

ALGER

HORATIO JR.

FRANK AND FEARLESS;
OR, THE FORTUNES OF
JASPER KENT

Horatio Alger

**Frank and Fearless; or, The
Fortunes of Jasper Kent**

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Jr. Horatio Alger

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CHAPTER I.

JASPER'S VICTORY

A dozen boys were playing ball in a field adjoining the boarding-school of Dr. Pericles Benton, in the town of Walltham, a hundred and twenty-five miles northeast of the city of New York. These boys varied in age from thirteen to seventeen. In another part of the field a few younger boys were amusing themselves. All these boys were boarding-scholars connected with the school.

The ball had been knocked to a distance by the batter, and it was the duty of Nicholas Thorne, one of the oldest boys, to run after it. But he thought of an easier way.

"Cameron, run for that ball!" he cried, addressing one of the smaller boys outside the game.

"I don't want to," said little Cameron.

"Did you hear what I said?" demanded Thorne, imperiously.

"Yes."

"Then you'd better go if you know what's best for yourself," said the bully, frowning.

"I ain't in the game," said Cameron. "Why should I get the ball?"

"Because I say so!" retorted the tyrant.

"Run after it yourself, Thorne," said a lad named Davies. "It's your business, not Cameron's."

"It's his business, because I ordered him to do it," said Thorne, flushed and angry. "Do you think I will allow him to bully me?"

"The boot's on the other leg," said Davies, dryly. "Run after the ball, and don't keep the game waiting."

"That's so," said half a dozen voices. "Let Cameron alone."

"I won't let him alone," said Thorne, who had by this time worked himself into a towering passion. "I'll give him the worst flogging he ever had, if he doesn't obey me!"

So saying, he advanced toward Cameron in a menacing manner.

Thorne was the acknowledged bully of the school. He was a big, hulking fellow, with a heavy figure and a repulsive face, and small ferret eyes, emitting a cold and baleful light. He was more than a match for any of his fellow-pupils, and availed himself of his superior physical strength to abuse and browbeat the smaller boys. Knowing his strength he was not afraid of interference, and usually carried his point. If Cameron had not been particularly occupied playing marbles with a boy of his own age he would not have ventured to object to obey the despot. When he saw Thorne advancing toward him with a cruel light in his eyes he became frightened, and said, hurriedly:

"Don't pound me, Thorne, I'll go."

"Yes," said Thorne, between his teeth, "you'll go; but you ought to have done so at first. I'll give you something to remind you to be more prompt next time."

"Don't hit me, Thorne!" pleaded the little boy, with tears in his eyes. "I'm going."

"Shame, Thorne!" exclaimed Davies.

Thorne glared at Davies wrathfully.

"Take care how you talk," he said, "or it'll be your turn next!"

Davies was two inches shorter than Thorne, and by no means his equal. So, honestly indignant as he was, he didn't venture to say any more.

Little Cameron turned to run, despairing of help, and Thorne started to pursue him. Of course there was no chance of the smaller boy's escape, or would not have been, but for an unexpected incident.

"Stop!" was heard, in a clear, commanding voice.

Thorne turned in surprise. What boy (for it was a boy's voice) had dared to command him to atop?

He wasn't long in doubt.

Jasper Kent, a new scholar, who had only arrived the day before, advanced intrepidly to the rescue of the little victim. He was an inch shorter than Thorne, of a slight, elegant build, with a clear complexion and a bright, attractive face that would have been pronounced handsome by anyone. Judging from outward appearances, no one would have thought him the equal of Thorne in strength.

When Nicholas Thorne's eye lighted on his antagonist his lip turned in scorn and he paused.

"You're the new boy, I believe?" he said.

"Yes."

"I thought so. If you had been here longer you would know better than to interfere with me."

This was spoken with the utmost arrogance.

"You appear to consider yourself master here," said Jasper, quietly.

"I am master here," returned Nicholas, in the same tone.

"And you claim the right of ordering around smaller boys?"

"I do."

"And of beating them if they dare to disobey your majesty's commands, I suppose?" continued Jasper, with sarcasm.

"Yes, I do. Have you anything to say about it?" exclaimed the young despot, in a swaggering manner.

"Yes, I have," was the quiet answer.

"What have you got to say, I should like to know?"

"That I won't allow it," said Jasper.

"You won't allow it?" exclaimed Thorne, bursting into a brutal laugh. "And who are you, young poppinjay?"

"My name is Jasper Kent, at your service."

"Then, Mr. Jasper Kent, I beg leave to suggest that you mind your own business."

"I generally do," said Jasper, coolly; "but that advice comes with a bad grace from you."

"Why does it?"

"Because you are not attending to your business."

"What is my business?" demanded Thorne, angrily.

"To go after that ball."

"It's Cameron's business. I ordered him to go after it."

"And I order him not to go for it," said Jasper, resolutely, but without excitement.

Thorne answered with an oath.

"I've a great mind to send you for it," he exclaimed, his small eyes glaring at his opponent.

"It's one thing to order, and another to secure obedience," said Jasper.

"Your turn will come," growled Thorne, "but just at present I've got Cameron's case to dispose of. Cameron, go for that ball!"

The little boy started, but his purpose was interrupted. Jasper Kent hurried forward and placed his hand kindly on his shoulder.

"Don't go, Cameron," he said. "I'll protect you."

Cameron stopped, but looked apprehensively at Thorne. He evidently doubted the power of his young protector.

Thorne was now thoroughly exasperated. His authority was openly defied. He rushed at Jasper, intending to overwhelm him by the suddenness and momentum of his attack. But Jasper was prepared for him. He turned swiftly aside and planted a blow on Thorne's right ear which sent him staggering to the earth.

The bully was astonished, but rallied. Almost foaming at the mouth with rage, he sprang to his feet and renewed the attack. He attempted to throw his arms round the waist of Jasper and throw him. Had his tactics been successful, probably Jasper would have been borne to the earth by the superior weight of his opponent. But here, again, he was prepared. He stepped back and received Thorne with a blow on his breast, so firmly planted that he staggered again.

By this time he had lost all control of himself and was thoroughly under the dominion of passion. He "pitched into" Jasper, trying to get in a blow wherever he could, and in so doing exposed himself to the skilful blows of his slighter foe, who had some knowledge of boxing, while Thorne had none whatever.

Finally Thorne was stretched on his back, not immediately to rise.

"Have you had enough?" asked Jasper, bending over him.

"I'll kill you!" shrieked Thorne.

"Wail till you are able," said Jasper.

Thorne struggled to rise. Jasper held him down forcibly.

"You will stay there till you promise to let Cameron alone," he said.

"I won't promise!"

"Then you'll stay where you are."

But at that moment a small boy came across the field from the school.

"Thorne is wanted," he said. "There's a lady to see him."

"You can rise, then," said Jasper.

Thorne rose sullenly, and without a word strode toward the large, square building, with an extended wing, which was used for the boarding-school.

Little Cameron seized Jasper's hand and kissed it.

