

Horatio Alger Jr.

Digging for Gold



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Jr Horatio Alger

Digging for Gold / A Story of California

CHAPTER I

GRANT AND HIS MOTHER

“Mother, this is an important day for me,” said Grant Colburn, as he entered the kitchen with an armful of wood, and deposited it in the box behind the stove.

His mother looked up from the table where she was cutting out pie crust, and asked in surprise, “What do you mean, Grant? Why is to-day any different from ordinary days?”

“I am sixteen to-day, mother!”

“So you are, Grant. I ought to have thought of it. I am sorry,” she added wistfully, “that I haven’t got a present for you, but you know Mr. Tarbox – ”

“Is the stingiest man in the country. Yes, I know that well enough.”

“I actually haven’t a cent that I can call my own, Grant.”

“I know that very well, mother. It was an unlucky day when you married that old skinflint.”

“Don’t call him that, Grant,” said his mother, with an apprehensive look in the direction of the door.

“He’s all that, and more if possible. When did he give you any money last?”

“Two weeks ago.”

“And how much did he give you at that time?”

“Twenty-five cents.”

“What a shame! Why, if you had hired out as his housekeeper he would have been compelled to give you more.”

“Yes, Grant,” sighed Mrs. Tarbox, “I wish I were his housekeeper instead of his wife. I should be more independent.”

“He made a good bargain when he married you, mother. But I never understood why you married *him*.”

“I acted for the best, as I thought, Grant. You know how your poor father left us. After his affairs were settled, there were only two hundred and fifty dollars left, and you were but twelve years old. I took in sewing, and earned what I could, but at the end of a year I had used up a hundred dollars of our small capital. Then Mr. Tarbox asked me to marry him, and I agreed, for I thought it would give us a comfortable home.”

“A comfortable home!” repeated Grant. “We have enough to eat, it is true, but you never worked so hard in your life, and I can say the same for myself. I was barely fourteen when Mr. Tarbox took me away from school, and since then I have had to work early and late. At five o’clock, winter and summer, I have to turn out of bed, and work all day, so that when night comes I am dead tired.”

“That is true, Grant,” said his mother, with a look of distress. “You work too hard for a boy of your age.”

“And what do I get for it?” continued Grant indignantly. “I haven’t any clothes. Charlie Titus asked me the other day why I didn’t go to church. I was ashamed to tell him that it was because I had no clothes fit to wear there. It is a year since I had my last suit, and now I have grown out of it. My coat is too short in the sleeves, and my pantaloons in the legs.”

“Perhaps I can lengthen them out, Grant.”

“You did it six months ago. There is no more chance. No, I’ll tell you what I am going to do. I’ll ask Mr. Tarbox for a new suit, and as it is my birthday, perhaps he will open his heart and be generous for once.”

“It is a good plan, Grant. There he is now, out by the well curb.”

“Then I’ll speak at once. Wish me luck, mother.”

“I do, my son. I heartily wish you good luck now and always.”

Grant opened the side door, and went out into the yard. Seth Tarbox looked up, and his glance fell upon his step-son.

“Come here, Grant,” he said, “I want you to turn the grindstone while I sharpen my scythe.”

“Wait a minute, Mr. Tarbox. I want to speak to you.”

“Go ahead! You can speak if you want to,” said Tarbox, slightly surprised.

“It is my birthday to-day.”

“Is it? How old be you?”

“Sixteen.”

“A boy of sixteen ought to do a great deal of work. Why, you are ’most a man.”

“I do a good deal of work, Mr. Tarbox, but I don’t seem to get much pay for it.”

“Hey? You want pay? Why, don’t you get your victuals and clothes?”

“I get my victuals, yes. But I don’t get clothes, and that is just what I want to speak to you about.”

Mr. Tarbox began to grow uneasy. He knew what was coming.

“What have you got on, I’d like to know?” he inquired.

“Some rags and overalls,” answered Grant bluntly.

“They’re good enough to work in. You’ve got a suit to wear Sundays.”

“Have I? It’s hardly fit to wear common days. Why, it’s a year since I had the suit, and I’ve outgrown it.”

“I’m afraid you’re getting proud, Grant,” said his step-father uneasily.

“I’m not proud of my clothes, I can tell you that. Mr. Tarbox, I’ve worked for you the last year early and late, and I think I ought to have a new suit. It will make a nice birthday present.”

“Money’s very skerce, Grant,” said his step-father uneasily, “and clothes are very high. I gave twelve dollars for that last suit of yours. It came hard. Think how long it takes to earn twelve dollars. I haven’t had a suit myself for ten months.”

“But you can have one if you want it.”

“I’ll tell you what I’ll do, Grant,” said Mr. Tarbox, with a bright idea. “You’re ’most as big as I am. You’re unusually large for your age. I’ll buy a new suit for myself, and give you mine. Your mother can fix it over to fit you.”

Grant’s face assumed a look of disgust.

“Thank you, Mr. Tarbox,” he said, “but I don’t want to wear your old clothes. If I can’t have a new suit I don’t want any.”

“Pears to me you’re mighty particular.”

“I don’t think so. I only want what’s right. Most boys of my age have at least two new suits a year. Charlie Titus had three.”

“Then his father’s very foolish to gratify his love of finery. Come, we’d better go to work.”

“You haven’t answered my question yet, Mr. Tarbox.”

“What is it?” asked Tarbox peevishly.

“Will you buy me a new suit?”

“Wait two or three months, Grant.”

“Why should I wait two or three months? I need the clothes now.”

“Money may be easier then.”

“I am not willing to wait.”

“Pears to me you’re very headstrong, Grant Colburn,” said the farmer in a tone of displeasure.

“I want my rights. I won’t work if you are going to deal so closely with me.”

Seth Tarbox frowned, and looked perplexed. But presently an idea came to him and his face smoothed.

“Perhaps we can fix it, Grant,” he said in a conciliatory tone.

Grant felt encouraged. It looked as if his request were to be granted.

“I shall be very much obliged to you,” he said.

“Wait a minute! You aint got my idea. Your mother has money.”

“What if she has?” asked Grant suspiciously.

“If she will lend you ten or twelve dollars to buy a suit I’ll make it up to her in, say three or four months.”

Grant’s face darkened. He knew very well that the money never would be repaid, and he penetrated the crafty design of his step-father.

“No, Mr. Tarbox,” he said. “My mother’s money must not be touched. There’s little enough of it, and I don’t want her to run the risk of losing it.”

“But she won’t lose it. Didn’t I say I would pay it back?”

“Why can’t you advance the money yourself?”

“Didn’t I tell you money was skerce?” said Seth Tarbox irritably.

“I know you’ve got money in two savings banks, besides some railroad bonds. Tom Wilson told me the other day that you had over five thousand dollars in money and bonds.”

“Tom Wilson don’t know anything about my affairs,” said Tarbox hastily. “I’ll think it over, Grant, and mebbe – I won’t promise – I’ll see what I can do for you. Now we’ll go to work. It’s a sin to be idle.”

CHAPTER II

RODNEY BARTLETT

Mr. Tarbox's farm was located in Woodburn, rather a small town in Iowa. He was originally from Connecticut, but at the age of thirty removed to the then frontier Western State. He owned a large farm, which he had bought at the government price of one dollar and a quarter an acre. He also owned a smaller farm a mile and a half west of the one he occupied, and this he cultivated on shares. It had been a lucky purchase, for a railway intersected it, and he had obtained a large price for the land used. Besides his two farms, he had from six to seven thousand dollars in money; yet it seemed that the richer he grew the meaner he became. He had a married daughter, living in Crestville, six miles away, and when he died she and her family would no doubt inherit the miserly farmer's possessions. Like her father she was selfish and close so far as others were concerned, but she was willing to spend money on herself. She had a son about the age of Grant, who liked to wear good clothes, and was something of a dude. His name was Rodney Bartlett, and he looked down with infinite contempt on his grandfather's hard-working stepson.

Just before twelve o'clock a smart looking buggy drove into the yard. The occupants of the buggy were Rodney and his mother.

"Hey, you!" he called out to Grant, "come and hold the horse while we get out."

Grant came forward and did as he was requested. Had Rodney been alone he would not have heeded the demand, but Mrs. Bartlett's sex claimed deference, though he did not like her.

"Just go in and tell your mother we've come to dinner."

But Grant was spared the trouble, for the farmer came up at this moment.

