ALGER HORATIO JR.

MAKING HIS WAY; OR, FRANK COURTNEY'S STRUGGLE UPWARD

Horatio Alger

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
TWO SCHOOL FRIENDS

Two boys were walking in the campus of the Bridgeville Academy. They were apparently of about the same age—somewhere from fifteen to sixteen—but there was a considerable difference in their attire.

Herbert Grant was neatly but coarsely dressed, and his shoes were of cowhide, but his face indicated a frank, sincere nature, and was expressive of intelligence.

His companion was dressed in a suit of fine cloth, his linen was of the finest, his shoes were calfskin, and he had the indefinable air of a boy who had been reared in luxury.

He had not the broad, open face of his friend—for the two boys were close friends—but his features were finely chiseled, indicating a share of pride, and a bold, self-reliant nature.

He, too, was an attractive boy, and in spite of his pride possessed a warm, affectionate heart and sterling qualities, likely to endear him to those who could read and understand him.

His name was Frank Courtney, and he is the hero of my story.

"Have you written your Latin exercises, Frank?" asked Herbert.

"Yes; I finished them an hour ago."

"I was going to ask you to write them with me. It is pleasanter to study in company."

"Provided you have the right sort of company," rejoined Frank.

"Am I the right sort of company?" inquired Herbert, with a smile.

"You hardly need to ask that, Herbert. Are we not always together? If I did not like your company, I should not seek it so persistently. I don't care to boast, but I have plenty of offers of companionship which I don't care to accept. There is Bob Stickney, for instance, who is always inviting me to his room; but you know what he is—a lazy fellow, who cares more to have a good time than to study. Then there is James Cameron, a conceited, empty-headed fellow, who is very disagreeable to me."

"You don't mention your stepbrother, Mark Manning."

"For two reasons—he doesn't care for my company, and of all the boys I dislike him the most."

"I don't like him myself. But why do you dislike him so much?"

"Because he is a sneak—a crafty, deceitful fellow, always scheming for his own interest. He hates me, but he doesn't dare to show it. His father is my mother's husband, but the property is hers, and will be mine. He thinks he may some day be dependent on me, and he conceals his dislike in order to stand the better chance by and by. Heaven grant that it may be long before my dear mother is called away!"

"How did she happen to marry again, Frank?"

"I can hardly tell. It was a great grief to me. Mr. Manning was a penniless lawyer, who ingratiated himself with my mother, and persecuted her till she consented to marry him. He is very soft-spoken, and very plausible, and he managed to make mother—who has been an invalid for years—think that it would be the best thing for her to delegate her cares to him, and provide me with a second father."

Frank did not like his stepfather, he did not trust him.

"Your stepbrother, Mark Manning, enjoys the same advantages as yourself, does he not?" inquired Herbert.

"Yes."

"Then his father's marriage proved a good thing for him."

"That is true. When he first came to the house he was poorly dressed, and had evidently been used to living in a poor way. He was at once provided with a complete outfit as good as my own, and from that time as much has been spent on him as on me. Don't think that I am mean enough to grudge him any part of the money expended upon him. If he were like you, I could like him, and enjoy his society; but he is just another as his father."

Here Herbert's attention was drawn to a boy who was approaching with a yellow envelope in his hand.

"Frank," he said, suddenly, "there's Mark Manning. He looks as if he had something to say to you. He has either a letter or a telegram in his hand."

CHAPTER II
THE TELEGRAM

Frank's heart gave a great bound at the suggestion of a telegram. A telegram could mean but one thing—that his mother had become suddenly worse.

He hurried to meet his stepbrother.

"Is that a telegram, Mark?" he asked, anxiously.

"Yes."

"Is it anything about mother? Tell me quick!"

"Read it for yourself, Frank."

Frank drew the telegram from the envelope, and read it hastily:

"My wife is very sick. I wish you and Frank to come home at once."

"When does the next train start, Herbert?" asked Frank, pale with apprehension.

"In an hour."

"I shall go by that train."

"I don't think I can get ready so soon," said Mark, deliberately.

"Then you can come by yourself," replied Frank, impetuously. "I beg your pardon, Mark," he added. "I cannot expect you to feel as I do. It is not your mother."

"It is my stepmother," said Mark.

"That is quite different. But I must not linger here. I will go at once to Dr. Brush, and tell him of my summons home. Good-bye, Herbert, till we meet again."

"I will go with you to the depot, Frank," said his friend, sympathizingly. "Don't wait for me. Go ahead, and make your preparation for the journey. I will be at your room in a quarter of an hour."

"You won't go by the next train, Mark?" said Herbert.

"No. I don't care to rush about as Frank is doing."

"You would if it were your own mother who was so ill."

"I am not sure. It wouldn't do any good, would it?"

"You would naturally feel anxious," said Herbert.

"Oh, yes, I suppose so!" answered Mark, indifferently.

Mark Manning was slender and dark, with a soft voice and rather effeminate ways. He didn't care for the rough sports in which most boys delight; never played baseball or took part in athletic exercises, but liked to walk about, sprucely dressed, and had even been seen on the campus on a Saturday afternoon with his hands incased in kid gloves.

For this, however, he was so ridiculed and laughed at that he had to draw them off and replace them in his pocket.

As Frank and Herbert walked together to the railway station, the latter said:

"It seems to me, Frank, that the telegram should have been sent to you, rather than to Mark Manning. You are the one who is most interested in the contents."

