were both in the office, he occupying the more lucrative position. I was married and had a modest, but comfortable, home in Seneca, in the State of Illinois. He too had been three years married, and had a son two years old."

"Were you friends?"

"Not intimate friends, but we were on friendly terms. He had extravagant habits and spent more money than I—a family man—could afford to do. I had bought a house and lot, for which I agreed to pay the sum of two thousand dollars. I was paying this by slow degrees, but my salary was small, when the great temptation of my life came."

The sick man paused in exhaustion, but soon proceeded.

"One evening Bradley Wentworth came to my house in a strange state of excitement, and called me to the door, I asked him in, but he declined. 'I want you to take a walk with me, Lane,' he said. I demurred, for it was a cold, damp evening, and suggested that it would be better to sit down by the fire, inside."

[7]

"'No, no,' he said impatiently, 'what I have to say is most important, and it must be kept a profound secret.'"

"Upon this I agreed to his proposal. I took my hat, told your mother that I would soon return, and went out with Wentworth. We had proceeded but a few rods when he said, 'Lane, I'm in a terrible scrape.'"

"'What is it?' I asked."

"'Last week I forged a check on my uncle for five hundred dollars. It was paid at the bank. To-morrow the bank will send in their monthly statement, and among the checks will be the one I

forged—'

"'Good heavens! what induced you to do it?' I asked.

"'I was in a tight place, and I yielded to sudden temptation,' he answered bitterly.

"'I advise you to go to your uncle early to-morrow and make a clean breast of it.'

"'It would not do,' he replied, 'the old man has the strictest ideas of honor, and he would never forgive me.'

[8]

"'It's a bad position to be in,' I said gravely.

"'The worst possible. You know that I am generally recognized as my uncle's heir, and he is worth three hundred thousand dollars. You see that if my uncle finds out what has happened I am a ruined man, for he will dismiss me from his employment with a tarnished name.'

"'Indeed I feel for you, Bradley,' I said.

"'You must do more,' he replied; 'you must save me.'

"'But how can I do that?'

"'By taking my crime upon yourself. You must acknowledge that you forged the check.'

"'What do you mean?' I demanded sharply. 'You want me to ruin my own prospects?'

"'It isn't the same thing to you. You won't lose your inheritance, but only your place.'

"'Only my place! How then can I live? Why should I dishonor my own name and lose my reputation for you?'

"'Because I will make it worth your while. Listen.'

"Then he proceeded to make me an offer. If I would consent to take his guilt upon myself, he agreed to pay over to my wife five hundred dollars annually out of his salary of fifteen hundred dollars, and when he inherited his uncle's estate, he furthermore agreed to pay over to me twenty thousand dollars. It was this finally won me over to his plan. To a poor man, struggling along on a small salary, and with no hope of getting rich, twenty thousand dollars was a dazzling temptation. It would make me comfortable for life. Besides, as he urged, I should not have to wait for it long, for his uncle was already seventy-one years old. Still, the service that I was called upon to perform was so distasteful that I held out a long time. At last he sank on his knees, and implored me in the name of friendship to consent. After much hesitation, I agreed to do so upon one condition.

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"'Name it!' he said, in feverish excitement.

"'That you will sign a paper admitting that you forged the check, and that I have agreed, though innocent, to bear the blame, in order to screen you from your uncle's anger.'

"Wentworth hesitated, but, seeing that I was firm, he led me to his own room and drew up the paper.

"'Of course,' he said, 'this paper is not to be used.'

"'Not unless you fail to carry out your agreement.'

[10]

"'Of course,' he said in an airy manner.

"We then talked over the details of the scheme. It was decided that I should leave town the next morning, and start for Canada. I began to realize what I had done, and wished to beg off, but he implored me not to desert him, and I weakly yielded. Then came the hardest trial of all. You were an infant, and I must part from you and your mother for a time at least. I must leave the village under a cloud, and this seemed hard, for I had done no wrong. But I thought of the fortune that was promised me, and tried to be satisfied.

"I did not dare to tell your mother of the compact I had made. I simply told her that I was going away on business for a few days, and did not care to have my destination known. I told her that I would shortly write her my reasons. She was not satisfied, but accepted my assurance that it was necessary, and helped me pack. Early the next morning I took a north bound train, and reached Montreal without hindrance.

"I waited anxiously, and in a few days received the following letter:

"'MY DEAR LANE:

[11]

"'The murder's out! The forged check has fallen into my uncle's hands, and he was in a great rage, you may be sure. Of course suspicion at once fell upon you on account of your hasty flight. My

uncle was at first resolved upon having you arrested, but I succeeded in calming him down. "The man must have been mad," he said. "He has ruined himself." I pleaded for mercy, and he has authorized me to say that he will not prosecute you, but he expects you some day to make good the loss. This is out of consideration for your wife and child. You are therefore at liberty to come back to the United States and obtain employment. He will not interfere with you. Of course I will see that the note is paid by installments and let him think that the money comes from you.

"My dear friend, you have done me an inestimable service. He would not have been as lenient with me. At any rate, he would have disinherited me. Now I am high in favor, and mean to retain the favor. I shall not be insane enough again to risk the loss of a fortune by weakly yielding to temptation. I have had a close shave, and am sensible of it. I am sorry that your sacrifice was necessary, but some day, probably not many years distant, you will be richly paid. Meanwhile I have prevailed upon my uncle to hush up the matter and not let it leak out.

[12]

"I advise you to go to Chicago or some other Western city and obtain employment. Then you can send for your family and wait patiently till the tide turns and you become a moderately rich man.

"BRADLEY WENTWORTH."

"This letter comforted me. I went to Chicago and succeeded in securing a position yielding me the same income as the one I had given up. I sent for my wife, but did not venture to explain to her fully my reasons for leaving Seneca. I feared that she would say something that might injure Bradley Wentworth, so loyal was she to me."

"Did Mr. Wentworth send you the five hundred dollars he promised you annually?" asked Gerald.

"Yes; he would not have dared to omit doing so, for I had his written confession, and this, if made known to his uncle, would have lost him the estate. He wrote me, however, in a complaining tone, asking me to let him reduce the sum to three hundred dollars, but this I positively refused to do. I felt that my sacrifice was worth at least all that I had stipulated to receive.

[13]

"Five years passed, and old Mr. Wentworth died at the age of seventy-six. As was expected, the whole of his large estate—three hundred and twenty thousand dollars—was left to his nephew.

"I waited anxiously for Bradley to redeem his promise. Three or four weeks passed, and I heard nothing. I sat down, therefore, and wrote to him, demanding that he should carry out his agreement.

"Here is the letter I received in reply."

The sick man drew from his pocket a much worn document and handed it to Gerald, who read it with indignation.

"MR. WARREN LANE.

"DEAR SIR:

"I have received from you a letter, asking me to send you twenty thousand dollars, alleging that some years since I promised to give you that sum upon the death of my uncle. What I may have promised while in a state of great excitement I do not remember. I certainly don't consider myself responsible for any rash and inconsiderate words, and I am surprised that an honorable man should seek to hold me to them. I am quite sure that my deceased uncle would not approve any such gift to a stranger. I consider myself a steward of the large fortune I have inherited, and should not feel justified in sending you such a considerable portion of it. I think upon reflection you will see the justice of my position.

[14]

"I believe you claim to have some papers that you think may injure me. I don't think you will find among them any written promise to give you twenty thousand dollars. If, however, you will send or bring the papers you have, I will, out of kindness to an old acquaintance, give you a thousand dollars for them. That is all that I will consent to do, and I strongly advise you to accept this generous offer. After all you did not suffer from losing your place in my uncle's office. I need only refer you to the annual sum which I sent you regularly, pinching myself to do it.

"Trusting you will see the matter in a reasonable light and accept the very liberal offer which I have made you, though in nowise bound to do so, I am,

"Yours sincerely,

"BRADLEY WENTWORTH."

[15]

CHAPTER II.

A DEBT OF HONOR.

"WHAT do you think of that letter, Gerald?" asked his father, when the boy had perused the epistle which had been handed to him.

Gerald's look of disgust answered for him.

"I think it is thoroughly contemptible," he said. "It is the worst case of ingratitude I have heard of. Is Bradley Wentworth yet living?"

"Yes; he is rich and prosperous."

"What did you do when you received his letter?"

"I wrote him in scathing terms, declining his proposal to surrender the paper for the paltry sum he offered. I reminded him of the good service I had rendered him. I had undoubtedly saved him the estate. I had also sacrificed more than I originally supposed, for I had learned two years after my departure that Mr. Wentworth had intended to give me a small interest in his business, which by this time would have made me a rich man. Of course when he came to look upon me as a forger my chance was lost."

[16]

"Did Bradley Wentworth know this also?"

"Certainly he did. He knew better than any one the extent of the sacrifice I had made for him, but when his uncle was dead and the estate was securely his, he took advantage of this fact and treated me as I have told you."

"Did you receive any answer to your second letter?"

"Yes, but it only renewed the proposal contained in the first. He requested me bluntly not to be a fool and declared that the papers were not really worth even the small sum he offered for them."

"And what followed?"

"I was at a loss what further steps to take. Then came the death of your mother after a brief illness, and this quite broke me down. I became sick, my business suffered, and finally I came to regard myself as born to misfortune. Three years since I moved out here, and here we have lived, if it can be called living, cut off from the advantages of civilization. I begin to understand now that I acted a selfish and unmanly part, and cut you off from the advantages of an education."

"I have studied by myself, father."

[17]

"Yes, but it would have been better to attend a school or academy."

"Your health has been better here."

"Yes; the pure air has been favorable to my pulmonary difficulties. Probably I should have died a year since if I had not come out here."

"Then you were justified in coming."

"So far as my own interests are concerned; but I ought not have buried you in this lonely and obscure place."

"Don't think of me, father. Whatever I have lost I can make up in the years to come, and it is a great deal to have you spared to me a little longer."

"Dear Gerald!" said his father, regarding his son with affection. "You are indeed a true and loyal son. I feel all the more under obligations to secure your future. An unexpected hemorrhage may terminate my life at any moment. Let me then attend at once to an imperative duty."

He drew from his pocket an envelope and extended it to Gerald.

"This envelope," he said, "contains two important documents—the written confession of Bradley Wentworth, that it was he, not I, who forged the check upon his uncle, and the last letter in which he repudiates my claim upon him for the sum he agreed to pay me."

[18]

"You wish me to keep these, father?" said Gerald, as he took the envelope containing the letter.

"Yes. I wish you to guard them carefully. They give you a hold on Bradley Wentworth. I leave you nothing but this debt of honor, but it should bring you twenty thousand dollars. He can well afford to pay it, for it brought him a fortune."

"What steps am I to take, father?"

"I cannot tell. It may be well for you to consult some good lawyer. You are young, but you have unusual judgment for your years. I must warn you that an effort will probably be made by Bradley Wentworth, perhaps through an agent, to get possession of these papers, which he knows are in existence. Ten days since I wrote to him, and in such terms that I should not be surprised if he would seek me out even here. If he comes, it will be in the hope of securing the papers which I have placed in your hands. Should you meet him here, don't let him know that they are in your possession."

Half an hour later Gerald set out slowly in the direction of a small mountain lake a mile distant, with fishing tackle in hand.

[19]

It was not so much that he wished to fish as to get a chance to think over the important communication which had been made to him within the last hour. He had often wondered why his father had buried himself among the mountains, and had always concluded that it was wholly on account of his health. Now he understood what it was that had darkened his life and made him a melancholy recluse. The selfish greed of one man had wrought this evil. To him, Gerald, was left the task of obtaining redress for a great wrong. It was not so much the money that influenced him, for youth is apt to be indifferent to worldly considerations, but his heart was filled with resentment against this man who had profited by his father's sacrifice, and then deliberately refused to fulfil the contract he had made.

"It is only through his pocket he can suffer," thought Gerald. "If it is possible he shall be made to pay the last dollar that is rightfully due my poor father."

He reached the shore of the lake, and, unfastening a boat which he kept there for his own use, he pushed it out from the shore, and then suffered it to float lazily over the smooth surface of the lake while he prepared his fishing tackle. In the course of a couple of hours he caught four beautiful lake trout, and with them as a trophy of his skill he started for home, first securely fastening his boat.

[20]

"Perhaps father will relish these," he soliloquized. "I will cook them as soon as I get home, and try to tempt his appetite."

Gerald had walked but a few rods, when he was hailed by a stranger.

"Hallo, boy, do you live about here?"

Gerald turned, and his glance rested upon a man of about his father's age, but shorter and more thick-set. He was well dressed, in city rather than in country style, but his face wore an expression of discontent and vexation.

"Yes," answered Gerald, "I live in this neighborhood."

"Then perhaps you can help me. I have lost my way. It serves me right for venturing into such a wild country."

"Is there any particular place to which you wish to be guided, sir?"

"If you mean towns, there don't seem to be any. I wish to find a man named Warren Lane, who I believe lives somewhere among these mountains."

[21]

Gerald started, and looked intently at the stranger. He connected him at once with his father's story, and felt that he must be Bradley Wentworth, the man who had ruined his father's life. A natural feeling of dislike sprang up in his breast, and he delayed replying.

"Well," said Wentworth irritably, "what are you staring at? Did you never see a stranger before? How long are you going to keep me waiting? Do you know such a man?"

"Pardon me," replied Gerald coldly; "but your question surprised me."

"Why should it?"

"Because Warren Lane is my father."

"Ha!" exclaimed the other, eying the boy sharply. "You don't look like him."

"I am thought to resemble my mother's family."

"Do you live near by?"

"Yes, sir. Fifteen or twenty minutes will bring us to my father's house."

"Then I should like to go there at once. I want to get out of this country as soon as possible."

"You have only to follow me," and without another word Gerald started off.

CHAPTER III.

BRADLEY WENTWORTH.

"ARE you back, Gerald?"

"Yes, father, and I am going to surprise you. I have brought company with me."

"Company! Whom can you have met in this wilderness?"

"A man whom you used to know in early days."

"Not Bradley Wentworth?" said Mr. Lane eagerly.

"Yes, Bradley Wentworth."

"Thank Heaven! I wanted to see him before I died. Where is he?"

"Just outside. He is waiting to know if you will see him."

"Yes, yes; bring him in at once."

Gerald went to the door, and beckoned to Wentworth, who rose immediately and passed into the cabin.

"Bradley Wentworth," said the invalid, looking up excitedly, "I am glad to see you. I thank you for obeying my summons." [23]

Even Wentworth, callous to suffering and selfish as he was, was shocked by the fragile appearance of his old companion.

"You look very weak," he said.

"Yes, Bradley. I am very weak. I stand at the portal of the unseen land. My days are numbered. Any day may bring the end."

"I am shocked to see you in this condition," and there was momentary feeling in the tone of the world-hardened man.

"Don't pity me! I am not reluctant to die. Gerald, you may leave me alone with Mr. Wentworth for a while. I wish to have some conversation with him."

"Very well, father."

"Have you acquainted him with the incidents of our early life?" asked Bradley Wentworth, referring to Gerald with a frown.

"Not until this morning. Then, not knowing but I might be cut off suddenly, and uncertain whether you would answer my call, I told him the story."

"Better have left it untold!" said Wentworth with an uneasy look.

"Nay, he was entitled to know, otherwise he might not have understood why it was that I had buried him and myself here in this wilderness." [24]

"He would have supposed that you came here for your health. I understand that Colorado is very favorable to those having pulmonary diseases."

"Yes, but he was entitled to know my past history. He was entitled to know what a sacrifice I had made—for another."

Bradley Wentworth winced at this allusion, and his forehead involuntarily contracted.

"That is your way of looking at it," he said abruptly.

"It is the true way of looking at it," rejoined the sick man firmly.

"Hush!" said Wentworth, looking apprehensively towards the door of the cabin.

"Gerald knows all, and he is the only one to hear. But to resume: I saved you from disgrace and disinheritance. I did so against my wishes, because your need was so great, and you solemnly promised to provide handsomely for me and mine when you came into your fortune."

"I was ready to promise anything in my extremity. You took advantage of my position."

"The bargain I made was a fair one. It touches but one-sixteenth of the fortune which you inherited. Bradley Wentworth, *it was and is a debt of honor!*" [25]

"To talk of my giving you such a sum is perfect nonsense!" said Wentworth roughly.

"You did not regard it in that light fifteen years since," returned the sick man reproachfully.

"Of course I admit that you did me a service, and I am ready to pay for it. Give me the papers and I will give you a thousand dollars."

"A thousand dollars in repayment of my great sacrifice! Have riches made you narrow and mean?"

"Riches have not made me a fool!" retorted Wentworth. "Let me tell you that a thousand dollars is no small sum. It will give that boy of yours a great start in life. It is more than you and I had at his age."

"You have a son, have you not?"

"Yes."

"How would you regard a thousand dollars as a provision for him?"

"There is some difference between the position of my son and yours," said Wentworth arrogantly.

"You are fortunate if your son equals mine in nobility of character."

"Oh, I have no doubt your son is a paragon," said Wentworth with a sneer. "But to the point! I will give you a thousand dollars and not a cent more."

[26]

He had hardly finished this sentence when he started in affright. Warren Lane fell back in his chair in a state of insensibility.



Wentworth stepped hastily to the bureau, and opened the drawers one after another in the hope of finding the documents.—Page 27.

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CHAPTER IV.

COMPARING NOTES.

"Is he dead?" Wentworth asked himself, with sudden hope, for the demise of Warren Lane would remove all danger.

He bent forward, to see if the sick man yet breathed.

"He's only fainted," he said to himself in disappointment.

Then a cunning scheme flashed upon him.

"Perhaps I can find the papers while he is unconscious," he thought.

He stepped hastily to the bureau, and opened the drawers one after the other, peering here and there in the hope of seeing the important documents.

It was while he was thus occupied that Gerald opened the door.

"What are you doing, Mr. Wentworth?" he asked in a clear, incisive voice.

Bradley Wentworth turned, and his face betrayed marks of confusion.

"Your father has fainted," he said, "and I am looking for some restorative—have you any salts, or hartshorn?"

Gerald hurried to his father's chair in sudden alarm.

"Father," he said anxiously, and placed his hand on the insensible man's forehead.

"Get some water," said Wentworth—"bathe his face."

This seemed good advice, and Gerald followed it. In a short time his father opened his eyes and looked about him in a dazed fashion.

"How do you feel, father? What made you faint?" asked Gerald.

"I dreamed that Bradley Wentworth was here, and that we had a discussion. He—he would not agree to my terms."

"He is here," said Gerald, and Wentworth came forward.

"Then—it is all real."

"Yes," said Wentworth, "but you are in no condition to talk. Let us defer our conversation."

"Alas! I do not know how much time I have left——"

"You can rely upon me to be a friend to your son, Lane."

"And yet——"

"Don't let us go into details. You are not strong enough to talk at present. I am sure Gerald will agree with me."

"Yes, father," said Gerald. "Mr. Wentworth is right. Wait till this afternoon. I want to come in and cook the trout. It is high time for dinner."

"You say well, Gerald," put in Wentworth. "I don't mind confessing that I am almost famished. If there were a hotel near I wouldn't encroach upon your hospitality. As it is, I admit that a dinner of trout would be most appetizing. And now, if you don't mind, I will go outside and smoke a cigar while your son is preparing it."

"That will be best, Mr. Wentworth," said Gerald approvingly. "If you remain here father will be talking, and he has already exhausted his strength."

"I will take a little walk," said Wentworth, as he stepped out of the cabin, "but I won't be away more than half an hour."

"Very well, sir."

When Wentworth was at a safe distance Gerald advanced to his father's chair, and said in a low voice: "Father, I distrust that man. When I came into the room he was searching the bureau drawer."

Warren Lane nodded.

"He was after the papers," he said. "He offered me a thousand dollars for them."

"And you declined?"

"Yes: I will not barter my son's inheritance for a mess of pottage."

"I would rather have you do that, father, than have your last moments disturbed."

"I will not permit myself to be disturbed. But, Gerald, I have one

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warning to give you. When I am gone this man will leave no stone unturned to get possession of those papers. *Don't let him have them!*"

"I won't, father. You had better not let him know that I have them."

"I shall not, but he will guess it. You will need all your shrewdness to defeat him."

"I will bear that in mind, father. Now dismiss the matter from your thoughts. I know your wishes, and I understand the character of the man who is your enemy and mine."

Warren Lane breathed a sigh of relief.

"That lifts a burden from my mind," he said. "I am glad I took you into my confidence this morning. It was high time. I have done all I could, and must leave the rest to Providence and your own judgment and discretion."

"That's right, father. You have taught me to rely upon myself. I am ready and willing to paddle my own canoe." [31]

"I hope you won't make such a failure of life as I have, Gerald."

"Don't say that, father. Rather let me hope that when I die I shall leave behind me one who will love me as much as I love you."

Warren Lane regarded his son with affection.

"You have my blessing, Gerald. May God bless you as you have blessed me."

An hour later Bradley Wentworth re-entered the cabin. A table was spread, and the appetizing odors of the trout were grateful to the nostrils of the hungry man. With boiled potatoes, cornbread and coffee, the meal was by no means to be despised. Seldom in his own luxurious house had Bradley Wentworth so enjoyed a dinner.

"You have a son, too, Wentworth," remarked Warren Lane during the progress of the meal.

"Yes."

"How old is he?"

"Seventeen."

"Then he is a year older than Gerald—I remember now he was about a year old when Gerald was born. Is he living at home with his parents?"

"He is at an academy preparing for Yale College." [32]

"Ah!" said Warren Lane with a sigh, "he is enjoying the advantages I would like to give my boy. Is he studious?"

"Don't ask me!" replied Wentworth bitterly. "He has developed a far greater talent for spending money foolishly than for Latin or Greek."

"Being the son of a rich man, his temptations are greater than if, like Gerald, he were born to poverty."

"Perhaps so, but his taste for drink does not result from the possession of money. He has classmates quite as rich as he who are perfectly steady, and doing credit to their families."

"He may yet turn out all right, Bradley," said Mr. Lane, for the moment forgetting their points of difference and only remembering that he and Mr. Wentworth had been young men together. "Don't be too stern with him. It is best to be forbearing with a boy of his age."

"Forbearing! I try to be, but only last month bills were sent to me amounting to five hundred dollars, run up by Victor within three months."

Warren Lane inwardly thanked God that he had no fault to find with his boy. Gerald had never given him a moment's uneasiness. He had always been a dutiful son. [33]

"After all," he thought, "wealth can't buy everything. I would not exchange my poverty for Bradley Wentworth's wealth, if I must also exchange sons. Poverty has its compensations."

"You are still living in Chicago?" said Lane.

"No; I have my office in Chicago, but I retain my residence in Seneca."

"Do you still keep up the factory?"

"Yes. I do more business than my uncle ever did."

He said this in a complacent tone.

"How unequally fortune is distributed!" thought Mr. Lane with an involuntary sigh. "Still—I have Gerald!"

A COMPACT.

AFTER dinner Warren Lane complained of fatigue, and lay down.

"I will talk with you to-morrow, Wentworth," he said. "To-day I am too tired."

"Very well," assented Wentworth with some reluctance. "But I ought not to remain here longer than to-morrow. My business requires me at home."

"To-morrow, then!" said Lane drowsily.

"Shall we take a walk?" asked Wentworth, directing the question to Gerald.

"I don't think I ought to leave my father. He doesn't seem at all well."

"But you left him this morning."

"Yes, and perhaps he would spare me now, but I have a feeling that I ought to stay with him. I should feel uneasy if I left him."

"Oh, well, do as you think best," said Wentworth rather crossly. He found the cabin insupportably dull, and would like to have wandered around with Gerald as a guide.

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"I am sorry. I am afraid you will find time hang heavy on your hands."

"It can't be helped!" said Wentworth dryly. "I came here at your father's request, and to-morrow I must start for home. I will take a walk by myself."

He strolled out into the woods, taking his bearings, so as not to lose the way.

"Well, well, this will soon be over," he said to himself. "Warren Lane is doomed. If I could only get hold of those papers before he dies I would leave the place content, and would not care if I never saw him or Gerald again. Where can he keep them? If the boy hadn't interrupted me as he did, I might have found them. Does he keep them about his person, I wonder?"

He sauntered along for half an hour in a different direction from the one he had taken in his earlier walk.

"Not a house, or even a cabin!" he soliloquized. "This is indeed a forlorn place. One couldn't well get more out of the world."

"Ha, here is a cabin and its owner," he exclaimed a few moments later as his eye lighted on a log hut in a small clearing. "It seems pleasant to see a living being."

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The owner referred to was a man of sturdy make, very dark as to complexion, with coarse, black hair. He was roughly dressed, and was smoking a pipe. Wentworth coughed to attract attention, and the man looked up.

"Who are you?" he demanded, surveying his visitor with a glance half curious, half suspicious.

"I am a stranger—just arrived," answered Wentworth in a conciliatory tone, for he did not feel the most absolute confidence in this man with his brigandish look.

"Ha, a tenderfoot!"

"Well, I don't know about that. My feet will be tender, though, if I tramp round here much longer."

"Humph! Where might you be from?"

"From Chicago."

"And what brings you here?"

Bradley Wentworth did not quite like the man's intrusive curiosity, but he thought it policy not to betray his feeling.

"I came to see a friend—a sick friend," he answered, after a pause.

"The old man that lives a mile east of here? He has a son."

"The same."

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"So you are his friend!"

"Yes, do you know him?"

"Yes. I've seen him, but he ain't much to look at. He ain't my style."

"I should think not," passed through Wentworth's mind, but he

was tempted by curiosity to inquire: "What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, he's uppish—puts on frills, and so does his boy. I went round to make a neighborly call, but he told me he didn't feel like talking, and left me on the outside of the cabin lookin' like a fool!" and the backwoodsman spat to express his disgust.

"So he seemed to feel above you, did he?"

"Looked like it, but Jake Amsden don't knuckle down to nobody."

"Of course not. Why should you?" said Bradley Wentworth.

"Stranger, I don't know who you are, but you're the right sort. I've got some whisky inside. Will you drink?"

"Thank you," answered Wentworth hastily, "but I am out of health, and my doctor won't let me drink whisky. Thank you all the same!"

"Oh, well, if you can't, you can't. You ain't puttin' on no frills, are you?"

"Not at all, my friend. If you'll make room for me, I'll sit down beside you."

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Jake Amsden was sitting on a log. He moved and made room for the visitor.

"Have you lived here long?" asked Wentworth sociably.

"A matter of a few months."

"What do you find to do?"

"Nothin' much. I reckon I'm a fool to stay here much longer. I'll be makin' tracks soon. Goin' to stay long yourself?"

"No. I am only here on a short visit. I may go to-morrow."

"How are you fixed?" asked Jake abruptly.

"Well, I've got a little money," answered Wentworth cautiously.

"You couldn't spare a chap a dollar, could you?"

"Yes," said Wentworth, as he took from his pocket a well filled wallet, and after some search took from a roll of larger bills a one-dollar note and handed it to his companion.

If he had noticed the covetous look with which Jake Amsden regarded the wallet, he would have recognized his mistake. But before he looked up, Jake cunningly changed his expression, and said gratefully: "Thank you, boss; you're a gentleman."

Bradley Wentworth liked praise, especially where it was so cheaply purchased, and said graciously: "You're quite welcome, my good man."

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"I'd like to grab the plunder," thought Jake, but as he took in Wentworth's robust frame, he decided that he had better not act inconsiderately.

"I'm a poor man," he said. "I never knowed what it was to have as much money as you've got there."

"Very likely. There are more poor men in the world than rich ones. Not that I am rich," he added quickly, with habitual caution.

"Is your friend rich?" queried Jake. "The sick man, I mean."

An idea came to Wentworth.

"I don't think he has much money," he answered slowly, "but he has some papers that are valuable."

"Some papers?" repeated Jake vacantly. "What sort of papers be they?"

"Some papers that belong to me; my name is signed to them."

"How'd he get 'em, then?"

"I don't like to say, but they ought to be in my possession."

"Then why don't you ask for them?"

"I have."

"And he won't give 'em to you?"

"No; though I have offered a good sum of money for them?"

"How much?"

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Bradley Wentworth was too sharp to mention the amount he had offered Warren Lane. He was dealing with a character who took different views of money.

"I wouldn't mind giving a hundred dollars to any one who would bring me the papers," he answered, looking Jake Amsden full in the face.

"I'd like to make a hundred dollars," muttered Jake. "Where does he keep 'em?"

"My friend, if I could answer that question, I should not require

any assistance, and I would save my hundred dollars. But I think it probable that he keeps the papers somewhere in the cabin."

"How'd I know 'em?"

"Can you read writing?"

"Well, a little. I never went to no college," said Jake, with a grin.

"You probably know enough of writing to identify my signature. Do you see this?" and he took from his pocket a paper to which his name was attached.

"Yes."

"Can you read the name?"

Jake screwed up his face and pored over the signature.

"B-r-a-d—Brad—l-e-y, Bradley."

"Yes, you are right so far. Now what is the other name?"

"W-e-n-t, went—w-o-r-t-h. What's that?"

"Wentworth. My name is Bradley Wentworth."

"I see, boss. I made it out pretty good, considerin' it is such a long name?"

"Yes," answered Wentworth encouragingly; "you made it out very well."

"I'll think of what you say, boss. That money'll be sure, won't it?"

"Yes; it will be promptly paid."

"All right! You're my style. Shake!" and he extended a hand which was far from clean to the rich "tenderfoot."

Bradley Wentworth was fastidious, but he swallowed his disgust and shook the other's hand heartily.

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CHAPTER VI.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

"How long is Mr. Wentworth going to stay here?" asked Gerald, when his father had awakened from his nap.

"I think he will go away to-morrow."

"What is his object in coming here?"

"I sent for him. I wished to see if he would act a friendly part toward you when I am gone."

"Do you think he will?" asked Gerald, dubiously.

"He wants to buy the papers which I gave into your keeping for a thousand dollars."

"So you told me."

"Shall I make the bargain, Gerald?" asked his father, earnestly. "Remember, I leave you nothing except this poor cabin and its contents, and eighty acres of land which I pre-empted from the government. By the way, I must give you the paper attesting my ownership."

"Don't trouble yourself about me, father. I am young and strong," and Gerald straightened up, and extended his muscular arm. "I ought to be able to fight my way."

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"I hope you can, Gerald. As you say, you are young and strong, and here in this Western country a boy has a better chance than in the East. Still, I should like to feel that you had some money to start with. Now, a thousand dollars would be a large sum to one in your position."