"How brave you are!" he said. "How much I thank you!"

"Oh, it's nothing," said Jasper, modestly. "You just send for me when you're in trouble, Cameron. I won't let him hurt you."

CHAPTER II. STRANGE NEWS

Entering the house, Thorne reported at the doctor's study. His flushed appearance attracted the teacher's attention.

"What's the matter, Thorne?" he asked.

"The new boy pitched into me and I licked him," said Thorne.

But his sullen manner was so unlike that of a victor that the doctor shrewdly suspected that his statement was not wholly correct.

"What was the quarrel about?" he asked.

"We were playing ball," said Thorne, evasively.

"I will inquire into it. At present you are wanted in the parlor."

So Thorne left the presence of the principal and entered the opposite room. A lady, seated on a sofa, arose quickly, and advanced to meet him. She kissed the boy's cheek, to which he submitted without manifesting any responsive feeling.

"How long it is since I saw you, Nicholas, my dear boy!" she said.

"It's only about six months," said Nicholas, stolidly.

"And are not six months long for a mother to be separated from her only child?" said the lady, tenderly.

"It doesn't seem so long," said Nicholas.

The lady looked pained, but she proceeded:

"How you have grown!"

"Yes, I've grown," said Nicholas, showing a little pleasure now. "I think I shall be a large man."

"Like your father. And how are you improving in your studies, Nicholas?"

"Oh! I'm doing well enough," said the boy, indifferently, for Nicholas Thorne's taste for study was very moderate. "Did you bring me any money, mother?"

"You have your regular allowance, Nicholas."

"It isn't enough. What's a dollar a week?"

"It is a good deal for me to pay," said his mother. "Remember, I have to pay your school bills, and my means are but small."

"A dollar a week is very small for a boy of my age," grumbled Thorne. "Why, some of the little boys get more; and there's that new boy, Jasper Kent, gets five dollars, so they say."

The lady betrayed strong interest at the sound of his name.

"I forgot," she said. "So Jasper Kent has arrived, has he?"

"What, mother, do you know him?" demanded Thorne, surprised in turn.

"Yea, I know him. What do you think of him?"

"Think of him? I hate him!" said Thorne, fiercely.

"Why?"

"He tries to bully me."

"And you permit it? Why, you are larger than he."

"Yes, but he knows how to fight."

"How do you know?"

"I had a fight with him this morning," said Nicholas.

"Did he come off best?" asked the lady.

"No," answered Nicholas, with hesitation. "That is, we were only half through the fight when a boy ran up and said you had come. So we had to stop."

"Humph! That is strange," said the lady, in a low voice, more to herself than to her son, "this sudden antagonism."

"What do you know about Kent?" demanded Nicholas, his curiosity aroused.

"Perhaps I may as well tell you," said his mother, thoughtfully, "but I wish you to keep the matter secret from him."

"You won't catch me telling him anything, except that he is a scoundrel!" muttered Nicholas.

"Then sit down by me, and I will tell you much that you do not know, but ought now to hear. Is the door shut?"

"Yes."

"Go and see. It is important that no one should overhear us."

Nicholas complied with her request.

"It's shut fast enough," he said. "Now what have you got to tell me?"

"To begin with, do you know where I get the money I pay for your schooling and clothes?"

"My father left you some money, didn't he?"

"He left me a small property which rents for two hundred dollars a year."

"You pay three hundred a year for me, don't you?"

"For your school bills, yes. Besides, I give you an allowance and buy your clothes."

"How do you do it?" asked Nicholas, in surprise. "Have you sold the house?"

"No. If I should do that, there would soon be nothing left. That was the problem I had to solve three years ago, when your father died."

"What did you do?"

"I felt that the property must not be touched, save the income. I saw that it was necessary for me to exert myself, or I should be unable to educate you as I desired. I had a good education, and I determined to avail myself of it. I therefore went to a teacher's agency in New York and set forth my desire to obtain the position of governess in some family in the country."

"You a governess!"

"Why not? It was the only way I could think of that would yield me an income. After waiting a few weeks I succeeded. A wealthy gentleman, living in a country town of moderate size, saw my testimonials, was pleased with them, and engaged me to superintend the education of an orphan niece resident in his family. He offered me a fair salary—enough, added to the rent which I received from the property left me by your father, to justify me in putting you at this boarding-school. That was three years ago."

"Why didn't you tell me all this before, mother?"

"It would have done no good. I preferred that you should think of me as possessing an independent property. I felt that it would enable you the better to hold up your head among your school-fellows, as they could know nothing of your antecedents."

"Does Dr. Benton know this?" asked Nicholas, quickly.

"No; he only knows that I am a widow, He supposes that I have sufficient means."

"I am glad of that."

"Would it make any difference with him?"

"I don't know. Any way, I'd rather he wouldn't know it."

Nicholas Thorne sat by his mother's side thoughtful. He was disappointed to think that his mother's means were so limited, since it curtailed his future expectations. The thought of that mother working patiently to defray his expenses at school made comparatively little impression. He was essentially selfish, and, so long as his wants were provided for, he cared little who labored for him.

"You don't ask the name of the man who employs me," said his mother.

Nicholas looked up.

"I suppose it is nobody I ever heard of," he said.

"No, you never heard of him, but you know some one connected with him."

"What do you mean?" asked the boy, his curiosity aroused.

"The gentleman who employs me is father of one of your schoolmates."

"Father of one of my school-mates?"

"Yes."

"Who is it? Why don't you tell me, mother?"

"You have spoken of him to me this morning. It is Jasper Kent."

"You work for Jasper Kent's father!" exclaimed Nicholas in unbounded astonishment. "Does he know it?"

"Yes, he knows that I am, or have been, governess in his father's family. But he knows nothing of my connection with you."

"If he knew, he'd taunt me with my mother's being obliged to work for a living," said Thorne.

"I don't think he would. At any rate, the time is coming very soon when he will have no advantage over you."

"How do you make that out, mother?"

"Listen, and keep secret what I tell you. Next week I become his father's wife."

"You marry Jasper Kent's father!"

"Yes; I shall be Jasper's step-mother."

"Is old Kent rich?" asked Nicholas, eagerly.

His mother nodded.

"Yes, he is rich; that is, for the country. He is in poor health, too," she added, significantly.

"Good!" said Nicholas, with satisfaction. "You know how to play your cards, mother."

The mother smiled.

"My days of dependence are drawing to an end," she said. "Some time I can do better for you than I am doing now."

CHAPTER III. JASPER RECOGNIZES THE VISITOR

"Will the old man do anything for me after he marries you, mother?" asked Nicholas, who never failed to look out for his own interests.

"He doesn't know you are in existence, Nicholas."

"Did you never speak to him of me?"

"No; I didn't dare to tell him."

"Why not?"

"It might prevent his marrying me."

"It seems to me," grumbled Nicholas, "you only thought of yourself. You didn't care what became of me."