"I thought of that, Herbert, but I was too much affected by the contents to speak of it. I am not surprised, however. It is like Mr. Manning. It jarred upon me to have him speak of mother as his wife. She is so, but I never could reconcile myself to the fact."

"Do you remember your father—your own father, Frank?"

"You need not have said 'your own father.' I don't recognize Mr. Manning as a father, at all. Yes, I remember him. I was eight years old when he died. He was a fine-looking man, always kind—a man to be loved and respected. There was not a particle of similarity between him and Mr. Manning. He was strong and manly."

"How did it happen that he died so young?"

"He was the victim of a railway accident. He had gone to New York on business, and was expected back on a certain day. The train on which he was a passenger collided with a freight train, and my poor father was among the passengers who were killed. The news was almost too much for my poor mother, although she had not yet become an invalid. It brought on a fit of sickness lasting for three months. She has never been altogether well since."

"After all, Frank, the gifts of fortune, or rather Providence, are not so unequally distributed as at first appears. You are rich, but fatherless. I am poor enough but my father and mother are both spared to me."

"I would gladly accept poverty if my father could be restored to life, and my mother be spared to me for twenty years to come."

"I am sure you would, Frank," said Herbert. "Money is valuable, but there are some things far more so."

They had reached the station by this time, and it was nearly the time for the train to start. Frank bought his ticket, and the two friends shook hands and bade each other good-bye.

In an hour Frank was walking up the long avenue leading to the front door of the mansion.

The door was opened by his stepfather.

"How is mother?" asked Frank, anxiously.

"I am grieved to say that she is very sick," said Mr. Manning, in a soft voice. "She had a copious hemorrhage this morning, which has weakened her very much."

"Is she in danger?" asked Frank, anxiously.

"I fear she is," said Mr. Manning.

"I suppose I can see her?"

"Yes; but it will be better not to make her talk much."

"I will be careful, sir."

Frank waited no longer, but hurried to his mother's chamber. As he entered, and his glance fell on the bed and its occupant, he was shocked by the pale and ghastly appearance of the mother whom he so dearly loved. The thought came to him at once:

"She cannot live."

He found it difficult to repress a rising sob, but he did so for his mother's sake. He thought that it might affect her injuriously if he should display emotion.

His mother smiled faintly as he approached the bed.

"Mother," said Frank, kneeling by the bedside, "are you very weak?"

"Yes, Frank," she answered, almost in a whisper. "I think I am going to leave you."

"Oh, don't say that, mother!" burst forth in anguish from Frank's lips. "Try to live for my sake."

"I should like to live, my dear boy," whispered his mother; "but if it is God's will that I should die, I must be reconciled. I leave you in his care."

Here Mr. Manning entered the room.

"You will be kind to my boy?" said the dying mother.

"Can you doubt it, my dear?" replied her husband, in the soft tones Frank so much disliked. "I will care for him as if he were my own."

"Thank you. Then I shall die easy."

"Don't speak any more, mother. It will tire you, and perhaps bring on another hemorrhage."

"Frank is right, my dear. You had better not exert yourself any more at present."

"Didn't Mark come with you?" asked Mr. Manning of Frank.

"No, sir."

"I am surprised that he should not have done so. I sent for him as well as you."

"I believe he is coming by the next train," said Frank, indifferently. "He thought he could not get ready in time for my train."

"He should not have left you to come at such a time."

"I didn't wish him to inconvenience himself, Mr. Manning. If it had been his mother, it would have been different."

Mr. Manning did not reply. He understood very well that there was no love lost between Mark and his stepson.

CHAPTER III
FRANK'S BEREAVEMENT

Early in the evening Mark made his appearance. Supper had been over for an hour, and everything was cold. In a house where there is sickness, the regular course of things is necessarily interrupted, and, because he could not have his wants attended to immediately, Mark saw fit to grumble and scold the servants. He was not a favorite with them, and they did not choose to be bullied.

Deborah, who had been in the house for ten years, and so assumed the independence of an old servant, sharply reprimanded the spoiled boy.

"You ought to be ashamed, Mr. Mark," she said, "of making such a fuss when my poor mistress lies upstairs at the point of death."

"Do you know who you are talking to?" demanded Mark, imperiously, for he could, when speaking with those whom he regarded as inferiors, exchange his soft tones for a voice of authority.

"I ought to know by this time," answered Deborah, contemptuously. "There is no other in the house like you, I am glad to say."

"You are very impertinent. You forget that you are nothing but a servant."

"A servant has the right to be decently treated, Mr. Mark."

"If you don't look out," said Mark, in a blustering tone, "I will report you to my father, and have you kicked out of the house."

Deborah was naturally incensed at this rude speech, but she was spared the trouble of replying. Frank entered the room at this moment in time to hear Mark's last speech.

"What is this about being kicked out of the house?" he asked, looking from Mark to Deborah, in a tone of unconscious authority, which displeased his stepbrother.

"That is my business," replied Mark, shortly.

"Mr. Mark has threatened to have me kicked out of the house because he has to wait for his supper," said Deborah.

"It wasn't for that. It was because you were impertinent. All the same, I think it is shameful that I can't get anything to eat."

"I regret, Mark," said Frank, with cool sarcasm, "that you should be inconvenienced about your meals. Perhaps you will excuse it, as my poor mother is so sick that she requires extra attention from the servants. Deborah, if possible, don't let Mark wait much longer. It seems to be very important that he should have his supper."