"It might be considerable for me to receive, but it would be too little for Mr. Wentworth to pay after all his obligations to you. No, father, don't take the money."

"This is your settled opinion, Gerald? You have considered carefully all the risk you run, all the inconvenience that may come from poverty?"

"Yes, father."

"I am glad you have no doubt on the subject. As for me, I have been in great uncertainty."

"You need be so no longer, father."

"Then when Wentworth broaches the subject again I will tell him, both for you and myself, that I decline his offer."

"Yes, father."

"I don't think he will increase it."

"Nor do I."

"Very well, Gerald. I see that you comprehend the situation. Probably Bradley Wentworth will return leaving us no better off for his visit."

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"I have no doubt you are right, father."

"And yet you are not troubled?"

"No, father, except about you. I am worried about your health."

"It will do no good, my dear boy. I am ready for the summons that is sure to come soon."

Meanwhile Bradley Wentworth had left his questionable friend Jake Amsden, and had been walking about on a tour of observation. He was naturally a shrewd man, and had been forming an opinion about the capabilities and prospects of the out-of-the-way locality in which he now found himself.

"I shouldn't be surprised," he reflected, "if at some day—not far distant—a town might spring up on this spot. It is remarkable how soon in this wonderful region the wilderness gives place to flourishing settlements. I suppose land can be bought here for a song."

He took a further survey of the neighborhood, and made up his mind that if a town were to spring up, Warren Lane's land would be in the heart of the future settlement.

"He has chosen his land well. I didn't think him so shrewd," thought Wentworth, "though perhaps it may have been mere chance. He was always a visionary. Still, the fact remains that his land is in the best location hereabouts."

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Then it occurred to Wentworth that it would be a good speculation to purchase the property. Doubtless Lane was unaware of its value, and would sell for a trifle.

"I could agree to let him occupy it as long as he lives," reflected Wentworth. "That won't be long, and it may be some years before the settlement starts. I think, upon the whole, I can make my visit pay, however the other negotiation comes out."

Now that there seemed a prospect of turning a penny, Wentworth began to find his stay in this remote place less tiresome. It was with a quick, brisk step that he walked towards Warren Lane's humble cabin, revolving the new scheme in his mind.

"I have been taking a long walk, Lane," he said, as he re-entered the house.

"Have you?" said the sick man languidly. "I wish I were in a condition to accompany you. I am afraid you found it lonely and uninteresting."

"Oh, no; it is a new country to me, you know. I have never been so far West before. In fifty years from now I shouldn't wonder if there might be a town located here."

"In much less time than that."

"Oh, no, I think not. This is 'the forest primeval,' as Longfellow calls it. It will be a great many years before a change comes over it. Probably neither you nor I will live to see it."

"I shall not."

"Pardon me, Warren. I forgot your malady—I am thoughtless."

"Don't apologize, Bradley. I am not disturbed by such references. I understand very well how I am situated—how very near I am to the unseen land. I have thought of it for a long, long time."

"And of course you are troubled about your son's future?"

"Yes, I admit that, though he tells me he has no anxieties."

"He is too young to understand what it is to be thrown on his own resources."

"I think not. He is strong and self-reliant."

"Strength and self-reliance are good things, but a fair sum of money is better. That emboldens me to mention to you a plan which has occurred to me. You own the land about the cabin, do you not?"

"Yes; I pre-empted it, and have a government title."

"So I supposed. Of course it will be of little value to Gerald. I propose to buy it of you. How many acres are there in your holding?"

"Eighty."

"I will give you two hundred dollars for it."

"I do not feel that I have a right to sell it. It belongs to Gerald."

"Not yet."

"It soon will."

"Of course if I buy it I do not wish to interfere with your occupation of it as long as you live."

"No, I suppose not. There is no place for me to go. But I think the land will some time be worth a good deal more than at present, and I want Gerald to reap the benefit of it."

"I am offering you more than it is worth at present," said Wentworth impatiently. "Two hundred dollars for eighty acres makes two dollars and a half an acre."

"I cannot sell the boy's little patrimony," said Mr. Lane firmly.

"It seems to me he ought to be consulted. As you say, he will soon be the owner."

At this moment Gerald entered the cabin.

"Gerald," said his father, "Mr. Wentworth has offered me two hundred dollars for our little home, including the cabin and land. He thinks you ought to be consulted in the matter."

"I don't want to sell, father," said Gerald. "This place is the only home I have, and I don't want to part with it."

"But the money will be very useful to you," interrupted Wentworth, "and from what your father says, money will be scarce with you."

"I suppose it will," said Gerald with a steady look at the visitor, "though it ought not to be if we had our rights. But, be that as it may, I do not care to have the property sold."

Opposition only made Mr. Wentworth more eager. "I will give

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you two hundred and fifty dollars," he said.

"It is of no use, Mr. Wentworth. This humble home is all father has to leave me. For a time, at least, I wish to retain it."

Mr. Wentworth bit his lip, and was silent. He saw by the resolute face of Gerald, so much stronger and firmer than his father's, that it would be of no use to prolong the discussion.

The evening wore away. It was a question how the guest was to be accommodated for the night. But Gerald settled the question. He had a small single bed in one corner while his father occupied a larger one. He surrendered his bed to the guest, and stretched himself out, fully dressed, on a buffalo robe near the door. They retired early, as Gerald and his father usually did. Mr. Wentworth did not ordinarily keep early hours, but he had been fatigued by his walks during the day, partly because he had traversed considerable ground, but partly on account of the high altitude which made the air rarer, and exertion more difficult.

All three slept soundly. Though his bed was a hard one, Gerald was no child of luxury and rested peacefully.

About seven o'clock Mr. Wentworth rose and dressed himself. Gerald was already up, preparing breakfast. All at once he was startled by an exclamation. Looking around he saw Bradley Wentworth examining his pockets in a high state of excitement.

"What's the matter?" asked Gerald.

"Matter enough!" returned the visitor. "I've been robbed during the night, *and you*," he added fiercely, with a furious glance at Gerald, "*you are the thief!*"

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CHAPTER VII.

TRACKING THE THIEF.

GERALD blushed with indignation at the unexpected accusation.

"What do you mean, Mr. Wentworth?" he demanded angrily.

"I mean just what I say. During the night my wallet, which was full of bank bills, has been stolen. Of course your father couldn't have taken it. There was no one else in the room except yourself."

"You are making a poor return for our hospitality," said Gerald coldly. "In what pocket did you keep your wallet?"

"In the inside pocket of my coat."

"Look about on the floor. It may have slipped out."

Bradley Wentworth deigned to accept this suggestion. Both he and Gerald looked about on the floor, but could discover no trace of the lost article.

"Just as I expected," observed Wentworth in a significant tone.

Gerald colored and felt mystified.

"I don't understand it," he said slowly.

"Probably the wallet walked off without hands," sneered Wentworth.

"It must have been taken," said Gerald quietly, "but who could have done it?"

"Yes, who could have done it?" repeated Wentworth with another sneer.

"I will trouble you to speak in a different tone," said Gerald with quiet dignity. "My father and I are poor enough, but no one ever charged us with dishonesty."

Mr. Lane, awakening from sleep, heard the last words.

"What is the matter? What has happened?" he asked dreamily.

"Mr. Wentworth misses his pocketbook, father," exclaimed Gerald.

"How much money was there in your wallet, Bradley?" asked the sick man.

"Nearly two hundred dollars."

"That is a great deal of money to lose. You are sure it was in your pocket when you went to bed?"

"Yes, I felt it there."

"Some one must have got into the cabin during the night."

"But the door was locked," said Wentworth.

"True, but there is a window near your bed. There was no fastening, and it could be raised easily. And that reminds me," he continued with a sudden thought, "I waked up during the night, that is I partially awakened, and thought I saw a figure near your bed in a stooping position. It must have been the thief going through your pockets."

"Why didn't you speak, father?"

"Because I was more asleep than awake, and my mind was too torpid to reason upon what I saw."

"Did the figure remind you of anyone, father? What was it like?"

"A man of medium height, stout and broad-shouldered."

Bradley Wentworth started, and a sudden conviction flashed upon him. The description tallied exactly with Jake Amsden, the man with whom he had had a conference the day before.

"Is there any such person who lives near by?" he asked.

"Yes, a worthless, dissipated fellow named Jake Amsden."

"I think I caught sight of him yesterday during my walk. Is his hair red?"

"Yes. Did you speak to him?"

"I spoke to him," said Wentworth evasively, for he did not care to mention the subject of their conversation.

"Did he know where you were staying?"

"I believe I mentioned it."

"And from your appearance doubtless he concluded that you had money."

"Possibly. Has he ever stolen anything from you?"

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"I am too poor to attract burglars. Besides, theft in this neighborhood is a serious offense. Only last year a man living five miles away was lynched for stealing a horse."

"This is an awkward loss for me," said Wentworth. "If I were at home I could step into a bank and get all the money I wanted. Here it is different."

"Have you no money left? Did the wallet contain all you had?"

"I have some besides in an inside pocket, but not as much as I may have occasion to use. Is there any hope of recovering the wallet from this man—that is, provided he has taken it?"

"After breakfast I will go with you," said Gerald, "and see if we can find Jake Amsden. If we do we will make him give up the money."

"But will it be safe? He looks like a rough character."

"So he is; but the two of us ought to be more than a match for him."

"I have no arms."

"I will lend you my father's pistol, and I have one of my own."

Gerald spoke so calmly, and seemed so cool and courageous that Wentworth gave him a look of admiration.

"That boy has more in him than I thought. He is no milk-and-water youth as his father probably was.

"Very well," he said aloud. "I will accept your offer—that is, after breakfast. I am afraid I shouldn't muster up courage enough to meet this rough fellow on an empty stomach. I don't feel like giving up such a sum of money without a struggle to recover it. Do you know Amsden?"

"Yes; he has been in this vicinity almost as long as we have."

"Are you on friendly terms?"

"We are not unfriendly, but he is not a man that I cared to be intimate with."

"Will he be likely to leave the neighborhood with his booty?" asked Wentworth anxiously.

"No; he is not a coward, and will stay. Besides, he probably thinks that he has covered his tracks, and will not be suspected."

Breakfast was prepared and eaten. As they rose from the table Gerald said: "Now, Mr. Wentworth, I am at your service."

They took their way partly through woods till they reached the poor cabin occupied by Jake Amsden. The door was open and they looked in. But there was no sign of the occupant.

"He is gone!" said Wentworth, in accents that betrayed his disappointment.

"I didn't much expect he would be here," said Gerald.

"Have you any idea where he is?"

"Yes; he is very fond of whisky, and there is a place at the foot of the hill where drink can be obtained. It is kept by a negro, a man of bad reputation."

"Then let us go there. There is no time to be lost," said Wentworth, anxiously.

As they walked along Wentworth broached the old subject of selling the cabin and the land attached.

"I think you make a mistake, Gerald," he said, "in not selling me the cabin. Two hundred dollars would be very useful to you."

"The place is worth more."

"I offered you two hundred and fifty, and I stand by that offer."

"I may desire to sell it some time, but not at present."

"You don't mean to remain here after your father dies?"

"Please don't refer to that, Mr. Wentworth," said Gerald with emotion. "I don't want to think of it."

"But you know he can't recover."

"I know it, but I don't like to think of it."

"This is only weakness. You ought to think of it, and be forming your plans."

"Excuse me, Mr. Wentworth," said Gerald with sad dignity, "but I cannot and will not speak of my father's death at present. When God takes him from me it will be time to consider what I shall do."

"Suit yourself," said Bradley Wentworth stiffly, "but you must not forget that I am your father's friend, and——"

"Are you my father's friend?" asked Gerald with a searching look.

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"Of course I am," answered Wentworth, coloring. "Hasn't he told you we were young men together?"

"Yes, he has told me that."

"Then you understand it. I am his friend and yours."

"I am glad to hear it," said Gerald gravely, "but there," he added, pointing to a low, one-story frame building, "is the place where Jake Amsden probably came to buy liquor."

Over the entrance was a large board on which was painted in rude characters:

P. JOHNSON,
Saloon.

CHAPTER VIII.

FOILING A THIEF.

MR. PETER JOHNSON, the proprietor of the saloon, hearing voices, came to the door. He was a dirty looking negro of medium size, dressed in a shoddy suit, common enough in appearance, but with a look of cunning in his small round eyes.

"Good mornin', gemmen," he said rubbing his hands and rolling his eyes. "What can I do for you dis mornin'?"

"Has Jake Amsden been around here?" asked Gerald abruptly.

"No, sir," answered Peter.

In spite of his answer there was a look in his eyes that belied his statement.

"You have seen nothing of him?" continued Gerald, sharply.

"No, sir. What for should Jake Amsden come here for, Mr. Gerald?"

"He might feel thirsty," suggested Wentworth, "just as I am. Have you got some good whisky?"

"Yes, *sir*," answered Peter briskly.

"Well, go in and get a couple of glasses," said Wentworth.

"None for me," commenced Gerald, but Wentworth gave him a quick look that silenced him. He saw that his companion had an object in view.

Wentworth made a motion to go in, but the negro interfered hastily. "Stay where you are, gemmen, I'll bring out de whisky."

"We can go in as well as not, and save you trouble," said Wentworth, and despite Peter's opposition the two followed him in.

They looked about scrutinizingly, but saw nothing to repay their search.

There was a counter, such as is usually found in saloons, and Mr. Johnson going behind this brought out glasses and a bottle of whisky.

"Help yourselves, gemmen!" he said, but there was an uneasy look on his face.

Wentworth poured out a small quantity of whisky and drank it down. He poured out a less quantity for Gerald, but the boy merely touched his lips to the glass.

"So you say Jake Amsden has not been here?" repeated Wentworth in a loud voice.

"No, stranger, no, on my word he hasn't," answered Peter earnestly. But he was immediately put to confusion by a voice from behind the bar; a voice interrupted by hiccoughs: "Who's callin' me? Is it you, Pete?"

"Come out here, Jake," said Wentworth, showing no surprise. "Come out here, and have a drink with your friends."

The invitation was accepted. Jake, who was lying behind the counter half stupefied, got up with some difficulty, and presented himself to the company a by no means attractive figure. His clothes were even more soiled than usual by contact with a floor that was seldom swept.

Wentworth poured out a glass of whisky and handed it to the inebriate, who gulped it down.

"Now you drink with me!" stuttered Jake, who was too befuddled to recognize the man who had treated him.

"All right, Jake, old boy!" said Wentworth with assumed hilarity.

He poured out for himself a teaspoonful of whisky, but did not replenish Gerald's glass, as Amsden was not likely to notice the omission.

"Now pay for it, Jake," prompted Wentworth.

"Never mind!" said Peter hastily, "'nother time will do!"

"Jake has money. He doesn't need credit," said Wentworth.

"Yes, I've got money," stammered Amsden, and pulled out the wallet he had stolen from Wentworth.

"Give it to me, I'll pay," said Wentworth, and Jake yielded, not knowing the full meaning of what was going on.

"I take you to witness, Gerald," said Wentworth, "this is my

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pocketbook, which this man Amsden stole from me last night. I'll keep it."

"Stop there, gemmen!" said Pete Johnson. "Dat don't go down. Dat wallet belongs to Jake, I've seen him have it a dozen times. I won't 'low no stealin' in my saloon."

"Be careful, Mr. Johnson," said Wentworth sternly. "There are papers in this wallet that prove my ownership. You evidently intended to relieve Jake of the wallet when he was sleeping off the effects of the whisky. If you make a fuss I'll have you arrested as a confederate of Jake Amsden in the robbing."

"Fore Hebbin, massa!" said Peter, becoming alarmed, "I didn't know Jake stole the money."

"Did you ever know him have so much money before?" demanded Gerald.

"Didn't know but he might a had some money lef' him," said Peter shrewdly. [62]

"Well, you know now. When this gentleman lay asleep in our cabin last night Jake stole in and took his wallet."

"What'll I do, gemmen? When Jake wakes up" (he had dropped on the floor, where he was breathing hard with his eyes closed) "he'll 'cuse me of takin' his money."

"Tell him that the man he stole it from came here and got it," said Gerald.

Gerald and his companion left the saloon, leaving Peter Johnson quite down in the mouth. His little game had been spoiled, for rightly supposing that Jake did not know how much money there was in the wallet, he had intended to abstract at least half the contents and appropriate it to his own use.

"Did he use much of your money, Mr. Wentworth?" asked Gerald.

"I will examine and find out," answered his companion.

He sat down under the tree and took out the roll of bills.

"Only five dollars are missing," he said in a tone of satisfaction.

"Have you a son?" asked Gerald. "I think I heard my father say you had one somewhere near my own age." [63]

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"My son—Victor—is seventeen. You have one advantage over him."

"What is that, sir?"

"You are a poor man's son."

"Do you consider that an advantage?"

"Money is a temptation," returned Bradley Wentworth slowly, "especially to a boy. Victor knows that I am rich—that is, moderately rich," he added cautiously, "and he feels at liberty to spend money, often in ways that don't do him any good. He buys clothes extravagantly, but that does no harm outside of the expense. I am sorry to say that he has contracted a taste for drink, and has given several champagne suppers to his friends. I suppose you don't indulge yourself in that way," Wentworth added, with a faint smile.

"I have heard of champagne, but I never tasted it," returned Gerald.

"You are as well off without it—nay, better. I noticed you merely sipped the whisky at the place we just left."

"Yes; I knew your object in ordering it, and did not want to arouse Peter's suspicions, or I would not even have done that." [64]

"So I supposed. I approve of your moderation. I do not myself drink whisky, and indeed very little wine. Drink has no temptation for me. I wish I could say as much for Victor. I presume, however, if you were in his place, you would do the same."

"You are quite mistaken, Mr. Wentworth," said Gerald indignantly.

"Well, perhaps so, but you can't tell, for you have never been tried."

"I have never been tried, but I hate liquor of all kinds, and drunkenness still more. The sight of Jake Amsden just now is enough to sicken any one."

"True, he makes a beast of himself. I am not afraid Victor will ever sink to his level; but I should be glad if he would abstain from drinking altogether."

Bradley Wentworth rose from his recumbent position.

"Shall we take a walk?" he said.

"I would do so, but I don't like to leave my father alone."

"He looked comfortable when we left the cabin."

"Yes, but he is subject to sudden attacks."

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"And you have no doctor within a reasonable distance?"

"No; but his attacks are always the same, and I know what to do for him."

"We will walk to the cabin, and then, if he seems well, you might venture to take a walk."

"Very well, Mr. Wentworth."

When they were within a few rods of his home, Gerald, impatient and always solicitous about the invalid, ran forward, leaving Mr. Wentworth to follow more slowly.

The latter was startled when Gerald, pale and agitated, emerged from the cabin and called out: "Oh, come quick, Mr. Wentworth. My father has had a serious hemorrhage, and—" he choked, unable to finish the sentence.

Wentworth hurried forward and entered the cabin. Mr. Lane lay back in his chair, gasping for breath.

He opened his eyes when he heard Gerald's voice.

"I—am—glad—you—are—come, Gerald," he gasped. "I think—the end has come!"

He did not utter another word, but in half an hour breathed his last!

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CHAPTER IX.

ALONE IN THE WORLD.

Two days afterward the simple burial took place. Mr Wentworth remained, influenced by a variety of motives. He felt that with Warren Lane dead all form of a demand upon him for the money he had once faithfully agreed to pay had passed. Gerald might know something about it, but what could a poor and friendless boy do against a rich manufacturer? Still, if the boy had the papers, he might as well secure them for a trifle. So as they sat in front of the cabin after the burial he said suddenly: "What do you propose to do, Gerald?"

"I don't know," answered Gerald sadly.

"If you will go home with me, I will give you a place in my factory."

"I prefer to remain here for a time."

"But how will you live?"

"I can hunt and fish, and as my wants are few I think I shall get along."

"As your father and I were young men together, I should like to do something for you."

"You can do something for me," said Gerald significantly.

"What is it you refer to?"

"Keep the promise you made to my father fifteen years ago."

Bradley Wentworth looked uneasy. It was clear that the boy thoroughly understood the compact.

"What do you mean, Gerald?" he asked.

"I mean that my father sacrificed his reputation to save yours. Through him you obtained your inheritance and are to-day a rich man. For this you solemnly agreed to give him twenty thousand dollars when you came into your uncle's fortune."

"You are laboring under a delusion, boy!" said Wentworth harshly.

"You know better than that, Mr. Wentworth," answered Gerald calmly.

"You are certainly very modest in your demands. Twenty thousand dollars, indeed!"

"It was not I who fixed upon that sum, but yourself. As my father's sacrifice brought you over three hundred thousand dollars, it was a good bargain for you."

"What have you to show in proof of this extraordinary claim of yours?" demanded Wentworth, waiting eagerly for the answer.

"Your confession over your own signature that you forged the check, a crime attributed to my father, and confessing that he bore the blame to screen you."

"Where is this paper?" demanded Wentworth, edging, as if unconsciously, nearer the boy.

"It is safe," answered Gerald, rising and facing his companion.

"Show it to me! I won't believe in its existence unless you show it to me."

"This is not the time to show it," said Gerald.

"I differ with you. This is the precise time to show it if you have it, which I very much doubt."

"I will show it to you in due time, Mr. Wentworth. This is not the right time, nor the right place."

"Have you it about you?"

"I shall answer no more questions, Mr. Wentworth."

Wentworth eyed Gerald, doubting whether he should not seize him then and there and wrest from him the paper if he proved to have it, but there was something in the resolute look of the boy that daunted him, man though he was, and he decided that it would be better to have recourse to a little strategy. For this the boy would be less prepared than for open force.

"Look here, Gerald," he said, moderating his tone and moving further away, as if all thoughts of violence had left him, "I will have a few plain words with you. If you have any paper compromising me

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in any way, I will make it worth your while to give it to me. I remember that I was in a little trouble, and being young made a mountain out of a molehill. Still I don't care to have it come out now, when I am a man of repute, that I ever sowed wild oats like most young men. I will make you the same offer that I did your father. Give me the paper and I will give you a thousand dollars to start you in life. Think what such a sum will be to a boy like you."

"I don't think I care much for money, Mr. Wentworth," responded Gerald. "But my father left me this claim upon you as a sacred trust. I feel that I owe it to his memory to collect it to the uttermost farthing."

Bradley Wentworth shrugged his shoulders.

"You are about the most foolish boy I ever met," he said. "You are almost a pauper, yet you refuse a thousand dollars."

"I shall never be a pauper while I have my health and strength, Mr. Wentworth."

"You must think me a fool to surrender so large a sum as twenty thousand dollars on the demand of a half-grown boy like yourself!"

"No, Mr. Wentworth. I was only trying to find out whether you were a man of integrity!"

"Do you dare to impugn my integrity?" demanded the manufacturer angrily.

"A man of integrity keeps his engagements," said Gerald briefly.

Bradley Wentworth regarded Gerald with a fixed and thoughtful glance. He had expected to twine the boy round his finger, but found that he was more resolute than he expected. He exhibited a force of character which his father had never possessed.

Wentworth was not a patient man, and the boy's perverseness, as he called it, provoked him, and brought out his sterner and more disagreeable qualities.

"Boy," he said harshly, "I have a piece of advice to give you."

"What is it, sir?"

"Don't make me your enemy! I came here intending to be your friend, and you decline my advances."

"No, sir," answered Gerald firmly. "I don't consider that you act a friendly part when you decline to carry out a solemn compact made with my father."

"It is a delusion of his and yours," returned Wentworth, "I can only look upon your attitude as that of a blackmailer."

"No one has more contempt for a blackmailer than I," said Gerald. "I am old enough to understand the meaning of the term. If a man owed you money, and you presented your claim, would you consider it blackmail?"

"Certainly not."

"Then I need not defend myself from your charge."

"You and I take different views on this question, but it is of some importance to you not to offend me."

"Why?" asked Gerald, looking straight into the eyes of his companion.

"Because I am rich and powerful."

"And I am weak and poor?"

"Precisely."

"What use do you propose to make of your power, Mr. Wentworth?"

"To *crush* you!" hissed the manufacturer.

"Listen, boy, I am capable of being a good friend——"

"As you were to my father," suggested Gerald significantly.

"As I was to your father, only he did not appreciate it."

"I don't care to have such a friend."

"But I have something to add. I can be a bitter enemy when I am badly treated."

"I suppose that is meant as a threat, Mr. Wentworth," said Gerald calmly.

"You can take it so."

"Then I have my answer ready. I care neither for your friendship nor your enmity. I shall do what I consider right, and if my own conscience approves I shall seek no other approval."

"You are very independent for a young boy, especially one in your circumstances," sneered Wentworth.

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"You may be right. I am independent, and I intend to remain so."

"Wait till you get older, and have been buffeted by the world. You will understand then that you have made a serious mistake in repelling my offer of help."

"Have you anything more to say to me, Mr. Wentworth?"

"No, unless to add that I generally get even with those who oppose me. Indeed, I have a great mind to chastise you here and now."

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Gerald rose from his seat and confronted the angry man, but without betraying any trace of excitement or fear.

"You are probably more than a match for me physically, Mr. Wentworth," he said, "but if you undertake anything of that kind you will meet with a determined resistance."

And as Wentworth looked into the boy's resolute face he quite understood that he spoke only the truth.

"No," he said, after a brief pause, "I will bide my time. You may repent of your folly and decide to come to terms with me. If you don't—"

He did not finish the sentence, for a man on horseback came galloping up to the cabin. He checked his horse, and said inquiringly, "Is this Mr. Bradley Wentworth?"

"I am he," answered Wentworth, rising.

"Then here is a telegram for you. It came to Denver, and I have ridden seventy miles to bring it to you."

Wentworth tore open the message. It contained these words:

"Come home at once. The men are on strike. I can do nothing without your authority.

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"MORGAN."

"This is from my foreman. I am summoned home," said Wentworth, looking up. "How soon can I leave here?"

"At once. I engaged a wagon that will be here in fifteen minutes."

In fifteen minutes Bradley Wentworth set out on his return. His mind was so much occupied with the serious news from home that he left without a word to Gerald, who stood watching the conveyance till it disappeared behind a bend in the cliff.

"Now I am indeed alone!" he reflected, as his eyes rested sadly on the poor cabin which he and his father had occupied for three years. "I am alone in the world, with no friend, but with one powerful enemy."

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CHAPTER X.

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

GERALD had often thought vaguely of the time when he would be left alone. Between him and his father there had been an intimacy and mutual dependence greater than usually exists between father and son. Now that his father had passed away, a sudden feeling of desolation chilled the boy's spirits, and he asked himself what life had in store for him of hope and happiness. But youth is buoyant, and Gerald was but sixteen. He felt that he had something to live for. He would redeem his father's reputation, and instead of giving way to his feelings would fight manfully the great battle of life.

But how? To what should he turn? He began to consider his resources. First and most available was money. He emptied his pockets, and took account of his worldly wealth. It amounted to one dollar and sixty-five cents, all told.

"That isn't much," thought Gerald. "I shall have to go to work without delay."

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He prepared supper as usual, but had small heart to sit down to it alone. Little as he liked Bradley Wentworth he would have been glad to have his company till he could endure the thought of solitude. But he was not destined to eat by himself. Going to the door of the cabin just as his simple preparations were made, he caught sight of an approaching figure. It was that of a stranger, a strong, robust man of little more than thirty, with a florid face and dressed like an English tourist.

"Hallo, there!" called out the stranger, as he caught sight of Gerald.

"Hallo!" responded Gerald.

"Is there any hotel round here?"

"Not that I know of, sir."

"As I feared. I've been wandering round this confounded country till I've got lost. It's a beastly wilderness, that's what it is."

Gerald smiled. His experience of men was limited, and he had never met a British tourist before.

"May I sit down awhile?" went on the newcomer.

There was a long seat built against the cabin, with the wall of the latter for a back.

"Certainly, sir. I shall be glad of company."

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"Do you live here?"

"Yes, sir. I have lived here for three years."

"I should think you'd commit suicide, I should, upon my word. Does no one live with you?"

"Not now," answered Gerald gravely. "My father died two days since."

"Oh, I beg your pardon, I do indeed," said the Englishman in a tone of sympathy. "It wasn't an accident, was it?"

"No, he had long been sick of consumption. I was feeling very lonely, for he was only buried to-day."

"I hope I don't intrude. I wouldn't do that on any account."

"No; on the contrary I am glad to have company. I was about to sit down to supper. If agreeable I shall be pleased to have you join me."

"Supper!" repeated the tourist with sudden animation. "It is the one thing I have been longing for. I haven't eaten a particle of food since morning, and didn't know where to find any, though my pocket is full of money."

"I can't offer you anything very inviting," said Gerald, as he led the way into the cabin. "I have some fish and potatoes, bread and coffee, but I have neither milk nor butter."

"Don't apologize, my young friend," interposed the Englishman. "It is a feast fit for the gods. I have an appetite that will make anything palatable. But where do you get your bread? There can't be any bakers' shops in this wilderness."

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"There are not. I make my own bread."

"You don't say so! And upon my word it is delicious."

"It is fortunate that you are hungry," said Gerald with a smile.

"No, 'pon honor, it isn't that. It is really better than I often eat at hotels. You really have talent as a cook."

"I don't think so. I don't care for cooking, but have taken it up from necessity."

The tourist hadn't exaggerated his appetite. He ate so heartily that when the meal was concluded there wasn't a crumb left. All the dishes were empty.

"I ought to apologize for my appetite," he said, "but I have been rambling about ever since breakfast, and I find the air here very stimulating."

"Don't think of apologizing!" returned Gerald. "I am glad you relished my simple supper."

"Now, if I were only sure of a bed, I should feel quite easy in mind."

"I will gladly offer you a bed. This is the first night that I should have been alone, and the solitude depressed me."

"I will accept your kind offer thankfully. But you ought to know whom you are obliging."

The stranger drew from his pocket a card on which Gerald read the name:

THE HON. NOEL BROOKE.

"I should be glad to give you my card, Mr. Brooke," said Gerald, "but here in this wilderness cards are not customary. My name is Gerald Lane."

"I am delighted to know you, Mr. Lane," said the tourist offering his hand cordially.

It seemed odd to Gerald to be called "Mr. Lane."

"If you don't mind, Mr. Brooke," he said, "please call me Gerald. I never thought of myself as Mr. Lane."

"I will do so with pleasure, and it will seem easy and familiar, for I have a *Cousin* Gerald. His name, too, is not unlike yours. He is Lord Gerald Vane, son of the Marquis of Dunbar."