"That is unjust, Nicholas. You must see that it is. Once we are married I shall have more control of money, and if Mr. Kent dies I shall be entitled to a third of his property."

"I wish he'd leave you the whole, and cut off that upstart Jasper," said Nicholas, frowning.

"There is not much chance of that. He thinks everything of Jasper. However, I don't think he'll live long, and I shall induce him, if possible, to name me as Jasper's guardian."

"That would be a good job for you, mother—not so good for Jasper, I'm thinking."

"You are right, Nicholas. Did you say you disliked him?"

"Yes, I hate him."

"So do I," said his mother in a low tone, but one of intense energy.

"Why?" asked Thorne, in some curiosity.

"I'll tell you. From my entrance into his father's family he has never treated me with any cordiality. Evidently he didn't like me. I think, indeed, he mistrusted me, though I never gave occasion for any suspicions. If he should learn now that I am to marry his father, he would move heaven and earth to prevent the marriage."

"Has he been home much since you were in the house?"

"No; he was at school elsewhere, and was only at home during his vacations."

"How did he come to be sent here to this school? Did you advise it?"

"No; I was opposed to it, but Mr. Kent was recommended by a friend to send his son here. I did not venture to say much, lest I should be asked how I came to know anything of the school. I was afraid you and he would meet, and he would learn the connections between us."

"I suppose you'll own up after the wedding, won't you?"

"I think not at once, Nicholas."

"Why not?"

"Remember what I told you, that Mr. Kent is in poor health. He may not live six months. We can keep the matter secret for that time, can't we, Nicholas?"

"If you were only sure he would die in that time."

"He has heart disease, and is liable to die at any time."

"You want him to make his will first, and leave you guardian?"

"Of course."

"After that you wouldn't mourn very much for his loss?"

"No; I don't pretend to care for him."

"He thinks you do, eh, mother?"

"Of course."

"Oh, you're a deep one, you are," said Nicholas, winking in a way to indicate his shrewd insight into his mother's motives.

"I have to be, Nicholas. There's no getting on in this world without it. But I think I shall have to leave you now."

"Then you don't mean to invite me to the wedding, mother?"

"It will be a private ceremony."

"Will Jasper be invited?"

"His father was anxious to have him at home. Indeed, I have had a great deal of trouble to prevent his sending for him, but at length I have succeeded. I know too well the danger. The boy has a great influence over his father, whose mind is weakened with his body, and I should be afraid that the match would be broken off even at the last moment if the boy got wind of our plan."

"How mad Jasper will be when he hears of it!" said Thorne, laughing with malicious enjoyment. "I wish I could tell him."

"Don't breathe a word of it, Nicholas," said his mother, in evident alarm.

"Oh, I'll keep the secret. But it won't do any harm when it's all over, will it?"

"Say nothing till I authorize it."

"Well, I won't, then, if I can help it. But I say, mother, the old gentleman will come down handsomely when you're married. You ought to raise my allowance to two dollars a week."

"I will if I can afford it," said his mother. "But I must leave you now, Nicholas. I shall have about time to go to the station and meet the next train."

"Shan't I go with you?"

"I should like your company, my dear boy, but we must be prudent. We might meet Jasper Kent."

"That's so. Well, good-bye."

"Good-bye, Nicholas," and his mother pressed her lips upon the cheek of her son.

He tolerated the kiss, but did not return it. His heart was not very impressible, and he cared for no one except himself.

"I won't stop to see Dr. Benton," she said, at parting. "You may tell him that I was in haste."

"All right."

Mrs. Thorne emerged from the parlor and from the house. She was tall and erect in figure, and walked rapidly. Her face was concealed by a thick veil, but, for the information of the reader it may be described as narrow and long, with small eyes, like those of Nicholas, and thin, tightly-compressed lips. She was not a woman to yield to misfortune or give way to sentimental sorrow. She looked rather like one who knew how to face fortune and defy it. It was not a pleasant face, but it was decidedly a strong one.

The grounds of the school were extensive, and the house stood back two or three hundred yards from the street. A long avenue led from the house to the main thoroughfare.

Mrs. Thorne looked hurriedly about her as she went out on her way.

"I shouldn't like to meet Jasper Kent," she said to herself. "It might lead to unpleasant questions and suspicions on his part, and I don't want anything to happen before I am married."

It seemed likely that she would escape the encounter which she dreaded. Had there been no interruption or delay she would have done so; but it was not so to be. She met Dr. Benton in front of the house, and was compelled to stop and speak to him.

"You find Nicholas well?" he said, politely.

"Oh, yes, doctor," she answered, softly. "I have no anxiety on that subject, as long as he is under your care. I know that he cannot fail to do well."

We all like flattery, and the learned principal was not proof against it.

"Ahem! Mrs. Thorne," he said, pompously, "we try to do our duty by the young people intrusted to our charge. We do not limit our endeavors to their mental culture, but strive to promote their physical well-being also."

"And you succeed remarkably well, Dr. Benton. But you must excuse my leaving you abruptly. I wish to catch the next train."

"I hope we shall see you again soon, madam," said the doctor, politely.

"I shall endeavor to call again before many weeks, Dr. Benton. Good-morning."

"Good-morning, madam."

Mrs. Thorne adjusted her veil and swiftly resumed her course. Her heart gave a bound when, just outside the gate, she espied the well-known figure of Jasper Kent.

"I hope he won't recognize me," she thought

But she forgot her peculiar gait, and the quick, rapid step, which were likely to identify her in the eyes of anyone who had seen her often. Jasper Kent's attention was drawn to her, and he observed these peculiarities.

"By Jove!" he said to himself, "she walks just like the governess."

Still, having no reason to suspect the presence of Miss Thorne, as he called her, at the school, he would have thought the resemblance only accidental, but for a whiff of wind which blew the veil aside from her face. That face there was no mistaking.

"Miss Thorne!" he exclaimed, in surprise, advancing to meet her.

She was exceedingly vexed, but it would not do to betray it.

"Jasper!" she said, with a smile. "You didn't expect to see me here?"

"No; did you come to see me? Is my father unwell?" he asked, anxiously.

"Your father is quite well."

"Then—"

"Why have I come? I see that is what you wish to ask. I have not come on your account at all. I came to see a nephew of my own."

"At this school?"

"Yes."

"You must mean Nicholas Thorne."

"Yes; do you know him?"

"A little," said Jasper, with reserve.

"Poor fellow! He has neither father nor mother to look after him, only myself. I am his only relative living."

"I never heard you speak of him before."

"No; I have not cared to intrude my private concerns upon your father or yourself. But I must hurry, or I shall be late at the station. Have you any message to send to your father?"

"Give him my love, and tell him to take care of his health for my sake."

"I hope he will do that for all our sakes," said the lady, with affected warmth. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

Jasper Kent looked after her as she walked rapidly away.

"Why is it that I distrust her so much?" he thought to himself. "So she is Thorne's aunt. Well, he is not a relation to be proud of."