"Howdy do, Sophia!" he said. "What sent you over?"

"I wanted to consult you about a little matter of business, father. I hope Mrs. Tarbox will have enough dinner for us."

"I reckon so, I reckon so," said Seth Tarbox, who, to do him justice, was not mean as regarded the table. "How's your husband?"

"Oh, he's ailing as usual. He's lazy and shiftless, and if it wasn't for me I don't know what would become of us."

By this time the two had entered the house. Rodney stayed behind, and glanced superciliously at Grant.

"Seems to me you're looking shabbier than ever," he said.

"You're right there," said Grant bitterly, "but it isn't my fault."

"Whose is it?"

"Your grandfather's. He won't buy me any clothes."

"Well, you're not kin to him."

"I know that, but I work hard and earn a great deal more than I get."

"I don't know about that. Maybe I can hunt up one of my old suits for you," Rodney added patronizingly.

"Thank you, but I don't want anybody's cast-off clothes; at any rate, not yours."

"You're getting proud," sneered Rodney.

"You can call it that if you like."

"Don't you wish you was me, so you could wear good clothes all the time?"

"I should like to wear the good clothes, but I'd rather be myself than anybody else."

"Some time I shall be rich," said Rodney complacently. "I shall have all grandfather's money."

"Won't it go to your mother?"

"Oh, well, she'll give it to me. I hope you don't think you and your mother will get any of it?"

“We ought to, for mother is making a slave of herself, but I don’t think we will. If your grandfather would do more for us now we wouldn’t mind inheriting anything.”

There was a tapping on the front window.

“That means dinner, I suppose,” said Grant.

“Are you going to sit down with us?” asked Rodney, eyeing Grant’s costume with disfavor.

“Yes.”

“In those clothes?”

“I haven’t time to change them. Besides my Sunday suit isn’t much better.”

At the table, toward the close of the meal, Rodney said, “Grandfather, Grant isn’t dressed very well.”

Seth Tarbox frowned.

“Has he been complaining to you?” he asked. “He’s been pesterin’ all the mornin’ about new clothes. I told him money was skerce.”

“I can save you expense, grandfather. I will give him an old suit of mine – one I have cast off.”

“Why, that’s an excellent plan,” said Tarbox, brightening up. “Do you hear that, Grant? You won’t need to buy a new suit for yourself now.”

“I don’t care for any of Rodney’s old clothes,” answered Grant, with an indignant flush.

“Sho! sho! You’re acting very contrary. Rodney’s suit is a good deal better than yours, I’ve no doubt.”

“I don’t know whether it is or not, but I’m entitled to new clothes, and I want them.”

“What do you say to that, Mrs. Tarbox?” demanded the farmer, looking over at his wife.

“I say that he is right. Grant has worked hard, Mr. Tarbox, and he ought to be decently dressed.”

“Rodney,” said his mother, “your kind offer is thrown away.”

“So I see,” said Rodney, extending his plate for another piece of pie.

“I’m sorry you take Grant’s part, Mrs. T.,” said the farmer. “I won’t countenance no extravagance. What’s the use of spending good money when a suit of clothes is offered for nothing.”

“If the suit is a good one,” retorted Grant, “why does Rodney lay it aside?”

“There is a difference between him and you,” said Mrs. Bartlett in an acid tone.

“What difference?”

“I’m a gentleman and you’re a farm boy,” said Rodney, taking it upon himself to answer.

“I shan’t always be a farm boy!”

“No, you won’t be a boy when you’re grown up,” returned Rodney, looking around to see if his joke were appreciated.

“There aint no disgrace in bein’ a farm boy,” said Seth Tarbox. “I worked on a farm myself when I was a boy, and I’ve worked on a farm ever since.”

“I’m going to college, and be a lawyer,” said Rodney in a consequential tone.

“It costs a sight of money to go to college, Sophia,” said Tarbox deprecatingly.

“I shall make a lot of money when I am a lawyer,” explained Rodney. “Why, I read in the paper that there are some lawyers that make fifty thousand dollars. Besides, I may get elected to Congress. That’s better than working on a farm. When Grant is getting fifteen dollars a month and his board, as a hired man on a farm, I will ride in my carriage, and live like a gentleman.”

“I may be a rich man myself,” interrupted Grant.

“You a rich man! Ho, ho!” laughed Rodney. “You look like it.”

“No, I don’t look like it, but I may get there all the same.”

“You talk a good deal for a boy of your age,” remarked Mrs. Bartlett in a tone of rebuke.

“No more than Rodney.”

But Grant, looking at his mother, saw that she was disturbed, and refrained from noticing any further speeches of his young antagonist.

“By the way, father,” said Mrs. Bartlett, “you remember John Heywood, of our town?”

“Yes; what of him?”

“He’s just got back from California.”

“It’s dreadful expensive goin’ to California.”

“That isn’t of much account if you can bring back a lot of money.”

“Did John Heywood bring back a lot of money?” asked the farmer, pricking up his ears.

“He brought back ten thousand dollars.”

“Sho! How you talk!”

“It’s true, every word of it.”

“How did he make it?”

“Mining, I believe. He’s bought the Ezra Jones place, and is going to put up a nice house.”

Among the most interested listeners was Grant Colburn. His color went and came, and he seemed excited.

“How long was Mr. Heywood in California,” he asked.

“About a year. He was gone a good deal longer, for he went across the plains, and it took four months. He came back across the Isthmus.”

“I would like to go California,” said Grant thoughtfully.

“*You* go to California! A boy like you!” repeated Mrs. Bartlett scornfully. “What could you do?”

“I could make more money than I do here,” answered Grant with spirit.

“I reckon you won’t go in a hurry,” said Seth Tarbox composedly. “You haven’t money enough to get you twenty-five miles, and I s’pose it’s as much as two thousand miles from Iowa to Californy.”

Grant felt that there was a good deal of truth in his step-father’s words, but the idea had found lodgment in his brain, and was likely to remain there.

“I mean to go sometime!” he said resolutely.

“You’d better start right off after dinner!” said Rodney in a sneering tone.

CHAPTER III

A TERRIBLE RESPONSIBILITY

“Grant, you may go over to the other farm and ask Luke Weldon for the pitchfork he borrowed of me last week. There’s no knowing how long he would keep it if I didn’t send for it.”

“All right, sir.”

“Rodney can walk with you if he wants to.”

“Thank you,” said Rodney, shrugging his shoulders, “but I don’t care to walk a mile and a half for a pitchfork. I’ll go part way, though, to the village.”

The two boys started out together. Rodney looked askance at his companion’s poor clothes.

“You’re foolish not to take the suit I offered you,” he said. “Its a good deal better than yours.”

“I presume it is.”

“Then why don’t you want it?”

“Because it will prevent your grandfather buying me a new one.”

“Have you asked him?”

“Yes, I asked him this morning.”

“What did he say?”

“That he would buy a new one for himself, and have his best suit cut down for me.”

Rodney laughed.

“You’d look like a fright,” he said.

“I think so myself,” assented Grant with a smile.

“You’d better take mine than his. Grandfather isn’t much like a dude in dress.”

“No; he tells me that I dress as well as he.”

“So you do, nearly. However, it does not make much difference how an old man like him dresses.”

Rodney rather approved of his grandfather’s scanty outlay on dress, for it would enable him to leave more money to his mother and himself.

“Do you know how old grandfather is?” asked Rodney.

“I believe he is sixty-nine.”

“That’s pretty old. He won’t live many years longer probably. Then the property will come to mother and me.”

“Shall you come to live on the farm?”

“Not much. Mother says she’ll sell both farms, and then we may go to Chicago to live.”

Grant did not like Mr. Tarbox, but he was rather disgusted to hear his grandson speculate so coolly about his death.

“Don’t you think grandfather is failing?” continued Rodney.

“I don’t know that he is,” answered Grant coldly.

“Mother thinks he’s got kidney disease. Old men are very apt to have that trouble.”

“I never heard him complain of being sick.”

By this time the two boys had reached the village.

“I think I’ll drop into the drug store,” said Rodney. “They keep cigarettes there, don’t they?”

“I believe so.”

“Mother don’t like me to smoke, but I do it on the sly. I’ll give you a cigarette, if you want one,” he said, in an unusual fit of generosity.

“Thank you, but I don’t smoke.”