"He shall have it," assured Deborah, rather enjoying the way in which Mark was put down; "that is, if he don't get me kicked out of the house."

"You had better not make any such threats in the future, Mark," said Frank, significantly.

"Who's to hinder?" blustered Mark.

"I am," answered Frank, pointedly.

"You are nothing but a boy like me," retorted Mark.

"My mother is mistress here, and I represent her."

"Things may change soon," muttered Mark; but Frank had left the room and did not hear him.

Mark did not trouble himself even to inquire for his stepmother, but went out to the stable and lounged about until bedtime. He seemed very much bored, and so expressed himself.

Frank wished to sit up all night with his mother, but, as she had a professional nurse, it was thought best that he should obtain his regular rest, the nurse promising to call the family if any change should be apparent in her patient's condition.

About half-past four in the morning there was a summons.

"Mrs. Manning is worse," said the nurse. "I don't think she can last long."

One last glance of love—though she could no longer speak—assured Frank that she knew him and loved him to the last.

The memory of that look often came back to him in the years that followed, and he would not have parted with it for anything that earth could give.

Just as the clock struck five, his mother breathed her last. The boy gazed upon the inanimate form, but he was dazed, and could not realize that his mother had left him, never to return.

"She is gone," said Mr. Manning, softly.

"Dead!" ejaculated Frank.

"Yes, her sufferings are over. Let us hope she is better off. My boy, I think you had better return to your bed. You can do nothing for your mother now."

"I would rather stay here," said Frank, sadly. "I can at least look at her, and soon I shall lose even that comfort."

The thought was too much for the poor boy, and he burst into tears.

"Do as you please, Frank," assented Mr. Manning. "I feel for you, and I share in your grief. I will go and tell Mark of our sad loss."

He made his way to Mark's chamber and entered. He touched Mark, who was in a doze, and he started up.

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

"Your poor mother is dead, Mark."

"Well, there was no need to wake me for that," said the boy, irritably. "I can't help it, can I?"

"I think, my son, you might speak with more feeling. Death is a solemn thing."

"There's nobody here but me," said Mark, sneering.

"I don't catch your meaning," said his father, showing some annoyance, for it is not pleasant to be seen through.

"Why should you care so much?" continued Mark. "I suppose you will be well provided for. Do you know how she has left the property? How much of it goes to Frank?"

"I can't say," said Mr. Manning. "I never asked my wife."

"Do you mean to say, father, that you don't know how the property is left?" asked Mark, with a sharp glance at his father.

"I may have my conjectures," said Mr. Manning, softly. "I don't think my dear wife would leave me without some evidences of her affection. Probably the bulk of the estate goes to your brother, and something to me. Doubtless we shall continue to live here, as I shall naturally be your brother's guardian."

"Don't call him my brother," said Mark.

"Why not? True, he is only your stepbrother; but you have lived under the same roof, and been to school together, and this ought to strengthen the tie between you."

"I don't like Frank," said Mark. "He puts on altogether too many airs."

"I had not observed that," said his father.

"Well, I have. Only this evening he saw fit to speak impudently to me."

"Indeed! I am really amazed to hear it," said Mr. Manning, softly.

"Oh, he thinks he is the master of the house, or will be," said Mark, "and he presumes on that."

"He is unwise," said Mr. Manning. "Even if the whole property descends to him, which I can hardly believe possible, I, as his guardian, will have the right to control him."

"I hope you'll do it, father. At any rate, don't let him boss over me, for I won't stand it."

"I don't think he will boss over you," answered his father, in a slow, measured voice, betraying, however, neither anger nor excitement. "Of course, I should not permit that."

Mark regarded his father fixedly.

"I guess the old man knows what's in the will," he said to himself. "He knows how to feather his own nest. I hope he's feathered mine, too."

Mr. Manning passed from his son's chamber and went softly upstairs, looking thoughtful. Anyone who could read the impassive face would have read trouble in store for Frank.

CHAPTER IV
MRS. MANNING'S WILL

During the preparations for the funeral Frank was left pretty much to himself.

Mr. Manning's manner was so soft, and to him had been so deferential, that he did not understand the man. It didn't occur to him that it was assumed for a purpose.

That manner was not yet laid aside. His stepfather offered to comfort him, but Frank listened in silence. Nothing that Mr. Manning could say had the power to lighten his load of grief. So far as words could console him, the sympathy of Deborah and the coachman, both old servants, whom his mother trusted, had more effect, for he knew that it was sincere, and that they were really attached to his mother.

Of Mr. Manning he felt a profound distrust, which no words of his could remove.

Meanwhile, Mr. Manning was looking from an upper window down the fine avenue, and his eye ranged from left to right over the ample estate with a glance of self-complacent triumph.

"All mine at last!" he said to himself, exultingly. "What I have been working for has come to pass. Three years ago I was well-nigh penniless, and now I am a rich man. I shall leave Mark the master of a great fortune. I have played my cards well. No one will suspect anything wrong. My wife and I have lived in harmony. There will be little wonder that she has left all to me. There would be, perhaps, but for the manner in which I have taken care he shall be mentioned in the will—I mean, of course, in the will I have made for her."

He paused, and, touching a spring in the wall, a small door flew open, revealing a shallow recess.

In this recess was a folded paper, tied with a red ribbon.

Mr. Manning opened it, and his eyes glanced rapidly down the page.