"How vexatious that I should meet him," thought Mrs. Thorne. "I ought not to have run the risk of coming. If he tells Nicholas that I have admitted a relationship it may do harm. Once the wedding is over I shall feel more secure."

CHAPTER IV. THORNE'S REVENGE

The unexpected communication which Thorne had received from his mother influenced his treatment of Jasper. Under ordinary circumstances he would have resented bitterly the humiliating defeat he had received at the hands of the "new boy." Now, however, he felt sure of ultimate revenge, and was willing to "bide his time."

"Just wait till his father is dead, and mother is his guardian!" he said to himself. "Then, my young gentleman, your pride'll be taken down, see if it ain't!"

His politic forbearance surprised the other boys, who did not understand the secret cause.

"Ain't you goin' to lick that new boy?" asked Tower, a sycophantic follower of Thorne.

"What for?" asked Nicholas.

"Because he licked you the other day."

"Who says he licked me?" demanded the young tyrant, with a frown.

"Why, all the boys say so," stammered Tower.

"Do you say so?" demanded Nicholas, savagely.

"N-no," said Tower, timidly.

"Lucky you don't," said Thorne, significantly. "I'll lick any boy that tells such a lie about me."

Tower was silent.

"The fact is," he continued, in a milder tone, "we were stopped in the middle of the fight. I was called to see a lady visitor. But for that I should have licked him in the end."

"I guess you can lick him," said the young sycophant.

"Of course I can," said Nicholas, loftily.

"Are you going to try it?"

"Why should I? I haven't anything against him. We came out even. What's the use of bearing malice?"

Tower was astonished to hear such sentiments from Thorne. It did not sound at all like him. He was about the last boy who would be singled out for forbearance or forgiveness of injuries. So the younger boy concluded that his leader was afraid of Jasper. But here he did him wrong. Thorne had learned to respect his adversary's strength and skill, but he would have hazarded a second encounter but for the prudential reasons already suggested. For the present he thought it best to keep quiet.

Jasper also had made a discovery, though, as we know, the information he had received was not correct. He supposed Thorne to be a nephew of his father's governess, whereas she was his mother.

"Does Thorne know this?" he asked himself.

He could not feel quite satisfied on this point, nor could he determine precisely how far his feelings were affected by this discovery. He felt a dislike toward Thorne on account of his tyrannical disposition and ill-treatment of younger boys. He cherished a dislike for the governess, the cause of which he could not as well define. Now, it appeared that these two were allied to each other. I beg to say that Jasper was too sensible and gentlemanly to dislike the governess simply because she was poor. That he knew very well had nothing to do with the substantial worth of a person. But he could not rid himself of the feeling that Miss Thorne's residence in his father's family portended misfortune to the parent whom he loved so well.

So a week passed without any new disturbance or outbreak between the two boys. Jasper had been on the lookout, fearing that Thorne would take some opportunity to wreak vengeance on young Cameron when he was not present. But his fears were gradually allayed. Thorne seemed usually peaceable—so much so that his school-mates, who knew him well, thought he had turned over a new leaf, and speculated as to what had produced the change. But neither boys nor men change suddenly

and completely, though policy and self-interest may for a time lead them to suppress the manifestation of their characteristic traits.

Nine days after the fight recorded in my first chapter, as Jasper was walking in the school-yard, Davies came up hurriedly.

"Kent," he said, "you're wanted."

"Who wants me?" asked Jasper. "Is it Dr. Benton?"

"No, the doctor's absent."

"Who wants me, then?"

"Little Cameron."

"What! is Thorne at him again?" asked Jasper, stopping short and looking toward the house.

"Yes, Thorne's at his old business, bullying him. He took the opportunity when he thought you were out of hearing."

"I must stop it," said Jasper. "Where are they?"

"In the back yard."

"I suppose I shall have to fight him again," said Kent, regretfully.

"You needn't be afraid to try it. You are a match for him."

"I think I am. That is not my reason."

"What then?"

"I don't like fighting—it's brutal. Besides, I have another reason, which I don't care to mention."

By this time they had reached the scene of the difficulty, Little Cameron was half-crying, and Thorne stood over him with upraised arm.

"Do as I tell you, you little blackguard!" he was just saying, when a voice he well knew was heard, calm and resolute:

"Thorne, are you bullying that boy again?"

Nicholas turned and saw his old antagonist. He was sorry to see him, but he could not well withdraw now.

"It's none of your business," he answered, sullenly.

"I shall make it my business to protect the weak," said Jasper, quietly.

"You may need to protect yourself," sneered Thorne.

"If necessary, I feel competent to do so. Cameron, come here."

"Don't you go!" said Thorne, menacingly.

The little boy looked in terror from one to the other. Evidently he dreaded that the immediate result of his obeying Kent would be to precipitate a blow from the bully.

Jasper saw the little boy's quandary, and he quickly advanced to the rescue. Throwing one arm protectingly round Cameron's waist, he regarded Nicholas firmly.

"Well," he said, "what do you propose to do?"

Thorne had had time to think. He hated Jasper worse than ever, but he knew that our hero did not care for blows. Moreover, he was likely to give back better than he received. There was another way of wounding him, which prudence would have led him to hold in reserve. But he was too angry to be prudent. Moreover, he had had a note two days before from his mother, from which he learned that the wedding was to be solemnized on that very day. Probably at that moment his mother was Mrs. Kent.

"I won't fight," he said, with an unpleasant smile, "seeing we're relations."

"Relations!" repeated Jasper, with a look of surprise and inquiry. "I don't know what you mean."

"You'll know soon enough," said Thorne, mockingly.

A suspicion of the truth entered Jasper's mind. He turned pale, and said:

"Will you step aside with me, Thorne, and tell me what you mean!"

"If you like," said Thorne, indifferently.

"Now," said Jasper, when they had withdrawn a few rods from the other boys.

"It appears you haven't heard the news," said Thorne, with malicious enjoyment. "Your father has married my mother. That makes us step-brothers, doesn't it?"

"My father married again!" said Jasper, recoiling as if he had received a blow.

"Yes. Strange you wasn't invited to the wedding, isn't it?"

An hour later Jasper, having obtained special permission from Dr. Benton, was on his way home, sick with apprehension lest this threatened misfortune should prove real.

CHAPTER V. JASPER'S RETURN HOME

His father married again, and he left in ignorance of his intention! Jasper felt hurt that his father, for whom he cherished so deep and warm an affection, should have taken such a step without apprising him of it in advance. If he was to marry, certainly his only son ought to have been present at the wedding.

"But it isn't father's fault," he thought, bitterly. "It's the fault of Miss Thorne. She is more artful and designing even than I thought. She has married my father for his wealth and position, and she was afraid I would dissuade him from such a step."