“It’s just as well, for you are poor and couldn’t afford to buy cigarettes. Well, I suppose you’ve got to go on.”

“Yes.”

So the two boys parted. Rodney entered the drug store, and not only bought a package of cigarettes, but drank a glass of soda water. It did not occur to him to offer Grant soda water, for that would have cost a nickel, while a cigarette was inexpensive.

“Somehow I don’t like Rodney,” said Grant to himself as he walked along. “He seems anxious to have his grandfather die in order to get hold of the property. I wouldn’t want to feel that way about anybody, though money would be very acceptable.”

Grant walked a mile farther till he reached the farm. Luke Weldon, who had taken it on shares, was in the yard.

“Well, Grant, have you come to see me?” he asked with a good-natured smile.

“Yes, Mr. Weldon. Mr. Tarbox wants his pitchfork, which you borrowed last week.”

“Was the old man afraid he wouldn’t get it back?”

“Perhaps so.”

“He doesn’t mean to let anybody get the advantage of him. Well, come to the barn with me, and I’ll give it to you.”

Grant followed Luke to the barn, and received the borrowed article.

“It beats all how suspicious Seth Tarbox is,” continued Luke. “You know I run this farm on shares. The old man is dreadfully afraid I shall cheat him in the division of the crop. He comes over spying round from time to time. How do you like working for him?”

“Not at all,” answered Grant bluntly.

“Does he pay you any wages?”

“I work for my board and clothes, but I don’t get any clothes. Look at me.”

“The old man is awful close. I sometimes ask myself how it is all to end. He stints himself and his family, and all his money will go to his daughter Sophia and her boy.”

“They are over there to-day.”

“How do you like the boy?”

“About as much as his grandfather.”

“He’s a disagreeable young cub, and about as mean as the old man.”

“He offered me a cigarette this morning,” said Grant smiling.

“Did you accept?”

“No, I do not smoke. He offered me one of his old suits, too, but it was only to save his grandfather the expense of buying me a new one.”

“I suppose you accepted that.”

“No, I didn’t. I will have a new suit or none at all.”

“I like your spirit. I wish I could have you to work for me.”

“I would rather work for you than for Mr. Tarbox, but there is one thing I would like better still.”

“What is that?”

“To go to California.”

“What put that into your head?”

“Mrs. Bartlett was mentioning that John Heywood had just got back, bringing ten thousand dollars in gold.”

“Sho! You don’t say so.”

“And he bought a farm and is going to put up a new house.”

“Some men are lucky, that’s a fact. Ten thousand dollars, and he’s only just turned thirty. Well, I wish I were in his shoes.”

“I mean to go to California some time.”

“But how will you go? It costs money to go so far.”

“That’s true, and I don’t know where the money is coming from, but I mean to get there all the same.”

“If you had the money Seth Tarbox wouldn’t let you use it for that.”

“I’d like to see him stop me!” said Grant, nodding his head with emphasis.

“Well, I wish you luck, Grant, but I reckon it’ll be a good many years before you get to California.”

Privately Grant was of the same opinion, but the idea had entered his mind, and was not likely to be dislodged.

There were two ways of going home, one through the village, the same way he came, and the other across the railroad and over the fields. This was no shorter, but there was a variety in it, and Grant decided that he should take it.

A hundred feet from the place where he crossed the railroad there was a bridge spanning the creek, not wide, but lying some twenty feet below. The bridge was about fifty feet long.

As Grant gave a careless glance at the structure, which he was not intending to cross, he saw something that startled him. The supports of the further end of the bridge had given way, and it hung, partially fallen, supported only from the other end. It was clear that no train could pass over it in its present condition without being precipitated into the creek below.

“Good Heavens,” thought Grant, “there’ll be an accident! I wonder what could have weakened the bridge.”

It was useless speculating about this point. The danger was imminent, for in less than ten minutes a train was due.

Grant thought of going to the village and giving the alarm, but there was no time. Before he could return the train would have arrived, if on time, and the accident would have happened.

“What shall I do?” Grant asked himself in excitement. “The engineer will have no warning, and the train will push on at its usual speed.”

A vision of the wrecking of the train and the death of innocent and unsuspecting passengers rose before Grant’s mind, and he felt that the catastrophe must be averted if possible. If only some one would come along with whom to consult. But he was alone, and on his young shoulders rested a terrible responsibility.

What could he do?

CHAPTER IV

GRANT SAVES THE TRAIN

“I must signal to the engineer in some way,” thought Grant. “How shall I do it?”

He felt in his pocket and found that he had a white handkerchief of large size. He wore a soft felt hat. This he took off, spread the handkerchief over it, and then lifted it in the air on the tines of the pitchfork. Then he sought a place where he might attract the attention of the engineer.

About two hundred feet from the bridge there was a small eminence on one side of the railroad. It was just in front of a curve, and this seemed to Grant the best place to station himself. He posted himself there, raised the pitchfork, and waited anxiously for the train.

By and by he heard the cars approaching. His heart was in his mouth.

“Will they see me?” he asked himself. “If not –” but he could not bear to think of the alternative.

As the train drew nearer and nearer he began to wave the hat vigorously, shouting at the same time, though he knew that his voice would be drowned by the thunderous noise of the train.

Nearer and nearer came the train. Would it stop?

All at once his heart was filled with joy, for the train began to slow up, and stopped just a little beyond where he was standing.

Grant ran forward till he was abreast with the engine.

“What’s the matter, boy?” demanded the engineer, half inclined to be angry. “If you are playing a trick on me, I’ll give you a good horse-whipping.”

“It’s no trick,” answered Grant earnestly. “The bridge just ahead is broken down.”

“Good Heavens! is this true?”

“Get out and see for yourself.”

The engineer lost no time in following Grant’s advice. He and his young guide walked forward, and he saw that Grant’s information was correct.

“It’s a narrow escape,” he said slowly. “The train would have been wrecked, and by this time in all probability I should have been a dead man.”

By this time a number of passengers, curious to know what had happened, and why the train had stopped so suddenly, got off the cars and advanced to where the engineer stood with Grant at his side.

“What’s the matter,” asked the first man.

“You can see for yourself,” answered the engineer, pointing to the bridge.

“Good Heavens!”

“You’ve been as near death as you probably ever will be without meeting it.”

“And what saved us?”

“This boy,” said the engineer, pointing to Grant. “But for him, some of us would be dead men at this moment.”

Grant blushed, for all eyes were fixed on him.

“It was lucky I was here and discovered the broken bridge,” he said.

“Gentlemen,” said a portly, gray-haired man, a clergyman, “this boy has under Providence been the means of saving our lives. He deserves a reward.”

“So he does! So he does!” exclaimed a dozen men heartily.

“Let me set the example,” and the minister took off his hat and deposited therein a five dollar bill. “I am not a rich man – ministers seldom are – but what I give, I give with all my heart.”

“Here is another!” said the engineer. “I am perhaps under deeper obligations than any one.”

“Let me contribute!” said a sweet-faced old lady, and she dropped another five-dollar bill into the minister’s hat.

Then the passengers generally brought forward their contributions, though some were able to give but a silver coin. There was one notable exception: One man, when he saw what was going forward, quietly shrunk away, and got back into the train.

“Who’s that man,” asked the engineer sharply.

“I know,” said an Irishman, who out of his poverty had given a dollar. “It’s Mr. Leonard Buckley, of New York. He’s worth a million. He is rich enough to buy us all up.”

“No matter how much money he possesses, he is a poor man,” said the minister significantly.

“He’s given all his life is worth to the world,” said a passenger cynically. “When he dies he won’t be missed.”

“And now, my young friend,” said the clergyman to Grant, “let me make over to you this collection of money as a small acknowledgement from the passengers of this train of the great service you have rendered us.”

While the collection was being taken up, Grant stood as if dazed. All had passed so suddenly that he could not realize what it meant. Now he found a voice to speak.

“I don’t think I ought to take it,” he said. “I didn’t do it for money.”

“Of course you didn’t!” said the clergyman. “If you had, your act would have been far less commendable, though it might have been as effective. I think you need not hesitate to take the money.”

“Take it, take it!” said more than one.

So Grant took the hat, and held it awkwardly for a moment, hardly knowing what to do with the contents till some one suggested, “Put it in your own hat!”

Grant did so, and then the engineer went forward to examine the bridge more carefully, and decide what had better be done.

