

HORATIO ALGER

A DEBT OF
HONOR

Horatio Alger
A Debt of Honor

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Horatio Alger

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

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.”

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.

“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?”

“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.”

“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?”

“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.

“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.’

“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.

“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.’

“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:

“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.

“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.

“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.

“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.”

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.”

“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.”

“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.”

“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.

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.

“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.”

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.”

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.”

“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!*”

“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.”

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

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 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.”

“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.”

“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.

“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!”

CHAPTER V

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.

“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.”

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.”

“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.”

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.”

“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?”

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.

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.”

“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.”

“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.”

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 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!*”

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?”

“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.

“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 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.

“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.”

“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.”

“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.”

“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!

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 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.

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

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