It was certainly a bitter thought that he must look upon this woman as his step-mother—that she was to take the place of the mother whom he tenderly remembered, though six years had passed since she left him. But, after all, was it true? Might it not be the case that Thorne, who evidently disliked him, had fabricated the story in order to annoy him? There was a gleam of comfort in this, and he felt that he would willingly run the risk of being laughed at for having started on a "wild-goose chase" if only his fears could be relieved. But, after all, there was the possibility—nay, the probability, considering what he knew of Miss Thorne—that Thorne's story was all true.

The cars stopped for a brief minute at the depot in Morton, Jasper's destination, and he jumped out. He looked eagerly about him to see if there was anyone of whom he could ask information. To his joy he caught sight of John, a serving-man in his father's employ.

"Halloo, John!" he cried, "give me a hand with my valise!"

"Why, Master Jasper!" returned John, in evident surprise, "I didn't know you were coming home."

"I am not expected," said Jasper. "I came at a moment's notice."

"You're too late for the wedding, Master Jasper."

"For the wedding!" repeated Jasper, his heart sinking at this confirmation of his worst fears.

"Yes; didn't you know of it?"

"I heard something, but not much. Tell me about it. When did it take place?"

"At ten o'clock this morning."

"At the house?"

"No; your father and the governess walked over to the church, and were married private like. There was nobody invited, but we were all surprised that you didn't come to it."

"I knew nothing about it," said Jasper, sadly.

"It was Miss Thorne's doings, then—leastways, I must say Mrs. Kent's, now."

"I know it, John. My father would not have treated me that way. How long has it been going on—the—"

"The courtship? Well, that was all on the side of Miss Thorne, I'm thinkin'. She wheedled your father into marrying her."

"I wish I had been here."

"Poor man! he felt too weak to resist, and he did it only because she teased him. I can take my oath of that."

"It is infamous!" said Jasper. "Have they gone away?"

"No; they ain't goin', I've heard. Your father don't feel able to travel, and the governess—I mean your step-mother—she don't care much. They're at home now."

"Then I will go up. I suppose they will be surprised to see me."

"Yes, they will, but your father'll be glad. He sets the world by you, Master Jasper."

"I believe he does, John," said Jasper. "I wish I could have saved him from this misfortune."

"It's too late now entirely."

"You are right. I don't know but it might be best for me to turn round and go back again to school without going to the house at all; but I must face this thing, and see for myself. If you've got nothing else to do, John, you may carry my valise."

"I'll do it, Master Jasper, directly. You go up to the house, and I'll be there in a jiffy."

So Jasper walked thoughtfully and sadly homeward.

We must precede him.

In a sunny sitting-room on the second-floor sat Jasper Kent's father in a luxurious arm-chair. He was barely fifty, but evidently a chronic invalid. His constitution had been undermined years before by a residence of several years in Central America, where he had acquired a fortune, but paid a costly price therefor in the loss of his health.

For years he had done no business other than to take care of his property, which was amply sufficient to enable him to live luxuriously. Yet he did not find the time hanging heavily upon his hands. Of a studious taste, he had surrounded himself with books and pictures. He received regularly a New York daily paper, and the leading magazines and reviews, and barring his ill-health, and occasional seasons of pain, passed his time in a placid and agreeable manner. Circumstances, perhaps, had fostered a disposition to indolence, and made it more difficult to resist the artful schemes of Miss Thorne, whom he had admitted into the house as governess of his little niece, Florence Grantley, but who had from the first cherished the ambitious design of making herself mistress of the establishment.

It is needless to recapitulate the steps she took in this direction. It is enough to chronicle her ultimate success.

We introduce the newly-married pair, as they sit conversing in the pleasant sitting-room already referred to.

"I think Jasper ought to be at once informed of our marriage," said Mr. Kent.

"There is no need of haste, in my opinion, my dear," said Mrs. Kent.

"Indeed, he ought to have been present at the ceremony. I am afraid the poor boy will feel hurt that I should have left him wholly in the dark."

Mrs. Kent's lip curled. Evidently she had no particular feeling for the "poor boy."

"Lay the whole blame upon me, Mr. Kent," she said. "It was I who advised it, and I am willing to take the responsibility."

"I know you advised it, my dear," said Mr. Kent, to whom this phrase was yet new; "but I could not understand why."

"I will explain, and I think you will consider my explanation a good one. It would have taken Jasper's attention from his studies, and it might have been some time before he would have been able to resume them to advantage."

"That may be, but still on an occasion of this kind—"

"If the ceremony had not been so private—wholly out of regard to your health—of course he should have been recalled. As it is, it is better on all accounts not to disturb him. Did I tell you that I saw him last week?"

"Saw Jasper?"

"Yes."

"Was he here? Why did I not see him?" asked Mr. Kent, in surprise.

"It was not here that I saw him—it was at his school."

"At his school! How came you to go there?" inquired her husband in still greater surprise.

"I will tell you, though I have hitherto kept it a secret, as a matter of my own. Now, since I am your wife, it is only proper that I should acquaint you with it. I have a nephew at the same school."

"You have a nephew at Dr. Benton's boarding-school?"

"Yes," answered Mrs. Kent, lowering her voice to a compassionate inflection. "Poor boy! he has neither father nor mother! He is entirely dependent upon me. Out of my salary I have paid his expenses ever since I entered your employ."

"That was generous and kind of you," said her husband, approvingly. "What is the boy's name?"

"Nicholas Thorne."

"Your brother's son, I suppose?" said Mr. Kent.

"Ye—es," she replied, hesitatingly.

"What is his age?"

"Sixteen. He is about the same age as Jasper. Do I venture too much in asking you to become his friend?"

Mrs. Kent modulated her voice, as she well knew how to do, to counterfeit warm and tender feeling, as she proffered this request. Her nature was feline, and she knew how to conceal her claws.

"You may rely upon my co-operation, my dear," said Mr. Kent, kindly, "in your noble task."

There was a latent gleam of triumph in Mrs. Kent's eyes as she heard this promise, which transferred to her husband a burden which had long been a drain upon her own slender purse. She had dreaded the effect of this announcement upon her husband, and finally, as we have seen, thought it best to change the relationship and call Nicholas her nephew, and not her son. So that difficulty was well surmounted, and the effect had been to impress Mr. Kent with a sense of her generous and unselfish devotion.

But her exultation was short-lived. A bustle was heard outside. An instant later the door was thrown open, and Jasper entered the room, flushed and excited.

CHAPTER VI. THE STEP-MOTHER

"Jasper!" exclaimed his father, in surprise, but showing pleasure, nevertheless, at his son's unexpected presence.

The boy went straight up to his father, passing within two feet of his father's wife, but without even looking at her.

"Father!" he burst forth, impulsively, "is it true?"

"Is what true?" asked his father, embarrassed, for he guessed what Jasper meant.

"Are you married—to her?" pointing to Mrs. Kent, who looked indignant at the reference.

"Yes, Jasper," answered his father, nervously. "Shake hands with your—with Mrs. Kent."

He was about to say "your mother," but something in his memory, perhaps something in his son's face, led him to change the expression.

Jasper did not apparently heed the suggestion. Instead, he said, reproachfully:

"Why was it, father, that you left me in ignorance of your intention?"