"This is the true will," he said to himself. "I wish I could summon courage to burn it. It would be best out of the way. That, if found out, would make me amenable to the law, and I must run no risk. In this secret recess it will never be found. I will replace it, and the document which I have had prepared will take its place, and no one will be the wiser."

On the day after the funeral, the family solicitor and a few intimate friends, who had been invited by Mr. Manning, assembled in the drawing room of the mansion to hear the will read.

Mr. Manning himself notified Frank of the gathering and its object.

He found our hero lying on the bed in his chamber, sad and depressed.

"I don't like to intrude upon your grief, my dear boy," said his stepfather, softly, "but it is necessary. The last will of your dear mother and my beloved wife is about to be read, and your presence is necessary."

"Couldn't it be put off?" asked Frank, sadly. "It seems too soon to think of such things."

"Pardon me, my dear Frank, but it is quite needful that there should be an immediate knowledge of the contents of the will, in order that the right person may look after the business interests of the estate. I assure you that it is the invariable custom to read the will immediately after the funeral."

"If that is the custom, and it is necessary, I have nothing to say. When is the will to be read?"

"At three o'clock, and it is now two."

"Very well, sir; I will come down in time."

"Of course there can't be much doubt as to the contents of the will," pursued Mr. Manning. "You are doubtless the heir, and as you are a minor, I am probably your guardian. Should such be the case, I hope that the relations between us may be altogether friendly."

"I hope so," said Frank, gravely.

At three o'clock the members of the family, with a few outside friends, gathered in the drawing room. The family solicitor, Mr, Ferret, held in his hand what purported to be the last will of Mrs. Manning.

The widowed husband had directed the lawyer to the bureau of the deceased lady as likely to contain her will. It was found without trouble in the topmost drawer.

Deborah and the coachman had speculated as to whether they would be invited to attend at the reading of the will.

Their doubts were set at rest by an invitation from Mr. Manning himself.

"You were so long in the service of my dear wife," he said, "that it is fitting that you be present at the reading of her will, in which it is quite probable that you may be personally interested."

"He is uncommonly polite, I am sure," thought Deborah, disposed for the moment to think more favorably of the man whom she had never been able to like.

"My friends," said the lawyer, after a preliminary cough, "you are assembled to listen to the will of Mrs. Manning, just deceased. The document which I hold in my hand I believe to be such an instrument. I will now open if for the first time."

He untied the ribbon, and began reading the will.

It commenced with the usual formula, and proceeded to a few bequests of trifling amount.

Deborah and Richard Green were each left two hundred dollars, "as a slight acknowledgment of their faithful service."

One or two friends of the family were remembered, but to an inconsiderable extent. Then came the important clause:

"All the rest and residue of the property of which I may die possessed I leave to my beloved husband, James Manning, whose devoted affection has made happy the last years of my life. Having implicit confidence in his good judgment and kindness of heart, I request him to make proper provision for my dear son Frank, whose happiness I earnestly desire. I hope that he will consent to be guided by the wisdom and experience of his stepfather, who, I am sure, will study his interests and counsel him wisely. In my sorrow at parting with my dear son, it is an unspeakable comfort to me to feel that he will have such a guardian and protector."

Frank listened with amazement, which was shared by all present.

Practically, he was disinherited, and left wholly dependent upon his stepfather.

CHAPTER V
DISINHERITED

The contents of the will created general astonishment. There was not one in the room who didn't know the devotion of Mrs. Manning to her son Frank, yet, while speaking of him affectionately, she had treated him, as they considered, most cruelly. Why should she have left such a dangerous power in her husband's hands?

And how was Mr. Manning affected?

He summoned to his face an expression of bewilderment and surprise, and, feeling that all eyes were fixed upon, him, he turned toward the lawyer.

"Mr. Ferret," he said, "I need hardly say that this will surprises me very much, as I see that it does the friends who are present. Are you sure that there is no codicil?"

"I have been unable to discover any, Mr. Manning," said the lawyer, gravely, as he scanned the face of the widower keenly.

Mr. Manning applied his handkerchief to his eyes, and seemed overcome by emotion.

"I knew my dear wife's confidence in me," he said, in a tremulous voice, "but I was not prepared for such a striking manifestation of it."

"Nor I," said Mr. Ferret, dryly.

"Knowing her strong attachment to Frank," paused Mr. Manning, "I feel the full extent and significance of that confidence when she leaves him so unreservedly to my care and guidance. I hope that I may be found worthy of the trust."

"I hope so, sir," said Mr. Ferret, who, sharp lawyer as he was, doubted whether all was right, and was willing that Mr. Manning should be made aware of his feeling. "It is certainly a remarkable proviso, considering the affection which your wife entertained for her son."

"Precisely, Mr. Ferret. It shows how much confidence the dear departed felt in me."

"So far as I can see, the boy is left wholly dependent upon you."

"He shall not regret it!" said Mr. Manning, fervently. "I consecrate my life to this sacred trust."

"You acquiesce in the arrangement, then, Mr. Manning?"

"I cannot do otherwise, can I?"

"There is nothing to prevent your settling the property, or any part of it, on the natural heir, Mr. Manning. You must pardon me for saying that it would have been wiser had your wife so stipulated by will."

"I cannot consent to reverse, or in any way annul, the last wishes of my dear wife," said Mr. Manning, hastily. "It was her arrangement solely, and I hold it sacred. She has put upon me a serious responsibility, from which I shrink, indeed, but which I cannot decline. I will do all in my power to carry out the wishes of my late wife."