There was no further reason for Grant to remain, and he walked a little distance away and began to count his money. There were one hundred and forty dollars in bills, and about twelve dollars in silver.

“One hundred and fifty-two dollars!” said Grant, elated. “Now,” and his face brightened up, “now I can go to California!”

But what should he do with the money? He felt that it would not be prudent to carry it home, for his step-father would be sure to claim it. He might hide it somewhere, but there was danger that it would be discovered, and lost. Finally, he decided to carry it to Luke Weldon, and ask him to keep it for him for the present. Luke was a poor man, but he was thoroughly honest. There was no one in town who would not sooner have trusted him than Seth Tarbox, though Seth had twenty dollars to his one.

When Grant entered the farm-yard again, Luke looked up with surprise.

“What brings you back, Grant?” he asked.

“I want to ask a favor of you, Mr. Weldon.”

“I am always ready to do you a favor, Grant.”

“Will you keep some money for me?”

Luke Weldon was surprised. He knew pretty well how Grant was situated, and that money must be a scarce article with him. Perhaps, however, he had a little extra change which he was afraid of losing, he reflected.

“All right, Grant!” was his reply. “I’ll keep it for you. How much is it?”

When Grant began to draw the bills out of his pocket, Luke’s eyes opened with amazement.

“Where did you get all this money, Grant?” he asked. “You haven’t been – no, I can’t believe it possible you’ve been robbing the old man.”

“I should think not,” returned Grant indignantly. “I haven’t sunk so low as that.”

“But where did you get it? Why didn’t you ask me to take charge of it when you were here before?”

“Because I didn’t have it.”

“Have you got it since?”

“Yes.”

“Then you found it somewhere. It must belong to some one who hid it.”

“No, it doesn’t. It was given to me.”

“I want to believe you, Grant, and I never knew you to tell a lie, but it aint easy, boy, it aint easy. If you don’t tell me where and how you got it, I can’t agree to keep it for you. It might be stolen money for aught I know.”

“Then I’ll tell you, Luke. When I crossed the railroad I found the bridge was broken. I signalled the train just in time to stop it’s going across.”

“Sho! you don’t say! Then but for you the train would have been wrecked?”

“Yes.”

“I’m proud of you, Grant! Give me your hand. Why, boy, you’ve saved fifty lives, perhaps.”

“That’s what the engineer said.”

“But about the money – ”

“The passengers took up a contribution, and here it is.”

“How much is there?”

“As near as I can tell, for I counted it in a hurry, there’s a hundred and fifty-two dollars.”

“And you deserve it all, Grant. Yes, I’ll keep it for you, and give it back whenever you ask for it.”

“I was afraid Mr. Tarbox might try to get it away from me.”

“So he would, I make no doubt. He won’t get it from me, I’ll tell you that.”

“Now I must be getting home. I’ve been away a long time.”

When Grant approached the farm-house, Rodney, who was standing in front of the house, hailed him.

“Say, there’s a rod in pickle for you. Grandfather’s awfully mad at your staying so long.”

CHAPTER V

GRANT ORDERS A NEW SUIT

Grant listened to what Rodney said, but Mr. Tarbox's anger did not signify as much to him as it would have done a few hours earlier. The money he possessed made him feel independent.

Seth Tarbox appeared at the door, ready to empty the vials of his wrath on Grant's devoted head.

"So you've been loiterin' on the way, have you?" he said harshly. "You've been twice as long as you need to be."

"Well, perhaps I have," Grant admitted coolly.

"So you own up to it, do you?"

"Of course I do."

"And what excuse have you?"

"Do you expect me to work *all* the time?"

"I expect you to earn your board and clothes."

"I earn them both, and more too, but I don't get the clothes."

"Hey? Oh, I see. You loitered because I wouldn't buy you a suit of clothes," snarled Seth.

"You can take it that way if you want to," said Grant.

"What's got into you, Grant Colburn? 'Pears to me you are mighty independent all at once."

"That's the way I feel."

"You seem to forget that but for me you wouldn't have a home."

"When you get tired of providing me with a home, Mr. Tarbox, I will find one somewhere else."

"So you think, but if you leave my home you'll become a poor tramp."

Rodney laughed.

"I guess you're right, grandfather," he said.

Grant darted a look at him which showed that he understood the nature of his feelings.

"Well," he said, "I'll take the risk."

"I don't take back the offer of a suit of clothes, Grant," said Rodney smoothly. "I'll bring 'em over the next time I come."

"Yes, do, Rodney," put in his grandfather.

"You needn't take the trouble, Rodney," said Grant. "I shan't wear the suit if you bring it."

"I suppose you expect I'll buy you a new one," sneered Seth Tarbox.

"No, I don't."

"Then you are content to go as you are?"

"No, I shall have a new suit in a few days, if I have to pay for it myself."

"You're welcome to do that," responded Seth in a tone of satisfaction, for he concluded that Grant's mother would pay the bill, and that suited him.

No more was said to Grant on the subject of his delay in returning from the other farm. He had occasion a little later to go on an errand, and called at the village tailor's.

"Mr. Shick," he said, "I want you to make me up a good serviceable suit. How much will it cost?"

"It depends on the cloth, Grant. Here is a remnant that will wear like iron. I can make it up in two styles, according to the trimmings, seventeen dollars or twenty."

"I want a good suit, and will pay twenty."

The tailor was rather surprised, for he knew that Grant's step-father was a thoroughly mean man.

"Mr. Tarbox is getting liberal, isn't he?" he inquired. "That's more than he pays for his own suits."

“He isn’t going to pay for mine.”

“Oh, it’s your mother, then.”

“No, I shall pay for it myself.”

“Will it be cash down?”

“Yes.”

“I am glad you are so well off, Grant,” said Mr. Shick, puzzled.

“So am I. You may rest assured that you won’t have to wait for your money.”

“Then I’ll do a good job. You shall have as nice a suit as any boy in the village. You deserve it, too, Grant, for you’re a hard-working boy.”

“Just say that to Mr. Tarbox when you meet him,” said Grant, smiling, “for I am afraid he doesn’t fully appreciate me.”

As Grant left the tailor’s shop he met Rodney at the door. Rodney found the farm rather a slow place, and had made a second visit to the village.

“Hallo,” he exclaimed, “have you been into the tailor’s?”

“Yes,”

“I suppose you had business there.”

“I had.”

“What was it?”

“You can ask Mr. Shick, if you like. I’m in a hurry.”

Rodney decided to act on this suggestion.

“How do you do, Mr. Shick?” he said politely, for he wanted to get some information. “I see Grant has just been in here.”

“Yes.”

“Are you going to make him a suit?”

“Yes.”

Rodney was surprised.

“Would you mind showing me the cloth?” he asked. “I might like to get a suit myself.”

“I shall be happy to fill your order. This is the cloth.”

“It looks pretty good.”

“Yes, it is of excellent quality.”

“How much do you charge for a suit off this cloth?”

“Twenty dollars is what I charged Grant.”

It must be explained that Shick, being in the country, was obliged to put his prices a good deal lower for the same article than if he lived in the city.

“Well, I hope you’ll get your pay,” said Rodney shortly.

“I shan’t trouble myself about that. Grant is an honest boy.”

“Well, I’m glad you feel so confident.”

Rodney left the shop abruptly, and, going into the street, came face to face with his grandfather.

“Grandfather,” he said, “I’ve got some news for you.”

“Have you, Rodney? What is it?”

“Grant has ordered a suit of Mr. Shick, for which the price is twenty dollars.”

“You don’t mean it?” ejaculated the farmer.

“Yes, I do. I suppose the bill will be sent to you,” added Rodney, desirous of making trouble.

“I won’t pay it!” exclaimed Seth Tarbox excitedly.

“You’d better see Mr. Shick about it.”

Seth Tarbox entered the shop, looking flurried.

“Is it true, Mr. Shick,” he said abruptly, “that Grant has ordered a twenty-dollar suit of you?”

“Yes, Mr. Tarbox.”

“If you expect me to pay for it, you’ll be disappointed. Did Grant tell you to charge it to me?”

“No; he said he would pay for it himself.”

“I suppose he expects to get the money out of his mother,” continued Mr. Tarbox, feeling somewhat relieved. “It will be a shame to make her pay so much. Why, I don’t pay that for my own suits.”

“Why don’t you?” asked the tailor bluntly. “You can afford it.”