"There is one essential difference," said Gerald. "I am plain Gerald—I can't call myself a lord."

"Oh, you are all sovereigns in America," laughed the Englishman, "and that is higher than the title of lord."

"Perhaps you are a lord also?" suggested Gerald.

"No, Gerald, not at present. My father has a title, but my elder brother will inherit that. However, that is of little importance here."

"Have you been long in Colorado, Mr. Brooke?"

"About a month. I was told it was the Switzerland of America. So after visiting your principal cities and having seen your famous Niagara, I pushed on out here, but I didn't reckon on there being no hotels, or I might have stayed away."

"There will be plenty of hotels in a few years. There are few settlements as yet."

"Just so. Excuse my saying so, but until that time comes I should rather keep away. And you have actually lived here for three years?"

"Yes."

"But why come here when there are plenty of places where you would have enjoyed greater advantages?"

"We came here on account of my father's health. He was in a consumption, and the dry, clear air of this region is especially favorable for any lung troubles."

"Did he experience benefit?"

"Yes; he lived three years, when elsewhere he would probably have died in twelve months."

"But now you won't stay here? *You* haven't got consumption."

"Not that I am aware of," answered Gerald with a smile.

"Have you formed any plans?"

"No; I have not had time."

"You ought to go to New York or Chicago. There would surely be an opening in one of those cities for a clever boy like yourself."

"Thank you for the compliment. There is one good reason, however, why I cannot follow your advice."

"Name it."

"Money is necessary, and my poor father was unable to leave me

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any.”

“But this cabin?”

“That indeed belongs to me and the eighty acres adjoining, but it would be difficult to sell it, nor do I care to do so. Some day, when the country is more settled, it may be worth much more than at present.”

“You are right, Gerald. But you are not obliged to remain here. The cabin and the land won’t run away.”

“That’s true. I mean to leave it and go somewhere, but my plans are not formed yet.”

“Then let me help you form them. I want to make a prolonged tour in this country, and I find it beastly dull without a companion. Come with me!”

“But, Mr. Brooke, I am poor. I have less than two dollars in my possession.”

“My dear fellow, what difference does that make?”

“But I can’t travel without money.”

“I offer you a position as my—private secretary, with a salary of—I say now, I don’t know how much to pay you. We’ll call it four pounds a week, twenty dollars in your money, if that is satisfactory.”

“But, Mr. Brooke,” exclaimed Gerald in astonishment. “I don’t understand the duties of a private secretary, and I can’t possibly be worth that money.”

“You won’t find your duties difficult. I call you my secretary, but you’ll only have to keep me company.”

“I will do that with pleasure, Mr. Brooke.”

“Then it’s all settled, Gerald. Your hand upon it!”

The two clasped hands, and Gerald felt that this new friend would be a good offset for his powerful enemy.

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CHAPTER XI.

JAKE AMSDEN MAKES AN EARLY CALL, AND HAS A WARM

RECEPTION.

THE next morning Gerald was up bright and early. He felt bound to entertain his new employer, who was temporarily his guest, as royally as possible. So he decided to make some fresh bread for breakfast, and this would take him some time. Still all his preparations were made, and breakfast all ready to be served before his companion awoke.

"He must be pretty tired," thought Gerald. "I won't wake him up, for his business isn't very pressing, and he will be glad of a good long rest."

He ate a little himself, for he had been up long enough to have a good appetite, and seated himself on the settee in front of the cabin.

It was a charming morning, and as Gerald sat there, he felt that he had good reason to be thankful. Yesterday he had felt alone in the world, and had very little idea how he was going to make a living, but to-day he found himself with a bright prospect ahead, and the promise of an income which would have been satisfactory to many of double his age.

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The state of the weather is apt to affect our spirits, and the clear sunshine and cool bracing air had its effect on Gerald. From his seat he could see at a distance of twenty-five miles the snowy top of Pike's Peak, looking on account of the clearness of the atmosphere not more than five miles away. There were intermediate summits which, had he been nearer, would have hidden the snowy crest of the grand old mountain, but from where he was he could see clearly, rising above the wooded slope.

"Colorado may be a wilderness, but it has grand scenery!" thought Gerald. "Some time I must go to the top of Pike's Peak. The view from there must be great."

He had entertained this wish before, but his father would not consent, and, indeed as there was some danger of losing one's way in case of a sudden fog, his apprehensions were justified.

"How peaceful and beautiful everything looks this morning," thought Gerald.

But though Gerald was right, the peacefulness of the scene was soon to be broken in upon by a human intruder on whom it produced no impression.

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As Gerald sat in quiet contemplation the figure of a man approached rapidly. When he came nearer Gerald recognized his visitor as Jake Amsden.

There was something hostile in Jake's appearance, and there was an ugly look on his face that indicated anything but friendship.

"Hallo, you young rascal!" he called out roughly, when he arrived within earshot. "Why don't you answer me?" he continued as Gerald remained silent.

"I am no rascal, Mr. Amsden," said Gerald in a dignified tone, "and I don't choose to be called one."

"Oh, you're puttin' on frills, are you?" retorted Jake, halting where he stood, and eying the boy with evident malevolence.

"If that's what you call it, I am. If you will speak to me in a civil manner I will answer you."

"Oh, you will, will you?" sneered Amsden. "You'll answer me any way."

"Have you any business with me?"

"Yes, I have. You don't think I'd come round here so early in the mornin' if I hadn't?"

"I don't know. I am not acquainted with your habits."

"Has the gentleman gone that was stoppin' here?"

"You mean Mr. Wentworth?"

"Like as not. I don't know his name."

"He went away yesterday."

Jake Amsden appeared to receive this answer with satisfaction.

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He wanted to be sure that Gerald was alone and unprotected.

"Ho ain't comin' back, is he?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then you're livin' alone?"

"My poor father is dead as you know. Yes, I am alone in the world."

"Look here, boy!" he commenced abruptly, "you asked me if I came on business."

"Yes."

"Well, I have," and the visitor eyed Gerald with a sinister glance.

Gerald suspected that Jake had heard of his visit to Pete Johnson's saloon, and wanted to hold him responsible for the loss of the stolen wallet. He was not alarmed, knowing, as Jake Amsden did not, that he had a friend within call.

"State your business," he said calmly.

"I'll do just that. Gerald Lane, you've played me a mean trick."

"Go ahead! Tell me what it is."

"You came to Pete Johnson's and stole a wallet full of money from me when I was asleep. Now it ain't no use your denyin' that you was there, for Pete Johnson told me all about it."

"I don't intend to deny it. Mr. Wentworth and I called at Pete Johnson's saloon when you were lying under the counter."

"No matter where I was. I'm a gentleman, and if I choose to lie down under the counter of my friend Pete Johnson, it's none of your business."

"Oh, I don't care to interfere with you. You can lie there every night if you like, so far as I am concerned."

"Of course I can, but that ain't business. Where's that wallet you took from me? Answer me that, you young jackanapes!"

"I took no wallet from you."

"Then the man that was with you did."

"That is nothing to me. Tell me, Jake Amsden, where did you get that wallet, and the money that was in it?"

"It was my wallet."

"And the money was yours, too, I suppose?"

"It's none of your business any way. It was in my pocket when I lay down and when I got up it was gone. You needn't go to deny it, for Pete Johnson saw it taken."

"Look here, Jake Amsden!" said Gerald in a fearless tone, "the wallet and money were stolen by you from Mr. Wentworth, and he only took what belonged to him."

"That's a lie!"

"It's the truth."

"Did you see me take it?"

"No, but my father woke up in the night, and saw you bending over Mr. Wentworth. That was when you took the wallet."

"Your father was dreamin'! It's all a made up story. Jake Amsden ain't no thief."

"I shan't call you any names. I only tell you the facts in the case."

"Look here, boy, you're mighty independent for a kid. Do you know who I am?" and Jake, with his arms akimbo, faced Gerald threateningly.

"I know who you are very well, Mr. Amsden."

"Mr. Amsden! Well, that's all right. You'd better be respectful. Do you know what I've come here for?"

"Suppose you tell me."

"I've come here to thrash you within an inch of your life."

"What for?" asked Gerald, who didn't seem as much overwhelmed as Jake Amsden anticipated.

"For robbin' me of a wallet full of money."

"I told you already that I had nothing to do with taking the wallet. You must see Mr. Wentworth about that."

"But he isn't here."

"You may see him again some time."

"That don't go down. He's gone away, but you are here. I'm goin' to take it out of your hide."

"I am only a boy, Mr. Amsden. Won't you let me off?"

Gerald seemed alarmed, and Jake Amsden was pleased at the

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impression his threats appeared to have made.

"How much money have you got about you?" he demanded.

"Not quite two dollars."

"Didn't your father leave you any?" asked Jake, incredulous.

"My father was a very poor man. He had no money to leave."

"Then it's all the wuss for you, youngster. I'm goin' to tan your hide, and don't you forget it!"

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Jake slipped off his coat, and advanced in a menacing way.

Gerald dodged him, and tried to escape. For a time he succeeded in eluding the grasp of his antagonist, and the delay only infuriated Amsden the more.

At last he managed to catch Gerald, and with a savage cry of triumph bore him to the ground.

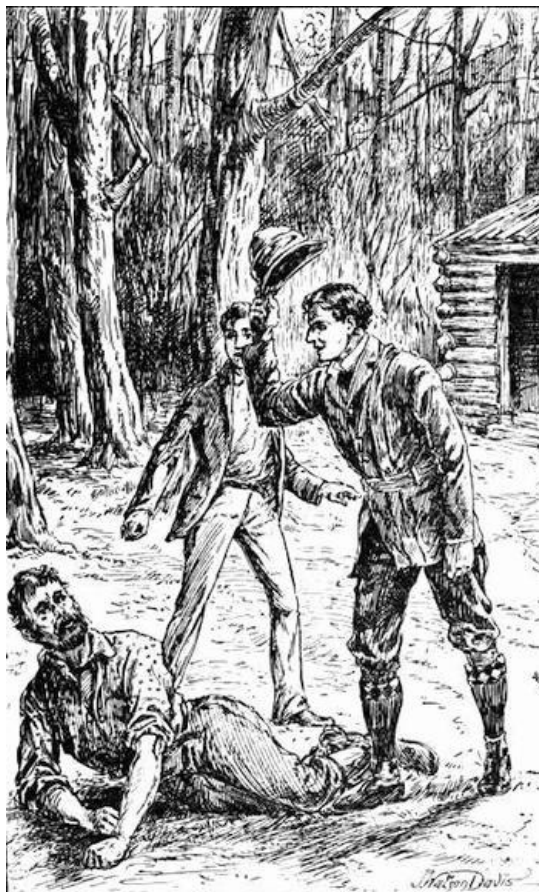
"Now I've got you!" he exclaimed, "and I'm goin' to pound you till you won't know where you are."

He pinioned Gerald to the earth, and the boy would have fared very badly, but for the timely assistance of his guest.

Jake Amsden was preparing to carry out his threat, when something unexpected happened, and he was under the impression that he had been struck by a cyclone. The English tourist had been awakened by the discussion, and comprehending from what he heard that Gerald was in a tight place, he hastily threw on his clothes, and at the right time darted out of the cabin, seized Jake by the collar with one hand while with the other he planted a blow in his face, nearly stunned him, and dragging him from Gerald hurled him forcibly upon the ground six feet away.

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"Jumpin' Jehosaphat! What have I struck?" muttered Jake, looking around stupidly, as he lay on his back without attempting to get up.



"Allow me to introduce myself," said the Englishman. "I am the Hon. Noel Brooke of England."—Page 93.

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CHAPTER XII.

AN INTERNATIONAL COMBAT.

"Excuse my want of ceremony," said Noel Brooke nonchalantly. "I would have waited for an introduction but there wasn't time."

"Who are you?" gasped Jake Amsden.

"Allow me to introduce myself," said the Englishman, raising his hat as ceremoniously as if he were addressing a Chicago millionaire. "I am the Hon. Noel Brooke, of England, at your service."

"An Englishman? That is worse than all. That Jake Amsden should live to be floored by an Englishman!"

"My friend, I hope that is no disgrace. There are plenty of your countrymen who could floor me."

"But I can't understand it," said Jake, rising with difficulty from his recumbent position. "You don't weigh within twenty-five pounds of me."

"It isn't always weight that counts—it's science. I learned how to box when I was at Eton."

"I think I could lick you in a fair fight," went on Jake, surveying the trim figure of his antagonist, who was at least three inches shorter than himself. "You hit me when I wasn't lookin'."

"True enough! Would you like to try it again?"

"Yes."

"I'm ready."

Gerald awaited the result not without anxiety. Certainly the two did not look very well matched. Jake Amsden was a broad-shouldered, powerfully built man of five feet ten, and would tip the scales at a hundred and eighty pounds. Noel Brooke was three inches shorter, and did not look to weigh over a hundred and fifty.

"I am afraid Jake will be too much for him," he thought, "and if he is, it will be my turn next."

Evidently Jake was of the same opinion.

"Why, you're a Bantam compared to me," he said. "You'll think you've been struck by a cyclone."

"Strike away—cyclone!" said the Englishman calmly.

Jake Amsden took him at his word. He advanced confidently, waving his arms like a flail, and tried to overwhelm his opponent at the first onslaught. But, intent on attack, he did not provide for defense, and received a powerful blow for which he was unprepared, and which quite staggered him. Now he began to get angry and renewed the attack with even less prudence than before. The result may easily be guessed. A blow behind the ear prostrated him, and he resumed his recumbent position.

"That's the end of the first round," said the Englishman with unruffled composure. "Will you try another?"

"No, I've got enough," returned Amsden, raising himself on his elbow. "I say, stranger, you're a reg'lar steam engine. Do all Englishmen fight like that?"

Noel Brooke laughed.

"Not all," he said, "but some Americans fight better. I put on the gloves in New York with a member of the Manhattan Athletic Club, and he served me as I have served you."

"I'm glad of that."

"You have no hard feelings, I trust, my mountain friend."

"No, but I'm glad you've found your match in America."

"And you perhaps feel the same, Gerald?" said Mr. Brooke.

"I am a true American boy, Mr. Brooke," returned Gerald.

"You are right there, and I respect you the more for it, but we won't let any international rivalry interfere with our friendly feelings."

"Agreed!" said Gerald cordially.

"Now," continued Noel Brooke, turning to Amsden, "you'll tell me why you attacked my young friend here."

Jake Amsden looked a little sheepish.

"I thought he didn't use me right," he answered.

"Suppose you tell me the particulars. I'll arbitrate between you."

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"He took a wallet full of bills from me when I was drunk."

"I didn't take it," said Gerald. "It was the gentleman who was with me that took it."

"How came you with a wallet full of bills?" asked the Englishman.

"I found it."

"Where did you find it?"

"I can't remember exactly where."

"Then I will help you," put in Gerald. "You found it in our cabin during the night, when Mr. Wentworth, our visitor, was asleep." [97]

"That puts rather a different face upon the matter, it strikes me," said the tourist.

"Mr. Wentworth owed me some money anyway," retorted Amsden doggedly.

"He owed you money? What for?" asked Gerald in unfeigned surprise.

"He hired me to hunt for some papers that he said were in your cabin somewhere."

"Is this true?" demanded Gerald in amazement.

"Yes; it's true as preachin'."

"And was that why you came there that night?"

"Yes."

"You came for the papers?"

"Yes."

"How about the wallet?"

"I saw it on the floor and I thought I'd take it—payment in advance."

"Do you believe this story, Gerald? Do you know anything about the papers this man speaks of?" asked Mr. Brooke.

"Yes, I think his story is true as far as that goes. My father had some papers which Mr. Wentworth tried to buy, first of my father, and next of me. They were the records of a debt which he owed father. But I didn't think he would stoop to such means to obtain them." [98]

"What kind of a man is this Wentworth?"

"I cannot consider him an honorable man, or he would have treated us differently."

"What are his relations with you?"

"Unfriendly. He will do me an injury if he gets a chance. But I will tell you more of this hereafter."

"I have heard your story, Mr. Amsden," said the Englishman, "and I am obliged to decide against you. You had no right to tackle Gerald—"

"It was hard on a poor man to lose so much money," grumbled Amsden.

"No doubt, only it happened that it was money to which you had no rightful claim."

"You don't know what is it to be poor, squire."

"I have no doubt it is very uncomfortable, but there are others who are in the same condition. Gerald here is poor, but he doesn't pick up wallets belonging to other people. I advise you to go to work—there are few Americans who don't work—and no nation is more prosperous. Go to work, and you won't have so much reason to complain."

"That's all very well to say, but if a fellow hasn't a cent to bless himself with, it's a poor lookout." [99]

"Are you so poor as that?"

"If gold mines were sellin' for a nickel apiece, I couldn't raise the nickel," asseverated Amsden in a melancholy tone.

"Come, that's a pity. I didn't know any American was ever so poor as that. As I've knocked you down twice, perhaps it is only fair to compensate you for affording me such a chance for healthful exercise. Here, my friend, here are two silver dollars, one for each time I floored you."

"You're a gentleman!" exclaimed Amsden, his face lighting up with satisfaction as he pocketed the coins. Then, as he turned, a sudden idea struck him, and he asked insinuatingly: "Wouldn't you like to knock me down ag'in, stranger?"

"No, I think not," responded the tourist laughing. "However, we'll suppose I have, and here's another dollar."

"Thank you, squire."

Jake Amsden departed with alacrity, making a bee-line for his friend Pete Johnson's saloon.

Gerald and his friend then sat down to breakfast, which, it is needless to say, they both heartily enjoyed. As they rose from the table a knock was heard at the cabin door. [100]

Gerald answered it in some surprise, for visitors and calls were infrequent, and found outside a man of about forty, holding by the hand a boy of twelve.

CHAPTER XIII.

A VICTIM OF INJUSTICE.

THE man who stood before Gerald was dressed like a mechanic in a working suit somewhat the worse for wear, but he had an honest, intelligent face that inspired confidence. He had an anxious look, however, as if he were in some mental trouble.

"Good morning," said Gerald courteously. "Won't you come in and share our breakfast?"

On hearing this invitation the boy's face brightened up.

"You are very kind, and I accept thankfully," said the father. "Oscar and myself are both hungry, for we have eaten nothing since one o'clock yesterday."

"Come in then," said Gerald hospitably.

"I ought perhaps first to explain how I happen to be here in such a plight."

"I shall be glad to hear your story, and so will my friend, Mr. Brooke, but you must breakfast first. Then you will feel probably in much better condition for talking."

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Though Gerald and his guest had eaten heartily there was enough left for the two new arrivals, and it was very evident that both thoroughly enjoyed their meal.

"I hope I haven't taken up your time," said the visitor as he pushed back his chair from the table. "And now, as in duty bound, I will tell you my story."

"Don't think we require it," said Gerald courteously. "The slight favor we have done you gives us no right to ask your confidence."

"Still you look friendly and I am glad to tell you about myself. I am, as you will judge from my appearance, a working-man, and have ever since I attained my majority been employed in woolen mills. The last place where I was employed was at Seneca, in the factory of—"

"Bradley Wentworth?" asked Gerald quickly.

"Yes. Do you know him?" inquired the stranger in surprise.

"Yes; he has been making me a visit here. If you had come here twenty-four hours earlier you would have seen him."

"Then I am glad I was delayed."

"Why? Has he wronged you?"

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"I don't know whether I can rightly say that, but he has treated me without mercy. Let me explain. Fifteen years ago I was employed in an Eastern factory. Among my fellow-workmen was one I thought my friend. We were so intimate that we occupied the same room at a factory boarding-house. All went well. I received excellent wages, and had money laid by. My companion, as I soon found, was given to extravagance, and frequently indulged in drink, so that he found it hard work to make both ends meet. Then he began to borrow money of me, but after a time I refused to accommodate him any further. He earned the same wages as myself, and I felt that he ought to maintain himself without help as I did.

"The result of my refusal was to make him my enemy. He said little but looked ugly. Though I did not expect it he schemed a revenge. One day a pocketbook containing money was missing from an adjoining room. A fuss was made, and a search instituted, which resulted to my utter dismay in the pocketbook being found in my trunk. It contained no money, but a couple of papers which attested the ownership. Of course I asserted my innocence, but no one believed me. The proof was held to be too convincing. I was brought to trial, and sentenced to three months' imprisonment. That imprisonment," he continued bitterly, "has shadowed all my life since. Of course I could not get back to the factory where I had been employed, and I went to another State. I was left in peace for ten months when one of my fellow-workmen made his appearance and told the superintendent that I had served a sentence of imprisonment for theft. I was summoned to the office, informed of the charge, and had to admit it. I was instantly discharged. To assert my innocence was of no avail. 'You were found guilty. That is enough for us,' said the superintendent.

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"I had to leave the factory. I found employment elsewhere, but

was hounded down again, and by the same man. But before denouncing me, he came to me, and offered to keep silent if I would pay him a hundred and fifty dollars. I raised the money, but the treacherous scoundrel did not keep faith with me. He went to the superintendent, and told him all, exacting that the source of the information should not be divulged. So I was sent adrift again, knowing very well, though I couldn't prove it, that Clifton Haynes had betrayed me."

"Why didn't you thrash the scoundrel?" asked Noel Brooke indignantly. [105]

"It would only have increased the prejudice against me," answered the visitor wearily.

"Well," he continued, "I needn't prolong the story, for it is always the same. I went from one factory to another, but this man followed me. When we met he had the assurance to demand another sum of money in payment for his silence. I had no money to give him, nor would I have done so if I had, knowing his treachery. The result was that again I was discharged. A year ago I went to Seneca, and obtained employment from Mr. Wentworth. Month after month passed and I began to congratulate myself, when one unlucky day Haynes again made his appearance. He tried to extort money from me, but though I had some, I refused to bribe him. He went to Mr. Wentworth and denounced me. I was discharged unceremoniously, though I told him my story and appealed to his humanity. Then at last, in my despair and anger, I lay in wait for Haynes, and gave him an unmerciful beating until he roared for mercy."

"Good! good!" exclaimed the Englishman, clapping his hands, "you served the scoundrel right."

"I always think of it with pleasure, though I am not a revengeful man." [106]

"Were you arrested?" asked Gerald.

"Yes, but I escaped with a fine which I paid gladly. I am glad to say when it got out that Haynes had dogged me so persistently none of the men would associate with him, and he was obliged to leave the factory."

"I wish I had been Mr. Wentworth," said Brooke. "I would have retained you in my employ even if you had been guilty in the first place. I don't believe in condemning a man utterly for one offense."

"I wish more men were as charitable as yourself," said John Carter, for this, as he afterward informed Gerald, was his name.

"But how did you happen to come to Colorado?" asked Noel Brooke.

"I was tired of persecution. In fact I had been employed in so many factories, all of which were now closed against me, that I decided to earn a living some other way. I had a little money left, and I traveled westward. I came to Colorado because it was a new country, and there must be something here for an industrious man to do. It has been rather hard on poor Oscar," he added with an affectionate glance at his son. "For latterly my money gave out, and we have more than once gone hungry, as we would have done to-day but for your kindness." [107]

He was about to rise and leave the cabin but Gerald stopped him.

"Wait a minute, Mr. Carter," he said. "I have an arrangement to propose."

Carter regarded him with a glance of inquiry.

"I have made an engagement to travel with my friend, Mr. Brooke," Gerald went on, "and this cabin will be untenanted. If you are willing to occupy it you are welcome to do so. You will be sure to find some employment, and if not you can hunt and fish. What do you say?"

"What can I say except that I am grateful? I am not afraid but that I can make a living for myself and Oscar, and I shall not live in constant fear that Clifton Haynes will find me out and expose me."

"I wish he would happen along about this time," said Noel Brooke. "I should like nothing better than to get a chance at the fellow. One thrashing isn't enough for him."

"I think you would make thorough work with him, Mr. Brooke," said Gerald laughing.

"I would try to at all events," rejoined the Englishman.

"If you want any certificate attesting your prowess you have only to refer to Jake Amsden." [108]

“Jake Amsden,” exclaimed John Carter in surprise. “Why, he is the man for whose crime I suffered. He was the man who stole the wallet and put it in my trunk to incriminate me.”

CHAPTER XIV.

JAKE AMSDEN TURNS OVER A NEW LEAF.

Now it was the turn of Gerald and Mr. Brooke to look surprised.

"Why, I thrashed Jake Amsden within an hour," said the tourist, "for an attack upon Gerald."

"He doesn't seem to have improved then," said Carter. "Does he live hereabouts?"

"Yes."

"Is he in business in this neighborhood?"

"His chief business," answered Gerald, "is to get drunk, and when he can't raise money any other way he steals it."

"Evidently he is the same man. He is the cause of all my misfortunes."

"Here he is coming back!" said Gerald suddenly.

"Good!" exclaimed the tourist. "I have some business with him."

Jake had evidently visited Pete Johnson's saloon again, judging from his flushed face and unsteady gait. Still he was in a condition to get around. [110]

"Stay in the cabin till I call you!" whispered Noel Brooke to Carter.

"Well," he said, turning to meet Amsden, "have you come back for another boxing lesson?"

"No, squire," answered Jake.

"What then?"

"I thought you might like a guide, considerin' this is your first visit to Colorado. Don't you want to go up Pike's Peak?"

"I have engaged Gerald here to go about with me."

"He's a boy. He don't know nothin' of the country."

"He will satisfy me as a companion better than you."

"If you're goin' away, Gerald," said Amsden with unabashed assurance, "won't you let me live in the cabin till you come back?"

"It has been engaged by another tenant," answered Gerald.

"Who is it? It isn't Pete Johnson, is it?"

"No, I don't propose to let my cabin for a saloon."

"You're right, boy. You'd better let me have it."

"But I told you that it was already promised to another party." [111]

"Who is it?"

"An old acquaintance of yours."

At a signal from Noel Brooke John Carter came out, leading Oscar by the hand. He looked earnestly at Jake Amsden. It was the first time in many years that he had seen the man who was the prime mover in the events that had brought about his financial ruin. He would hardly have known Jake, so much had his appearance suffered from habitual intemperance.

Jake Amsden on his part scanned Carter with curious perplexity.

"Do I know you?" he asked.

"You knew me once. I have good reason to remember you," answered John Carter gravely.

Something in his voice recalled him to Amsden.

"Why, it's Carter," he said, "John Carter. How are you, Carter, old fellow? It does me good to set eyes on an old friend."

Carter was unprepared for this cordial welcome, and when Jake Amsden approached with hand extended, he put his own behind his back.

"I can't take your hand, Jake," he said. "You've done me too much harm."

"Oh, you mean that old affair," said Jake in an airy tone. "I did act meanly, that's a fact, but we're both older now. Let bygones be bygones. It's all over now." [112]

"It isn't all over. That false accusation of yours has blighted my life. It has driven me from factory to factory, and finally driven me out here in the hope that I might begin a new life where it would no longer be in my way."

"I'm sorry for that, Carter," said Jake Amsden. "'Pon my soul, I

am. I know it was a mean trick I played upon you, but it was either you or I."

"And you ruined this man's reputation to save your own?" said Noel Brooke sternly.

"I didn't think much about it, squire, I really didn't," said Jake. "You see I run in a hole, and I was ready to do anything to get out."

"It was the act of a scoundrel, Amsden. There is only one thing to do."

"What is it? Take another lickin'?"

"No, that wouldn't mend matters. You must sign a confession that you committed the theft of which Carter was unjustly accused, so that he may have this to show whenever the old charge is brought up against him hereafter."

"I'll do it, squire. I'd have done it long ago if I'd known."

"It is better late than not at all. Come into the cabin, both of you."

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His orders were obeyed, and after asking questions as to details he wrote out a confession exonerating John Carter and laying the blame on the right party. Gerald furnished him with pen, ink and paper.

"Now," he said, when the document was completed, "I want you, Jake Amsden, to sign this and Gerald and I will subscribe our names as witnesses."

"All right, squire, I'll do it. You must not mind the writin' for I haven't handled a pen for so long that I have almost forgotten how to write."

Jake Amsden affixed his signature in a large scrawling hand, and the two witnesses subscribed after him.

"Now, Mr. Carter," said Noel Brooke, as he handed him the paper, "keep this carefully, and whenever that scoundrel who has made it his business to persecute you engages again in the same work you can show this document, and it will be a satisfactory answer to his base charges."

"I thank you, Mr. Brooke," said Carter in a deep voice. "You cannot conceive what a favor you have done me. I feel that a great burden has been lifted from my life, and that it has passed out of the shadow which has obscured it for so long. Now I shall be able to leave Oscar an untarnished name!"

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During the day Carter made a trip to a point two miles distant where he had left his modest luggage, and returned to take possession of the cabin. In the afternoon Jake Amsden made another call, and informed him that he could obtain employment at a lumber camp not far distant.

"Are you going to work there, Mr. Amsden?" asked Gerald.

"I am offered employment," answered Jake, "but my health won't allow me to do hard work, so I gave my chance to Carter."

Gerald smiled, for he understood this was not the real objection. Jake Amsden was naturally stronger and more robust than John Carter, but he had for years led a life of idleness, and the mere thought of working all day fatigued him.

John Carter felt relieved at the prospect of obtaining work and grateful to the man whom for years he had regarded as his enemy for his agency in securing it.

"What pay will I receive?" he asked.

"Four dollars a day."

"Why, that is twice as much as I was paid at the factory," he said. "Now I can see my way clear to support Oscar and myself comfortably. Jake Amsden, I never expected to feel grateful to you, but if I get this job I will forget the past and feel kindly towards you from henceforth."

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"It's all right, Carter, old boy. I ain't all black, you see."

But there were certainly some pretty dark spots still on his character, not the least of which was his compact with Bradley Wentworth concerning the papers in Gerald's possession, which the crafty Amsden had by no means forgotten.

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CHAPTER XV.

BRADLEY WENTWORTH'S MORNING MAIL.

BRADLEY WENTWORTH lived in quite the most pretentious house in Seneca. It was within five minutes' walk of the huge brick factory from which he drew his income. All that money could buy within reasonable limits was his. Handsome furniture, fine engravings, expensive paintings, a stately carriage and handsome horses, contributed to make life comfortable and desirable.

But there is generally something to mar the happiness of the most favored. Mr. Wentworth had but one child—Victor—whom he looked upon as his successor and heir. He proposed to send him to college, partly to secure educational advantages, but partly also because he thought it would give him an opportunity to make friends in high social position. He had reached that age when a man begins to live for those who are to come after him.