"She thought it best," said his father, in an apologetic tone.

Mrs. Kent spoke for the first time.

"Yes, Jasper, we thought it would only interrupt your studies."

Jasper could not help a slight sneer, as he answered:

"You were very considerate, madam; but it seems to me that such an important event in my father's life would justify an interruption."

Mrs. Kent repressed her real feelings of anger and vexation, and answered mildly, and with an affectation of good humor:

"I don't know but you are right, Jasper, and we were wrong. At any rate, since you have come it is a pity you were not here earlier, so that you could have been present at the ceremony. It was quite private, as your father can tell you."

"Yes, Jasper, there were no invitations issued," said his father.

"I wish that I had come earlier," said Jasper, slowly.

"At any rate, now that you are here," said Mrs. Kent, with well-feigned cordiality, for it was politic to keep on good terms with Jasper, since he was his father's favorite, "you will stay a day or two."

"You forget, madam, the interruption to my studies," said Jasper.

"I should like to wring the boy's neck," thought Mrs. Kent, her eyes contracting slightly, but she answered, amiably: "I am afraid I have thought too much of that already. Let me make amends by welcoming you, and asking you to stay as long as you can."

Mr. Kent nodded approvingly at these words of his wife.

"I ought not to complain," said Jasper, "since you treated me no worse than you did your own son."

"Nicholas has betrayed my secret!" thought Mrs. Kent, turning pale.

"What are you talking about, Jasper?" demanded Mr. Kent, surprised. "My wife has no son."

"Jasper means my nephew," explained Mrs. Kent, recovering her assurance.

"He said you were his mother," said Jasper.

"Yes," said Mrs. Kent, with admirable composure, "the poor boy has always looked upon me as a mother, though such is not our relationship. Indeed, I may say, orphan as he is, I have been a mother to him."

"And it is very much to your credit, my dear," said Mr. Kent, kindly. "We must have him here on a visit. As Jasper's schoolmate, and your nephew, he shall be doubly welcome."

"You are very kind, Mr. Kent," said his wife, in a tone which might well be mistaken for that of grateful emotion. "It will, indeed, be a treat to my poor Nicholas to come here, even for a day."

"He must spend his next vacation here, eh, Jasper? It will be pleasant for you to have a boy of your own age here."

"Do as you like, father," said Jasper, who didn't care to say how distasteful the proposition was to him, or to explain the nature of the relations between Nicholas and himself.

Mrs. Kent looked at him sharply as he spoke, and understood better how he felt. But, as he did not openly object, she was satisfied. It was what she had wished to bring about, and she felt pleased that the proposal had come from Mr. Kent, and that Jasper had not spoken against it.

"I will go and order your room to be made ready for you, Jasper," she said. "You had better write to Dr. Benton that you will stay with us a day or two."

So saying, she left the room, and Jasper was left alone with his father.

"Don't you like this marriage, Jasper?" asked his father, anxiously, seeing that his son looked sober.

"No, father," answered Jasper, frankly. "I have not yet got over the shock of the first news."

"You think I ought to have told you about it."

"You are not accustomed to keep secrets from me, father."

"I did it for the best, Jasper; I wanted to tell you, but she—Mrs. Kent—thought it best not."

"I am afraid, father," said Jasper, sadly, "it will not be the only time that she is destined to come between us."

"No, Jasper," answered his father, with more energy than was usual with him, "that shall not be. I am sure she would not wish it, and I know I wouldn't permit it. I hope, my dear boy, that you will become reconciled to the new state of things."

"One thing would reconcile me to it," said Jasper.

"What is it?"

"To be assured that it would promote your happiness."

"I feel sure that it will," said Mr. Kent, but he did not speak very confidently.

"If it be so, it is all I ask. But tell me, father, did you marry for love?"

Mr. Kent hesitated.

"I am too old for that, Jasper," he answered, pleasantly. "The fact is, I need a nurse and Miss Thorne needed a home; and, in fact, without pretending to any sentimental reason, we concluded that it would be the best thing under the circumstances."

"Was she very much surprised when you made the proposal, father?" asked Jasper, significantly.

"No, I can't say she was," answered his father, embarrassed.

"It is as I thought," Jasper said to himself; "she inveigled my father into the marriage."

He said aloud:

"Well, father, I heartily hope it will be for your happiness; and now let us talk about something else. Shall I tell you about the school?"

"Yes, Jasper."

So Jasper gossiped about school matters in a way that interested his father, and the two forgot for a time that a new tie had been formed that might possibly make a difference between them.

Meanwhile Mrs. Kent, instead of giving directions about Jasper's room, opened her writing-desk and wrote a hurried note to Nicholas. In this she said:

"Remember, Nicholas, you are to pass for my nephew. Why were you so imprudent as to tell Jasper I was your mother? I have explained that you regard me as a mother, though really my nephew. You must give the same explanation. Jasper is at home now, not very well pleased to find that he has a step-mother. But it is done, and he will find it can't be undone. Be prudent, follow my directions implicitly, and you will find it to your account."

"Your devoted aunt,

"Matilda Thorne Kent.

"P.S.—I have told Mr. Kent about you, and he authorizes me to invite you here to spend the next vacation."

CHAPTER VII. NEW RELATIONS

Jasper remained till the next afternoon. His father urged him to stay longer, and his step-mother, with apparent cordiality, seconded the invitation; but Jasper felt that the charm of home was gone. The new wife had stepped in between his father and himself. He felt sure that the marriage had not been of his father's seeking. To him it was no object. To the former governess it was a matter of importance, since it secured her a permanent home and position, and a share of Mr. Kent's property.

There was an old servant in the family, a trusty maid, who had been in it before Jasper was born. With her he could speak confidentially.

"Tell me, Margaret," he asked, "how came my father to marry Miss Thorne?"

Margaret went to the door and looked out cautiously, then closed it.

"I don't want her to hear what I say," she commenced, when convinced that they were in no danger of listeners, "but it's my belief she asked your father to marry her."

"Do you really believe that, Margaret?"

"Yes, I do, Master Jasper. She's that bold she wouldn't mind it, not a bit. Only she'd do it sly-like. I know just how she'd do it. She'd tell him how she hadn't got a home, and must go out into the wide world, and get him to pity her. Then, you know, he'd got used to seeing her round, and a sick man don't like changes."

"Why couldn't she stay as governess to Florence?"

"According to her father's will Florence is to pass the next four years in the family of his sister, and she—that's her aunt—has a governess for her own children that'll do for Florence, too. So there wasn't no need of Miss Thorne staying here any longer. Your father asked her to stay a while, till she could find another place. It's my belief she didn't try, being bent on staying here as the mistress. At any rate, she told your father she couldn't get a place, and he offered her the one she wanted, that of his wife."

"How do you like her, Margaret?" asked Jasper, thoughtfully.