“I don’t believe in throwing away money,” answered Seth shortly.

“You wouldn’t. This suit of Grant’s will wear like iron.”

“It’s all foolish extravagance. Rodney, my grandson, offered to give him one of his old cast-off suits.”

Mr. Shick smiled.

“Probably Grant thought he would prefer a new one.”

“But it’s wasteful extravagance.”

“Mr. Tarbox, you need a new suit yourself. You’d better let me make you one. You don’t want your step-son to outshine you.”

“I’ll see about it. I can make the old one do a little longer.”

When Mr. Tarbox got home he at once tackled his wife.

“Mrs. T.,” he said, “I’m surprised at your letting Grant order a twenty-dollar suit. Truly a fool and his money are soon parted, as the saying is.”

“I don’t know what you mean, Mr. Tarbox, and I’ll thank you not to call me a fool,” she added, with a flash of spirit.

“You mean to say you haven’t authorized Grant to order a twenty-dollar suit at Mr. Shick’s?”

“Grant hasn’t asked me to buy him a suit?”

“Well, he’s ordered one, for Mr. Shick told me so. It aint possible that he’s going to trust that boy. I don’t understand it.”

“Nor do I. I will speak to Grant about it.”

Mrs. Tarbox felt anxious, for the story seemed strange and almost incredible. It did not seem like Grant, but still she knew that he was very anxious to have a new suit. She would have been willing to advance ten dollars to buy him a ready-made one, but twenty dollars in her circumstances would be extravagant.

Just then Grant entered the room.

“Grant,” she said, “have you ordered a suit at Mr. Shick’s?”

“Yes, mother.”

“At twenty dollars?”

“Yes, mother.”

“How could you be so inconsiderate? Mr. Tarbox will not pay for it, and I cannot afford to pay so high a price.”

“Don’t be worried, mother,” said Grant quietly, “*I shall pay for it myself.*”

CHAPTER VI

SETH TARBOX MAKES A DISCOVERY

Two pairs of eyes were fixed upon Grant in wonderment – those of his mother and Mr. Tarbox.

“Are you crazy, Grant Colburn?” asked Mr. Tarbox.

“Not that I know of, Mr. Tarbox.”

“Do you mean to say you have got twenty dollars to pay for your suit?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Show it to me.”

“I haven’t got the money with me.”

“Where is it, then?”

“I decline to tell.”

“Do you know, Grant, that I, as your step-father, and natural guardian, have a right to make you tell?”

“No, I don’t. At any rate, I shan’t tell.”

“You’re getting dreadful contrary lately, Grant. Mrs. T., I think we are going to have trouble with that boy. Of course Mr. Shick won’t be paid, and he’ll send in his bill to you or me likely. He can’t make us pay, for he has trusted a minor without consultin’ his parents or guardians. I wash my hands of the matter.”

So saying, Mr. Tarbox left the room.

“Grant,” said his mother, “I can’t help feeling anxious. It does seem a crazy idea for you to order a twenty-dollar suit.”

“Why should it, mother?”

“When you have no money to pay for it.”

“Mother, did you ever know me to tell a lie?”

“No, Grant.”

“Then, when I tell you that I’ve got money enough to pay for this suit, and more, too, you can believe me.”

“Was it got honestly, Grant?”

“Of course it was.”

“And the money is really and truly yours?”

“It is.”

“Are you willing to tell me where you got it?”

“Not just yet, mother. I will before long.”

“Well, Grant, I will trust your word,” said Mrs. Tarbox, relieved, “and I am really glad of your good fortune.”

“You won’t worry any more, then, mother?”

“No, Grant.”

“I am glad you haven’t lost confidence in me.”

Grant took an opportunity, after supper, to go to Luke Weldon’s, and draw twenty-five dollars. On his way back he called at the tailor’s, and paid Mr. Shick for his suit in advance. The remaining five dollars, in silver, he kept in his pocket.

“It is so long since I carried any money,” he said to himself, “that I want to know how it seems.”

Meanwhile Jotham Perry, a neighbor, called at the farm-house on an errand.

“That’s a pretty bad thing, the breaking down of the railroad bridge, isn’t it?”

“I haven’t heard of it,” said Seth Tarbox, pricking up his ears.

“Sho! I thought everybody knew it.”

“How did it happen?”

“I don’t know, except it gave way from old age. It’s long been shaky.”

“When was it found out?”

“This afternoon, just before the accommodation train came along. I tell you it was a narrow escape for the train. They stopped just a few rods before they got to the bridge.”

“What made them stop? How did the engineer come to suspect?”

“It seems a boy came along that way, and saw the condition of the bridge, and signalled the train.”

“A boy?”

“Yes. He had a pitchfork, and stuck his hat and a handkerchief on the tines, and so attracted the engineer’s attention.”

Mr. Tarbox opened his eyes wide, and a sudden revelation came to him.

“Why, it must have been Grant,” he said.

“Didn’t he tell you anything about it?”

“No.”

“I heerd the passengers took up a collection for the boy, whoever he was. He must have got as much as twenty-five dollars.”

“That’s where Grant’s money came from,” exclaimed Seth Tarbox, slapping his leg vigorously. “He’s gone and ordered a twenty-dollar suit, and been hintin’ mysteriously that he’d got money enough to pay for it.”

“Yes, I suppose that explains it. Well, the boy needs a new suit and he’s earned it easy.”

“But it’s such a foolish way of spendin’ his money. My grandson Rodney offered him a suit of his for nothin’, and he might have given me the money to keep for him.”

“Yes, he might,” said Jotham with a queer smile, “but I think if I’d been in Grant’s place I’d have done the same thing he did.”

Mr. Perry went away directly afterward, and Seth Tarbox sought his wife.

“Where is Grant, Mrs. T.?”

“He went out to walk after his chores were done, but he didn’t say where he was going.”

“I’ve found out where he got his money,” said Seth, nodding his head.

“Where, then? He didn’t do anything wrong, I am sure.”

“Well, no, not in gettin’ the money, but he’d ought to have consulted me before bein’ so extravagant.”

“Where did he get the money?”

“He found out the bridge was broken, and signalled the train and saved it from being wrecked.”

Mrs. Tarbox’s eyes sparkled with maternal pride.

“It was a noble act,” she said.

“The passengers took up a contribution, and Jotham Perry thinks Grant got about twenty-five dollars.”

“He deserved it.”

“Well, I’m glad he got it, but he had no right to spend it himself. Ther’s one thing that don’t occur to you, Mrs. T. What he did was done in time, and he lost at least an hour by the delay it cost. You know yourself how late he came home.”

“What is that, Mr. Tarbox, to the lives of the passengers and the safety of the train?”

“You don’t understand me, Mrs. T. Under the circumstances I think I ought to have half the money he received.”

“Mr. Tarbox!” exclaimed his wife in profound disgust.

“That’s so, and of course if I had it he wouldn’t have no twenty dollars to throw away on a suit of clothes.”

“You forget, Mr. Tarbox, that it has saved you the money you would have to pay for a new suit for him.”

“It has saved me nothing. I wouldn’t have bought him a new suit. My grandson, Rodney, was goin’ to give him one of his old suits. Now I think of it, I’ll go down and see Mr. Shick and warn him not to make up the suit, tellin’ him that Grant can’t pay for it with my permission.”

“That will be a mean thing to do, Seth Tarbox.”

Mrs. Tarbox always called her husband by his full name when she had occasion to feel displeased with him.

“You and I don’t look on things in the same way, Mrs. T.,” said her husband calmly. “I’ll go and see Mr. Shick at once.”

The tailor shop was still open for business when Mr. Tarbox entered.

“Well, Mr. Tarbox, have you come to pick out a suit for yourself?”

“No, I haven’t. Have you cut out Grant’s suit yet?”

“Yes; it is nearly finished.”

“Then I’m sorry for you. You mustn’t make it up?”

“Why not?”

“Because I shall forbid the boy to pay for it. He’s got the money, as I’ve found out, but part of it belongs to me, and I won’t have him spendin’ it so extravagantly.”

“I shan’t be able to oblige you, Mr. Tarbox. The suit will be made up, as I agreed, and delivered to Grant.”

“Well, you’ll be takin’ a risk. I’ve warned you that you won’t get your pay.”

“You are behind the times, Mr. Tarbox. You have taken your walk for nothing. The suit is already paid for.”