Mr. Ferret shrugged his shoulders.

"I am not surprised at your decision, sir," he said, coldly. "Few men would resist the temptation. My duty is discharged with the reading of the will, and I will bid you good-afternoon!"

Mr. Manning was a crafty man. He knew that the strange will would be discussed, and he thought it best that the discussion should come at once, that it might be the sooner finished.

Deborah, faithful old servant, was in a blaze of indignation.

She went up quickly to Frank, and said:

"It's a shame, Mr. Frank, so it is!"

"If my mother made that will, it is all right," said Frank, gravely.

"But she didn't, Mr. Frank! I know she would never do such a thing. She loved you as the apple of her eye, and she would not cheat you out of your rightful inheritance."

"No more she would, Mr. Frank," said the coachman, chiming in.

"I don't know what to think," said Frank. "It has surprised me very much."

"Surprised you!" exclaimed Deborah. "You may well say that. You might have knocked me down with a feather when I heard the property left away from you. Depend upon it, that man knows all about it."

"You mean Mr. Manning?"

"To be sure I mean him! Oh, he's managed artfully! I say that for him. He's got it all into his own hands, and you haven't a cent."

"If it was my mother's will I wouldn't complain of that, Deborah. It was hers to do with as she liked, and I know, at any rate, that she loved me."

"There's one thing surprises me," said Richard Green. "If so be as the will isn't genuine, how does it happen that you and I come in for a legacy, Deborah?"

"It's meant for a blind," answered Deborah. "Oh, he's the artfulest man!"

"You may be right, Deborah. I must say the will sounded all right."

"Maybe it was copied from the mistress' will."

This conversation took place in one corner of the room.

It ceased as Mr. Ferret advanced toward the disinherited boy.

"Frank," said he, in a tone of sympathy, "I am very sorry for the provisions of the will."

"So am I, sir," answered our hero. "It isn't pleasant to be dependent on Mr. Manning."

"Particularly when the whole estate should be yours."

"I wouldn't have minded if half had been left to him, provided I had been left independent of him."

"I appreciate your feelings, Frank. I knew your father, and I am proud to say that he was my friend. I knew your mother well, and I esteemed her highly. I hope you will let me regard myself as your friend also."

"Thank you, Mr. Ferret!" said Frank. "I am likely to need a friend. I shall remember your kind proposal. I want to ask you one question."

"Ask, and I shall answer."

"Did my mother consult with you about making this will?"

"No, Frank."

"Did she ever say anything that would lead you to think she would leave the property as it is left in this will?"

"Not a word."

"Was there another will?"

"Yes. I wrote her will at her direction more than a year ago. This will is dated only three months since, and, of course, takes precedence of it, even if the other is in existence."

"Can you tell me what were the provisions of the other will?"

"A legacy of ten thousand dollars was left to Mr. Manning, and the rest of the estate to you, except the small legacies, which were all larger than in the will I have read. For instance, Deborah and Richard Green were each put down for five hundred dollars."

"So they suffer as well as I?"

"Yes."

"Have you any idea, Mr. Ferret, of the value of the estate which falls into Mr. Manning's hands?"

"I have some idea, because I have talked with your mother on the subject. This estate is worth fifty thousand dollars at least, and there are fully fifty thousand dollars in money and bonds. The legacies do not altogether exceed one thousand dollars, and therefore it may be said that your stepfather has fallen heir to one hundred thousand dollars."

"I suppose there is nothing I can do, Mr. Ferret?"

"Not unless you can show that this will which I have read is not a genuine document. That would be difficult."

"Did you notice my mother's signature?"

"Yes. I am not an expert, but I cannot detect any difference greater than maybe existed between two signatures of the same person."

"Then I suppose there is nothing to be done at present. I expect to have a hard time with Mr. Manning, Mr. Ferret."

"How has he treated you in the past, Frank?" asked the lawyer.

"I have had nothing to complain of; but then he was not master of the estate. Now it is difficult, and I think his treatment of me will be different."

"You may be right. You remember what I said, Frank?"

"That I should regard you as a friend? I won't forget it, Mr. Ferret."

One by one the company left the house, and Frank was alone.

Left alone and unsustained by sympathy, he felt more bitterly than before the totally unexpected change in his circumstances.

Up to the last hour he had regarded himself as the heir of the estate. Now he was only a dependent of a man whom he heartily disliked.

Could it be that this misfortune had come to him through the agency of his mother?

"I will not believe it!" he exclaimed, energetically.

CHAPTER VI
AN UNSATISFACTORY INTERVIEW

Frank came to a decision the next morning. A long deferred interview with his stepfather was necessary. Having made up his mind, he entered the room in which his stepfather sat. His air was manly and his bearing that of a boy who respects himself, but there was none of the swagger which some boys think it necessary to exhibit when they wish to assert their rights.

Mr. Manning, in a flowered dressing gown, sat at a table, with a sheet of paper before him and a lead pencil in his hand. Short as had been the interval since his accession to the property, he was figuring up the probable income he would derive from the estate.

He looked up as Frank entered the room, and surveyed him with cold and sarcastic eyes. His soft tones were dropped.

"Mr. Manning," said Frank, "I wish to talk to you."

"You may, of course," his stepfather replied mildly. "It is about the will," Frank advised him.