But Victor unfortunately took different views of life from his father. He did not care much for a liberal education, and he selected his companions from among those who, like himself, enjoyed a good time. He was quite aware that his father was rich, and he thought himself justified in spending money freely. [117]

Victor was in attendance at the classical academy of Virgil McIntire, LL.D., an institute of high rank in the town of Ilium, about fifty miles from Seneca. He had been there about two years, having previously studied at home under a private tutor. Being a busy man his father had been able to visit the school but twice, and had but a vague idea as to the progress which his son was making.

Five days after he returned home from Colorado he received a letter from Dr. McIntire, the material portion of which is subjoined:

"I regret to say that your son Victor is not making as good use of his time and advantages as I could desire. I have hitherto given you some reason to hope that he would be prepared for admission to Yale College at the next summer examination, but I greatly fear now that he will not be ready. He is a boy of good parts, and with moderate application he could satisfy you and myself in this respect; but he is idle and wastes his time, and seems more bent on enjoying himself than on making progress in his studies. I have spoken with him seriously, but I am afraid that my words have produced very little effect. It may be well for you to remonstrate with him, and try to induce him to take sensible views of life. At any rate, as I don't want you to cherish hopes that are doomed to disappointment, I have deemed it my duty to lay before you the facts of the case.

"Yours respectfully,
"VIRGIL MCINTIRE."

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Bradley Wentworth received and read this letter in bitterness of spirit.

"Why will that boy thwart me?" he asked himself. "I have mapped out a useful and honorable career for him. I am ready to provide liberally for all his wants—to supply him with fine clothes as good, I dare say, as are worn by the Astors and Vanderbilts, and all I ask in return is, that he will study faithfully and prepare himself for admission to college next summer. I did not fare like him when I was a boy. I had no rich father to provide for my wants, but was compelled to work for a living. How gladly would I have toiled had I been situated as he is! He is an ungrateful boy!" [119]

Bradley Wentworth was not altogether justified in his estimate of himself as a boy. He had been very much like Victor, except that he was harder and less amiable. He had worked, to be sure, but it was not altogether because he liked it, but principally because he knew that he must. He, like Victor, had exceeded his income, and it was in consequence of this that he had forged the check for which he had induced his fellow-clerk, Warren Lane, to own himself responsible. He forgot all this, however, and was disposed to judge his son harshly.

By the same mail with Doctor McIntire's letter came the following letter from Victor:

"DEAR FATHER:—I meant to write you last week but was too busy"—"Not with your studies, I'll be bound," interpolated his father—"besides there isn't much to write about here. It is a fearfully slow place"—"You wouldn't find it so if you spent your time in study," reflected Mr. Wentworth—"I don't enjoy Latin and Greek very much, I don't see what good they are ever going to do a fellow. You never studied Latin or Greek, and I am sure you have been very successful

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in life. I have an intimate friend here, Arthur Grigson, who is going to spend next year in traveling. He will go all over the United States to begin with, including the Pacific coast. I wish you would let me go with him. I am sure I would learn more in that way than I shall from the stuffy books I am studying here under that old mummy, Dr. McIntire. Arthur thinks he shall be ready to start in about six weeks. Please give your consent to my going with him by return of mail, so that I may begin to get ready. He thinks we can travel a year for two thousand dollars apiece.

"Your affectionate son,
"VICTOR."

Bradley Wentworth frowned ominously when he read this epistle.

"What a cheerful sort of letter for a father to receive," he said to himself, crushing the pages in his strong hands. "Victor has all the advantages that money can command, and a brilliant prospect for the future if he will only act in accordance with my wishes, and yet he is ready to start off at a tangent and roam round the world with some scapegrace companion. I wish he were more like Lane's boy—I don't like him, for he is obstinate and headstrong, and utterly unreasonable in his demands upon me, but he is steady and correct in his habits, and if he were in Victor's place would never give me any uneasiness."

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Gerald would have been surprised if he had heard this tribute from the lips of his recent visitor, but he was not likely to know the real opinion of the man who had declared himself his enemy.

Bradley Wentworth, continuing the examination of his letters, found another bearing the Illium postmark. It was addressed in an almost illegible scrawl and appeared to be written by a person of defective education. It was to this effect:

"DEAR SIR:—YOUR son Victor, at least he says you are his father, and have plenty of money, has run up a bill of sixty-seven dollars for livery at my stable, and I think it is about time the bill was paid. I am a poor man and I can't afford to lose so much money. I have already waited till I am tired, but your son's promises ain't worth much, and I am obliged to come to you for payment.

"I shall take it as a favor if you will send me a check at once for the money, as I have some bills coming due next week. I don't mind trusting your son if I am sure of my money in the end, and if it isn't convenient for you to pay right off, you can send me your note on thirty days, as I am sure a gentleman like you would pay it when due.

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"Yours respectfully,
"SETH KENDALL."

This letter made Mr. Wentworth very angry. It is hard to tell whether he was more angry with his son or with the proprietor of the livery stable. He answered the latter first.

"MR. SETH KENDALL:—I have received your letter, and must express my surprise at your trusting my son, knowing well that he is a minor, and that I have not authorized his running up a bill with you. It would serve you right to withhold all payment, but I won't go so far as that. Cut your demand in two, and send me a receipt in full for that sum, and I will forward you a check. I never give a note for so small an amount. Hereafter, if you are foolish enough to trust Victor, you must run your own risk, as I shall decline to pay any bill that may be presented.

"BRADLEY WENTWORTH."

Mr. Wentworth next wrote to Victor a letter from which a paragraph is extracted:

"I admire your audacity in asking me to let you leave school and go around the world with some scapegrace companion. You say it will only cost two thousand dollars. That probably seems to you a very small sum of money. When I was several years older than yourself I was working for seventy-five dollars a month or nine hundred dollars a year. It is evident that you do not understand the value of money. You speak of me as a rich man, and I admit that you are correct in doing so, but I do not propose to have you make ducks and drakes of my money.

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"I may mention, by the way, that a livery stable keeper, who signs himself Seth Kendall, has sent me a bill run up by you for sixty-seven dollars. I have written him that I didn't authorize your running up such a bill, and that he must be content with fifty per cent of it, or else go unpaid. Hereafter I forbid your running up bills in Illium of any description. Bear this in mind.

"Your father,
"BRADLEY WENTWORTH."

A week later Mr. Wentworth received this telegram from Illium.

"Your son Victor has disappeared, leaving no traces of his destination. Particulars by mail.

"VIRGIL MCINTIRE."

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CHAPTER XVI.

A LETTER FROM JAKE AMSDEN.

ON receipt of the despatch reproduced at the close of the last chapter Mr. Wentworth started immediately for Ilium, and had an interview with Dr. McIntire.

"When did my son leave Ilium?" he asked.

"Two days ago, probably. He was not at recitations, but I received a note saying he was sick with the influenza. This seemed natural, for I have myself been suffering from the same malady, and therefore my suspicions were not excited. When the next morning Victor also absented himself I sent around to his boarding-house, and learned that he and a school friend of his—Arthur Grigson—had not been seen for twenty-four hours. Their trunks were left, but each had taken a valise, filled with clothing, as may be presumed, for the bureau drawers were empty. It is clear that the flight was premeditated. Can you furnish me with any clew, Mr. Wentworth, to the probable cause of this escapade?"

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"Only this, that Victor in his last letter asked permission to go off on a trip with this boy, Arthur Grigson. He wished to leave school and travel for a year."

"That explains it. You refused, I presume?"

"Yes, emphatically."

"Your son then has gone without leave."

"It would seem so. What is the character of this Arthur Grigson?"

"He is from Syracuse, in New York State. I believe he has no immediate family, but is under the charge of a guardian, who lets him do pretty much as he pleases. Had your son any money, do you think?"

"I had just sent him fifty dollars to settle his board bill for the month, with a margin for his own personal use."

"Probably he used the money to travel with. It may be well to inquire at his boarding-house if he has paid his board."

This Mr. Wentworth did, and ascertained that the bill was still unpaid. He returned to the principal with this information.

"What would you advise me to do?" he inquired in some perplexity.

"I will advise you, but you may not be willing to adopt my advice."

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"At any rate I shall be glad to have your views, for I am in great doubt."

"I would make no effort to recover the fugitive."

"What!" exclaimed Bradley Wentworth startled, "would you have me abandon my only son to his own devices?"

"Only for a time. You might, of course, secure the services of a detective to pursue him, but that would be expensive and probably would do no good."

"But I don't like to return home without an effort to recover Victor."

"Listen to me, Mr. Wentworth. How old is your son?"

"Seventeen."

"Then he ought to be able to look out for himself in a measure. I predict that it won't be long before you hear from him."

"What leads you to think so?"

"Victor left school with only fifty dollars in his pocket. That sum won't last long. His companion no doubt had more, for his guardian foolishly supplied him with money very liberally. But, at any rate, it won't be long before the two boys will be at the end of their resources. Then the natural thing will be for each to write for money to get home. When you receive your son's letter you will, of course, learn where he is, and can seek him out and take him home."

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"Your advice is most judicious, Dr. McIntire," said Mr. Wentworth brightening up. "I shall adopt it. I shan't be sorry if the young scapegrace gets into trouble and suffers for his folly."

"I hope, Mr. Wentworth, you don't blame me in the matter."

"No, Dr. McIntire, I blame no one but the boy himself. Your suggestions have entirely changed my intentions. I did propose to

advertise a reward to any one who would send me information of the missing boy, but now I shall do nothing of the kind. I will trust to time and the want of money to restore Victor to his senses."

Mr. Wentworth settled all Victor's debts in Ilium, and when his task was finished returned to Seneca.

"The boy needn't think I am going to make a fuss about him. It would be making him of altogether too much importance. I think I can afford to wait quite as well as he can."

"Did you see Mr. Victor?" inquired the housekeeper when he returned home. [128]

"No, Mrs. Bancroft."

"I thought you went to Ilium, sir."

"So I did."

"And did not call on Mr. Victor?"

"Victor isn't at Ilium. He has gone away on a little journey with a school companion."

Mrs. Bancroft looked surprised.

"Will he be gone long?" she ventured to inquire.

"It is not decided," answered Wentworth. From his manner the housekeeper understood that he did not care to be interrogated further. She would like to have asked where Victor had gone, for she felt some affection for the boy whom she had known since he wore knickerbockers, but she reflected that when letters were received the postmark would reveal what she desired to know. Accordingly she waited eagerly, but so far as she could learn no letters came from the absent boy. She grew anxious, but Bradley Wentworth seemed calm and imperturbable.

"Master Victor must be all right," she concluded, "or his father would look anxious."

One morning Mrs. Bancroft found in the mail a letter dated Gulchville, Colorado, but the address was evidently written by an uneducated person not much in the habit of holding the pen. It couldn't be from Victor, whose handwriting was very good, but Mrs. Bancroft reflected in alarm that he might be sick and unable to write for himself, and had employed an illiterate amanuensis. [129]

She looked closely at Mr. Wentworth when he read the letter at the breakfast table. He seemed surprised, but that was the only emotion which the housekeeper could detect.

He laid the letter down without a word, having read it apparently with some difficulty.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Wentworth," said Mrs. Bancroft, "but does the letter give any news of Master Victor?"

"No; what should make you think it did, Mrs. Bancroft?"

"I noticed that it was postmarked in Colorado."

"True, but I don't expect Victor to go so far, I have acquaintances in Colorado."

That was the only information vouchsafed to Mrs. Bancroft.

"I'm a poor woman," she said to herself, "but I'd freely give ten dollars to know just where Master Victor is. I'm afraid he's a little wild, and don't like study, but I haven't forgotten what a nice little boy he was, and how he used to kiss the old housekeeper. He's got a good heart, has Victor. It's very mysterious his going away so sudden-like. Mr. Wentworth evidently doesn't want me to know where he is. Maybe he's sent him to one of them strict military schools, where he'll be ruled with a rod of iron. I only wish I could see him for just five minutes." [130]

The mysterious letter (not to keep the reader in doubt) was written by our old acquaintance Jake Amsden, and we will reproduce it here, correcting the orthography, which deviated considerably from the standards set by the best writers.

"MR. WENTWORTH,

DEAR SIR:—I think you will be interested to know that the boy, Gerald Lane, has gone away from Gulchville. I don't know where he has gone, but he went with an Englishman named Brooke or Brooks. I think the Englishman is going to travel round Colorado, and has taken Gerald as a guide. He would have done a good deal better to take me, for Gerald is only a kid, and doesn't know much about the State, while I have traveled all over it. Oh, I almost forgot to say that he has let his cabin to a Mr. Carter, whom I used to know a good many years ago. That shows he means to come back again. When he does come back I will let you know. [131]

"I hope you will consider this letter worth five dollars for I am very short of money and times are so hard that I can't get anything to do.

"Yours to command,
"JAKE AMSDEN, ESQ."

Why Mr. Amsden signed himself Esq. is not altogether clear. As he had expressed a hope to go to Congress some day he perhaps wanted to keep up his dignity.

Mr. Wentworth returned the following answer to this letter:

"JAKE AMSDEN,

"I am glad to receive information about Gerald Lane. I enclose five dollars. When you hear anything more about him, particularly when he returns, write me again.

"BRADLEY WENTWORTH."

He did not, however, address this to Jake Amsden, Esq., rather to the disappointment of his gifted correspondent. But Jake found substantial consolation in the five dollars enclosed, which soon found its way into the coffers of Pete Johnson.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE BACKWOODS HOTEL.

THREE weeks later Noel Brooke and Gerald, after a long day's ride, halted their horses in front of a rude, one-story dwelling at the foot of a precipitous hill in Western Colorado.

"I hope this is a hotel, Gerald," said the tourist. "I am tired and hungry."

"So am I. We have had a rough ride to-day."

"No doubt our poor horses think so," went on Brooke, gently stroking the neck of his patient steed. The weary animal signified the pleasure which the caress gave him, and turning his head looked at his rider with almost human intelligence.

"Shall I dismount and inquire, Mr. Brooke?" asked Gerald.

"Yes, if you please."

Gerald knocked on the door, which after a slight delay, was opened by a tall, gaunt woman attired in a soiled calico dress which hung limply about her thin and bony figure. [133]

"Madam," said Gerald, lifting his hat with quite unnecessary politeness, for the woman before him knew nothing of social observances, "is this a hotel?"

"Well," drawled the woman, "we sometimes put up travelers here."

"I am glad to hear it. My friend and I have ridden far to-day, and would like to have supper and a bed."

"That'll be a dollar apiece," said the woman abruptly.

"We are willing to pay it; and can we get some provision for our horses?"

"This ain't no horse tavern, but you can tie 'em to a tree and let 'em forage for themselves."

"That will do," answered Gerald. "Mr. Brooke," he added, "this lady consents to entertain us."

"I shall esteem it a favor," said Noel Brooke, alighting from his horse.

"Did you tell him what I charged?" asked the backwoods landlady.

"We are to pay a dollar each," explained Gerald, turning to his companion.

"That is satisfactory," said the tourist.

"You may give it to me now," said the new landlady with commendable caution. [134]

"Just as you please, madam."

Noel Brooke took out a large wallet that seemed well filled with bills, and selecting a two-dollar note passed it over.

The landlady extended her hand eagerly, and taking the bill examined it minutely, and finally, as if satisfied with her scrutiny, thrust it into a probable pocket in the interior recesses of her dress. She was evidently fond of money, judging from her manner, and Gerald noticed that she fixed a covetous look on the large and well-filled wallet from which Mr. Brooke had selected the bank bill. It gave him a momentary feeling of uneasiness, but he reflected that there was little danger from a solitary woman, and did not mention his feeling to the tourist.

"What do you want for supper?" asked the woman in a quick, jerky way.

"Almost anything, provided it is hearty and there is enough of it, madam."

"I've got some antelope steak and corn cakes, and I'll boil some potatoes if you want 'em."

"That will do admirably. But where did you get antelope meat? You didn't shoot the animal yourself?"

"No, my man shot him." [135]

That settled the question that had arisen in Gerald's mind. The woman had a husband.

"I might have known that you didn't shoot him yourself."

"And maybe you'd be mistaken. I've dropped more'n one fine

antelope, if I am a woman—Bess, bring me my rifle.”

Bess, undoubtedly the woman’s daughter, was quite a contrast to her thin, bony mother, for, though not over the average height of women, she would easily have tipped the scales at a hundred and eighty pounds. She had a round, fat face, rather vacant in expression, but good-natured, and in that respect much more attractive than her mother’s. She brought out a large rifle, which her mother took from her and raised to her shoulder in fine, sportsmanlike fashion.

“Please don’t mistake me for antelope, madam,” said Noel Brooke hastily.

This excited the risibilities of Bess, who broke into a loud and noisy fit of laughter.

“What yer cacklin’ at, Bess?” demanded her mother.

“No, I won’t shoot yer,” she added, turning to Brooke. “You wouldn’t be half so good eatin’ as an antelope.”

Here Bess went off into another fit of laughter, in which Gerald and his companion joined, for the girl’s evident enjoyment was contagious.

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“I am glad to hear that, madam.”

“What do you call me madam for?” inquired the woman suspiciously.

“Because I don’t know your name.”

“My name’s Sal Peters.”

“I shall remember, Mrs. Peters.”

“Bess, you can go and tell the man where to tie his hoss.”

The girl led the way to the rear of the building, where about a hundred feet back was a sapling with a long rope attached to it.

“Hitch your hoss on to that,” said she. “And there’s another for the young chap.”

Gerald smiled at this designation, and availed himself of the information.

“You can set down anywhere, and when supper’s ready I’ll shout.”

“Thank you, Miss Peters,” said the tourist with an amused smile.

But Bess seemed still more amused at being called Miss Peters.

“Oh, I shall bust with laughing, I shall!” she giggled. “*Miss Peters!* Oh, ain’t you funny, though?”

“Is there any place to wash?” asked Gerald, looking at his dust-soiled hands.

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Bess pointed to a little rill of water that flowed and trickled down the hillside, and which Gerald had not yet observed.

“Thank you!”

“Towels are apparently unknown in this wilderness,” said Brooke, after Bess had gone back to the house.

“And soap, too, I expect.”

“A little extra rubbing will make up for the last, and our handkerchiefs may do as a substitute for the former. This seems a primitive sort of place.”

Gerald admired the ease with which Mr. Brooke, who had undoubtedly been brought up in the lap of luxury, adapted himself to the accommodations of the wilderness. The young man, after refreshing himself with an ablution, threw himself on the grass, and said contentedly: “It seems good to rest after our long ride.”

“Yes, Mr. Brooke, that is the way I feel.”

“To tell you the truth, Gerald, I was afraid we might have to camp out in the woods, and go to bed without our supper.”

“Our hotel isn’t exactly first class.”

“No, but if we get a plain supper and a comfortable night’s rest it ought to satisfy us. If I cared to stop at first-class hotels I would have remained in the larger cities. But I like better, for a time at least, the freedom of the woods, even if it carries with it some personal sacrifices and privations.”

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“I have been thinking, Mr. Brooke, that my duties as private secretary are not very laborious.”

“True, Gerald,” answered the tourist smiling. “In fact I have no use for a private secretary as such, but I wanted a companion, and you are worth more to me in that capacity than a college graduate whose acquirements would be much greater.”

"But, Mr. Brooke, it doesn't seem to me that I am earning the very liberal salary you are paying me."

"Not perhaps by your labors as secretary, but your company I rate higher than this."

"Thank you, Mr. Brooke," said Gerald, gratified by this evidence of appreciation.

"So that you needn't feel any compunction at accepting your salary."

"I know you mean what you say, and I shall hereafter feel easy on that score. I wonder what would have been my future if you had not made your appearance."

"You would have got along somehow. You are a clever boy, one of those that get on. There is one thing I reproach myself for, however."

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"What is that, Mr. Brooke?"

"I have taken you away from the congenial society of Jake Amsden."

Gerald laughed.

"It is true," he said, "but I will try to find compensation in yours."

Noel Brooke rose and made a low bow.

"Really," he said, "I can't remember when I received such a compliment before."

At this moment Bess came out of the cabin and called out "Supper's ready, you fellers!"

"And we 'fellers' are ready for it," said Noel Brooke rising briskly. "Come along, Gerald, the inner man and the inner boy must be replenished."

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CHAPTER XVIII.

THE PETERS FAMILY.

"SET right up there!" said Mrs. Peters, pointing to a table which was backed up against the wall with one leaf extended.

The antelope steak emitted a delicious odor to our hungry travelers, and they did not mind the absence of a table-cloth and napkins. These would have seemed out of place in this backwoods hotel.

In addition to the antelope meat there were corn cakes as promised and cups of coffee which had already been poured out.

"Mrs. Peters," said Brooke, "you have given us a supper fit for a king."

"I don't know about no kings," said the bony landlady. "I've heerd of 'em, but don't take much stock in 'em. I don't believe they're any better than any other folks."

"I am not personally acquainted with any, but if I were I am sure they would relish your cooking."

"You're monstrous polite," said Mrs. Peters, her grim features relaxing somewhat, "but I reckon I can cook a little."

"And your daughter, no doubt, understands cooking also."

"No, she don't. She don't seem to have no gift that way."

"That's a mistake," said Brooke gravely. "What will she do when she is married and has a home of her own?"

"Oh, how you talk!" exclaimed the delighted Bess. "Who'd think of marrying me?"

"I think, Miss Peters, any one who married you would get his money's worth."

"Are you married?" asked Bess in an insinuating tone.

"I believe I am spoken for," answered Brooke hastily, for it seemed clear that he would not have to sue in vain for the hand of the plump young lady, "but my friend here, Mr. Lane, is single." Gerald looked alarmed, but was relieved when Bess said, "He's only a boy. He ain't old enough to be married."

"Won't you sit down and have your supper with us, Miss Peters?"

"No, I couldn't eat a mite if anybody was looking," answered Bess bashfully.

"I feel that way myself," said Brooke. "Please don't look at me, Miss Peters. Look at Gerald. It makes no difference to him."

"What nonsense be you two talkin'?" asked the landlady, as Bess went off into another fit of laughter. "I never saw Bess so silly before."

"It ain't me, mother. The man is so funny he makes me laugh."

The conversation stopped here, as Bess was sent out on an errand by her mother. Gerald and the tourist devoted themselves to eating, and did full justice to the plain but wholesome meal.

"I feel better," said Noel Brooke, as he rose from the table.

"Folks generally do after eatin'," observed Mrs. Peters philosophically. "I reckon if you're through you'd better go out. You're only in the way here."

"Mrs. Peters is delightfully unconventional," remarked Mr. Brooke as in obedience to the plain hint given by their landlady they went out and resumed their seats under a large branching oak tree in the rear of the cabin.

"She has given us a good supper. That'll pay for her unconventional manners. I wonder what sort of a person her 'man' is?"

The question was no sooner suggested than answered. A tall, powerfully built man, clad in buckskin and carrying a rifle, followed by two young men, slighter in figure, but quite as tall, strode from the woods, and halted when they caught sight of Gerald and his companion.

"Who are you, strangers?" asked the old man suspiciously.

"We are travelers," answered Noel Brooke promptly, "and at present we are guests of Mrs. Peters. Are you Mr. Peters?"

"I run that cabin, if that is what you mean."

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"So I supposed. Then you are my landlord."

"I've got nothin' to do with that. Ef you've made a bargain with Sal it's all right."

"We have made a bargain with Mrs. Peters, and she has given us a good supper."

"I hope there's something left for us," growled Peters, "or there'll be a row."

The two sons carried between them an antelope, so it looked as if they would not lack for supper.

The three men filed into the cabin, and their wants were provided for without trenching upon the antelope they had brought with them. An hour later they came out, and settled down near the two guests.

"Where do you come from?" demanded Peters with rude curiosity.

"From England, to start with," answered Noel.

"So you're a Britisher?"

"If you choose to call me so. I never heard the word till I came across the water."

"I don't think much of Britishers."

"I am sorry to hear it," said Brooke amused. "May I ask why you are prejudiced against my countrymen?"

"We've licked 'em twice, and we can lick 'em again," answered Peters forcibly.

"I really hope you will have no occasion. So far as I can judge England feels very friendly toward the United States. I must contend, however, that my countrymen know something about fighting."

"Wal, perhaps they do!" admitted Peters shortly, "but you ain't no match for us. Take you, for instance, how old be you?"

"Twenty-eight."

"My Ben, there, is only twenty, and he could double you up in less'n a minute."

Noel Brooke fixed a critical glance on the tall, awkward, but strongly built youth, indicated as Ben.

"He is certainly taller than I am," he admitted. There was about six inches' difference in their respective heights.

"Yes, and he's tough and wiry. Do you think you could lay him out, Ben?"

Ben grinned and answered shortly, "I reckon!"

Gerald, who had witnessed his friend's prowess, didn't feel quite so certain of this.

"I thought you'd crawl," chuckled the old man, using an expression more common in that locality than further east. "Ben's a chip of the old block, he is! He can lay out any tarnal Britisher you can fetch round."

Noel Brooke felt that it was foolish, but this good-natured depreciation of his abilities didn't fail to nettle him. He again surveyed Ben with a critical eye, and took stock of his points as a fighting man. He saw that as an antagonist he was not to be despised. Yet in his own case he possessed a scientific training to which Ben could lay no claim. Then, again, he was unusually strong and muscular for a man of his small proportions. He felt sure that even if conquered, Ben would not gain an easy victory, and—though it was a risk—he decided to take it.

"I don't mind having a little contest with your son—friendly of course," he said quietly, as he rose in a leisurely, almost languid, way from his low seat.

"What!" ejaculated Mr. Peters, almost doubting if he heard aright, "you are willing to tackle Ben?"

"Yes."

"Ho, ho! this is rich!" said the old man with an irresistible guffaw. "You; oh jeminny!" and he nearly doubled up in a paroxysm of mirth.

"You seem amused," said the tourist, rather provoked at the old man's estimate of his fighting ability.

"Excuse me, stranger! You're the pluckiest man I've met in many a long day. It does seem redikilus your standing up against Ben!"

"I won't hurt him much, dad!" said Ben, opening his mouth in a good-natured grin.

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"Of course it's all in fun," rejoined Noel Brooke smiling.

"Sartin! But you'd best consider what you're a undertakin' before you begin."

"I have done that."

"It's like a boy standin' up against me."

"So I am a boy, am I?" asked Brooke with a smile at Gerald.

"You ain't much bigger'n a boy, that's a fact. My Ben was as big as you when he was only fifteen years old. Wasn't you, Ben?"

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"I was as big as him when I was fourteen, dad."

"That's so. You see, stranger, we're a big race—we Peterses. Ben takes after the old man. When I was fifteen year old I could do a man's work."

"So could I, dad."

"So you could, Ben. Do you want to feel Ben's muscle, stranger?"

"No," answered Noel Brooke smiling. "I would rather not. It might frighten me in advance, you know, and I want to start fair."

"I guess you're right. Well, boys, you can begin if you're ready. I wouldn't have missed this for ten dollars."

He sat back and looked on with an air of intense interest, while the two ill-matched antagonists prepared for the trial.

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CHAPTER XIX

SCIENCE VERSUS STRENGTH.

EVEN Gerald felt rather alarmed when he saw the two contestants facing each other. Ben, who reached a height of six feet one, towered above his small antagonist as the spire of Trinity Church towers above surrounding buildings. A difference of six inches makes the difference between a tall man and a short one. Why is it that a man of six feet looks double the size of a man of five, though in reality only one fifth larger? It is an ocular deception which affects every one, but is not readily explained.

"If you want to back out, you kin do so," said Ben good-naturedly.

"What, an' spoil our fun?" demanded the old man. "No, stranger, it won't do to back out now."

"I have no intention of backing out, Mr. Peters," said Noel Brooke firmly.

"That's right! I like your pluck," said the old man in a tone of relief, for he feared he would lose a spectacle which he expected to enjoy. He would have felt as badly disappointed, as the visitors to Jerome Park if the races should be postponed.

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Noel Brooke had taken stock of his long-limbed adversary, and the result was that he felt encouraged. Ben had long arms, very long arms, but his figure, though muscular, was loose-jointed, and his motion indicated that he was slow. Now rapidity of movement is a very important thing in a contest such as was to take place between these two.

"Mr. Peters," said the Englishman, "may I trouble you to give the signal by saying 'Ready.'"

"Ready!" shouted the old man eagerly.

Ben began to move his arms in a flail-like way common to those who are untrained in the art of fighting, and advanced with the utmost confidence to the fray. If he had hit straight out his blows would have gone above the head of his antagonist, which was rather a disadvantage, though not so great perhaps as that under which Noel Brooke labored in being so short. It seemed to Ben, therefore, that he had better throw his long arms around his puny opponent, and, fairly lifting him off the ground, hold him helpless at his mercy.

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"I won't hurt him!" thought Ben magnanimously.

But somehow his plan miscarried. Noel Brooke skilfully evaded the close embrace which would have settled the fight then and there in favor of Ben, and skipping, first to one side, then to the other, rained in a shower of blows upon Ben, one of which took effect in his jaw, and drove him staggering back discomfited.

It may safely be said that never were three men more amazed than Mr. Peters and his two sons.

There stood Ben, actually staggering as if on the point of falling, while the Englishman, calm and unruffled, stood in an easy position watching for the next move.

Old Mr. Peters rose from the ground in his excitement.

"Pitch into him, Ben!" he shouted. "Ain't you ashamed of bein' beaten back by a little chap like that! Where's your pluck? Are you goin' to let a little undersized Britisher do you up afore your own father and brother?"

"No, dad, I'll be eternally walloped if I will. Look out, there! I'm goin' to smash yer. Look out I say! Here I come."

"All right! I'll look out," said Noel Brooke calmly.

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Ben stood a poorer chance now than before, for his unexpected defeat, and the raillery of his father, made him angry and reckless of consequences. He rushed at Brooke in an impetuous pell-mell manner which was utterly reckless and exposed him to attack, and which would have given his opponent a great advantage even if he had been less skilful.

Ben was excited, and Noel Brooke was not. Moreover, the tourist now thoroughly understood his advantage, and awaited the onslaught in calm confidence. Again he succeeded in avoiding the close hug by which Ben intended to paralyze and render him powerless, and took the opportunity to get in a couple of sledge-hammer blows, one of which took effect on Ben's chin.

It was too much for him.

Like a tall poplar he swayed for a moment, and then, falling backward, measured his length upon the ground.