"Me like her! That's what I never did. She's like a cat—soft-spoken enough when she has her own way, but she's got claws, and you may depend she'll show 'em. I hope she won't do anything to harm you, Master Jasper."

"Me!" said Jasper, with the bold confidence of a boy, laughing at the thought. "What can Mrs. Kent—a woman—do to injure me? I'll risk that, Margaret. It's of my father I'm thinking. Will she treat him well?"

"I think she will, for it's her object to, Master Jasper. She's married him for money, you know."

"I don't mind her benefiting by my father's property, if she will make him comfortable during his life."

"I think she will; she's too sly, and knows her own interest too well not to."

"I'm glad you think that, Margaret. I shall feel better about it."

"Then you don't think you can stay, Jasper?" said Mrs. Kent, softly, when he announced his determination.

"No, madam, I think I ought to be getting back to school."

"Perhaps you are right. We shall miss you."

"Yes, Jasper, we shall miss you," said his father.

"I will write you often, father. If you are not feeling well at any time, write and let me know."

"I will do so, Jasper," said his step-mother, promptly; "but I shall have better news to write. Your father shall have the best of care."

"Thank you, madam. If you can contribute to his comfort, you will place me under obligations to you."

"As a wife, it will be my duty as well as my pleasure to do so," said Mrs. Kent.

Jasper bowed. The suggestion of the relationship always fell unpleasantly on his ears.

The carriage came round to take Jasper to the depot. His father and step-mother looked out of the front windows, and saw him off.

"He is a noble, warm-hearted boy," said his father, warmly.

"Yes," said Mrs. Kent, assenting, because it was expected.

"Manly and high-spirited, too!" added his father, in a tone full of affectionate admiration.

"I'd like to break his spirit!" thought Mrs. Kent, spitefully. "Some time I may have the chance." Of course she didn't venture to say this. She only inquired, "Were you like him at his age, Mr. Kent?"

Mr. Kent smiled.

"I won't flatter myself so far," he answered. "Jasper is an improvement on the parent stock. I see in him more manliness and self-reliance than I possessed at his age."

"May it not be parental partiality?" asked Mrs. Kent, who by no means enjoyed hearing Jasper's praises.

"No, I don't think so."

"You must let me believe that it is your modesty then. Jasper may be a fine boy, but he will do well if he grows up as good a man as you."

"Now you flatter me, my dear," said Mr. Kent, smiling. "You have too good an opinion of me."

"I don't know about that," said Mrs. Kent to herself. "I think you are an addle-headed old fool, but I won't say so."

Aloud she said, with a smile: "My marrying you is a proof of my good opinion, Mr. Kent."

"Thank you," said her husband, politely.

He was not a suspicious man—far from it—but even he knew that his wife only married him for a home and an establishment. But he never let his mind dwell on such things, and he quietly permitted his wife's assertion to go uncontradicted.

Meanwhile Jasper Kent had returned to his boarding-school. There was one who awaited his return with mingled curiosity and exultation.

This was Nicholas Thorne.

He had received his mother's letter, from which he learned, first, that her plan had succeeded, and she was now the wife of a rich man, and, secondly, that his own relationship to her must be changed in the eyes of the world.

"I suppose mother knows what is best," he said to himself. "So I'm to be her nephew, am I? Well, it's all one to me, as long as I fare the better for her good fortune."

For the moment it occurred to him that his mother might intend to throw him off—in a measure—but he quickly laid it aside. Bad as his mother was, she was yet devoted to him, and in so far was superior to him, for he cared for himself first and for no one second. The thought originated in his own base selfishness, and was laid aside only because he had received too many proofs of his mother's affection to doubt her.

When he heard that Jasper had got back he took pains to meet him.

"Well, Kent," he said, with a show of intimacy which Jasper found very disagreeable, "what news from home?"

Jasper was about to reply abruptly, when it occurred to him that, after all, Nicholas had an interest in the matter.

"I suppose you mean to ask if your mother is well?" he said, eyeing Jasper keenly.

But Nicholas was on his guard. His mother's letter had cautioned him.

"No, I don't," he answered, impudently. "She is your mother, not mine."

"My mother!" exclaimed Jasper, coloring.

"Yes, she's your father's wife, isn't she?" said Thorne, with a leer.

"Yes, but I acknowledge no such relationship as you suggest."

"She's your step-mother, whatever you say."

"I shall never call her so. You told me before I went that she was your mother."

"I have always called her so, because I have known no other," said Thorne, composedly. "She is really my aunt."

"It must be true, then," thought Jasper. "However, it is of little importance to me what the relationship may be."

"I suppose this match makes us relations," said Thorne, smiling disagreeably.

"I don't see that it does," said Jasper, coldly.

"You'd rather it wouldn't, I suppose," sneered Thorne, provoked.

"I don't know you well enough to desire so close a connection," said Jasper, in the same cold tone.

"We shall know each other well enough some time," said Thorne, with something of menace in his tone.

Jasper turned on his heel and walked away.

CHAPTER VIII. SUDDEN DEATH

Two months later there was a vacation for a week. Nicholas expected to spend this with his mother, but for some reason Mrs. Kent gave him no invitation. Probably she thought that Nicholas, though a paragon in her eyes, was not likely to win favor in the eyes of Mr. Kent. His rough, brutal disposition would have repelled the sick man, who had become gentle in his enforced seclusion.

Thorne was disappointed, but his disappointment was softened by a timely remittance of ten dollars from his mother, which he spent partly in surreptitious games of billiards, partly in overloading his stomach with pastry and nearly making himself sick.

Jasper spent the week at home. His company was the source of great comfort and joy to his father, and this repaid him for the intrusion of his step-mother.

She treated him with politeness and apparent cordiality, but once or twice, when he chanced to look up unexpectedly, he detected her eyes fixed upon him with a glance that seemed to express detestation. On these occasions her expression changed instantly, and she addressed him in a soft, friendly voice.

All this puzzled him.

"Does she hate me or not?" he asked himself. "I certainly don't like her. Still, I shall force myself to treat her politely as long as she treats my father well."

His father seldom spoke of his wife to his son, but sometimes Jasper noticed that he breathed a sigh of relief when she left the room, as if her presence had been a restraint upon him.

He didn't like to ask his father any question directly as to the relations between them. He hoped that at least they did not add to his father's discomfort.

At the end of the week Jasper was about to return to school.

"How long before you have another vacation, Jasper?" asked his father, wistfully.

"Eleven weeks, father."

"It seems a long time, Jasper."

"I can come home during that time."

"To my mind such interruptions of study are bad for a boy," said Mrs. Kent.

"Perhaps they are," assented Mr. Kent, reluctantly.

"I won't let them be an interruption, father," said Jasper. "If you want me to come home, I will."

"I hope, Jasper, you will understand my motive for speaking," said Mrs. Kent, softly. "I should really be glad to see you, but sometimes we have to sacrifice our own inclinations—don't we, Mr. Kent?"

"Yes, my dear," said Mr. Kent, listlessly.