"So you would complain of your poor mother, would you?" said his stepfather, in a tone of virtuous indignation.

"I cannot believe that my mother made that will."

Mr. Manning colored. He scented danger. Should Frank drop such hints elsewhere, he might make trouble, and lead to a legal investigation, which Mr. Manning had every reason to dread.

"This is very foolish," he said, more mildly. "No doubt you are disappointed, but probably your mother has provided wisely. You will want for nothing, and you will be prepared for the responsibilities of manhood under my auspices."

Mr. Manning's face assumed a look of self-complacence as he uttered these last words.

"I have no blame to cast upon my dear mother," said Frank. "If she made that will, she acted under a great mistake."

"What mistake, sir?"

"She failed to understand you."

"Do you mean to imply that I shall be false to my trust?"

"Not at present, sir. I don't wish to judge of you too hastily."

As the boy turned to go, he said. "I have nothing further to say, sir."

"But I have," said Mr. Manning.

"Very well, sir."

"I demand that you treat my son Mark with suitable respect, and forbear to infringe upon his rights."

Frank looked up, and answered, with spirit: "I shall treat Mark as well as he treats me, sir. Is that satisfactory?"

"I apprehend," said Mr. Manning, "that you may make some mistakes upon that point."

"I will try not to do so, sir."

Frank left the room, and this time was not called back.

His stepfather looked after him, but his face expressed neither friendliness nor satisfaction.

"That boy requires taming," he said to himself. "He is going to make trouble. I must consider what I will do with him."

As Mr. Manning reviewed Frank's words, there was one thing which especially disturbed him —the doubt expressed by his stepson as to his mother's having actually made the will.

He saw that it would not do for him to go too far in his persecution of Frank as it might drive the latter to consult a lawyer in regard to the validity of the will by which he had been disinherited.

Frank rather gloomily made his way to the stable. As he reached it, Richard Green came out.

"I'm sorry for you, Mr. Frank. But your mother was a saint. She was too good to suspect the badness of others, Mr. Frank. She thought old Manning was really all that he pretended to be, and that he would be as kind to you as she was herself. When she was alive, he was always as soft as—as silk."

"His manner has changed now," said Frank, gravely. "Excuse me, Richard, for finding fault with you, but don't call him old Manning."

"Why not, Mr. Frank?"

"I have no liking for Mr. Manning—in fact, I dislike him—but he was the husband of my mother, and I prefer to speak of him respectfully."

"I dare say you are right, Mr. Frank, but, all the same, he don't deserve it. Is Mr. Mark to ride Ajax then?"

"If he asks for it, you are to saddle Ajax for him. I don't want you to get into any trouble with Mr. Manning on my account."

"I don't care for that, Mr. Frank. I can get another place, and I don't much care to serve Mr. Manning."

"I would rather you would stay, if you can, Richard. I don't want to see a new face in the stable."

"I don't think he means to keep me long, Mr. Frank. Deborah and I will have to go, I expect, and he'll get some servants of his own here."

"Has he hinted anything of this, Richard?" asked Frank, quickly.

"No; but he will soon, you may depend on it. I won't lose sight of you, though. I've known you since you were four years old, and I won't desert you, if I can do any good—nor Deborah, either."

"I have two friends, then, at any rate," said Frank to himself. "That is something."

CHAPTER VII
A SCHOOL FRIEND

Early Monday morning it had been the custom for Frank and Mark to take the train for Bridgeville, to enter upon a new week at the academy.

Frank felt that it would be better for him to go back without any further vacation, as occupation would serve to keep him from brooding over his loss.

"Are you ready, Mark?" he asked, as he rose from the breakfast table.

"Ready for what?"

"To go back to school, of course."

"I am not going back this morning," answered Mark.

"Why not?" asked Frank, in some surprise.

"I am going to stay at home to help father," said Mark, with a glance at Mr. Manning.

"If I can be of any service to you, sir, I will stay, too," said Frank, politely.

"Thank you, but Mark will do all I require," replied his stepfather.

"Very well, sir."

Frank appeared at the academy with a grave face and subdued manner, suggestive of the great loss he had sustained. From his schoolfellows, with whom he was a favorite, he received many words of sympathy—from none more earnest or sincere than from Herbert Grant.

"I know how you feel, Frank," he said, pressing the hand of his friend. "If I could comfort you I would, but I don't know how to do it."

"I find comfort in your sympathy," said Frank. "I look upon you as my warmest friend here."

"I am glad of that, Frank."

To Herbert alone Frank spoke of his mother and her devoted affection; but even to him he did not like to mention the will and his disinheritance. He did not so much lament the loss of the property as that he had lost it by the direction of his mother, or, rather, because it would generally be supposed so.

For himself, he doubted the genuineness of the will, but he felt that it was useless to speak of it, as he was unprepared with any proofs.

So it happened that when, on Wednesday afternoon Mark Manning made his appearance, Frank's change of position, as respected the property, was neither known nor suspected by his schoolfellows. It was soon known, however, and of course, through Mark.

The boys immediately noticed a change in Mark. He assumed an air of consequence, and actually strutted across the campus. Instead of being polite and attentive to Frank, he passed him with a careless nod, such as a superior might bestow on an inferior.

"What has come over Mark?" asked Herbert of Frank, as the two were walking together from recitation.

"How do you mean?"

"He holds his head higher than he used to do. He looks as if he had been elected to some important office."