"Why, Ben!" exclaimed his father in angry amazement, "what's got into yer? Hev you been drinkin'? Why, you can't fight more'n an old cow! To be floored by a little chap like that!"

Ben rose from the ground slowly, looking dazed and bewildered.

"He knows how to fight, he does!" he said.

"Why, he ain't half as big as you, Ben! Ain't you ashamed of yourself?"

"No, I ain't," said Ben in a sulky tone. "If you think it's so easy to tackle him do it yourself. He's a reg'lar steam engine, he is!"

"Will you try it again, Ben?" asked Brooke in a friendly tone.

"No, I won't. I've had enough."

His father was carried away by his angry excitement.

"I didn't think one of my boys would disgrace me," he said bitterly. "You've told me to tackle him myself, and I'll be whipped if I don't do it."

"You'll be whipped if you do, dad," said Ben. "If I can't lick him you can't."

"We'll see," said the old man, gritting his teeth. "Stranger, I'm goin' for yer!"

"Wait a minute, sir," said Brooke quietly. "I don't mean to fight you."

"You're afraid, be you?" sneered the old man.

"You may put it that way if you like, but I'm not going to raise my hand against a man old enough to be my father."

"I don't ask no odds on account of my age. You'll find me young enough for you."

"Perhaps you are right, for I couldn't fight with any spirit against you."

"You've only licked Ben. Now you want to crawl off."

"No; if your other son cares to meet me I'll have a set-to with him."

"Come, Abe, there's your chance," said the old man, addressing his eldest son. "Just stand up to the Britisher, and let him see that he can't lick the whole Peters family."

"All right, dad!" said Abe, rising and standing up a full inch taller than his younger brother. "The stranger's a good fighter, but I reckon he can't down me."

He was tall, muscular, and with no superfluous flesh. It looked to Gerald as if his friend would find it a hard job to vanquish this backwoods giant.

"Wal, stranger, how do you feel about it?" asked Abe, as he saw Brooke apparently taking stock of his thews and sinews.

"I don't know," answered the tourist. "I had a hard job with your brother, but I think I'll find it harder to tackle you."

"Ho, ho! I think so too. Wal, dad, give the signal."

Ben and his father seated themselves as spectators of the coming encounter. It may seem strange, but Ben's good wishes were in favor of the stranger. He had been defeated, and if Abe were victorious he knew that he would never hear the last of it. But if Abe, too, were worsted he would have a very good excuse for his own failure. The father, however, felt eager to have the presumptuous Briton bite the dust under the triumphant blows of his eldest son.

Abe was not as impetuous or reckless as Ben. Indeed, had he been so naturally, Ben's defeat would have made him careful.

He approached cautiously, and at the proper time he tried to overwhelm Brooke with what he called a "sockdolager." But Noel Brooke had a quick eye, and drawing back evaded the onslaught which fell on the empty air. Before Abe could recover from the recoil the tourist dealt him a heavy blow beneath his left ear which nearly staggered him.

Ben laughed gleefully, and rubbed his hands.

"Now you see how 'tis yourself, Abe!" he cried.

"Shut up!" growled his father. "Don't you go to crowin' over your brother. He's all right. Just wait!"

Abe's rather sluggish temperament was angered by his brother's

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derisive laugh, and he too lost his head. From this time he fought after Ben's reckless fashion, of course laying himself open to attack—an opportunity of which the tourist availed himself.

When five minutes later Abe measured his length on the turf, Ben got up and bending over his prostrate brother said with a grin: "How did it happen, Abe? An accident, wasn't it!"

"No," answered Abe manfully. "I reckon the stranger's too much for either of us."

"Try it again, Abe!" said the old man in excitement.

"No, I've had enough, dad. I shan't laugh at Ben any more. I can't best the Englishman. I might try the boy."

"No, thank you," said Gerald laughing. "You could fight me with one hand."

This modest confession helped to restore Abe's good humor, and he shook hands with his adversary.

"You're a smart 'un!" he said. "I didn't think you had it in you, I didn't by gum. But there's one thing I can beat you in—and that's shootin'."

CHAPTER XX.

HITTING THE BULL'S-EYE.

"I HAVE no doubt of it—you can beat me at shooting," said the Englishman. "I can aim pretty fairly, but I don't believe I can equal you."

"Let us try!" proposed Ben eagerly.

"Very well," rejoined Brooke, "if you'll lend me a rifle. Mine is not a good one."

"All right; I'll lend you mine," said Ben.

A board was placed in position, and with a piece of chalk a circular disc was roughly outlined with a bull's-eye in the center.

"Now," said Ben, handing his weapon to Noel Brooke, "lemme see what you can do!"

Brooke fired, striking the disc about two inches from the bull's-eye.

"That's good!" cried Ben. "Now I'll show what *I* can do."

He raised the rifle carelessly and struck the disc an inch nearer the bull's-eye than the tourist.

"I've beat you," he said gleefully.

"And I'll beat you, Ben," added Abe.

He raised the rifle, took careful aim, and struck the bull's-eye.

"That's the way Americans shoot," said he. "We don't give in to anybody in shootin'."

"You've both beaten me," said Brooke good-naturedly, "and I expected you would."

"You shoot pretty well for an Englishman," said Abe magnanimously. "I reckon you'd be called a crack shot in England?"

"Well, I have a pretty fair reputation there."

"Don't you want to shoot, kid?" asked Ben, turning to Gerald.

"I wouldn't mind," said Gerald with alacrity.

"Kin *he* shoot?" asked Abe, turning to the tourist.

"I don't know. I never saw him try it," answered Brooke.

Indeed, Noel Brooke awaited the result with considerable curiosity. He had never heard Gerald speak of his rifle practise, and had no idea whether he was skilful or not. The fact is, however, that in the three years Gerald had lived with his father in Colorado he had had large experience in hunting, for it was upon this that the two depended largely for their supplies of food. Gerald had a quick eye, and steady hand, and he had practised a good deal by himself, being ambitious to gain skill with the rifle. He had succeeded so well that as soon as the second contest was proposed he was anxious to enter, but felt rather bashful about suggesting it himself. When, however, Ben mentioned it he accepted at once.

"You kin use the rifle, kid, can you?" asked Abe a little doubtfully.

"Yes, a little."

"We can't expect too much of a boy like you, but you'll learn after a while."

Gerald smiled inwardly, and determined to give the brothers a little surprise.

He raised the rifle to his shoulder, and when quite ready he let fly.

The bullet struck the bull's-eye, a little more exactly, if possible, than Abe's.

There was a shout of surprise.

"Why, he's hit the bull's-eye!" exclaimed Ben, running forward to examine the target.

"So he has!" cried Noel Brooke joyfully, for he was delighted by his young companion's unexpected success.

"It's an accident!" said Abe jealously. "He couldn't do it again?"

"Can you?" asked Brooke, turning to Gerald.

"I don't know. I think so."

"Then have a second trial."

The board was reversed, a second disc was drawn, and the three marksmen prepared to repeat their shots.

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"Shoot first, kid!" said Ben.

"No, I'm the youngest, I would rather follow."

"I won't shoot this time," said the tourist. "It's no use. You can all beat me."

The shooting took place in the same order. Ben did about as well as before, but Abe, though coming nearer, failed this time to hit the bull's-eye.

"Now it's your turn, boy!" he said.

A minute after there was another shout of surprise.

A second time Gerald had hit the bull's-eye, thus making the best record.

"You ain't a Britisher, be you?" asked Abe, mortified.

"No, I am a native-born American, and proud of it," returned Gerald.

"You'll do, then! Hurrah for the stars and stripes!" shouted Abe. "The Amerikins kin shoot, you must admit, stranger."

"Yes, I am willing to admit it," said Noel Brooke with a smile, "especially as it is my friend Gerald who has come out first."

Later on Mrs. Peters and Bess, who had completed their housework, came out and joined them. [160]

Mrs. Peters was astonished when she heard that the Englishman, who was two inches shorter than herself, had defeated both her tall sons.

"Why," she said, "I didn't think you could handle me."

"I don't believe I can, Mrs. Peters," said Noel Brooke modestly.

"I'm with you there!" put in her husband. "There ain't many men that's as tough and gritty as Sal Peters."

Mrs. Peters listened to this high encomium with complacency.

"And the boy there beat Abe and Ben in shooting," continued Mr. Peters.

"I reckon he couldn't beat me!" said Mrs. Peters.

"The fact is the old woman is the best marksman in the lot of us," explained Mr. Peters. "She's got a sharp, keen eye, even if she is forty-nine years old."

"Does Miss Peters take after her mother?" inquired the tourist.

"Miss Peters? Oh, you mean Bess. No, she'll never make the woman her mother is."

"I should hope not if I were going to marry her," thought Brooke. [161]

Before ten o'clock all the inmates of the cabin were asleep. It may readily be supposed that first-class accommodations were not provided. Gerald and his friend were shown to a bed in one corner, where they threw themselves down without undressing. But neither of them were inclined to be fastidious. They were thoroughly fatigued, and were soon oblivious to all that passed around them.

Noel Brooke, though a sound sleeper, was easily aroused. About midnight he started suddenly, and lifted his head as a noise was heard outside. It was a whinny from one of the horses, that were tethered to a tree at the rear part of the cabin. The horse was evidently frightened.

"Gerald!" exclaimed Brooke, shaking his companion energetically.

Gerald opened his eyes and asked drowsily, "What's the matter?"

"The horses! Some one is meddling with them. Get up at once!"

Gerald comprehended instantly, and sprang to his feet. Both he and the tourist were out of doors like a flash, and ran to the rear of the cabin.

Two cowboys wearing large flapping sombreros, had untied the horses, and were leading them away. [162]

"Hold on there!" exclaimed the Englishman. "Leave that horse alone!"

The cowboy who had sprung upon the horse turned and greeted him with derisive laughter.

"Mind your business, stranger, and get back to your bed!" he answered. "I've got use for this horse."

The other, who had Gerald's horse by the bridle, also sprang upon his back.

"That's my horse!" called out Gerald angrily.

"It's mine now!"

"I wish I had my rifle!" said Brooke in excitement, "I would soon

stop these thieves!"

This incautious speech betrayed the fact that he was unarmed, and made the two thieves feel secure.

"Good-by, strangers!" said the first cowboy. "Your horses will be taken care of. You ain't no cause to worry."

They turned the horses' heads and prepared to gallop away, though the poor animals, recognizing the voices of their real masters, seemed reluctant to go.

"If Mr. Peters and the boys were only awake," said the tourist, "they would manage these fellow."



"You just get off them animals, or I'll shoot!" cried a stern voice.—Page [163](#).

But help was near at hand after all.

"You just get off them animals, or I'll shoot!" cried a stern voice.

The two cowboys turned quickly, expecting to encounter a man, but instead saw only a tall, gaunt woman in a white night-dress, with her long, disheveled hair hanging down her back.

"Go back to bed, you old witch!" shouted the thief contemptuously.

If he had known Mrs. Peters better he would have hesitated before speaking in this strain, and above all he would have felt it prudent to get out of the way.

She took no time to parley, but raising a rifle which she carried at her side, aimed at the foremost ruffian, and an instant later a sharp pain in his shoulder told him he had been hit. With an imprecation he dropped to the ground, and his companion, striking Gerald's horse sharply, prepared to seek safety in flight, leaving his companion to his fate. But Mrs. Peters was ready for him, too. A second shot struck him in the leg, and he slid off the horse.

By this time Peters and his two boys showed themselves, roused by the sound of firing.

"What's up?" asked the old man.

"Two hoss thieves are down!" answered Mrs. Peters.

"Hoss thieves?"

"Yes; they was makin' off with the strangers' hosses. I've given 'em a hint not to come round here agin."

The groans uttered by the two fallen men confirmed her statement.

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CHAPTER XXI.

ON THE STEAMER ROCK ISLAND.

THE horse thieves struggled to their feet, and stood apprehensively, but defiant, facing the old man who eyed them with stern and threatening glances. They were too much disabled to think of escaping.

"Why, you poor contemptible hoss thieves!" ejaculated Peters, "what have you got to say for yourselves?"

The two men looked at each other, but the right words did not seem to occur to them, for they remained silent.

"Serves you right to be tripped up by a woman! You ain't men, you're sneaks!"

The thieves turned their eyes toward Mrs. Peters, who, tall and gaunt, stood looking on with her thin gray hair floating down her back.

"She ain't a woman! She's a witch!" said one of them bitterly.

"You'll have to answer for that to me!" cried Ben, and with a stride he struck the man with his huge fist, and prostrated him. [166]

"Dad, shall we string 'em up?" he asked, turning to his father. "He's insulted mother."

What Mr. Peters would have said is problematical, but Noel Brooke interposed earnestly, "No, no, Mr. Peters, let them go! They're both wounded, and that will be punishment sufficient."

"Just as you say, stranger! It's your hosses they tried to steal."

"But they insulted mother," insisted Ben.

"Let 'em go!" said Mrs. Peters contemptuously. "They'll remember the old witch for some time, I reckon!"

The men looked as if they would like to strangle her, but they were prudent enough to keep their mouths shut.

"Now scoot!" exclaimed Peters, in a threatening tone. "If I ever catch either of you within a mile of my cabin, I'll shoot you down like dogs."

The two thieves waited for no further hint, but, helping each other as best they could, struck into the woods.

"Mrs. Peters," said the tourist, turning to his hostess, "I feel very much indebted to you for your prompt action. But for you Gerald and I would be forced to walk till we could secure fresh horses." [167]

"You're welcome, strangers," responded Mrs. Peters, coolly reloading her rifle. "I ain't enjoyed myself so much for six months."

And indeed the old woman appeared to be in high spirits. The adventure, which would have terrified most women, only exhilarated her.

"I reckon we'd better be gettin' back to bed!" said Peters. "Gettin' up at midnight is too early risin' for me."

His feeling was shared not only by members of his family, but by his guests, and all betook themselves to bed again, and in half an hour were sleeping peacefully. The rest of the night passed without adventure, and at seven o'clock the next morning they sat down to breakfast.

As they were about to start on their journey Noel Brooke tendered a ten-dollar bill to his hostess.

"Mrs. Peters," he said, "allow me to offer you a slight gift in acknowledgment of your kindness and of the signal service you did us last night."

"I don't understand all your high words, stranger," said the old lady, as with a look of satisfaction she pocketed the money, "but I'll be glad to see you again any time. You're one of the right sort." [168]

"Thank you, Mrs. Peters."

So amid farewell greetings the two rode away.

Two months later Gerald and his English friend found themselves on a river steamer floating down the Mississippi from Davenport to St. Louis. They had kept on their way west as far as Salt Lake City, then struck up to the northwest, without any particular plan of proceeding till they reached the Mississippi. They had once been in danger of capture by the Indians, and once by highwaymen, but had on both occasions been fortunate enough to escape.

Noel Brooke had become more and more attached to his young secretary, whom he not only found an agreeable companion, but intelligent and an eager learner. He had voluntarily given him oral lessons in French and German, so that Gerald was able to make use of both languages to a limited extent.

At Davenport Mr. Brooke learned that the steamer Rock Island would start at ten o'clock the next morning on her way down the river to St. Louis and New Orleans, and on the impulse of the moment he decided to take passage.

"I have heard so much of the Mississippi," he said to Gerald, "that I should like to see something of its shores. How will that please you?"

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"I should like nothing better," said Gerald eagerly.

"The boats are running pretty full," said the landlord of the hotel. "You may not be able to secure a stateroom."

"We will try at any rate," rejoined the tourist. "If we don't succeed we can wait till the next boat. Our time is not of great value."

"Ah," said the landlord, "that is where you have the advantage of me. You rich Englishmen are not obliged to turn time into money like us poor landlords."

Noel Brooke laughed.

"I sometimes wish I had to work for a living," he said. "I am inclined to think that I should enjoy life more."

"In that case," remarked Gerald with a smile, "suppose you exchange places with me."

"Would you give me a place as private secretary?" asked the tourist.

"Yes."

"My dear Gerald, envy no man the possession of money. You are young and healthy, and with an excellent prospect before you. You will be happier than if there were no necessity for your working."

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"I believe you, Mr. Brooke. I was only joking."

While the landlord was bantering Mr. Brooke upon being a rich Englishman, a dark-whiskered man, with a sallow face and shifty eyes, listened with apparent interest. He watched Noel Brooke with a scrutinizing glance, and listened attentively to what he said.

When Brooke decided to board the steamer this man settled his bill and followed him to the boat. At the office the tourist found that a single stateroom was vacant, No. 37, and he secured it.

It contained two berths, an upper and lower.

"You may take the upper berth, Gerald," he said. "I shall avail myself of my privilege as an older man to occupy the lower."

"All right, Mr. Brooke. It makes no difference to me."

The man who had shown such a suspicious interest in Mr. Brooke managed to jostle him a little in going on board the steamer.

"Excuse me," he said. "Are you going down the river?"

"Yes," answered Brooke coldly, for he did not like the man's appearance.

"How far shall you go? To St. Louis?"

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"I presume so."

"I shall probably get off at St. Louis myself. Ever been there before?"

"No, sir."

"It's a nice city. I may be able to show you around."

"Thank you, but I should not like to give you the trouble."

"No trouble, I assure you. Is that your brother with you?"

"No, it is a young friend."

Later on, while Mr. Brooke had gone off to smoke a cigar, the stranger sought out Gerald.

"Are you English, like your friend?" he asked.

"No, sir. I am an American."

"I didn't quite catch the gentleman's name."

"Mr. Brooke."

"Oh, I've heard the name before. I presume he is a rich man."

"I never asked him," answered Gerald, displeased with his companion's curiosity which he considered ill-bred.

"Well, at any rate, you must have money to travel around with

him."

"I am his private secretary."

"You don't say so? Is it a soft snap?"

"I don't understand."

"I mean is it an easy job?"

"I do not complain of its duties."

"Where have you been traveling?"

"In Colorado and Utah."

"All expenses paid, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then it *is* a soft snap. I am a business man, a traveler for a Chicago house."

"Indeed!" said Gerald, who felt no interest in his companion or his business.

"My name is Samuel Standish. How long are you going to travel with Mr. Brooke?"

"I can't tell, sir."

"When you get out of a job, call on me, at No. 114 North Clark Street, Chicago."

"Thank you, sir."

"You look like a smart fellow. I will recommend you to my firm."

"You are very kind, sir."

"Don't mention it."

Mr. Samuel Standish walked away, and directly afterwards a stout gentleman walked by.

Gerald started in surprise, for in the newcomer he recognized Mr. Bradley Wentworth.

CHAPTER XXII.

BRADLEY WENTWORTH TRIES TO MAKE MISCHIEF.

If Gerald was stupefied at meeting Bradley Wentworth the latter was even more amazed at encountering Gerald.

"You here?" he exclaimed abruptly.

"Yes, sir," answered Gerald.

"Are you traveling alone?"

"No, sir. I am with an English gentleman, Mr. Noel Brooke."

"His servant. I suppose."

"No, sir; I am his private secretary."

"Private secretary! Couldn't he find a person better qualified for the position than a beardless boy from the hills of Colorado?"

"I presume he could," answered Gerald coldly, "but he seems to be satisfied with me."

"How long since you left home?"

"Two or three months."

"Do you still own the cabin in which your father lived?"

"Yes, sir."

"You had better sell it. I am ready to pay you a fair price."

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"I don't care to sell it, Mr. Wentworth."

"Humph! You are very foolish."

"Perhaps so, but I shall not sell it at present. Is your son well?"

This question Gerald asked partly out of politeness, partly because he wished to change the subject.

A gloom overspread the face of Bradley Wentworth. It was a sore point with him. For a moment he forgot his dislike for Gerald and answered: "My son Victor is giving me a good deal of trouble. He ran away from school more than two months ago."

"And haven't you heard from him since?" asked Gerald in quick sympathy.

"No, but I have not taken any special pains to find him."

"You will forgive him, won't you?"

"Yes," answered Mr. Wentworth with a sigh, "but I thought it best for him to reap the consequences of his folly. Perhaps I have waited too long. Now I have no clew to his whereabouts."

"Did he go away alone?" asked Gerald, interested.

"No, he was accompanied by one of his schoolmates, Arthur Grigson. He had but little money. I thought when that gave out he would come home, or at any rate communicate with me. But I have heard nothing of him," concluded Wentworth gloomily.

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"I am sorry for you, Mr. Wentworth," said Gerald earnestly. "Have you a picture of Victor with you?"

"Yes," and Wentworth drew from his inside pocket a cabinet photograph of a boy whose face was pleasant, but seemed to lack strength.

"I suppose you have met no such boy in your travels," said the father.

"No, but I may do so. If so I will try to get him to go home, and at any rate I will communicate with you."

Mr. Wentworth seemed to be somewhat softened by Gerald's sympathy, but he was not an emotional man, and business considerations succeeded his gentler mood.

"Have you got with you the papers I spoke of when we parted?" he asked with abruptness.

"They are safe," returned Gerald.

"Do you carry them around with you?"

"I must decline to answer that question," answered Gerald.

"You are an impertinent boy!"

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"How do you make that out?"

"In refusing to answer me."

"If it were a question which you had a right to expect an answer to, I would tell you."

"I have a right to an answer."

"I don't think so."

"Well, let that go. I will give you a thousand dollars for the papers, not that they are worth it, but because your father was an early friend of mine, and it will give me an excuse for helping his son."

"If your intention is kind I thank you, but for the present I prefer to keep the papers."

"Is the man you are traveling with rich?"

"I have reason to think he is."

"Humph!"

Bradley Wentworth walked away, but kept Gerald under his eye. Soon he saw him promenading with Mr. Brooke, and apparently on very cordial and intimate terms with him.

"The man seems to be a gentleman," reflected Wentworth, "but he can't be very sharp to let an uneducated country boy worm himself into his confidence. It doesn't suit my plans at all. I may get a chance to injure Gerald in his estimation."

Later in the day he met Noel Brooke promenading the deck. [177]

"A pleasant day, sir," said Wentworth politely.

"Yes, sir," answered the English tourist courteously.

"You are an Englishman, I judge?"

"Yes, sir. I presume I show my nationality in my appearance."

"Well, yes. However, I was told you were English."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, by the boy who seems to be in your company."

"Gerald Lane? Yes, he is in my company."

"I know the boy."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, and I knew his father before him. He and I were young men together."

"He must have been glad to meet you. He is an excellent boy."

"I am glad you like him," said Wentworth, but there was something unpleasant in his tone, that did not escape the attention of Noel Brooke.

"Don't you feel friendly to him?" he asked keenly.

"Yes, but the boy is headstrong and repels my advances." [178]

"That is singular. He seems to be a very open, frank boy, and I have discovered nothing objectionable in him in the ten weeks we have been together."

"I am pleased to hear it, but the boy's ancestry is against him."

"What do you mean? I thought you said his father was a friend of yours."

"Yes; we were associated together in early life, but something unpleasant occurred. However, perhaps I had better not speak of it."

"You have gone too far to recede. I insist upon your continuing."

"Well, if you insist upon it I will do so. Mr. Lane was in the employ of my uncle and lost his position in consequence of getting money upon a forged check which was traced to him."

Noel Brooke looked disturbed.

"I am sorry to hear it," he said gravely.

"I presume Gerald has not mentioned the matter to you."

"No."

"Well, he could hardly be expected to do so."

"Still the boy is no worse for his father's crime." [179]

"Unless he inherits the same tendency," said Wentworth significantly.

"I am sure he does not," said Noel Brooke warmly.

"You can't tell. I claim to be a sharp business man, but I have more than once been deceived in a man that I thought I knew well. Warren Lane seemed to my uncle and myself a thoroughly upright man, but——" here he paused suggestively.

"What induced him to commit forgery?"

"Extravagant living," answered Wentworth promptly. "His salary was only moderate and did not come up to his desires."

"You surprise me very much," said Noel Brooke after a brief pause.

"I thought I should, but I felt it to be my duty to warn you against

Gerald. He is probably in confidential relations with you, and he might play some dishonest trick on you. I advise you, as soon as practicable, to discharge him and secure some one in his place on whom you can rely. I need only call your attention to the individual he is talking with at this moment. He looks like a confidence man."

Samuel Standish had again joined Gerald, and to the boy's disgust had almost forced his company upon him.

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"That is a man whom we met at a hotel in Davenport, and he appears inclined to thrust himself upon us."

Bradley Wentworth shrugged his shoulders and smiled in evident incredulity.

"At any rate," he said, "I have warned you, and have done my duty."

Noel Brooke bowed slightly, but did not feel called upon to make any other acknowledgment of Mr. Wentworth's warning.

When Brooke had an opportunity he said to Gerald, "I have been talking to a man who claims to know you."

"A tall, well-built man?"

"Yes."

"He recently paid us a visit in Colorado."

"Do you consider him a friend?"

"No."

"He says he knew your father in early days."

"That is true."

"And he charges your father with having committed forgery and thus lost his position."

"Was he really so base as that?" asked Gerald indignantly.

"Then it isn't true?"

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"No; a thousand times no!"

"I believe you, Gerald," said the Englishman promptly.

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CHAPTER XXIII.

MR. STANDISH RECEIVES A COMMISSION.

"THANK you for your confidence, Mr. Brooke," said Gerald, "but I prefer that you should have proofs of what I say."

"It is not necessary, Gerald."

"But I prefer that you should look over some papers that I have with me, and for which, by the way, Mr. Wentworth is ready at any time to pay me a thousand dollars."

"But why should he be willing to pay so much?" asked the Englishman in surprise.

"Because they prove that he, and not my father, committed the forgery. My father agreed to have it charged upon him at Mr. Wentworth's urgent request, in order that Wentworth might not be disinherited by his uncle."

"But your father ought not to have made such a sacrifice. Why did he do so?"

"Because Bradley Wentworth promised him twenty thousand dollars when he came into his fortune."

"Was the fortune so large, then?"

"Over three hundred thousand dollars."

"And he came into his fortune?"

"Yes."

"And refused to carry out his agreement?"

"Yes; he said it was absurd to expect such a liberal reward, though it brought disgrace and loss to my poor father, and finally, as I think, shortened his life."

"It should have been considered a debt of honor."

"So my father thought, but Mr. Wentworth only offered him a thousand dollars, which, poor as he was, he indignantly refused. I don't think he would have offered anything, if he had not known that my father had letters proving that he was innocent, and Wentworth himself the forger."

"Who has these papers now?"

"I have."

"And you say Mr. Wentworth has offered a thousand dollars for them?"

"He made me that offer this very morning."

"And you declined to accept it?"

"Yes."

"Gerald, the man seems to be unscrupulous. If he finds he cannot obtain the papers in any other way he may plot to have them stolen from you."

"I don't know but you are right, Mr. Brooke," said Gerald thoughtfully.

"Shall I advise you?"

"I wish you would."

"When you get to St. Louis, deposit them with some safe deposit company, and carry about with you merely copies of them. Then, if they are stolen, there will be no harm done."

"Your advice is good, Mr. Brooke, and I shall follow it."

This conversation took place in their stateroom. Meanwhile, Bradley Wentworth was engaged in reflection.

"That boy means mischief, I fully believe," he said to himself. "He is of a different nature from his father. He is firm and resolute, and if I read him aright, he will never forego his purpose of demanding from me the sum which I so foolishly promised his father. The worst of it is, the papers he carries will, if shown, injure my reputation and throw upon me the crime of which during all these years his father has been held guilty. Those papers I must have! My security requires it."

It was easy to come to this conclusion but not so easy to decide how the papers could be obtained. He would gladly have paid a thousand dollars, but that offer had more than once been made, and always decidedly refused.

As Bradley Wentworth paced the deck with thoughtful brow,

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Samuel Standish, who was always drawn towards men whom he suspected to be wealthy, stepped up, and asked deferentially: "General, may I ask you for a light?" for Wentworth chanced to be smoking.

Bradley Wentworth paused and scanned the man who accosted him closely.

"Why do you call me General?" he asked.

"I beg your pardon, but I took you for General Borden, member of Congress from Kentucky."

"I am not the man."

"I really beg your pardon. Perhaps, however, you will oblige me with a light all the same."

"I will. What is your name?"

"Samuel Standish."

"Humph! I suppose you are not a member of Congress?"

"No, indeed!" laughed Standish. "I wish I were."

"Perhaps I could give a good guess as to who and what you are."

Standish looked curious.

"Suppose you do!" he said.

Bradley Wentworth looked the man full in the face. It was a glance of sharp scrutiny, so sharp that Samuel Standish, though not a sensitive man, flushed and winced under it.

"I may be wrong," said Wentworth, "but you look to me like an adventurer."

"Do you mean to insult me?" demanded Standish, starting angrily.

"No; in fact, I rather hope that you are the sort of character I take you to be."

"I don't understand you," and Standish looked and was really bewildered.

"Only because if you are as unscrupulous as I believe you to be, I may be able to throw a job in your way."

"You may assume then that you are correct." Wentworth laughed slightly.

"I thought so," he said.

"I am ready for a job," went on Standish. "In fact I am hard up, and am obliged to earn money in some way."

"And are not very particular in what way."

"Well, a man must live! If I had plenty of money it would be different. Will you kindly tell me what you want done?"

"I believe I saw you talking with a boy half an hour ago."

"Yes."

"Are you acquainted with him?"

"I saw him first at the hotel in Davenport. He is in company with an Englishman, who seems to have plenty of money."

"I see. You feel more interested in the Englishman than in the boy."

"Naturally. The boy is probably poor."

"I want you to become interested in the boy."

"If there is money in it, I shall certainly feel interested in him," said Mr. Standish briskly.

"There is money in it—if you carry out my wishes."

"What are they?"

"Listen! This boy is possessed of papers—probably he carries them about with him—which properly belong to me. I have offered to buy them of him, but he refuses to let me have them."

"Of what nature are they?"

"There is a letter, and also a memorandum signed by myself, and given to his father many years ago. The father died and the boy came into possession of them. Knowing that I wished them he holds them for a large—a foolishly large sum."

"I comprehend. How much did you say you had offered him for them?"

"I did not mention the sum, Mr. Standish."

"Oh, I thought you did," returned Standish, rather confused.

"In fact, that has nothing to do with you."

"I thought it would give me an idea of the value of the papers."

"It is quite unnecessary that you should know their value."

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"You wish me to get possession of them?"

"Yes."

"How much will it be worth to me?"

"That's another matter. That is something you do have a right to ask. Well, I am ready to pay"—Mr. Wentworth paused to consider—"I am ready to pay a hundred, yes, two hundred, dollars for them."