“*What!*” ejaculated Mr. Tarbox.

“It is just as I said. Grant has paid me for the suit in advance. I advise you to give me an order and do the same thing.”

Mr. Tarbox felt that he had been outwitted. He persuaded himself that Grant had treated him meanly. Of course there was no resource. He was too wise to ask Mr. Shick to refund the money, for he knew he would not do it. He found nothing to say, and shuffled out, looking down in the mouth.

“There goes the meanest man in town!” soliloquized the tailor, as his visitor walked slowly down the road. “Grant must have a pretty uncomfortable time at home. I am glad that in this case the boy has got the better of his step-father.”

“He’s got five dollars left,” reflected Mr. Tarbox. “I’d ought to have that, for it was in my time that he earned the money. I’ll go upstairs and get it to-night when Grant is asleep.”

Grant went to bed about nine o’clock, for he was tired out, and he was soon asleep.

Usually he did not wake up at all till morning, but it so happened that this night he waked up about eleven, and saw Mr. Tarbox rummaging in the pocket of his pantaloons.

He hardly knew whether to feel amused or indignant.

“What are you doing here, Mr. Tarbox?” he demanded in a voice which he made purposely loud.

CHAPTER VII

GRANT MAKES UP HIS MIND

Mr. Tarbox had not bargained for Grant's being awake, and he had the grace to look ashamed, but he put a bold face on it.

"I've come for the rest of the money you got for stoppin' the train," he said.

"What right have you to it, Mr. Tarbox," said Grant, more amused than surprised. "It was given to me."

"Mebbe it was, but you stopped the train in my time, and I'd ought to have half the money."

"You can't have it, Mr. Tarbox."

"I know you've fooled away twenty dollars on a new suit, when you might have had Rodney's; but you got as much as twenty-five dollars, so Jotham Perry said."

"How did he find out?" asked Grant in artful surprise.

"Then you did get twenty-five?"

"Yes."

"So I thought. Well, I want you to give me the five. You came home an hour late."

"And you charge me five dollars for an hour? If you'll pay me at that rate, Mr. Tarbox, I'll work for you all my life."

"Quit your foolin', Grant Colburn," said Seth, feeling that logic was against him. "I'm your guardian, and I claim the money. I'll keep four dollars of it for you."

"The fact is, Mr. Tarbox, I've disposed of part of the money. I've only got a dollar left."

This was true, for Grant had given his mother four dollars, to buy a new print dress.

"What did you do with it?" asked his step-father, disappointed.

"I gave it to mother."

"You'd ought to have given it to me."

"I don't think so."

"Where's the other dollar?"

"It's in my vest pocket."

Seth Tarbox thrust his fingers into the pocket of Grant's vest, and drew out two silver half-dollars. It was better than nothing, but he felt disappointed.

"I'll take this," he said, "to pay for your time."

"You are welcome to it, but don't you think you could spare me one half-dollar?" asked Grant meekly.

"When you've gone and spent twenty for a suit? No, I guess not. You can think yourself pretty lucky to get as much as you did."

Seth Tarbox took the candle, and went slowly down stairs. Grant was so much amused by the way in which he had outwitted his step-father that he laughed loud enough for Mr. Tarbox to hear.

"That's a queer boy," said Tarbox to himself. "I don't think he's exactly right in his head. I'd ought to have got more than one dollar out of all the money the passengers raised for him; but still it's something."

When Grant came down stairs to breakfast the next morning he looked very cheerful, in spite of losing his money the night before, and laughed two or three times, without any apparent reason for doing so. Mr. Tarbox had suggested to his wife the propriety of giving up to him half the money she had received from Grant, but Mrs. Tarbox, yielding as she generally was, had positively refused. Indeed, Grant had made her promise to do so.

Grant's new suit was finished in time for him to wear it on Sunday. He had great satisfaction in entering the village church decently clothed. Indeed, he felt that he was as well dressed as any boy in town, and this was for him a decidedly new sensation.

Grant had one hundred and twenty-seven dollars left in the hands of Luke Weldon. He withdrew ten dollars, and bought some shirts and underclothing. This did not come to the notice of Mr. Tarbox, who was under the impression that Grant's stock of money was exhausted. Had he known the truth, he would have moved heaven and earth to get hold of the balance of Grant's little fortune.

Grant was anxious to see John Heywood, the returned Californian. He was more than ever determined to leave the service of his step-father, and make a bold stroke for a fortune. All day he thought of the Golden State of the Pacific Coast, and all night he dreamed of it. For him it had the greatest fascination. The idea of wandering across the continent to this wonderful new land became strengthened, and he felt that, with the sum he had at command, he would be able to do it. He spoke of it to his mother privately, and, though it made her feel anxious, he succeeded in persuading her that it would be for the best.

But he could do nothing without seeing John Heywood, and getting more information. He thought of going to Crestville, and accordingly, one morning after breakfast, he started without notifying Mr. Tarbox, and walked the whole distance – six miles.

Mr. Heywood lived half a mile this side of the village, and Grant had the luck to find him at home.

“Good-morning, Grant,” said the young man. “What brings you to Crestville so early?”

“I came to see you, Mr. Heywood.”

“You did? Well, I'm glad to see you. Won't you come into the house?”

“No, I'll sit down here,” and Grant took a seat on a wood horse, while Heywood leaned against the well curb, and waited for his young visitor to open his business.

“I hear you have been very lucky in California, Mr. Heywood.”

“Yes,” answered the young man, with complacency. “I brought home ten thousand dollars. It makes me feel like a rich man. I'm only twenty-nine, and I didn't look to be worth that sum before I was sixty-nine. A clear gain of forty years!” he added with a laugh.

“You got it by digging gold, didn't you?”

“Yes.”

“And I suppose there's more gold in California? You didn't take it all?”

“I should say not. There's piles, and piles of it left.”

“Is digging gold very hard work? Is it too hard for a boy?”

“You don't mean to say you're thinkin' of goin' to California yourself?” said Heywood quickly.

“Yes, I do.”

“Well, you're a good, stout boy. I don't see why you should not succeed. But you'll have to work hard.”

“I am willing to.”

“What will your folks say?”

“Mother has given her consent. As for Mr. Tarbox, my step-father, he hasn't got anything to say about it.”

“You are working for him now, aren't you?”

“Yes, I'm working for my board and clothes. The board is fair enough, but he is not willing to give me any clothes.”

“That's a nice suit you have on.”

“So it is, but I had to buy it with my own money. He hasn't spent but ten dollars for my clothing in a whole year.”

“I've heard he was a mean man.”

“He thinks everything of a dollar. Mother made a great mistake in marrying him.”

“Then, under the circumstances, Grant, I don’t know as I blame you. But, you know, it takes money to go to California.”

“I know that. How much did it cost you?”

“I went across the plains. By the time I reached the mines I had spent about ninety dollars.”

“Ninety dollars!” repeated Grant in a tone of satisfaction. “But how am I to go, even if I have the money. I can’t start across the plains alone.”

“No, of course not. It’s always better to have a little company. There’s a family goin’ from this town in about a week – Mr. Cooper’s family. I am sure they will be willing to have you go with them. Shall I speak to them about it?”

“Yes, I wish you would.”

Much pleased, Grant set out on his long walk home. He found his step-father furious at his absence.

“Where have you been, Grant?” he demanded.

“Over to Crestville.”

“You’ve taken ’most a day of my time. It’s a shame! I can’t afford to take care of you, and give you victuals and clothes, when you’re playin’ truant half the time.”

“I don’t expect you to, Mr. Tarbox. I don’t want you to lose money by me,” said Grant demurely, “so I’ve made up my mind to leave you.”

“To leave me?” ejaculated Seth Tarbox, aghast. “Where are you goin’?”

“I’m going to California!”

Seth Tarbox dropped the hoe he had in his hand, and stared at Grant as though the boy had taken leave of his senses.

CHAPTER VIII

ALL IS SETTLED

“Goin’ to Californy!” ejaculated Mr. Tarbox in a dazed tone.

“Yes. I’ve seen John Heywood – that’s what I went to Crestville for – and he tells me there’s a chance for a boy to make money out there.”

“Goin’ to walk, I s’pose,” said Seth satirically.

“I’m going across the plains, if that’s what you mean.”

“Where are you goin’ to get the money? It will cost a good deal.”

“I have made arrangements about the money.”