And he turned his eyes once more to Jasper, who had his overcoat on and was waiting for the carriage to convey him to the depot.

"Do you feel as well as usual, father?" asked Jasper, anxiously.

"Yes, I don't know but I do; perhaps a little more languid, but that is not unusual."

"Well, good-bye, father. If you want to see me at any time, write a line, and I'll come at once."

"Thank you, my dear boy. Don't overwork yourself at school."

There was a slight smile on Mrs. Kent's thin lips. Jasper noticed and mentally resented it. But the time had come for leave-taking, and he hurried away.

Six weeks passed. Jasper heard from home that his father was about the same, and this assurance relieved him of anxiety. Still, he made up his mind that he would spend the next Sunday at home. He would go on Saturday morning and come back on Monday morning, and he knew that his father would enjoy even this brief visit. But he was destined to go home quicker.

On Thursday afternoon a boy came up to the main entrance of Dr. Benton's school.

"It's the boy from the telegraph office," said Wilder to Jasper.

"I wonder whether he's got a message for the doctor or one of us boys?" said Jasper, not suspecting that it was for himself.

"I'll ask," said Wilder. "Here, you, boy! who's your telegram for?"

"For Jasper Kent," said the boy. "Will you call him?"

"I am he," said Jasper, hurrying forward, with pale face and beating heart, for a telegram always inspires fear.

"Then here it is. Just sign the book," said the boy.

Jasper scrawled his name hurriedly and tore open the envelope.

These were the brief words of the dispatch:

"Come home, for the Lord's sake, Master Jasper. Your father's dying.

"Margaret Bower."

The paper swam before Jasper's eyes.

"What is it, Jasper—bad news?" asked Wilder; but Jasper did not wait to answer. He rushed to Dr. Benton's office, got his permission to go home, packed his valise, and in five minutes was on his way to the depot.

He was just in time for the afternoon train. At seven o'clock in the evening he entered the avenue that led to his father's house. Throwing open the front door, he met Margaret in the hall.

"I'm glad you're here, Master Jasper," said the faithful handmaiden, heartily.

"Is it too late?"

"I hope not; indeed, I hope not."

Jasper waited for no more, but rushed up stairs and into his father's room.

There were two persons there—the step-mother and a man of thirty, with black whiskers and sallow complexion, with whom she was talking earnestly. They, started when Jasper entered, and looked discouraged. Mrs. Kent looked displeased and annoyed.

"How is my father?" exclaimed Jasper, excitedly.

"Hush! He is very low," said Mrs. Kent "You shouldn't have dashed in here so abruptly."

"Is there no hope for him?" asked the boy, sorrowfully.

"No, my young friend," said the man, smoothly. "All has been done that human skill can do, but without avail."

"Are you the doctor?"

"I am."

"Where is Dr. Graham, my father's old doctor?"

"I dismissed him," said his step-mother, "He was not competent to attend so critical a case. This is Dr. Kenyon."

"I never before heard Dr. Graham's skill doubted," said Jasper. "Is my father conscious?"

"No; he is under the influence of morphine. Do not wake him up."

"Was he, then, in great pain?"

"Yes, in great pain."

Quietly Jasper drew near the bedside.

His father lay unconscious, his form rigid, his face thin and betraying marks of weariness and suffering. The tears rose to the eyes of Jasper as he realized that his father was passing away. As he looked on there was a slight convulsive movement; then repose. In that one moment his father had passed on to another world.

The doctor had approached the bedside also, and he, too, saw the movement.

"He is dead!" he announced.

"Dead!" repeated Mrs. Kent, in a voice rather of surprise than of sorrow.

"Yes."

"Well," she said, coolly, "we must all die. We have the satisfaction of knowing that we have done all we could do to preserve his life."

"Certainly, my dear madam; you may comfort yourself by that thought," said the physician.

"Why did you not send for me before?" asked Jasper, turning with moist eyes to his step-mother, "that I might see my father before he died?"

"We could not foresee his sudden death," said Mrs. Kent. "How do you happen to be here this afternoon?"

"Didn't you direct Margaret to telegraph for me?" asked Jasper, surprised.

"Did Margaret take upon herself to telegraph to you?" asked Mrs. Kent, in a tone of displeasure.

"Yes," said Jasper, bitterly. "Did you mean to keep me wholly unacquainted with my father's illness?"

"No; I wrote a line this afternoon, which I should have sent to the office at once."

"When it was too late!"

"Your reproaches are unseemly and uncalled for," said his step-mother, quite coldly.

"I think differently," said Jasper, bitterly. "You should have sent for me as soon as my father got worse than usual."

"In consideration of your grief I will overlook your impertinence," said Mrs. Kent, compressing her thin lips, as she left the room.

The doctor followed her out, and Jasper was left alone with the dead.

He did not realize it, but his father's death was to seriously affect his fortunes.

CHAPTER IX. A DECLARATION OF WAR

Half an hour later Jasper left the room where his father lay dead. He did not seek the presence of his step-mother, who, he felt, had done him wrong in keeping from him his father's condition. He went instead to the kitchen, where he found Margaret.

"This is a sad day for you, Master Jasper," said the sympathizing servant.

"It is, indeed, Margaret. I have lost my best friend."

"True for you."

"But for your telegram, I should not have known even now that he was dangerously ill, I thought at first Mrs. Kent asked you to telegraph."

"No, she didn't. I asked her would she send for you, and she told me it was none of my business."

"It was lucky you didn't heed her," said Jasper. "She is a cold, unfeeling woman."

"That she is, Master Jasper," assented Margaret, with emphasis.

"How long has my father been so sick?"

"For a week or more, but he took a sudden turn at the last. I think he got worse after the new doctor came."

"I wanted to ask you about that. Why was Dr. Graham dismissed? He has attended my father for years."

"Shall I tell you what I think, Master Jasper?" said Margaret, stopping short in her work, and looking mysterious.

"Yes."

"Let me whisper it, then. Come nearer, Master Jasper."

Rather surprised at her manner, Jasper obeyed.

"It's my belief," she whispered, "that your step-mother didn't want your father to get well."

Jasper looked horror-struck.

"Are you crazy, Margaret?" he ejaculated.

She nodded her head positively.

"I know what I'm saying," she answered.

"But what can make you believe such a horrible thing?" he asked.

She answered in the same low voice:

"A month ago she got your father to make his will. What there is in it I don't know, but it is likely it suits her. After that she had nothing to gain by his living."

"You don't think she'd—" Jasper hesitated to proceed.

"Poison him? No, I don't. It wasn't needful; but your papa was that delicate, it would be enough if he was not rightly treated, and I don't believe this new doctor did the right thing by him. Dr. Graham and Mrs. Kent never could agree, but she and the new doctor have been as thick as can be. They understand one another, I'll be bound."

Jasper looked shocked, and was silent for a moment.

"I don't like Mrs. Kent," he said, "but, Margaret, I hope you're wrong in this. That any one could wish my dear, gentle father dead I find it hard to believe."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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