Samuel Standish brightened up. To him in his present circumstances two hundred dollars was a great deal of money.

"Do you think there will be any chance to get hold of the papers on the boat?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"If not, I shall have to follow him."

"Yes."

"And I can't do it without money."

"I understand all that. Of course I would rather have you secure them on the boat, if possible, but it may not be possible."

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"Have you anything to suggest then?"

"The boy and his companion will undoubtedly stop a few days in St. Louis. You must go to the same hotel, and try to get a room near by. As to the details I can't advise you. It is out of my line. I suspect that it may be in yours. Before you leave the boat, I shall give you some money so that you may be able to pay your hotel expenses."

"I ought to know your name, so that I may communicate with you."

"Yes, that is needful. Of course I rely upon your keeping secret and confidential all that has passed between us."

"You can rely upon me. I am the soul of honor!" said Samuel Standish, placing his hand on his heart.

"If you are," said Wentworth dryly, "I am afraid you are hardly the man for my purpose."

"I mean that I shall be loyal to you. I am a gentleman."

"I am glad to hear it. One thing more, you had better not be much in my company. It might excite suspicion. In two minutes I can give you such directions as you may require, and then we had better avoid each other."

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"I understand."

As Gerald came out of his stateroom he saw the two walking together. It struck him as rather singular, but it did not occur to him that it boded harm to himself.

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CHAPTER XXIV.

A FALSE ALARM.

BRADLEY WENTWORTH had some slight hope that the words he had spoken would prejudice the English tourist against Gerald, but he was destined to be disappointed. The two promenaded the deck together, and were evidently on the most cordial terms.

"The boy is artful," thought Wentworth, "and for that reason he is the more dangerous. I wish he could happen to fall overboard. It would save me a great deal of anxiety, as he is the only one who is acquainted with the secret of my guilt."

The voyage proceeded. There are many rivers that are more interesting than the Mississippi. The shores are low and monotonous, and the river itself in a large part of its course is turbid and narrow. There are but few towns of much size or importance between Davenport and St. Louis.

"I say, Gerald," said Mr. Brooke, "we hear a good deal about American scenery, but if this is a specimen I can only say that it is a good deal overrated."

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Gerald laughed.

"I haven't traveled a great deal myself, Mr. Brooke," he said, "but I think you must have seen something worthy of admiration since you have been in this country. Have you been up the Hudson River?"

"Not yet."

"Or seen Niagara?"

"Yes; I saw that. We haven't anything like that at home."

"I am told the Columbia River has some fine scenery."

"I wasn't in earnest, Gerald. It only occurred to me to joke you a little. You must admit, however, that there is nothing worth seeing here."

"We don't boast so much of our scenery as our men," said Gerald. "Samuel Standish, for instance."

"And Jake Amsden?"

"Yes."

"I think we can match them both in England. I wish we couldn't."

On the third evening, however, there was a genuine sensation.

Some one raised the cry of "Fire!" and for five minutes there was a grand commotion. Those who were in their staterooms rushed out in dismay, and there was much rushing to and fro and wild confusion.

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Among those who ran out of their staterooms were Gerald and Noel Brooke, but both of them were calm and collected. The Englishman looked about him quickly, but could see no signs of fire.

"I believe it is a false alarm, Gerald."

At this moment one of the officers of the steamer passed by.

"Is there any fire?" asked Gerald.

"No; I should like to get hold of the miscreant who raised the cry. There is not the slightest indication of fire anywhere."

Satisfied by this assurance the two friends returned to their stateroom. As they reached the door which had been left open a man darted out.

"Hallo, there!" exclaimed Noel Brooke, seizing him. "What brings you in my stateroom?"

"Why, it's Standish!" exclaimed Gerald.

"I beg your pardon," said Samuel Standish apologetically. "I thought it was my room."

"That isn't very probable!" rejoined Brooke sternly.

"I assure you, Mr. Brooke, that it is the truth. I was so alarmed that I really did not know what I was about. I presumed the steamer was doomed, and wished to secure my small baggage, for I am a poor man and couldn't afford to lose it. Of course when I looked around me I saw that I was mistaken. I hope you will pardon me. Is the fire out? Excuse my agitation."

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"There has never been any fire. Some scoundrel raised the alarm. If he should be found he would probably be thrown overboard by the

indignant passengers."

"And serves him right, too!" said the virtuous Standish. "You have no idea what a shock he gave me. I am a victim of heart disease, and liable to drop at a minute's notice."

"I suppose you are ready to go?" said Brooke ironically.

"Well, no, I can't quite say that. Life is sweet, even if I am a poor man."

"Where is your stateroom?"

"On—on the opposite side of the steamer."

"Then it seems rather strange that you should have mistaken ours for yours."

"So it is, so it is! I can't understand it at all, I give you my word. The sudden fright quite upset me. Didn't it upset you?"

"No."

"How I envy you! But it is no doubt the condition of my heart. Well, it is fortunate that the alarm was a false one."

Meanwhile the officers had been instituting an investigation as to the person who had raised the cry.

A typical Yankee, who looked as if he had recently come from New England, pointed to Standish and said, "I am positive that man raised the alarm."

There was an immediate commotion. Voices from the crowd of passengers called out: "Throw him into the river! Lynch him!"

Standish turned ghastly pale as he saw the menacing glances of those around him.

"I assure you, gentlemen," he protested, "this is a base calumny."

"Do you mean to tell me I lie?" demanded the Yankee fiercely.

"No, no, I beg your pardon. I only mean to say you are mistaken!"

"I don't think I am."

"Throw him into the river! There he will be safe from fire!" called out one man.

"Yes, yes, throw him into the river!"

Samuel Standish was not a hero. Indeed, he was far from it. He seemed overcome with fear, and his knees smote with terror as a brawny cowboy seized him by the shoulder and hurried him towards the side.

"A ducking will do him no harm," said the cowboy, and he evidently voiced the sentiment of his fellow passengers.

"Gentlemen, friends!" exclaimed Standish, "I can't swim a stroke. Would you murder me?"

The position was critical. His appearance was against him, and had Gerald or his English friend mentioned the intrusion of Standish into their stateroom it would have been all up with him. But he found a friend just when he needed one most. Bradley Wentworth pushed his way through the crowd, and exclaimed angrily: "Let go that man! I won't permit this outrage."

"He raised the alarm of fire."

"He did not! I was standing six feet from him when the cry was raised, and if it had been he I should have known it."

"But I heard him," insisted the Yankee.

"You are mistaken! I hope you will not compel me to use a harsher word. I appeal to the officers of this boat to prevent an outrage upon an unoffending man."

Bradley Wentworth was handsomely dressed, and looked to be a man of wealth and standing, and his testimony had great weight. The Yankee was poorly dressed, and from all appearances a laboring man. The fickle crowd changed at once and such cries were heard as "It's a shame!" "It's an outrage!" Samuel Standish was released. The tide had turned and he was safe.

"Sir," he said, turning to Bradley Wentworth, "I thank you for your manly words. You have saved my life. You are a stranger to me, but hereafter I shall always remember you in my prayers."

"Thank you," answered Wentworth, "but I don't deserve your gratitude. What I have done has been in the interest of justice; for I feel no interest in you except as a man unjustly treated. I would have done as much for any of my fellow passengers."

These words created a very favorable impression and completely cleared Standish from suspicion, except in the minds of the Yankee passenger, Gerald and Noel Brooke.

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"I believe Standish was the man," said Brooke when they were by themselves, "and Mr. Wentworth's interference in his favor leads me to think there is something between them."

"But why should he give such an alarm?" asked Gerald puzzled.

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"To get a chance to enter our stateroom."

"I don't quite understand why he should enter our stateroom rather than any other?"

"Gerald," said his friend significantly, "*he was after your papers.* He thought you might keep them in the stateroom."

"Do you really think that, Mr Brooke?"

"I think it altogether likely, and that he has been engaged for the purpose by your friend, Mr. Bradley Wentworth. Unless I am greatly mistaken, we shall see more of Mr. Standish after we land."

"I believe you are right, Mr. Brooke," said Gerald thoughtfully. "I shall most certainly adopt your suggestion, and copy the papers as soon as I reach St. Louis."

The steamer arrived about three o'clock in the afternoon. Noel Brooke and Gerald went to the Lindell House and registered. An hour later, in the lobby of the hotel, looking, it must be confessed, rather out of place in his elegant surroundings, they recognized the familiar figure of Samuel Standish.

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CHAPTER XXV.

GERALD HAS AN UNPLEASANT ADVENTURE.

It was certainly a matter of surprise that a man like Standish should put up at a high-priced and fashionable hotel like the Lindell. Moreover Gerald soon learned that he had a room very near them. There was but one between. One thing more that looked suspicious was that Standish, though he frequently passed Gerald and his companion, appeared to take very little notice of them.

"I am afraid Mr. Standish is cutting us, Mr. Brooke," said Gerald laughing.

"Perhaps we are not up to his standard," returned Brooke. "I suppose there is no help for it. If you think a little social attention would conciliate him——"

"Such as lending him a five-dollar bill," suggested Gerald.

"I see you have some knowledge of human nature, Gerald. I confess I should like to find out the man's object in following us, for it is evident that our being at this hotel is the attraction for him."

"I will engage him in conversation," said Gerald, "on the first opportunity."

"Do so."

That evening Gerald met Mr. Standish in the lobby of the hotel.

"I believe we met on the steamer coming down the river," began Gerald politely.

"Yes," answered Standish promptly. "You are with an Englishman."

"Yes."

"I recognized you both, but I did not wish to intrude. Do you remain long in this city?"

"I don't know. Mr. Brooke is making a leisurely tour of the States, and it depends upon him."

"If you are not expected to spend all your time with him, I should like to go about a little with you."

"Then you are going to spend some time in St. Louis?" Gerald ventured to inquire.

"That depends on circumstances. I am here on a little matter of business. I am a traveling salesman."

"Indeed! In what line?"

"I travel for a house in Chicago," said Mr. Standish vaguely. "I would answer your questions, but our house is peculiar, and requires its agents to be very close-mouthed."

"Oh, that's all right. I didn't wish to be inquisitive."

"You can imagine how absurd it was for a man of my standing to be accused of raising the alarm of fire on the boat."

"Yes," answered Gerald non-committally.

In his own mind he was convinced that Standish *did* raise the alarm, but did not consider it necessary to say so.

"You are much indebted to the gentleman who came to your assistance," he said instead.

"Yes, he is a gentleman! I believe you know him?"

"Yes. Is he staying in St. Louis?"

"I think he went on to New Orleans."

"But he left the boat."

"Yes, for a day or two. I have not seen him since."

"Your room is near ours."

"Is it? I hadn't noticed."

Gerald knew better than this, for he had seen Standish standing in front of their door and scrutinizing it curiously.

The next morning he noticed something else. In the vicinity of the Southern Hotel he saw Samuel Standish and Bradley Wentworth walking together in close conference. It might have been their first meeting, so he found an opportunity some hours later of saying to Standish: "I thought I saw Mr. Wentworth in the street to-day."

"Indeed! Where?"

Gerald returned an evasive answer.

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"You may be right," said Standish. "If he is here I shall be glad to meet him and thank him once more for the service he did me."

"It is clear there is something between them," decided Gerald, "and that something must relate to me and the papers Mr. Wentworth is so anxious to secure."

But in that event it puzzled Gerald that Mr. Standish seemed to take no special pains to cultivate their acquaintance—as he might naturally have been expected to do. He was destined to find out that Standish was not idle.

One day—the fifth of his stay in St. Louis—Gerald was walking in one of the poorer districts of the city, when a boy of ten, with a thin, pallid face and shabby clothes, sidled up to him.

"Oh, mister," he said, whimpering, "won't you come wid me? I'm afraid my mudder will beat me if I go home alone." [203]

"What makes you think your mother will beat you?"

"Coz she sent me out for a bottle of whisky this mornin' and I broke it."

"Does your mother drink whisky?" asked Gerald compassionately.

"Yes, mister, she's a reg'lar tank, she is."

"Have you any brothers or sisters?"

"I have a little brudder. She licks him awful."

"Have you no father?"

"No; he got killed on the railroad two years ago."

"I am sorry for you," said Gerald, in a tone of sympathy. "Here is a quarter."

"Thank you, mister."

"Perhaps that will prevent your mother from beating you."

"I don't know," said the boy doubtfully. "Mudder's a hard case. She's awful strong. Won't you go home with me?"

"I am afraid I can't say anything that will make any impression on your mother. Where do you live?"

The boy pointed to a shabby house of three stories, situated not far away.

"It's only a few steps, mister." [204]

"Perhaps I may be able to do the little fellow some good," thought Gerald. "At any rate, as the house is so near, I may as well go in."

"Very well," he said aloud. "I'll go in and see your mother. Do you think that she has been drinking lately?"

"No; I spilt the whisky. That's why she's mad."

Gerald followed the boy to the house. His companion opened the outer door, and revealed a steep staircase covered with a very ragged oil-cloth, and led the way up.

"Come along!" he said.

When he reached the head of the first flight he kept on.

"Is it any higher up?"

"Yes, one story furdur."

Gerald followed the boy, inhaling, as he went up, musty and disagreeable odors, and felt that if it had not been on an errand of mercy he would have been inclined to retreat and make his way back to the street.

The boy pushed on to the rear room on the third floor, and opened the door a little way.

"Come in!" he said.

Gerald followed him in, and began to look around for the mother whom he had come to see. But the room appeared to be empty. [205]

A sound startled him. It was the sound of a key in the lock. He turned quickly and found that his boy guide had mysteriously disappeared and left him alone.

He tried the door, only to confirm his suspicion that he had been locked in.

"What does it all mean?" he asked himself in genuine bewilderment.

He knocked loudly at the door, and called out, "Boy, open the door."

The only answer was a discordant laugh, and he heard the steps of the boy as he hurried downstairs.

Gerald was completely bewildered. Had the boy been a man he would have been on his guard, but who could be suspicious of a street urchin, whose story seemed natural enough. What evil design could he have, or what could he do now that his victim was trapped?

"I wish he would come back, so that I might question him," thought Gerald.

With the hope of bringing this about Gerald began to pound on the door.

"Come back here, boy!" he called out in a loud tone. "Come back, and let me out!"

But no one answered. In fact the boy who had proved so unworthy of his compassion was by this time in the street, laughing aloud at his successful maneuver.

"Dat's a good one!" he said gleefully. "I got de bloke in good. Uncle Sam offered me half a dollar if I'd do it. I'll strike him for a dollar if I can."

After waiting five minutes Gerald tried a second fusillade on the door. This brought a response, not from his young jailer, but from a choleric German who lived opposite.

"I say, you stop dat or I'll come in and break your *kopf!*" he said.

"Come in!" cried Gerald eagerly. "I have been locked in."

"If I come in I mash you!"

"Come in, and I'll take the risk."

"How I come in widout de key?"

"I don't know unless you break open the door."

"And pay damages to de landlord? Not much, *nein*, I guess not," and the stout German walked away.

"I suppose I shall have to wait till some one else comes," said Gerald to himself, and he sat down on a wooden chair without a back.

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CHAPTER XXVI.

TIP AND HIS TRICKS.

A LITTLE reflection led Gerald to feel more comfortable. Without knowing exactly why he had been imprisoned, he concluded that it might be for purposes of plunder. Now he was not in the habit of carrying much money about with him, and his purse contained but fifteen dollars. Having no bills to pay, he allowed his salary to accumulate in the hands of his employer, and this accounted for his being so poorly provided.

"They are welcome to the fifteen dollars if they will let me out of this cage," he soliloquized. "Of course it's an imposition, but it won't ruin me. I wish that young rascal would come back."

But the young rascal was at that very moment talking in the street below with a man whose face looks familiar. In fact, it was Mr. Samuel Standish.

"I've got him, Uncle Sam," said the boy, when his respected relation turned the corner.

"You have really?" exclaimed Standish, his face lighting up with satisfaction. [208]

"Wish ter die if I ain't. Now give me that dollar."

"I didn't promise you a dollar, Tip. It was only fifty cents."

"It's worth a dollar," said the boy, screwing up his face. "I had awful hard work getting him here. Told him my mudder would beat me if he didn't come along and get me off."

"You're a smart one, Tip—take after your uncle."

"Den it's worth a dollar."

"Here, I'll give you seventy-five cents; that is, I'll see first if he's there," added Standish cautiously.

"You don't think I'd lie, do you, Uncle Sam?" said Tip with an injured look.

"It wouldn't be the first time, I'm afraid."

"I take after my uncle," said Tip, twisting his elf-like features into a grin.

"You've got me there, Tip. You are a smart one. Where is he?"

"Up-stairs, in de room."

"Is he locked in?"

"Well, I reckon."

"Come up with me, Tip, and, if I find it's true, I'll give you the dollar." [209]

"Come along, den."

Tip went up the rickety staircase, two steps at a time, and Samuel Standish followed in a more leisurely way.

Arrived at the landing, Standish signaled to Tip to knock on the door.

Tip did so.

"Is you dere?" he asked.

"Yes; let me out!" cried Gerald eagerly.

"What'll you give me?"

Gerald was tempted to answer "a licking," but he reflected that it would not be prudent. He must temporize.

"You've played a trick on me, and you don't deserve anything. But I'll give you another quarter, and won't say anything about it."

"So he gave you a quarter, did he, Tip?" inquired Standish.

"No; he's only gassin'," said Tip. "Now, do you believe he's dere?"

"Yes; it's all right."

"Where's de money?"

Samuel Standish drew seventy-five cents from his pocket—a fifty-cent piece and a quarter—and handed them to his promising nephew.

"I want a dollar," said Tip doggedly. [210]

"You've got it."

"No, I haven't."

"The boy inside gave you twenty-five cents."

"Dat's what I call mean."

"Go away, you young rogue! You've got more money now than you will make good use of. There's many a time even now when I haven't got as much."

"I say, uncle," asked the boy, excited by curiosity, "what are you goin' to do wid him?"

"That's my affair. I have some business with him—important business."

"Let me go in wid you!"

"If you don't clear out I'll kick you downstairs."

A glance at his uncle's face satisfied Tip that he meant what he said, and making a virtue of necessity, he descended the stairs, two steps at a time.

Gerald heard him and became alarmed.

"Come back here and let me out!" he called. "I'll pay you well."

If Tip had heard this he would have been tempted to retrace his steps, for if there was anything the young rascal was fond of it was money. But he was already out of hearing.

Gerald, however, heard a key inserted in the lock, and his hopes rose again. He had not heard the voice of Standish, and was not aware of his presence, but stood ready to make a rush out of the room when the door opened. But he reckoned without his host. The door opened, indeed, but only sufficiently to admit the figure of Samuel Standish.

"Mr. Standish!" exclaimed Gerald in astonishment.

"Yes, my dear young friend. I've come to make you a call."

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CHAPTER XXVII.

MR. STANDISH STATES HIS BUSINESS.

As Mr. Standish spoke, he slipped into the room adroitly, closed the door again, and locked it.

He looked about for a seat, and discovered a rocking-chair, which, like the chair Gerald occupied, appeared to be suffering from infirmity and old age.

"Glad to see you again, Gerald!" he said urbanely.

"Mr. Standish, are you responsible for this outrage?" demanded Gerald angrily.

"For what outrage, my dear young friend?"

"Did you send that boy to lure me in here?"

"That boy is my promising nephew, Tip Standish."

"I am not surprised to hear it. Was he acting under your orders?"

"You've hit it, my dear boy. He *was* acting under my orders, and I am proud to say that he did himself credit."

"He told me a story about being in danger of a beating from his mother." [213]

Standish laughed.

"His mother is a poor weak woman weighing about ninety pounds. She isn't strong enough to harm a fly."

"In other words the boy lied."

"Tip has remarkable inventive powers. He may make a story-writer in time."

"I am quite sure he doesn't excel you—in invention, Mr. Standish."

"Thank you, dear boy. It is pleasant to be appreciated. You do me proud, you really do."

"Never mind compliments, Mr. Standish. Of course you had some object in luring me here. What is it?"

"I admire the quickness with which you come to business. Really you are a very smart boy."

"With all my smartness I have fallen into a trap. Now, what do you want?"

"Perhaps you might have some idea—can't you now?"

"I can think of nothing except money. I suppose you want to rob me."

"My dear boy!" protested Standish, "you misjudge me. What, Samuel Standish a common thief? I am indeed mortified. I was not aware that you carried a large sum of money with you," he added, not without curiosity. [214]

"I don't," answered Gerald. "I have only fifteen dollars in my pocketbook."

Samuel Standish in spite of his disclaimer looked somewhat disappointed, but he kept up appearances.

"Keep the money, my boy!" he said with a wave of the hand. "Keep the money! Heaven forbid that I should deprive you of it. Samuel Standish is a man of honor."

Gerald gazed at him with increasing bewilderment. He had not expected such a display of honesty. Moreover, if Standish did not want money, what did he want? What could be his object in trapping him?

"If I have done you injustice, Mr. Standish, I apologize," he said. "I supposed it must be money you wanted, for I could think of nothing else. Of course in confining me you are committing an illegal act. If you will release me at once I will overlook what has already passed."

"You are a smart boy, Gerald," said Samuel Standish jocosely. "You ought to have been a lawyer."

"Thank you for the compliment."

"Oh, you are quite welcome, I am sure."



Samuel Standish leaned forward and said: "I want some papers that you are carrying about with you."—Page [215](#).

"I must trouble you to release me at once, as Mr. Brooke expects me back at the hotel. We had arranged to take an excursion." [215]

"I shouldn't like to interfere with any little arrangement you have made. Gerald, I am your friend, though you may not think it."

"Well, your treatment of me this morning doesn't seem like it. Is it your custom to trap and kidnap those to whom you are friendly?"

Mr. Standish laughed.

"Not in general," he answered, "but I wanted an interview with you for special reasons."

"It was not necessary to kidnap me in order to obtain it. If you had requested an interview I would have granted it."

"Well, perhaps so, but I wanted to make sure. I wanted an interview somewhere *where we were not likely to be interrupted.*"

"As you have your wish, will you please come to business, and let me know what you want of me?"

Samuel Standish leaned forward and said significantly, "*I want some papers that you are carrying about with you.*"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MR. STANDISH GAINS A BARREN VICTORY.

GERALD was not altogether surprised by what his visitor said. When Standish disclaimed any wish to secure his money, he began to suspect, remembering the confidential meeting with Bradley Wentworth, that it was the papers that were wanted. Desiring to learn what he could of Wentworth's agency in the matter, he said non-committally, "To what papers do you refer?"

"You know well enough," answered Standish, winking.

"Perhaps I do. Are you employed by Mr. Wentworth?"

"Who is Mr. Wentworth?"

"The gentleman who saved you from being thrown overboard on the steamer."

"Have you any papers of his?"

"No; but I have some papers that he wants to get possession of."

"He told me they belonged to him."

"Then you *are* his agent?"

"I may as well admit it. Now what have you got to say?"

"That the papers are mine."

"Then why does Mr. Wentworth want them?"

This inquiry was made in good faith, for Standish had not been taken into confidence by his employer, and he was puzzled to understand why it was that the papers were considered of such importance.

"Because he owes me, as my father's representative, a large sum of money, and these papers are very important evidence to that effect."

"How much did you say that he owes you?" asked Standish in a matter-of-fact tone.

"I didn't say," returned Gerald.

"Oh, I beg pardon. I did not suppose it was a secret."

"I don't mind telling you that Mr. Wentworth has repeatedly offered me a thousand dollars for the papers."

"You don't say so!" ejaculated Standish; "and he only offered me two hundred dollars for them," he soliloquized. "The boy has given me a valuable hint, which I shall make use of. When the papers are in my possession it will go hard with me if I don't get more than two hundred dollars for them."

His only fear was that Gerald would refuse to deliver them to him, and hold them for the large sum promised by Mr. Wentworth.

"You have no further dealings with Mr. Wentworth," he said hastily. "You must deal with me. But, first, have you the papers with you? You had better answer truly, for if you deny it I shall search you."

"I have them with me," answered Gerald briefly.

"Come, we are getting on," said Standish, delighted to hear this. "Now you will save yourself trouble by handing them over at once."

"How much are you authorized to give me for them?" asked Gerald demurely.

"Your freedom. Give them to me and you shall be released at the end of an hour."

"Why not at once?"

"Because you might be tempted to hand me over to the police, though you could not prove anything against me. Still it might be inconvenient."

"Do you expect me to give you without compensation what I have been offered a thousand dollars for?"

"Yes, under the circumstances."

"Suppose I refuse to give them up?"

"Then you will be imprisoned here for an indefinite period."

"I don't believe it. I would raise an alarm, and some one would be sure to hear it and interfere in my behalf."

"I am glad you have put me on my guard. Nothing will be easier than for me to charge you with insanity and have you committed to an asylum."

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Gerald shuddered at this threat, though he had made up his mind to secure his release by surrendering the duplicate papers in his pocket. The real documents were in the custody of a safe deposit company in the city, having been placed with them only the day previous.

"Won't you give me something for them?" he asked. "I don't like to give them up without any return."

"I may be able to secure a hundred dollars, but I won't promise. I don't see why you don't accept Mr. Wentworth's offer. How long since was it made?"

"It was made for the last time on the steamer Rock Island."

"You won't tell me how large a sum Mr. Wentworth owes you?"

"I may as well tell you, as the papers would inform you. It is twenty thousand dollars!"

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"Twenty thousand dollars!" ejaculated Standish thoroughly amazed. "How is it possible that he should owe so much?"

"I can only tell you that it is a debt of honor."

"Do you mean by that that it is a gambling debt?"

"No," answered Gerald indignantly. "My father never gambled in his life."

"Aha!" thought Standish, "it is well that I have wormed the truth out of this boy. Wentworth actually wants to pay me the pitiful sum of two hundred dollars for evidence that will save him twenty thousand. It won't go down, Mr. Wentworth! it won't go down!"

"Give me the papers," he said aloud, "and I will do what I can for you. I feel a sympathy for you, my dear young friend, but I must of course consult the interests of my employer."

"Meaning Mr. Wentworth?"

"Yes; you will of course conjecture that I am acting as his agent."

"I thought so," returned Gerald. "I didn't think the man was so unscrupulous."

"Perhaps it would inconvenience, or ruin him to pay so large a sum as twenty thousand dollars," suggested Standish.

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"Not at all. He is worth, I have reason to believe, over three hundred thousand dollars."

"Is it possible?" said Standish, his eyes sparkling. "Then he is a very rich man. Where did he get his money?"

"It was left him by his uncle. But for my father he would have been disinherited."

"That is why you call it a debt of honor?"

"Yes."

"He hasn't done the fair thing, I must confess. Let anybody secure me an inheritance of three hundred thousand dollars, and I won't haggle about paying a twenty thousand dollar fee."

"I am sorry Mr. Wentworth's sentiments are not as liberal as yours."

"Exactly so. I would have treated your father a great deal better. Mr. Wentworth is evidently a mean man. Still he is my employer and I must do what I can for him. Still my sympathies are with you."

"You have played me a mean trick, Mr. Standish."

"I admit it, but it isn't my fault. My poverty, and not my will, consents. However, we are losing time. Will you do me the favor of handing me the papers?"

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"Do you insist upon it?" asked Gerald in apparent mortification.

"I must, for reasons which you understand," said Standish, extending his hand for the expected papers.

Gerald unbuttoned his vest, and from an inner pocket drew out the duplicate documents, or rather the copies of the original papers.

Standish took the two letters and ran his eye over them eagerly.

"I am not surprised that Mr. Wentworth wanted these letters," he said. "They are a confession in so many words that he committed forgery, and hired your father to bear the blame, in consideration of a large sum which he promised to pay when all danger was over and the estate was his."

"You have stated the matter clearly, Mr. Standish."

"Your father was badly used."

"His life was ruined," said Gerald bitterly, "his life and his prospects, for his employer. Mr. Wentworth's uncle intended to give him an interest in the business. As it was he died with the conviction

that my father was a forger.”

“It’s too bad, it is upon my honor.”

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“Then you will return me the papers?”

“I couldn’t do that. I am a poor man, and the money that Wentworth is to give me is of great importance to me. If you could raise five or six hundred dollars, I might afford to return them to you.”

“That will be quite impossible, Mr. Standish.”

“Then I am afraid I must retain the papers. It goes to my heart to do it, I assure you. I am a very tender-hearted man, Gerald, but I am a poor man, and I feel that I must not injure my own interests. I will do what I can for you, however, and I may be able to persuade Mr. Wentworth to give you something. Now I must bid you good morning.”

Samuel Standish opened the door, and prepared to go out.

“In an hour you will be released,” he said. “I shall leave directions with Tip.”

As he went downstairs, Gerald settled back in his chair, trying to resign himself to remaining for another hour in the shabby room.

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CHAPTER XXIX.

GERALD IS RELEASED.

At length the door was opened and Gerald was free to leave his place of confinement.

There was a cunning smile on Tip's weazened face.

"I say, boss," he said. "Ain't you goin' to give me somethin' for lettin' you out?"

Gerald was amused in spite of himself.

"I ought rather to punish you for getting me into such a scrape."

"'Twasn't me. 'Twas Uncle Sam that made me do it."

"I know that, and for that reason I will forgive you. You were paid for luring me in here, and ought to be satisfied with that. So Mr. Standish is your uncle?"

"That is what *he* says. I couldn't swear to it."

"Perhaps he will leave you some money in his will."

"He ain't got no money," said Tip contemptuously. "He's strapped most of the time. Did you give him any?"

"No."

"Didn't he take your pocketbook?"

"No."

Tip looked puzzled.

"Then what did he want you shut up for?"

"I had some papers that he wanted."

"Did you give them to him?"

"Yes."

"War they worth much?"

"He thought they were."

Tip was silent a moment.

"I wish I'd known that," he said, after a pause.

"Suppose you had?" inquired Gerald curiously.

"I'd have let you out before he came for five dollars."

"That is very kind of you, Tip. What would your uncle have done to you?"

"He'd have licked me, but I'd stand a lickin' any time for five dollars."

"I see, Tip, you are a sharp boy. I haven't any hard feelings against you. I hope you will grow up a good man."

Tip shook his head.

"It ain't likely," he said. "There ain't many good boys round here. This ain't a Sunday-school neighborhood."

"I am afraid it isn't," thought Gerald. "I fear Tip isn't likely to turn out a good man or a model citizen. He is smart enough, but he isn't using his smartness in the right way."