"You will soon learn, Herbert," said Frank. "Make a pretext to join him, and let the news come from him."

Herbert looked puzzled.

"Do you wish me to do this?" he asked.

"Yes, I have a reason for it."

"Very well. I am always ready to oblige you, Frank, but I hope Mark won't think I have suddenly formed a liking for his society."

"If he does, you can soon undeceive him."

"That is true."

Herbert left the side of his friend, and sauntered toward Mark.

As Herbert was known as Frank's especial friend, Mark was at first surprised, but quickly decided that his improved position had been communicated by Frank, and that Herbert was influenced by it. That is to say, he judged Herbert to be as mean and mercenary as himself.

Herbert's position was too humble to entitle him to much notice from Mark, but the latter was pleased with the prospect of detaching from Frank his favorite friend.

"You came back rather late, Mark," said Herbert.

"Yes," answered Mark, with an air of importance. "I remained at home a short time, to help my father in his accounts. You know the property is large, and there is a good deal to do."

"I should think that was Frank's place, to help about the accounts."

"Why?"

"The property is his, of course!"

"Did he tell you that?" asked Mark, sharply.

"He has not said a word about the property."

"No, I suppose not," said Mark, with a sneering laugh.

"Has anything happened? Didn't his mother leave as much as was expected?" went on Herbert, quite in the dark.

"Yes, she left a large estate, but she didn't leave it to him."

"To whom, then?"

"To my father!" replied Mark, with conscious pride. "Frank has nothing. He is entirely dependent upon father."

"Did his mother leave him nothing, then?" asked Herbert, in pained surprise.

"Nothing at all," assured Mark, complacently.

"That is very strange and unjust."

"I don't look upon it in that light," said Mark, nettled. "My father knows what is best for him. He will provide for him just as his mother did before."

"But when Frank is of age, doesn't he come into possession of the estate then?"

"No, of course not. Didn't I tell you it belongs to father? Frank is a poor boy—as poor as you," said Mark, in a tone of evident satisfaction.

"Or you," added Herbert, pointedly.

"You are mistaken," said Mark, quickly. "I am father's heir."

"Suppose your father dies—how will the property go?"

"I suppose something will be left to Frank, unless my father leaves me the property, with directions to provide for him."

"Would you think that right and just?" demanded Herbert, indignantly.

"Of course I would. My stepmother knew what she was about when she made her will. I see you are surprised. You won't be quite to thick with Frank, now, I expect."

"Why shouldn't I be?"

"Because he is just as poor as you are. He never can help you."

"Mark Manning, I believe you are about the meanest boy I ever encountered, and you judge me by yourself!"

"Do you mean to insult me? Mind what you say!" blustered Mark, unpleasantly surprised at this outburst from a boy whom he expected would now transfer his allegiance from Frank to himself.

"I mean that you and your father have robbed Frank of his inheritance, and glory in it, and you think that I am mean enough to desert him because he is no longer rich. It makes no difference to me whether he is rich or poor. I think I like him all the better because he has been so badly treated. As for you, I despise you, and shall continue to, even if you get the whole of Frank's money."

"You forget that you are talking to a gentleman, you low-born mechanic!" said Mark, angrily.

"You a gentleman!" replied Herbert, contemptuously. "Then I never want to be one!"

He walked away, leaving Mark very much incensed.

"He is a fool!" muttered Mark. "When I am a rich man, he may repent having insulted me."

Herbert went back to Frank.

"Did he tell you?" asked Frank, quietly.

"Yes; and he actually appeared to think I would be ready to desert you because you were poor, and follow him about."

"I am not afraid of that, Herbert."

"I don't think Mark will have that idea any more. I gave him a piece of my mind, and left him very angry. But what does it all mean, Frank?"

"I know no more than you do, Herbert. I cannot understand it."

"What could have induced your mother to make such a will?"

"I cannot believe my poor mother ever made such a will; but, if she did, I am very sure that she was over-persuaded by my stepfather, who is one of the most plausible of men."

"What shall you do about it?"

"What can I do? I am only a boy. I have no proof, you know."

"How are you likely to be treated?"

"I have had a little foretaste of that."

"It looks very bad for you, Frank," admitted Herbert, in a tone of sympathy.

"I don't so much care for the loss of the property, Herbert," said Frank, "but I am afraid I shall have sorts of annoyances to endure from Mark and his father. But I won't anticipate trouble. I will do my duty, and trust that things will turn out better than I fear."

The next afternoon a letter was placed in Frank's hands. It was in a brown envelope, and directed in a cramped and evidently unpracticed hand, with which Frank was not familiar.

On opening it, a glance at the signature showed that it was from Richard Green, the coachman. It commenced:

"Dear Mr. Frank: This comes hoping you are well. I have no good news to tell. Mr. Manning has sold your horse, Ajax, and he is to be taken away to-night. I thought you ought to know it, and that is why I take my pen in hand to write."

There was more, but this is all that was important.

Frank's face flushed with anger. He immediately went in search of Mark, who, he felt assured, knew of the sale.

It may be said here that Ajax was one of Frank's dearest trophies, a gift from his mother.

CHAPTER VIII
A NEW PLAN

Mark was in his room, where Frank found him trying on a new necktie. Though decidedly plain, Mark fancied himself very good-looking, and spent no little time on personal adornment. In particular, he had a weakness for new neckties, in which he indulged himself freely.