“Is John Heywood goin’ to supply you with funds?”

“I’d rather not tell,” answered Grant mysteriously. He was glad that this idea had occurred to his step-father, as he did not wish him to know that he had any funds of his own.

“I don’t know as I’ll let you go,” went on Seth Tarbox slowly.

“What right have you to stop me?” demanded Grant, not very much alarmed.

“I’m your step-father.”

“Yes; but you’re not my guardian.”

“Mind, I don’t say I’ll stop you,” said Seth, for an idea had occurred to him whereby he might turn the expedition to his own advantage. Should Grant bring back a good sum of money, he meant to get control of it, and thought he should succeed on account of the boy’s being so young.

“No, Mr. Tarbox, it wouldn’t be any use.”

“Does John Heywood really think you can make it pay?”

“He says there’s piles of gold there.”

“Piles of gold!” repeated Seth Tarbox, an expression of greed stealing over his face.

“Yes, that’s what he said.”

“I wish I was a young man. I ain’t sure but I’d go myself. But I’m sixty-eight.”

“That’s a little too old to go.”

“If you are prosperous, Grant, take care of your money and bring it all home. We’ll be glad to see you back safe and prosperous, your mother and me.”

“Thank you, Mr. Tarbox.”

This conversation relieved Grant’s mind. Even if Mr. Tarbox were opposed to his going, he meant to go all the same, but it was pleasanter to have no trouble in the matter.

The next day he went to Crestville again, this time to see Jerry Cooper, as everybody called him, and his son Tom, and ascertain whether they were willing that he should join their party.

Mr. Cooper, a weather-beaten man of fifty, was at work in his yard when Grant came up. Grant knew him by sight, and bade him good-morning.

“Has John Heywood spoken to you about me?” he asked.

“Yes. You’re the boy that wants to go to Californy with us.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You look kind of rugged; I guess you can stand it,” said the blacksmith, surveying critically Grant’s broad shoulders and athletic frame.

“Yes, Mr. Cooper; I’m not a city dude. I’ve always been accustomed to hard work.”

“That’s good. There’s a good deal of hard work in goin’ across the plains.”

“How long do you think it will take to make the journey?”

“About four months.”

“It will give us a good chance to see the country – ”

“That ain’t what I’m goin’ for. When you get to be fifty years old you won’t care much about seein’ the country. You will be more practical.”

“I shall try to be practical,” said Grant, with a smile.

“It’s my belief we shall see more of the country than we care for. I wish it wasn’t so fur.”

“So do I. Some time there may be a railroad across the continent.”

Mr. Cooper shook his head.

“I never expect to see that,” he said. “It wouldn’t pay. You’re a boy, and by the time you get to be an old man there may be a railroad, but I doubt it.”

“When do you expect to start, Mr. Cooper?”

“Next Thursday. Can you be ready?”

“I could be ready to-morrow if necessary,” returned Grant promptly. “How much is it going to cost me, Mr. Cooper?” he added. “If you will tell me, I can give you the money in a lump, and you can undertake to see me through.”

“Mebbe that will be a good plan, as I shall have to lay in more supplies. We’ll say seventy-five dollars; and it will be well for you to bring a pair of blankets.”

“All right. I will give you the money now if you will give me a paper acknowledging the receipt, and what it is for.”

“Just as you say, Grant.”

Grant had brought a hundred dollars with him, and handed over to Jerry Cooper the sum he had mentioned, receiving back a receipt. This he put into his pocket with a sense of satisfaction. He felt that now the die was cast, and he was really bound for California; that he had taken the first step on the road to fortune.

On his way home he chanced to meet Rodney Bartlett. Rodney was walking with an affected step and swinging his cane. He had an idea that he was a striking figure and excited the admiration of all whom he met.

When his eyes fell on Grant, he started in genuine surprise.

“How do you happen to be over here, Grant Colburn?” he asked.

“I am here on business,” answered Grant.

“Oh, come over on an errand for my grandfather, I suppose.”

“No, I came on business of my own.”

Rodney arched his eyebrows.

“Oh, so you have business of your own?” he said, in a ironical tone.

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t think you would feel interested in it.”

“Look here, Grant, I don’t believe you have any business here at all,” said Rodney rudely.

“It makes little difference to me what you think,” returned Grant briefly.

“I think you are playing truant from the farm – that you have come over here to get rid of work. If I were grandfather I wouldn’t let you come. I’d keep you at work.”

“You are very kind and considerate, as usual, Rodney. However, you are mistaken in one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“You think I am in the employ of your grandfather.”

“I know you are a farm boy.”

“I was, but am so no longer.”

“What do you mean? Has grandfather discharged you?”

“No, I have discharged myself. I don’t expect to work for your grandfather any longer.”

“What are you going to do? Do you expect to live without work?”

“No; I expect to work harder next year than ever before.”

“I don’t understand you,” said Rodney, puzzled. “Are you trying to fool me?”

“No.”

“Then what do you mean?”

“I start next Thursday for California.”

Rodney *was* surprised.

“You – don’t – mean – it!” he ejaculated.

“It’s true.”

“Who are you going with?”

“With Jerry Cooper’s family.”

“But you can’t go without money.”

“That’s true.”

“And you haven’t got any.”

“That’s a mistake. I have all I need.”

“Where did you get it?”

“That’s my business.”

“Who put you up to going?”

“I had a talk with John Heywood. He told me he thought I would succeed in making money.”

“Oh, I see. I suppose he was fool enough to lend you the money.”

Grant smiled, but did not answer. This confirmed Rodney in his belief. He looked at Grant with envy and dislike. With the amiable desire to depress him, he said, “I predict that you’ll come back poorer than you went away.”

“It may be so, but I don’t believe it.”

When he parted with Grant, Rodney went around to John Heywood’s house, with the view of ascertaining whether he had supplied Grant with the funds necessary for his journey.

“I think you are foolish, Mr. Heywood,” Rodney began, “to lend Grant Colburn money to go to California.”

John Heywood looked up from his work.

“Who told you I had supplied him with money?” he asked.

“Well, no one.”

“Then why do you say I did?”

“He must have got the money somewhere, so I concluded you had let him have it.”

“Then you concluded wrong. He never asked me to lend him money. If he had – ”

“Well, if he had?” repeated Rodney eagerly.

“If he had, I should probably have done it. Grant Colburn’s a hardworking boy and a good fellow, and I think he’ll be happier out in California than on your grandfather’s farm.”

“It’ll be a relief to grandfather to have him go. He’s been supporting him for the last two years.”

“Grant has earned his living twice over. He’ll have to work hard in California, but he’ll be paid for it. I shouldn’t be surprised to see him a rich man some time.”

Rodney scowled and walked away. He thought the prediction ridiculous, and hoped it would not come true.

CHAPTER IX

THE LONG JOURNEY BEGINS

The day before they were to start Grant came over and spent the night with Mr. Cooper and his family. The blacksmith had been guided by John Heywood in making his preparations. Independence, Mo., was at that time the usual starting-point for overland emigrants, and it was to this point that the little party directed their course. Mr. Cooper started with two horses, but at Independence he exchanged one of them for a yoke of oxen, being advised that oxen were upon the whole more reliable, and less likely to be stolen by the Indians. Here, too, he laid in a supply of flour, bacon, coffee, and sugar, with a quantity of rice, crackers, and smaller articles, for they were going through a land where there were no hotels, and must carry their own provender.

When they had completed their outfit they set out. A long journey lay before them. From Independence to the gold region was rather more than two thousand miles, and such were the difficulties of the way that they only averaged about fifteen miles a day. A detailed account of the trip would only be wearisome, and I shall confine myself to some of the salient incidents.

The custom was to make an early start and stop at intervals, partly for the preparation of meals and partly to give the patient animals a chance to rest.

One evening – it was about ten weeks after the start – they had encamped for the night, and Mrs. Cooper, assisted by Grant, was preparing supper, a fire having been kindled about fifty feet from the wagon, when steps were heard, and a singular looking figure emerged from the underbush. It was a man, with a long, grizzled beard, clad in a tattered garb, with an old slouch hat on his head, and a long, melancholy visage.

“I trust you are well, my friends,” he said. “Do not be alarmed. I mean you no harm.”

Tom Cooper laughed.

“We are not alarmed,” he said. “That is, not much. Who are you?”

“An unhappy wayfarer, who has been wandering for days, almost famished, through this wilderness.”