"Where have you been, Gerald?" asked Mr. Brooke, when his secretary returned to the hotel. "You don't often come back late to lunch."

"I was unavoidably detained, Mr. Brooke. In other words, I was imprisoned."

"Is that true?" asked the English tourist in surprise. "Please explain yourself."

Gerald did so.

"So the papers were taken?"

"Yes, they are gone," answered Gerald, smiling. "I should like to see Mr. Wentworth when he discovers that he has been duped."

"He and his agent will both be disappointed. Do you know if he is in the city?"

"I believe he is at the Southern Hotel."

"Waiting till his agent has secured the papers, I presume?"

"I suppose so."

"Really, Gerald, this is an excellent joke. I don't think he will make any further attempt to rob you. We can afford to laugh, but it might have been quite otherwise."

Meanwhile Mr. Standish made his way slowly towards the

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Southern Hotel. He was plunged in deep thought. Should he give up the papers to Mr. Wentworth, or should he stand out for a larger sum? He had been promised two hundred dollars, but his principal had repeatedly offered a thousand dollars for them, and he persuaded himself that he ought to receive at least half this amount. He could not quite make up his mind what to do, and was still in a state of indecision when he reached the handsome hotel where Mr. Wentworth was a guest.

He entered the office, and did not have far to look, for Bradley Wentworth was standing at the news counter where he had just purchased a Chicago paper.

"Well?" he said eagerly when he saw Standish enter. "What news?"

"I've got the papers," nodded Standish.

"You have? Give them to me."

"Wait a minute, Mr. Wentworth. I want to see you alone."

"Oh, very well! Come up-stairs."

They boarded the elevator and stopped at the second landing, where Mr. Wentworth led the way to a front room, of which he unlocked the door and bade Standish enter.

"Give me the papers," he said, "and I will give you a check."

Samuel Standish made no motion to get the papers. Wentworth eyed him in some surprise.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

Standish cleared his throat.

"You agree to give me two hundred dollars," he said, "while I find that you have more than once offered the boy a thousand dollars for them."

"Who told you that?"

"Gerald himself."

"It is a lie," said Wentworth harshly. "Do you think I am a fool?"

"No; I think you are a very shrewd man. The papers are worth all that you offered for them?"

"How do you know? How can you judge?" demanded Wentworth hastily.

"I have read them, and the boy explained the circumstances."

Bradley Wentworth turned red. He saw that his secret was exposed, and that this man knew that he had once been a forger.

"You can't depend upon what the boy told you," he said.

"It is confirmed by the letters."

"You had no right to read the letters. It was a breach of faith."

"I don't look at it in that light. I wanted to be sure that they were the papers I was instructed to secure."

"Very well. I will excuse you. Give me the papers and I will give you two hundred dollars, as I promised."

"I must have five hundred," said Standish firmly. "Even then you will save five hundred. If you had bargained with the boy you would have been obliged to give him a thousand."

Then ensued a wordy wrangle, not necessary to detail. Wentworth, after trying in vain to keep Standish to the original agreement, finally paid him three hundred and fifty dollars, two hundred in bills and one hundred and fifty in a check payable to the order of Samuel Standish. Though he had not secured as much as he desired, Mr. Standish was reasonably satisfied, not for years having had so large a sum in his possession.

Bradley Wentworth was about to examine the papers when a bell-boy came up with a telegram. Wentworth tore it open hastily.

It was an urgent summons to return, as matters of importance demanded his presence at the factory.

He thrust the papers into his pocket.

"I am called home to Seneca," he said. "I must catch the next train for Chicago, if possible. I will not detain you any longer, as I have no time to give you."

"All right, Mr. Wentworth! I don't want to interfere with your plans. My acquaintance with you has been very agreeable, and, as I trust, for our mutual advantage. I hope you may some time have further occasion to employ my services. Good day, sir!"

Bradley Wentworth was already packing his valise, and did not think it necessary to notice his agent's farewell greeting.

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"Three hundred and fifty dollars!" soliloquized Standish. "Did I ever have as much money before? I can't remember the occasion. Mr. Samuel Standish, you can afford to live comfortably for a time. Did I do well to part with the papers, or should I have stood out for a larger sum? It is hard to tell. They must be worth more to the boy than this, but it is not likely he had money enough to buy them. On the whole, Samuel, you have probably done as well as you could."

It will be remembered that Mr. Standish had a room at the Lindell. As he entered the hotel he met Gerald in the corridor. [231]

"So you have got back?" he said with a pleasant smile.

"Yes," answered Gerald.

"I thought Tip could be relied upon. I prefer you won't cherish any hard feelings on account of the events of the morning."

"Have you still got the papers, Mr. Standish?" asked Gerald abruptly.

"No."

"Then I suppose you have given them to Mr. Wentworth?"

"Yes; I would much rather have given them back to you, but I judged that you had not money enough to purchase them."

"Mr. Standish," said Gerald composedly, "I wouldn't give five dollars to have the papers back."

"But," stammered Standish, "you said Mr. Wentworth offered you a thousand dollars for them."

"For the originals, yes. *Those I delivered to you were copies.*"

Standish seemed transfixed with amazement.

"But the originals? Where are they?" he asked.

"Where neither you nor Mr. Wentworth can get hold of them." [232]

When Standish had recovered from his astonishment he burst into a hearty laugh.

"The old man's been fooled," he said. "Serves him right for being so mean."

CHAPTER XXX.

TIDINGS OF THE FUGITIVE.

It was not until Bradley Wentworth was on board the train that was to bear him to Chicago that he drew out the letters which he had secured through the agency of Standish and examined them.

He almost leaped from his seat in anger and disappointment.

"They are fraudulent, and not worth the paper they are written on," he at once decided. "And I have actually given that scoundrel three hundred and fifty dollars for them. Why didn't I take the precaution to examine them before handing over the money?"

He examined them again. They might be fraudulent, for the handwriting was not his, but they were word for word similar to the genuine letters which he had written many years since to Warren Lane. The question arose, Who had copied them? Was it Standish? He dismissed this supposition as very improbable, and adopted the theory that the genuine letters were not in existence—that Warren Lane had given these to his son as a record of what had passed between himself and Wentworth. [234]

"In that case," he reflected with satisfaction, "the boy has no hold upon me. I have only to deny all knowledge of the letters and stigmatize them as part of a conspiracy to extort money from me on false charges. It is worth three hundred and fifty dollars to find this out."

So Wentworth's anger was succeeded by a feeling of satisfaction.

"It is better to pay three hundred and fifty dollars than a thousand," he reflected, "and that was the sum I was ready to give Gerald. On the whole my meeting with this fellow Standish was a fortunate one. I shall destroy these letters, and with them will perish the only evidence of my crime."

When Mr. Wentworth reached home he found among his letters the following written in a regular schoolboy hand:

"DEAR SIR:

"Your son Victor and I are in hard luck. We are staying at a poor boarding-house in Kansas City, and have only enough money to pay this week's board. I have sent to my guardian for a remittance, and expect it within a few days, but Victor's money gave out some time since. As I know you are a rich man I do not feel called upon to pay his expenses. I shall have only enough left for myself. [235]

"Will you telegraph money at once to Victor, No. 125 H. Street, and I will advise him to take the money and go home.

"Yours respectfully,
"ARTHUR GRIGSON."

Bradley Wentworth read this letter with a mixture of feelings. He had been very anxious about his son, but he was not a soft-hearted man, and now that he knew him to be alive his heart hardened.

"He hasn't suffered enough," he said to himself. "If I forgive him too quickly he will do the same thing again. He has dared to disobey me, and he must be made to understand that he has been guilty of a serious offense. This fellow Grigson has the hardihood to suggest that I telegraph money to Kansas City. If I should do so he would probably claim a share of it, and instead of returning, the two would very likely continue their journey." [236]

Under the influence of these feelings Mr. Wentworth wrote the following letter:

"MR. ARTHUR GRIGSON:

"You have done me the honor to write me suggesting that I should telegraph money to my son, who took the bold step of leaving the school, where I had placed him, without my permission. Your letter contains no expression of regret for this flagrant act of disobedience, and I assume that neither you nor Victor feels any. No doubt you find it inconvenient to be without money, and it naturally occurs to you to apply to me. You may say to Victor that as he appears to think himself independent of me, and has shown a disregard for my wishes, I think it may be well for him to keep on a little longer. I do not feel under any obligation to help him home from Kansas City, since he went there without my permission. Whenever he returns home, and shows proper regret for his disobedience I will consider what I may be disposed to do for him.

"BRADLEY WENTWORTH."

Hard as his nature was Bradley Wentworth did not send away this letter without momentary compunction. So far as he was capable of affection he was attached to his son. But he was a man [237]

who required implicit obedience, and Victor's flight had excited his sternest indignation. He was a proud man, and was not willing to show signs of softening though he really yearned to see his absent son.

He held the letter in his hands undecided whether to send it or not, but pride finally gained the ascendancy, and he dropped it into the box in which he deposited his outgoing mail.

"He will see that I am not to be trifled with," he soliloquized, as he closed his lips firmly.

So the letter went on its cruel mission.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE YOUNG RUNAWAYS.

IN a small, plainly furnished room in Kansas City sat two boys of sixteen and seventeen. One of them was Victor Wentworth, the other his schoolmate and the companion of his flight, Arthur Grigson.

Victor looked despondent. He had a pleasant but weak face, in which little or no resemblance could be traced to his father. The latter's hard nature was wholly wanting in Victor. He resembled his mother, now dead, who had been completely under the domination of her husband.

"I wonder if our letters will come to-day, Arthur," he said anxiously.

"I hope so. I expected before this that your father would telegraph money."

"You don't know my father, Arthur," said Victor sadly. "No doubt he is very angry with me, and I am not sure that he will send me any money at all."

"You are an only son, are you not?"

"Yes."

"And your father is very rich?"

"Yes."

"Then he won't be such a beast as to refuse. Isn't he rather close with you?"

"Yes."

"Rather mean, in fact. It costs money to telegraph. I presume it is on this account that he has written you by mail."

"If he doesn't write, what shall I do?" said Victor. "I have only twenty-five cents left, and that will barely buy my dinner."

"I haven't much more," said Arthur, "but I don't worry."

"No, for you have money of your own, and are sure to get something."

"I am not one of the worrying kind," said Arthur. "I wouldn't be as nervous as you are on any account."

"I can't help it."

"If your father is like you he will be so worried about you that he will be sure to send the money, or else come on himself. Perhaps he will do that."

Victor shook his head.

"He isn't like me at all, Arthur. He is a very stern man. Oh, how foolish I was to leave school, but you persuaded me to do it!"

"Oh, you throw all the blame on me, do you?" returned Arthur in an unpleasant tone. "You were in for it as much as I was."

"I didn't know what I was doing," said Victor in an unsteady voice.

"Do try to be more manly! One would think you were in danger of going to prison!" exclaimed the stronger-minded Arthur, in ill-concealed disgust.

"I don't know but I shall. I can't starve, and I may have to steal when my money is gone."

"You'd better get a place and work. That will be better than to starve or go to jail."

"That is true. I didn't think of that," said Victor, brightening up. "But I don't know what I can do. I never did any kind of work. I am afraid no one will employ me."

"Then set up in business for yourself. You can sell papers if you can't do anything else. That is, if you are not too proud to do it."

"I am not too proud to do anything," said the miserable Victor, "if I can make a living!"

"Good for you! That shows that you are not a snob, any way. What do you think your rich and aristocratic father would say if he should learn that his son was a newsboy?"

"He wouldn't like it, and I don't like it myself, but I shall not be ashamed to do it, if it is necessary."

"I admire your spunk, Victor."

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"I am afraid I haven't got much," said Victor, shaking his head. "Oh, what a fool I have been! If I were only out of this scrape, I'll never get into another."

"It may all come right. It's time we got letters. When we do we'll start for home."

At this instant there was a knock at the door, and the landlady, a stout woman with a red face, appeared.

"Here's two letters just come!" she said.

Both boys sprang to their feet in excitement.

"One for each of us!" said Victor gladly.

"No; they are both for Mr. Grigson."

Victor dropped into his seat in despondency.

"None for me!" he murmured.

"Better luck next time!" said the landlady. Meanwhile Arthur had torn open one of his letters.

"Hurrah!" he said. "There's fifty dollars inside."

"Who is the other from?"

"It is postmarked Seneca. It must be from your father."

CHAPTER XXXII.

ARTHUR GRIGSON'S TREACHERY.

"OPEN the letter, quick!" cried Victor in feverish anxiety. "I don't see why father didn't write to me."

The letter was opened. The reader is already acquainted with its contents. Arthur read it aloud, and Victor turned sick with disappointment.

"Well," ejaculated Arthur, "if that isn't a cold-blooded message for a man to send to his own son! And he rolling in wealth!"

"I was afraid he would refuse to send me some money," said Victor. "What is that last sentence?"

"He says if you will come home he will see whether he will forgive you—that's the upshot of it."

"But I can't go home without money unless you will pay my way. You will, won't you, Arthur? I'll pay you back just as soon as I can."

"But you can't, you know," returned Arthur coldly. "Your father has always given you a very small allowance, and you can't save anything out of that."

"I will be sure to pay you some way."

"You are very ready with your promises, but promises ain't cash. Look here, Victor, I've got only fifty dollars."

"That's a big sum."

"It's got to last me some time. As for giving you fifteen or twenty dollars, I can't do it, and that settles it."

"Are you going home?"

"I shall take the next train for Chicago."

"And leave me here?" faltered Victor, turning pale.

"I don't see what else I can do," returned Arthur, his face hardening.

"But I shall starve."

"No; I will leave you two or three dollars, and I advise you to buy some papers if you can't get any other position."

"How meanly you are treating me!" said Victor indignantly.

"I am sorry, of course, but it is the best I can do——"

"But for you I should not be here. Please remember that!"

"You were very ready to come when I proposed it," retorted Arthur.

"You promised to see me through. I didn't have money enough to come."

"Well, I've kept my promise as well as I could. I was looking over my accounts yesterday, and I find that I have spent for you thirteen dollars and sixty-seven cents. Of course I shall never see a cent of it back."

"I will pay it if I live," said Victor, his companion's meanness bringing a flush to his cheek. "I have just found you out. If I had known how mean you were I would never have left school in your company."

"I wish you hadn't. I didn't suppose your father was such a miser. I knew you were an only son, and I expected that he would come to your help if you needed it. You mustn't be so unreasonable. I am going out to get my bill changed. Will you come, too?"

"I suppose I may as well," said Victor, in a spiritless tone.

Arthur made his way to a railroad ticket-office and purchased a ticket to Chicago.

Victor turned away to hide the indignant tears that rose to his eyes as he thought of his companion's base desertion. It was on his lips to beg Arthur to buy another ticket, but his pride checked him. He felt that he had humiliated himself enough already.

On their way back they passed a periodical store.

On the window outside was a sign—

"BOY WANTED!"

"There's your chance for a situation, Victor," said Arthur, half in joke.

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Victor looked at the sign, and made up his mind. It was absolutely necessary for him to get employment, and he might as well work here as anywhere.

"Wait a minute," he said.

He went in, expecting to meet a man, but found that the shop was kept by a middle-aged woman. Victor had never been obliged to rough it, and he colored up with embarrassment as he prepared to apply for the place.

"I see you want a boy," he said.

"Yes," said the woman, very favorably impressed by Victor's neat appearance. "Have you ever worked in a store of this kind?"

"No; I have always attended school."

"I won't ask if you're honest, for your looks speak in your favor. Would you be willing to sleep in the back part of the store?"

"Yes," answered Victor, relieved to think that this would save him the expense of a room.

"When can you come?"

"At one o'clock if you wish. After I have eaten dinner."

"Then I will engage you. You will receive four dollars and a half a week. Is that satisfactory?"

"Yes," answered Victor thankfully.

He went out and told Arthur of his success. His companion was relieved, for, selfish as he was, it troubled him to think that Victor would be left in destitution.

"Good!" he said. "Now I advise you to write home, and see what your father has to say. I will leave you three dollars to buy your meals till your first week's pay comes in."

Mrs. Ferguson, the good Scotch lady who kept the periodical store, would have been very much surprised if she had learned that the quiet looking boy whom she had just engaged was the son of a man worth over three hundred thousand dollars. Her mind was occupied with other matters or she would have questioned Victor more closely in regard to his history and antecedents. He was glad she did not, for he would have felt some embarrassment in confessing that he had run away from school and was a fugitive from home.

He felt obliged to accept the three dollars offered him by Arthur Grigson, since it was necessary to have money to pay for his meals in the interval that must elapse before he would receive his first week's pay.

"I will pay you back, Arthur," said he gratefully, as he took the money from the boy who had been the cause of his trouble.

"Oh, that's just as you like."

"I would prefer to do it. I don't care to be under any further obligations to you."

"Oh, don't be foolish! You didn't expect I'd strip myself of money to give you a chance to go home?"

"You would have more than money enough to get us both home. I wouldn't have treated you as you have treated me."

"Yes, you would, and I wouldn't have blamed you. I may go over to Seneca and tell your father how I left you. Maybe he'll open his heart and send you twenty dollars."

Victor did not reply, but knowing his father as he did, he cherished no such hopes. He tried to put a good face on the matter, however, reflecting that he was at any rate safe from starving, and would be able to live.

In the afternoon he went to work, and though evidently unused to business soon learned to do what was required of him. He seemed so willing that Mrs. Ferguson felt pleased with him, and did not regret her hasty choice of a boy who had no recommendations to offer.

The store closed at eight o'clock, and the shutters were put up.

Now came the hardest trial for Victor.

He had always been accustomed to a luxurious, or at all events, cozy bedroom, even at school. Now he was to sleep in a dark store, for the gas was put out, except one small jet in the rear. His bed was a small, narrow one, only about eighteen inches wide, and close behind the dark counter.

"This is where you will sleep," said Mrs. Ferguson. "The bed is small, but I guess you will find it wide enough."

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"I guess I can make it do," answered Victor.

"You are to get up at seven o'clock and open the store. Then you will sweep the floor and dust the books. I shall come at eight, and will then let you off for half an hour for breakfast."

"All right, ma'am."

Mrs. Ferguson went out, and Victor, not feeling yet like sleep, sat down on the side of the bed and began to reflect. [249]

Only a few weeks ago he had been a member of a classical school, recognized as the son of a rich man, and treated with the more consideration on that account. Now he was a friendless boy, obliged to earn a scanty living by his own labor. It might be considered quite a come-down, but, strange as it may seem, Victor was not altogether despondent. He inherited from his father a taste for business, and had already begun to take an interest in his duties. He would indeed have liked a larger income, for he was compelled to eat at cheap and poor restaurants, but at any rate he felt happier than he had done when traveling in Arthur Grigson's company.

At length he went to sleep, and slept comfortably for three hours or more. Then he suddenly awoke, and none too soon. The window at the rear of the store, leading out into the back yard, was half open, and he saw the figure of a large man crawling through.

"It must be a burglar!" thought Victor, and his heart sank within him.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

INTERVIEWING A BURGLAR.

VICTOR was not a brave boy, and it must be confessed that he felt dismayed when he saw the burglar, and realized that he was in danger of serious personal injury, perhaps death. This, however, was not his only feeling. He felt responsible for the safety of the goods in the store, having been left on guard. In an emergency one can think rapidly.

Prudence suggested to Victor to lie quite still and counterfeit sleep. Resistance would of course be futile, for he was rather a delicate boy of sixteen, and the burglar was nearly six feet in height and looked as if he might weigh a hundred and eighty pounds.

The burglar, when he had effected his entrance, looked about him to get his bearings.

His glance fell on Victor.

"Ha! a boy!" he exclaimed, and with one stride he reached the pallet on which the shop-boy slept. [251]

Stooping over, and flashing the dark lantern into Victor's face he saw his eyelids move.

"He is not asleep! He is only shamming," he decided, and shook him roughly.

Victor opened his eyes and looked with alarm into the rough, bearded face and fierce, forbidding eyes of the midnight intruder.

"Well, do you know who I am?" growled the burglar.

"I never saw you before."

"That isn't what I mean. Do you know why I am here?"

"To rob the store, I suppose," answered Victor with a troubled look.

"Right, my chicken! Did you see me get into the window?"

"Yes."

"And then you closed your eyes and pretended to be asleep?"

"Yes."

"I'm on to that trick. Do you see this?" and the burglar displayed a piece of iron which Victor supposed to be a "jimmy."

"Yes," answered Victor, gazing at it as if fascinated.

"A little tap on your head with it and you'd be done for. That's what I call a hint to you to act sensibly and not interfere with what don't concern you. Now where's the money?" [252]

"I don't think Mrs. Ferguson leaves any here. I expect she carries all away with her."

"You expect!" repeated the burglar frowning. "Don't you know?"

"How long have you been employed in this store?"

"I only came this afternoon."

"That accounts for it. Are you sure there is no money here?"

"I don't think there is."

"I'll look about and see. If you know what's best for yourself you'll keep quiet."

Victor was compelled to look on in helpless anxiety while the burglar rummaged the store. He managed to find a couple of dollars in small change, which he pocketed grumblingly. A few small ornamental articles he also took, and then made his exit from the window after a parting threat to Victor.

No sooner had he left the store than the latter sprang from the bed, drew on his pantaloons hurriedly, and running to the outer door unlocked it, and standing in the doorway looked up and down the street. [253]

By great good luck a policeman was just turning the corner. When he saw the boy in partial undress at the door of the bookstore he ran up, apprehending mischief.

"What's the matter, bub?" he asked.

"The store has just been entered from the rear and the burglar, after stealing what he thought worth taking, made his escape through the back yard."

Instantly the policeman tapped for assistance and three brother officers made their appearance. After a hurried conference, two

went through the store to the back, while the other two reconnoitered in front. The chances were in favor of the burglar's escape, but apprehending no danger he had made his way into the next yard and was trying to enter the adjoining store. His imprudence cost him his liberty.

In five minutes he was brought again through the window with a stout policeman on each side. He scowled menacingly at Victor.

"You betrayed me, you young scoundrel!" he said.

"Keep your mouth shut!" said one of his captors.

"Answer me, did you call the police?" demanded the burglar, not heeding the command. [254]

"Yes," answered Victor.

"I'll get even with you, for betraying your old pal."

"What?" ejaculated Victor.

"He's one of us," said the burglar, addressing the policemen. "We got him into the store on purpose to help us. He only got the place this afternoon."

Then for the first time Victor fell under suspicion.

"Is this true?" asked one of the officers turning to the boy.

"It is true that I got the place this afternoon."

"And you know this man!"

"No; I never saw him before in my life."

"That's a lie, John Timmins, and you know it," broke in the burglar audaciously.

"Is your name John Timmins?" asked the policeman with increased suspicion.

"No, sir. My name is Victor Wentworth."

"Good, John. It does credit to your invention," said the burglar laughing. "That's a high-toned name you've got now."

"Is this true that you are saying? Do you know the boy?"

"Of course I do. His father, Dick Timmins, is my pal. I thought we could trust the boy, but he's betrayed me, the young rascal, expectin' a reward for his honesty. Oh, he's a sly one, John is." [255]

Victor could hardly believe his ears. He understood at once that this man was acting from revengeful motives, but he saw also that the story made an impression on the police.

"You'll have to go with us," said one of the officers. "This man has made a charge against you, and you will have to disprove it."

Victor was compelled to dress hurriedly and accompany the officers to the station-house. He was questioned by the sergeant, who recognized the burglar and suspected his motive.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Victor Wentworth."

"Do you live in Kansas City?"

"No, sir. I have been stopping here a few days at a boarding-house, but my money gave out and I was obliged to seek a situation."

"When did you secure it?"

"This afternoon."

"Just what I told you," said the burglar. "It was all fixed that John should sleep there and open the window for me."

"What have you to say to this?" [256]

"That it is a lie. This man wants to punish me for calling in the police."

"You're lyin', John Timmins, and you know it. Your father'll whack you for this."

"Bring him here and let him claim me if he dare!" said Victor angrily.

"Who is your father? Is his name Timmins?"

"No, sir. My father is Bradley Wentworth, of Seneca, Illinois."

"We have an officer here who came from Seneca. He will tell us whether your statement is correct. Ah, here he is! Hilton, come here."

A stout, pleasant-faced policeman entered the station house.

"Well, sir," he responded, touching his cap.

"Look at this boy and tell me if you recognize him."

Hilton approached, and as he scanned Victor's face, said in surprise, "Why, it's Squire Wentworth's son."

"And he lives in Seneca?"

"Yes; I am surprised to see him here."

Victor flushed.

"I left school without my father's knowledge," he said in embarrassment.

"He is working in a bookstore here in town," explained the sergeant. "This man who has just been caught in the act of burglary declares the boy to be John Timmins, the son of one of his pals."

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"That isn't true. I recognize the boy as the son of Mr. Wentworth."

"That settles the matter. Young man, you are discharged. As for the man who has testified falsely against you, he will find that he has not improved his chances by so doing."

Victor left the station-house, and returning to the store, resumed his interrupted night's rest. But the last hour had been so full of excitement that it was at least two hours before he could compose himself to sleep.

"I've read about burglars," thought Victor, as he called to mind sundry dime novels that he had perused in his boarding-school days, "but I never expected to meet one, or to be suspected of being his accomplice."

Before Mrs. Ferguson reached the store she had already read in great excitement an account of how her place had been entered, and gave Victor high praise for his success in causing the arrest of the burglar.

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CHAPTER XXXIV.

A STRANGE MEETING.

NOEL BROOKE and Gerald remained at the Lindell Hotel beyond the time originally fixed, as the former found an English friend established in a prosperous business on Olive Street. Gilbert Sandford was a man of forty-five, a pleasant, genial, man, who lived in a fine house in the upper portion of the city. He had a wife and three attractive children.

"Come and take dinner with me next Sunday, Noel," he said in a hospitable manner.

"I shall be glad to do so if you will let me bring my friend also."

"By all means! Any friend of yours is welcome. Did he accompany you from England?"

"No. It is a young American—a boy of sixteen—whom I met in Colorado. We have been together three or four months now, and I have become very much attached to him."

"Bring him along by all means. My children will enjoy his company."

"By the way, how old is your oldest child?"

"Edward is fourteen, only two years younger than your friend. The other two are girls. What is your friend's name?"

"Gerald Lane."

"A good name. Is he fond of children?"

"Yes. In our travels he has frequently become acquainted with children, and has always made himself a favorite with them."

The next Sunday found Gerald and his employer dinner guests at the handsome residence of Mr. Sandford. Before he left, Gerald had made himself an established favorite with the entire Sandford family. The merchant was particularly gracious to him. It was not long before this partiality was to turn to his advantage.

Three weeks later Mr. Brooke received a letter from England which he read with an expression of pain.

"Gerald," he said, "this letter comes from my sister. My father is seriously ill, and I shall be obliged to return to England at once."

"I am very sorry," said Gerald with sincere sympathy.

"One regret I have is, that it will compel us to separate for a time at least."

"I feared so, Mr. Brooke. I shall feel quite lost without you. I have no relatives, and it will leave me alone in the world."

"I would invite you to go to England with me if it were not a case of sickness."

"I should not expect it, Mr. Brooke. Besides, I am an American boy, and I have my living to earn in America."

"That gives me an idea. Remain here, please, till I return from Mr. Sandford's office. I must go there and acquaint him with my recall."

An hour later he returned to the hotel.

"I have engaged my passage from New York by next Saturday's steamer," he said. "I shall leave St. Louis to-morrow morning."

"Then I shall have to form my plans," said Gerald.

"They are formed already. How would you like to go into the employ of Mr. Sandford?"

"I would like nothing better."

"He has a place provided for you. You will remain in the store here for a short time, and then he will send you off on a special mission."

Gerald brightened up.

"I must be indebted to you for this, Mr. Brooke?" he said.

"Partly, but partly also to the pleasant impression which you made on the whole family. You don't ask what salary you are to receive?"

"If it will pay my board with a little over I shall be satisfied."

"It won't pay for your board at this hotel."

"I should not expect it. I will seek a fair boarding-house. Probably I can get board for six or seven dollars a week?"

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"I should think so. Your salary will be fifteen dollars a week."

"But does Mr. Sandford know that I have no business experience?"

"Yes, he knows it, but he thinks you have qualities that will enable you to make a success."

After hurried preparations Mr. Brooke left St. Louis, and the same day Gerald moved to a plain, but cheerful boarding-house not far from the store where he was to be employed.

He was at first occupied as stock clerk, and soon familiarized himself with his duties. Three months later he had a summons from Mr. Sandford, who received him in his office. There were about a hundred clerks in the establishment, who got their orders in general from the heads of the departments, and seldom were admitted to interviews with their employer.

Gerald feared that he might have made some mistake and was to receive a reprimand, but the pleasant expression on Mr. Sandford's face relieved him from apprehension at once.

"Sit down, Gerald," said the merchant with a wave of the hand.

"Thank you, sir."

"How long have you been in my employ?"

"Three months to-day, sir."

"You are stock clerk?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you learned something about the stock?"

"Yes, sir, I think so."

"Mr. Hall"—this was the superintendent—"tells me that your services are intelligently rendered and very satisfactory."

"I am very glad that he is satisfied with me," said Gerald earnestly. "I have done my best."

"And your best seems to be very good. How would you like to travel for the house?"

Gerald knew that the position of drummer was courted by all the resident clerks, and was considered a distinct promotion.

"I should like it very much, sir, but do you think I am old enough?"

"You certainly are unusually young for such a position, and this, of course, occurred to me, but you have had some experience in traveling, though not on business, with our friend, Mr. Brooke."

"Yes, sir."

"And this experience will be of service to you. How old are you?"

"Nearly seventeen."

"I have never employed a drummer under twenty, but I am nevertheless inclined to give you a trial."

"I will do my best for you and the house."

"Then you will have a fair chance of succeeding. You may go and ask Mr. Hall for instructions—I have spoken with him on the subject—and I presume he will arrange to have you start on Monday next."

Mr. Sandford bowed, and Gerald understood that the interview was ended.

Two weeks later Gerald found himself in Kansas City. He had had but a fortnight's experience as a drummer, but he had met with success exceeding his anticipations. Though his youth was against him, and he often found it difficult to persuade dealers that he was really an authorized agent of a merchant so well known as Gilbert Sandford of St. Louis, five minutes' conversation was generally sufficient to show that he thoroughly understood his business.

His stay in Kansas City was drawing to a close. He was a guest of the Coates House, one of the representative hotels of the West, when he had occasion to enter a periodical store near the hotel. It was the one already known to us as kept by Mrs. Ferguson.

Victor Wentworth stood behind the counter and waited upon Gerald. But he was no longer the bright and healthy boy of a few weeks back. He had contracted malaria, and his face was pallid. Gerald could not but notice the boy's sick condition.

"You are not well," he said.

"No," answered Victor, shivering. "I don't know what is the matter with me."

"How long have you been sick?" inquired Gerald.

"I was taken about a week since."

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"You ought to be at home and in bed."

"I wish I could afford to rest," said Victor despondently; "but I cannot. I depend on my weekly wages."

"Have you a home in Kansas City?"

"No; I have no relatives in this place."

"Have you no friends who would help you while you were sick?"

Victor hesitated a moment.

"No," he answered slowly.

"Are you an orphan?"

"No; I have a father living."

"Ah! I understand. He is poor."

"No," answered Victor, shaking his head. "He is not poor. He is quite rich."

"Then how does it happen that you do not write to him and ask him to help you?"

"Because he is angry with me. He is a stern man, and I offended him very much some time since," and Victor flushed as he made the confession.

"How did you offend him? You could not have done anything very bad, I am sure."

"He had placed me at a boarding-school and I ran away. I was very foolish, and I have repented it more than once, but he is very angry with me and won't forgive me."

The story seemed familiar to Gerald. Surely he had heard it before.

"Tell me," he asked abruptly, "are you the son of Bradley Wentworth of Seneca, Illinois?"

"Yes; do you know him? Is he a friend of yours?" asked Victor in breathless astonishment.

"I knew him, but he is not a friend of mine."

"Ah! I hoped he was," sighed Victor, his face falling.

"But all the same I am going to help you."

Gerald had a brief conversation with Mrs. Ferguson and arranged with her to find a comfortable home for Victor, where he could rest and receive medical attendance, and deposited a sum of money with her to defray his expenses.

"How kind you are!" said Victor gratefully. "I was very much discouraged when you came in. I didn't know what was to become of me."

"I shall be back again in Kansas City in four weeks," said Gerald. "Till then you will be taken care of. Keep up your spirits and all will turn out well."

"How strange," he thought, "that I should help the son as my father helped his father. I like the boy. I am sure *he* will not prove ungrateful."

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CHAPTER XXXV.

THOMAS HASTINGS.

Two weeks later Gerald found himself in the town of Brentwood, Minnesota. It was too small for him to expect to do much business there, but he had a special message to bear to a sister of Mr. Sandford, who had her home in the place. He put up at the Commercial Hotel, a small inn capable of accommodating about thirty travelers.

Brentwood did not seem an attractive place to Gerald, and he felt that he should be glad to take the morning train to St. Paul. Yet he was destined to meet here a man who could aid him materially in the object to which he had consecrated his energies—that of clearing his father's reputation and punishing his enemy.

He was sitting in the office of the hotel when a man apparently fifty years of age entered and had a whispered conference with the clerk. He appeared to prefer some request which the latter denied. The man was thin and haggard, and his face bore a look of settled despondency. His clothing was shabby, yet he looked as if he had seen better days and had at some time occupied a better position. Without knowing why, Gerald's curiosity and interest were excited. As he left the room Gerald said: "That fellow looks as if the world had gone wrong with him."

"Yes," answered the clerk, "he has been going down hill the last three years, and now is near the foot."

"Does he drink?"

"Yes, when he gets the chance, but he has not had money enough to gratify his appetite lately. I don't pity him so much as I do his wife and child, for he has a daughter of twelve, a sweet, innocent child, whose lot in such a home as he can supply is far from being a happy one."

"How long has he lived in Brentwood?"

"Five years. When he first came here he kept a small store, and seemed to do tolerably well. He appeared to receive some help from outside, for he sometimes brought checks to the hotel to be cashed. They all came from the same party, a certain Bradley Wentworth."

"What!" exclaimed Gerald in startled surprise.

"Do you know the name?" asked the clerk.

"I know a man of that name. It may not be the same one."

"This man, so Hastings told me once, was a manufacturer, and lived in—in—"

"Seneca, Illinois?"

"The very place. Then it is the man you know?"

"It seems so. What is this man's name?"

"Thomas Hastings."

"Did he ever live in Seneca?"

"I think he once told me so."

"Perhaps he is some relative of Mr. Wentworth, and that may account for the checks."

"I can't say as to that."

"Then no checks come now?"

"No, not for a long time. Since these supplies were cut off Hastings has been going downhill."

Gerald bent his eyes upon the floor in silent thought. What, he asked himself, could be the connection between this human wreck, living in a small Minnesota town, and Bradley Wentworth, the wealthy manufacturer? With his eyes fixed upon the floor his attention was drawn to a torn letter which he now remembered that Hastings had held in his hand and clutched convulsively as he stood at the desk.

Mechanically he picked it up, when the name signed to it attracted his attention and filled him with a thrill of excitement.

This name was Bradley Wentworth. "I don't know as I am justified," thought Gerald, "but my father's connection with Mr. Wentworth makes me desirous of learning whatever I can about him."

He withdrew to a corner of the office where stood a table

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covered with newspapers and writing materials, and taking out the torn letter pieced it together so that he could read it consecutively.

It ran thus:

“SENECA, ILLINOIS, September 7.

“SIR: THOMAS HASTINGS,

“I have already warned you that you have annoyed me sufficiently, and that I should pay no further attention to your letters. Yet you persist in writing to me and demanding money. On what grounds? You claim to be acquainted with a secret now many years old, and threaten to divulge it unless I will send you money. What you have to tell is of no value whatever. The man to whom you want to reveal it is dead, and his son is dead also. There is absolutely no one who takes any interest in your threatened revelation. When I think of the sums of money which I have sent you in the aggregate I am provoked with myself for my weakness. You ought to be in comfortable circumstances, but you write me that you are destitute and that your wife and child are on the verge of starvation. Well, this is not my fault. It is largely the result of your inordinate love of drink. A man like you ought never to have married. You can't take care of yourself, much less can you care for a family.

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“I have wasted more words upon you than I intended. As, however, this is the last letter I ever expect to write you, I determined to make myself understood. Let me repeat, then, you have nothing to expect from me. You have exhausted my patience, and I have no more money to send you. If you can't support yourself in any other way, go out and work by the day, and let your wife take in washing. It is an honest business, and will help to keep the wolf from the door. In any event, don't write again to me.

“BRADLEY WENTWORTH.”

Gerald read this letter in ill-suppressed excitement. He could not misunderstand these words, referring to the secret of which this man had knowledge. “The man to whom you want to reveal it is dead, and his son is dead also.” He, the son, was not dead, but it suited Bradley Wentworth to represent that he was. What could this secret be? It must, he felt, relate to the “debt of honor,” and to the forgery which Wentworth had succeeded in laying upon the shoulders of his friend and associate.

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Hastings must possess some information of great value, or Bradley Wentworth would not have sent the sums of money referred to in the letter. Clearly it was for Gerald's interest to see Thomas Hastings, and learn what he could. He was quite in the dark as to the nature of his information, but it was unquestionably of importance. It seemed as if Providence had directed his steps to this out-of-the-way town in Minnesota, and he resolved to take advantage of his visit.

He sauntered up to the desk and in a voice of affected unconcern inquired, “Can you tell me where the man Hastings lives?”

“Are you interested in him?” asked the clerk, smilingly.

“Yes, somewhat. He looked so sad and woebegone. I might perhaps help him to a position if I could have a conversation with him and judge of his abilities.”

“Oh, his abilities are good, but his intemperate habits are so fixed that I would not advise you to recommend him.”

“At any rate I can give him a dollar, and I suppose that will be acceptable to him.”

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“It will be a godsend. You will find that he won't refuse it. As to where he lives I can't readily direct you, but here is a little fellow,” pointing to a colored boy who had just entered, “who will be glad to show you. Here, Johnny, do you want to earn a dime?”

“Don't I just?” returned the boy, showing the whites of his eyes.

“Then show this young man the way to Tom Hastings's house.”

“All right, boss, I'll show him.”

Gerald followed the boy along the street for about twenty rods; then down a side street, till he reached a shabby, two-story house, dismantled and with the paint worn off in spots.

“That's where he lives, boss,” said the boy.

“Does he occupy the whole house?”

“No, he occupies the right side.”

Gerald hesitated a moment at the gate and then walked in. He was considering how he should introduce himself.

Thomas Hastings himself answered the knock on the door. He was in his shirt-sleeves. There was a beard of nearly a week's growth on his cheeks, and he looked as neglected as the tenement which he occupied. He eyed Gerald in some surprise, and waited for him to mention his business.

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“Are you Mr. Thomas Hastings?” asked the young visitor.

"Yes."

"Are you acquainted with Bradley Wentworth of Seneca, Illinois?"

"Yes, do you come from him?" asked Hastings, eagerly.

"No, but I would like to talk with you about him. May I come in?"

Hastings looked backward, and the disordered rooms struck him with a sudden sense of shame.

"No," he said, "we can talk better outside. Wait a minute and I'll be with you."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

OLD ACQUAINTANCES.

"Now, what have you to say about Bradley Wentworth?" asked Hastings abruptly, as they walked slowly up the road.

"First, let me ask you how long you have known him?"

"How long have I known him? Before you were born, youngster—a matter of twenty years, I should say."

"Did you know a man who was in the employ of Wentworth's uncle at the same time—Warren Lane?"

Hastings started.

"What do you know of Warren Lane?" he asked abruptly.

"He was my father," answered Gerald.

"Your father! But I heard that he had died, leaving no son."

"My poor father is dead, but I am as much alive as you are. Who told you that I was dead?"

"Bradley Wentworth wrote me to that effect."

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"Bradley Wentworth would not be sorry to hear that I was dead, but he knows better. He has seen and spoken with me more than once during the last six months. He was at our cabin in Colorado when my poor father died."

"He is false and treacherous as he always was!" said Hastings bitterly.

"I can believe that. I consider him to be my bitter enemy, as he was my father's."

"Then you know—the secret?"

"You refer to the forgery? Yes. How much do you know about it?"

"Everything," answered Hastings emphatically.

"You know then his compact with my father?"

"I know of it. I was the only one that did know of it outside of your father and Bradley Wentworth himself."

"Then you probably know how basely he refused to pay my father the sum agreed upon for his sacrifice of reputation."

"I know that, too. The sum was twenty thousand dollars, was it not?"

"Yes, it was a debt of honor, or should have been considered such. I don't care so much for the money, but it was the price of my father's sacrifice, and in justice to his memory and his ruined life, I want this man to pay it."

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"That's sentiment, youngster. I should want the money for itself."

"I can earn my own living. I am earning it now."

"Where are you working?"

"In St. Louis. I am traveling for Gilbert Sandford, of that city. He is a well-known merchant."

"Never heard of him. You are young to travel for such a firm," continued Hastings, eying Gerald curiously.

"Yes, he engaged me as a favor, but I think that he has found my services satisfactory, or he would not have taken me from the store and sent me out on the road."

"You must be smart, youngster. Did your father leave you anything?"

"A cabin and a few acres of land among the foothills of Colorado."

"Have you any evidence of the agreement made by Bradley Wentworth?"

"I have two letters written by him on the subject, in which the matter is plainly referred to."

"Does he know that you have them?"

"Yes; he tried to buy them from me."

"What did he offer?"

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"A thousand dollars."

"Then he considers your claim good. And you refused?"

"Of course!" answered Gerald indignantly. "Do you think I would compromise such a thing?"

"I don't know. A thousand dollars would be a mighty convenient

sum to handle."

"I am not willing to pay so high a price for it. You must have been in Mr. Wentworth's confidence or you would not have known of the forgery."

"Why shouldn't I know it? I was the paying teller of the bank, and I cashed the check in the ordinary course of business."

"And the check—who presented it?" asked Gerald eagerly.

"Bradley Wentworth himself."

"Then you knew all the while that it was he that was the forger and not my father?"

"Yes."

"Then what kept you silent?"

"Bradley Wentworth's money," answered Hastings significantly.

"Yet you tell me."

"Because he has thrown me off. I wrote him ten days since for a beggarly fifty dollars, and he refused to send it to me. In fact he defied me, writing that there was no one alive to feel an interest in the secret I had to sell. That is the sort of man Bradley Wentworth is. Stay, I will show you the letter," and he began to explore his pockets.

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"I can't find it," he said, after an ineffectual search, with an expression of perplexity, "and yet I had it when I went to the hotel an hour since."

"Is this it?" asked Gerald, producing the torn letter already referred to.

"Yes, yes! How came you by it?"

"I found it on the floor of the hotel where you dropped it. You must excuse my reading it. I should not have done so if I had not seen the name of Bradley Wentworth signed to it. Everything that relates to him has an interest for me, and when I read it I felt that it must relate to my father."

"Yes, it does. I am glad to meet you, boy. I forget your first name."

"Gerald."

"I remember now. Why, I was in the church when you were baptized. There's some difference between now and then."

"I suppose I must have changed some," said Gerald smiling.

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"Yes; you have become a fine, manly boy. You don't look like your father, but you remind me of your mother. My wife would like to see you. She always liked your mother. Can't you come round and take supper with us," and then he hesitated and looked embarrassed; "but I am afraid we can't offer you much that is inviting," he added.

"I will come with pleasure, Mr. Hastings," said Gerald, "and as I am afraid you have been out of luck, will you allow me to lend you a small sum?"

Hastings took the ten dollars extended to him and his face brightened.

"Now I am not afraid to have you come," he said. "My wife's a good cook when she has the wherewithal. We've been reduced to short-commons lately."

"Well," said the clerk, as Gerald returned to the hotel, "did you call on Tom Hastings?"

"Yes; I found him at home. I am going there to supper to night."

"You don't say so!" ejaculated the clerk in astonishment. "Did Tom Hastings invite you?"

"Yes; he and his wife used to know my father and mother."

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"You will excuse my suggesting it, but it might be wise for you to eat something here before you go over. Hastings isn't much in the habit of entertaining strangers, and I don't think he sets a very good table."

"I think there will be a good supper to-night," said Gerald. "At any rate I will risk it."

He proved to be right. Mrs. Hastings was a good cook when she had the wherewithal, as her husband expressed it, and she did her best, going herself to the village market for supplies. It is safe to say that Gerald fared better than he would have done at the hotel.

He was very cordially received by Mrs. Hastings, who indulged in reminiscences of his mother, to which he listened eagerly.

"She was a good woman," said Mrs. Hastings, "and I was grieved

to hear of her death. I am sure she would have lived longer but for the wicked plot of Bradley Wentworth against your father."

"You knew about it?"

"Yes; and I could not bear to think that my husband was aiding and abetting him in his wicked scheme. I hope the time will come when his injustice will be repaired."

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"I think it will, Mrs. Hastings. To that end I have been working ever since my father's death. I think Providence directed me to your husband as the man who could help me. His testimony will be most important."

"And it will be forthcoming, Gerald," said Mr. Hastings. "I have stood by Bradley Wentworth long enough. I never liked him as well as your father, and I am prepared to help you because you are the son of Warren Lane."

"Thank you, Mr. Hastings."

"I am a poor man. Still I make no condition. When you come to your own you will not forget that I helped you to it."

"I shall not forget it, Mr. Hastings. Do I understand that you will be ready to give your testimony whenever I may call upon you?"

"I promise it. When do you leave Brentwood?"

"To-morrow morning, but it will not be long before you will hear from me."

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CHAPTER XXXVII.

A LETTER FROM GULCHVILLE.

WHEN Gerald returned to St. Louis after a longer trip than he had originally contemplated, he was cordially received.

"You have succeeded remarkably well, Gerald," said his employer. "I have never before employed so young a traveling salesman, and I may add that I have never sent one out of any age who succeeded as well on his first trip."

"If you are satisfied with me," said Gerald modestly, "I am very glad."

"It will not be long before I shall have occasion to send you again. Meanwhile I will add five dollars a week to your salary."

It often happens that one piece of good luck follows another.

Two days after Gerald's return he received a letter from John Carter, who, it will be remembered, was left to occupy, rent free, the cabin in Gulchville, which had been Gerald's old home. On making an engagement with the St. Louis firm Gerald had sent his address to Carter, with the request that he would from time to time communicate with him, in case there should be any news which he ought to know.

This was the material portion of the letter:

"I would have written you before, but had nothing to interest you. I have made a good living, having employment most of the time in logging. I am able to live comfortably, and my son Oscar is as happy as the day is long. He is no longer weak and puny, as he was when we first came here, but is strong and healthy, with red cheeks.

"Your friend (?) Jake Amsden is drinking more than ever. It is a mystery where he gets his money from. At any rate he seems to have a fair supply. I am sure he does not earn it, for he does not work one day in the week on the average. He seems to be very much interested in this claim, and hinted more than once that he would like to buy it and pay a fair price. I asked him how he expected to pay for it. He answered with an air of mystery that he had a friend who would furnish the money. I am inclined to think this friend is Bradley Wentworth, for I hear at the post-office that Amsden gets letters from Seneca at intervals.

"This brings me to the important part of my letter. *Gulchville is booming!* A land company represented by two Chicago men are here, buying up land, with the intention of laying out a town and selling lots. They want this property. It so happens that your land will be in the center of the town, as laid out by them. They tried to open negotiations with me, but I told them I was not the owner. They are anxious to meet you and talk matters over. You may be surprised when I tell you that you can probably get five thousand dollars for the land you own. Of course the cabin don't count. That I should like to buy from you and move to some land farther away.

"I advise you to come on at once, for the parties are in a hurry, and it is best to strike while the iron is hot. The time you will lose in your business won't amount to anything in comparison with the sum you will obtain from the sale of the property.

"I enclose a letter just received for you, bearing the Seneca postmark. I presume you can guess who wrote it.

"Yours truly,
"JOHN CARTER."

This was great news, and made Gerald feel like a rich man, or, rather, boy, but curiosity led him to open at once the letter from Seneca.

"It read thus:

"GERALD LANE:

"I have no particular reason to feel friendly toward you, as you have rejected all my offers made in kindness, but I do not forget that your father and I were young men together. I am aware, of course, that your future is very precarious, as the engagement you have at present with the English tourist is likely to terminate at an early day. What will become of you then?

"In view of your unfortunate position I will buy the cabin and land which your father left to you. Its intrinsic value is very small, but I will give you a thousand dollars for it, which I imagine is more than can be got for it five years hence. However, I offer it as a favor to you, who are the son of my old acquaintance and fellow-clerk. It will be necessary for you to give me an early answer, otherwise I shall consider you are blind to your own interest, in which case I cannot promise to leave the offer open.

"I send the letter to the care of the man who lives on your place, as he will probably know where to forward it to you.

"Yours, etc.,
"BRADLEY WENTWORTH."

"P. S.—I don't care to buy the papers, as the sum you are offered for the property will put you in good circumstances."

Gerald smiled as he finished reading this letter.

“Evidently,” he said to himself, “Bradley Wentworth knows that there is a scheme to boom real estate in Gulchville. He doesn’t offer enough.”

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

GERALD SELLS HIS PATRIMONY.

"Mr. SANDFORD, do you think you can spare me for a short time?" asked Gerald, as he entered the presence of his employer.

Mr. Sandford looked surprised.

"This is a busy season," he said. "Still if you have a good reason for wishing to be absent——"

"I have a good reason," answered Gerald. "I own some land in Gulchville, Colorado—eighty-five acres—and a rich syndicate formed in Chicago wants to buy it."

"That is a *very* good reason," said the merchant. "How much do they offer?"

"No definite offer has been made, but my tenant thinks they will be willing to pay me five thousand dollars."

"Excellent. I was not aware that my youngest clerk was a man of property. Go by all means and make the best bargain you can."

Gerald lost no time. He took the afternoon train to Kansas City, and thence went partly by cars and partly by stage to his old home in Gulchville. When he descended from the stage he saw at once a familiar face and figure. They belonged to Jake Amsden, who advanced to meet him with an eager welcome.

"Glad to see you, Gerald! How you've grown!" and Amsden grasped his hand as if they had always been the closest of friends.

"Thank you, Mr. Amsden," said Gerald, smiling. "I didn't imagine you would be so glad to meet me."

"I've been longin' to see you, my boy. It's been very lonesome without you. And where is the Englishman you went away with?"

"He's gone back to England. There was sickness in the family."

"Is he coming back here?"

"I don't know."

"So you are comin' back here to live?"

"No; I think not. I have a situation with a large firm in St. Louis. I am only here on a vacation."

"That reminds me, Gerald. If you've got five minutes to spare I would like to talk with you on business."

"I can give you five minutes, Mr. Amsden."

"It's about that place your father left you. It isn't worth much, but I've been thinkin' I'd like to settle down in a home of my own, and that place about suits me."

"But," said Gerald, who saw Amsden's drift, "I would not like to turn Tom Carter out of his home."

"No need of it, Gerald. I'd get him to board me, and I'd pay him somethin', besides giving him his rent free."

"Suppose I wait and consult Mr. Carter about it."

This proposal did not suit Amsden, who knew that in that case Gerald would hear about the land speculation, and then his plans would fail utterly.

"Don't wait for that, Gerald! Let's fix the matter on the spot."

"What do you propose to pay me for the property, Mr. Amsden?"

Jake Amsden closed one eye and assumed a contemplative look.

"I don't know but I'd be willin' to give you five hundred dollars, Gerald. That's a good deal of money."

"Have you got that sum of money in cash, Mr. Amsden?"

"Well, not exactly, but I'll give you my note indorsed by a reliable party."

"I would wish to know the name of the party."

"Bradley Wentworth, of Seneca, Illinois. You know him as the man that was visitin' you when your father died."

"And you think he would indorse your note?"

"I know he would. He feels very friendly to me, Mr. Wentworth does."

"And you offer me five hundred dollars?"

"Yes; and say twenty-five more for interest. Come now, what do you say?"

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"I say no, Mr. Amsden. I have a letter in my pocket offering me a thousand dollars for the property."

"Who is it from?" asked Amsden, making a grammatical mistake that plenty of better educated persons also make.

"Bradley Wentworth!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Amsden in chagrin. "He promised to leave the matter in my hands."

"So you were bidding for him?"

"Well, partly for him and partly for myself."

"And you really think you have offered me a fair price?"

"Yea; you can't get as much anywhere else."

"I'll take three days to consider it, Mr. Amsden."

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In less than three days Gerald had sold his land for six thousand dollars, reserving twenty acres for himself. He allowed John Carter to remove his cabin to this tract, and at the end of a week set out on his return, with a Chicago check for six thousand dollars in his pocket. This he deposited in St. Louis, and with it made a purchase of good dividend-paying bank stock.

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CHAPTER XXXIX.

CONCLUSION.

ON his way back from Colorado Gerald stopped at Kansas City and ascertained that Victor Wentworth had recovered from his sickness and was intending to go to work on the following Monday.

"Mrs. Ferguson has agreed to take me back," he said. "She has had another boy, but she does not like him."

"You can't make any arrangements without the consent of your guardian," said Gerald smiling. "I have other views for you."

"You can't be any older than I," said Victor, "but I feel like a small boy beside you. I wish I was as strong and self-reliant as you."

"We were brought up differently, Victor. You are the son of a rich man, while my father was very poor."

"My father's wealth doesn't seem to do me any good," said Victor sadly. "He leaves me to myself, and if it had not been for you I don't know what would have become of me."

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"It will be different soon. I want you to take the next train for St. Louis with me."

"That is on the way home," said Victor, brightening.

"And I am going to take you home. I have some business with your father."

"But if father will not receive me?" suggested Victor apprehensively.

"Then I will take care of you. You will in that case have to call me papa."

Victor laughed aloud. Gerald's bright humor was infectious.

"I will if you ask me to," he said.

Gerald's plans were already laid. He wrote to Thomas Hastings to come at once to St. Louis, and three days later all three started for Chicago. There Gerald called upon Stephen Cochrane, the lawyer, who had in his possession the agreement signed by Mr. Wentworth to pay Warren Lane twenty thousand dollars in a certain contingency.

"The promise is outlawed," said the lawyer, "but with the collateral evidence which you have in your possession I don't think that Bradley Wentworth will feel like setting this up as a bar to the payment."

We must now precede Gerald to the town of Seneca, which was his ultimate destination.

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A change had come over Bradley Wentworth. He was a man of iron constitution and had never had a sick day in his life. Yet a few weeks previous the grip, which had recently ravaged the country from the Atlantic to the Pacific, attacked him, and though he had recovered from it the languor which usually follows had come upon him in an aggravated form. He found it difficult to attend to his business, and was obliged to spend half of his time reclining upon a lounge in his office.

Those who are seldom sick feel the effects of illness much more keenly than those who are frequently indisposed. Bradley Wentworth found himself depressed in an unaccountable manner. He became alarmed about himself, and feared that he would never regain his strength. What then would become of his property? Where was the boy for whom he had been laboring these many years, and whom he had fondly looked upon as his heir? He was an exile from home, suffering perhaps. Why was he an exile from his father's house? Because, as he was compelled to acknowledge, he had been harsh and stern, unnaturally severe. For, after all, what had the boy done? He had not committed a crime. He had committed an act of youthful indiscretion, for which he was heartily sorry, yet to save his own pride and gratify his vindictive disposition the father had left the boy to the cold mercies of the world. Suppose Victor should die? What lay before him but a cold and solitary life, without object and without sympathy? Too late Bradley Wentworth lamented his refusal to send Victor money when he wrote for it.

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"I must have him back," he said to himself in feverish impatience, and began to institute a search for the lost boy. But he was without a clew. He despatched a messenger to Kansas City, but he returned

without information.

It was while he was suffering from this disappointment, and anxiously considering what to do next, that a servant entered the room where he was resting after supper and presented a card.

"A young gentleman who wishes to see you," she explained.

Mechanically Bradley Wentworth scanned the card and read the name,

GERALD LANE.

"Bring him in," he said quickly.

"Probably," he thought, "Gerald has repented his refusal and is ready to enter into negotiations for the sale of his small patrimony in Colorado."

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Gerald entered the room with an easy grace, and bowed to Mr. Wentworth. The merchant could see that he was no longer the unsophisticated boy whom he had met in the Colorado mountains. Still he did not give Gerald credit for the full change which had passed over him.

"Be seated," he said. "I suppose you have come about the land your father left you in Colorado."

"No, Mr. Wentworth, I have sold this land, or at least four-fifths of it."

Wentworth looked disappointed.

"You should have accepted my offer," he said harshly.

"I should have made a very great mistake if I had," replied Gerald calmly.

"How much did you sell it for?"

"I sold four-fifths of it for six thousand dollars."

Mr. Wentworth was amazed, but he gathered strength to say, "Probably you will never get your money."

"It was paid me in cash, and I have it invested in good dividend-paying bank stock in St. Louis."

"Then," said Wentworth after a pause, "I don't understand what has brought you here."

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"I have some very important business with you, Mr. Wentworth. I have come to ask you to redeem the solemn promise made to my father to pay him twenty thousand dollars."

"This is all nonsense," said Wentworth, knitting his brows. "No such promise was ever made."

"I beg your pardon, but I can prove to the contrary."

"Perhaps you will tell me how," sneered Wentworth.

"My lawyer, Stephen Cochrane of Chicago, is at the hotel. He has in his hands the written promise."

"It is a forgery. There could be no reason for my making such an extraordinary promise."

"Do you deny, Mr. Wentworth, that you forged a check on your uncle and that my father screened you?"

"Young man, you are impudent. The check was forged by your father."

"That is untrue. The letters written by you to my father disprove that."

"Can you produce those letters?" asked Wentworth with another sneer.

"Yes, I can."

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Bradley Wentworth looked amazed.

"I don't believe it," he ejaculated.

"Mr. Wentworth," said Gerald calmly, "the letters which your agent stole from me in St. Louis were copies. The originals are in a safe deposit vault in St. Louis, or rather they were there at the time of the robbery. Now they are in Mr. Cochrane's hands."

"This is a bold game you are playing, Gerald Lane, but it won't work. No one can connect me with the forged check."

"There is one who can. Thomas Hastings, who was paying teller at the bank when it was offered."

"He is dead!" said Wentworth hastily.

"I think you are mistaken."

"Then where is he?"

"He was at Brentwood, Minnesota, till recently. It was there that

I met him a few weeks since."

"I doubt if you will find him there now," answered Wentworth, registering a resolve to send a special telegram to him to change his residence in consideration of a handsome check.

"You are right, Mr. Wentworth," was Gerald's unexpected reply. "He is in this town."

"What!" ejaculated Wentworth in dismay.

"It is as I say. He is prepared to testify that he paid you personally the money on the forged check, and that you have from time to time paid him money to keep this secret."

"No one will believe him," said Wentworth, very much perturbed.

"You can discuss that question with Mr. Cochrane. I have merely wished to let you know the strength of our case. But before I go I ought to tell you that there is another person who has come with me from the West."

"Who is it in Heaven's name?"

"It is your son Victor."

"Victor!" exclaimed Bradley Wentworth, his face radiant with joy. "Is he well? Where is he?"

"At the hotel."

"Where did you find him?"

"In Kansas City some weeks since. The poor boy was sick and unable to work. I had him leave the store where he was employed, though hardly able to stand, and I paid the expenses of his sickness. He is now well and anxious to see his father."

Bradley Wentworth's face worked convulsively. His hard heart was touched at last.

"God bless you, boy," he said; "you have restored my son to me. I shall not forget it. You can send your lawyer to me. I will do what is fair and right; I begin to think that I have been wrong all these years."

"Will you consent to authorize a statement clearing my father from any connection with the forged check?"

"Yes, as long as I am not personally implicated."

"Mr. Cochrane tells me that this can be arranged——"

"If Victor is at the hotel I will go over at once."

Victor, uneasy and anxious, saw his father coming across the street. He did not know how he would be received, but he was not left long in suspense. The father's hard heart was softened, and he felt sincerely grateful that his only child had been restored to him.

The next week the Seneca weekly published a card from Mr. Wentworth stating that a discovery had been made exonerating the late Warren Lane from the charge which had so long been laid at his door. "The guilt lies elsewhere," so the card read, "but at this late day it is unnecessary to mention the name of the actual delinquent."

The debt of honor was paid, and Warren Lane's memory was vindicated.

Gerald felt that the task to which he had consecrated his energies was accomplished, and he could rest content. He is already rich for a young man, but he cares little for money compared with his father's vindication.

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A DEBT OF HONOR: THE STORY OF GERALD LANE'S SUCCESS IN THE FAR WEST ***

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