“Do you live about here?”

“No; I am on my way to California.”

“Not alone, surely?”

“I started with a party, but we were surprised a week since by a party of Cheyenne Indians, and I alone escaped destruction.”

Mrs. Cooper turned pale.

“Are the Indians so bloodthirsty, then?”

“Some of them, my dear lady, some of them. They took all our supplies, and I have been living on what I could pick up. Pardon my saying so, but I am almost famished.”

“Our supper is nearly ready,” said Mrs. Cooper hospitably. “You are welcome to a portion.”

“Ah, how kind you are!” ejaculated the stranger, clasping his hands. “I shall, indeed, be glad to join you.”

“What is your name, sir?” asked the blacksmith cautiously.

“Dionysius Silverthorn.”

“That’s a strange name.”

“Yes, but I am not responsible for it. We do not choose our own names.”

“And where are you from?”

“I came from Illinois.”

“Were you in business there?”

“Yes. Ahem! I was a teacher, but my health gave way, and when I heard of the rich discoveries of gold in California, I gathered up, with difficulty, money enough for the journey and started; but, alas! I did not anticipate the sad disaster that has befallen me.”

Mr. Silverthorn was thin and meager, but when supper was ready he ate nearly twice as much as any of the little party.

“Who is this young man?” he asked, with a glance at Grant.

“My name is Grant Colburn.”

“You are the image of a boy I lost,” sighed Dionysius. “He was strong and manly, like you – a very engaging youth.”

“Then he couldn’t have looked like you,” was Tom Cooper’s inward comment.

“Did he die of disease?” asked Mrs. Cooper.

“Yes; he had the typhoid fever – my poor, poor Otto,” and Mr. Silverthorn wiped his eyes with a dirty red silk handkerchief. “Have you a father living, my young friend?”

“No, sir.”

“Then it would be a gratification to me if you would look upon me as a parent.”

Grant was quite overwhelmed by this unexpected suggestion.

“Thank you, sir,” he said; “but you are a stranger, and I have a step-father living.”

He said this on the impulse of the moment, as a reason for not acceding to Mr. Silverthorn’s request, but it occurred to him that it would be about as difficult to regard Mr. Tarbox with filial feelings as the newcomer.

“Ah, he is indeed fortunate!” sighed Mr. Silverthorn. He had a habit of sighing. “My friend” – here he addressed himself to the blacksmith – “do you ever smoke?”

“Yes, when I get the chance.”

“And have you, perchance, a cigar?”

“No; a cigar is too high-toned for me. I have a pipe.”

“That will do.”

“But I have no tobacco.”

“Ah!” Here there was another long-drawn sigh.

After supper they sat down around the fire, to rest and chat for a while before retiring.

“I suppose, my friends,” continued Dionysius, “you would be surprised if I should tell you that I was once wealthy.”

“You don’t look like it now,” said Tom Cooper bluntly.

“No; indeed I don’t. Yet six years ago I was worth fifty thousand dollars.”

“I shall be glad if I am worth as much six years hence.”

“How did you lose it?” asked Jerry Cooper.

“Through the knavery of wicked men. I was so honest myself that I supposed all with whom I had dealings were equally honorable, and I was deceived. But I am happy to think that when I was rich I contributed to every good work. I gave a thousand dollars to the church in my town. I gave five thousand dollars as a fund for a town library. All men spoke well of me, but when I lost my fortune all turned the cold shoulder, and I found I had no friends. It is the way of the world.”

“If you were a teacher I don’t see where you got so much money,” remarked Grant curiously.

“I didn’t make it by teaching, my young friend. An old uncle died and left me his money. He had been a miser, and never took any notice of me, so it was a great surprise to me when his will was read and I was constituted his sole heir.”

“I wish an old uncle would die and leave me fifty thousand dollars,” said Tom.

“Such may be your luck.”

“Not much chance of that. I haven’t got but one uncle living, and he’s as poor as Job after he lost all his flocks and herds.”

“I don’t complain of my unhappy condition,” said Dionysius meekly. “I have been rich and now I am poor, but I am resigned to the Lord’s will.”

“He seems to be a very good man,” whispered Mrs. Cooper to Tom.

Tom shrugged his shoulders.

“I don’t take much stock in him,” he whispered back.

“How did you happen to escape when the rest of your party were destroyed by the Indians?” asked the blacksmith.

“The attack was made in the night. I had been unable to sleep, and I got up and went for a walk in the woods, hoping to become fatigued and drowsy. I was absent for an hour and a half, as well as I can estimate. When I returned to the camp, what was my dismay when I saw that my friends had been surprised, their goods confiscated, and a scene of violence enacted.”

“Were all killed?”

“I don’t know, but on the ground, by the dismantled tent, I saw a human arm which had been lopped from the shoulder.”

“Do you know whose it was?” asked Tom.

“Yes, it was the arm of a young man about your age, who doubtless had excited the anger of the Indians by resistance.”

Mr. Silverthorn put his red handkerchief to his eyes and sobbed, or appeared to do so, convulsively.

“Excuse these tears,” he said. “They are a tribute to my murdered friends.”

“Did you follow the Indians? Did you try to find out where they had carried your companions?”

“No. It would have been no good. I was single-handed.”

“I would have done it!” said Tom resolutely.

“I would expect it of you, for you are a brave young man.”

“How do you know I am?”

“By your looks and manner. I am not. You may despise me, but I am obliged to confess that I am chicken-hearted. I am afraid I am a coward. It is not a pleasant confession, but I do not wish to represent myself other than I am.”

“Then I am afraid that you are not the right kind of a man to cross the plains to California.”

“I am not sure but you are right. I sometimes think so myself. But I hoped to retrieve my fortunes, and in my state of health there seemed no other way open to me.”

“You haven’t had much encouragement yet?”

“No, but I feel that I am fortunate in meeting with your friendly party. And this emboldens me to make a request.”

“What is it?” asked the blacksmith.

“Will you let me travel with you? I am alone, quite alone. It would make me happy to be with you. The sight of that boy, who reminds me of my lost son, would be a daily source of happiness to me.”

Mr. Cooper hesitated, and the expression of his face showed that the proposal was distasteful to him.

“You can stay with us to-night,” he answered briefly. “I cannot promise more.”

CHAPTER X

MR. SILVERTHORN'S TREACHERY

The little party generally lay down to sleep soon after eight. The days were always fatiguing, and they were in the habit of rising early.

The weather was warm, for it was toward the end of June, and they did not even raise the tent, but lay down on the ground with a blanket underneath and above them. Mrs. Cooper generally slept in the wagon.

"We have an extra pair of blankets, Mr. Silverthorn," said Mrs. Cooper. "We cannot offer you a bed; you will fare as well as my husband and the boys."

"How kind you are!" murmured Dionysius. "To me this simple provision will be a luxury. For a week I have slept on the bare ground without a blanket."

"You need not go to bed as early as the rest of us, unless you like."

"My dear lady, if you don't object, I will retire into the woods for an hour and indulge in religious meditation. I wish to express my thanks to Providence for my happy encounter with your kind party."

"There is no objection, I am sure, Mr. Silverthorn," said Mrs. Cooper. "What a good man he is!" she said to herself.

"That man makes me sick," remarked Tom, aside to Grant.

"I think he is a humbug," whispered Grant.

"I am sure he is."

The little party stretched themselves on the ground, and Dionysius Silverthorn walked pensively into the woods.

When he returned, Mr. and Mrs. Cooper and Tom were asleep.

The pair of blankets assigned to the stranger lay ready for use. He did not immediately lie down, but thoughtfully surveyed the sleepers.

"They seem fast asleep, but perhaps it will be better to wait awhile," he murmured thoughtfully to himself. "It will not do for me to get caught. That young man, Tom, is very muscular, and the old man is strong in spite of his years. I will lie down awhile."

It was well for him that he decided thus, for Grant awoke – a thing unusual for him – and, looking around, saw their visitor.

"Haven't you gone to bed yet, Mr. Silverthorn?" he asked.

"No, my young friend; I have been into the woods, engaged in meditation and thanksgiving, but now I feel weary and I think I shall soon be lulled to rest. Do you often wake during the night?"

"No; it is unusual for me to wake at all."

"That is well. Boys like you should sleep soundly. I would I were a boy again! Good-night, my dear young friend."

"Good-night!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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