When the boys came to the academy, the principal proposed that they should room together; but both objected, and Mark had a room to himself—no one caring to room with him.

"Take a seat, Frank," said Mark, condescendingly. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes," answered Frank. "I hear your father has sold Ajax, or is intending to do so. Will you tell me if it is true?"

"I believe it is," answered Mark, indifferently.

"And what right has he to sell my horse?" demanded Frank, indignantly.

"You'd better ask him," said Mark, with provoking coolness.

"It is an outrage," said Frank, indignantly.

"As to that," said his stepbrother, "you can't expect father to be at the expense of feeding your horse."

"With my money?"

"The money is legally his," replied Mark.

"Do you know to whom your father has sold Ajax?"

"To Col. Vincent, I believe."

"I am glad, at any rate, that he will have a good master."

Frank felt that there would be no advantage in prolonging the interview, or carrying on further a war of words.

He sought out his friend Herbert, and communicated to him this last infraction of his rights.

"It is too bad, Frank!" said his sympathizing friend.

"Yes, it is," said Frank, gravely; "but I fear it is only the beginning of annoyances. I don't believe I can ever live in any place with Mr. Manning or Mark."

"Will it be necessary?"

"I suppose so. I have no money, as you know. All has gone to him. Herbert, I tell you frankly, I envy you and your position."

"Though my father is a poor man?"

"Yes; for, at any rate, you have a peaceful home, and a father and mother who love you. I have a stepfather, who will do all he can to make me miserable."

"Would you be willing to work for your own support, Frank?"

"Yes; far rather than remain a dependent on Mr. Manning."

"Suppose you should run away," suggested Herbert.

Frank shook his head.

"I wouldn't do that except in case of extreme necessity. I know that if my mother knows what goes on here, it would grieve her for me to take such a step."

"Suppose your stepfather should consent to your leaving home?"

"Then I would do so gladly. I am willing to work and I think I could make a living in some way."

"Why not ask him?"

Frank's face brightened.

"Thank you for the hint, Herbert," he said. "I will think of it, and I may act upon it."

Frank was naturally self-reliant and energetic. He was not disposed to shrink from the duties of life, but was ready to go forth to meet them. The idea which Herbert had suggested commended itself to him the more he thought of it.

In spite, therefore, of the news which he had received about Ajax, he resumed his cheerfulness, considerably to the surprise of Mark, whose natural suspicion led him to conjecture that Frank had some plan in view to circumvent his father.

"If he has, he'd better give it up," reflected Mark. "The old man's as sly as a fox. A raw boy like Frank can't get the better of him."

At the close of the week, both the boys went home. They were on board the same train and the same car, but did not sit together. When they reached the house, Mr. Manning was not at home.

Frank went out to the stable at once to see Richard Green, the coachman.

He found him, indeed, but he also found another man, a stranger, who appeared to be employed in the stable.

"Who is this, Richard?" asked Frank.

"My successor," answered the coachman.

"Are you going to leave?" asked Frank, hastily.

"Come out with me, Mr. Frank, and I will tell you," said Richard. "I've had notice to leave," he said, "and so has Deborah. It came last evening. Mr. Manning got a letter from Bridgeville—I know that, because I brought it home from the post office—which appeared to make him angry. He called Deborah and me and told us that he should not need our services any longer."

"Did he give you any reason?"

"Yes; he said that he could have our places filled for a good deal less money, and he had no doubt we could do as well elsewhere."

"He has filled your place pretty soon."

"Yes. This man came this morning. I think Mr. Manning had sent for him already. I told you the other day we should soon be discharged."

"I know it; but I can tell you what has hastened it."

"What, then?"

"Mark wrote his father that I had learned about the sale of Ajax, and that the information came from you or Deborah."

"I think it likely, Mr. Frank, for the old gentleman seemed mighty cool. I hope you won't take it too much to heart that Ajax is sold."

"I am not sure but I am glad of it," said Frank.

The coachman looked at him in surprise.

"I thought you would be very angry," he said.

"So I was at first, but he has been sold to a man who will treat him well, and I shall be glad to think of that when I'm away from home."

"You don't mean to run away, Mr. Frank?"

"No; but I mean to get my stepfather's permission to go, if I can."

"Where do you mean to go, Mr. Frank?"

"Somewhere where I can earn my living, without depending upon anybody. You know very well, Richard, how miserable I should be to stay here in dependence upon Mr. Manning."

"But to think that you, to whom the property rightfully belongs, should go away and work for a living, while that man and his boy occupy your place. I can't bear to think of it."

"I have done a good deal of thinking within a few days, and I don't shrink from the prospect. I think I should rather enjoy being actively employed."

"But you were to go to college, Mr. Frank."

"I know it, Richard, but I am not sure whether it would be for the best. My tastes are for an active business life, and I don't care for a profession."

"Do you think your stepfather will give you a start?"

"In the way of money?"

"Yes."

"I don't know. If he won't, I have still fifty dollars in the savings bank, which I have saved from my pocket money. I will take that."

"Mr. Frank, will you promise not to be offended at what I'm going to say?"

"I don't think you would say anything that ought to offend me, Richard."

"Then I want you to take the money that comes to me by the will—Mr. Manning is to pay it to me on Monday. I don't need it, and you may."

Frank shook his head.

"You are very kind, Richard, but I will get along with fifty dollars, unless Mr. Manning supplies me with more. If I really need money at any time, I will think of your offer."

"That's something, at any rate," said Richard. partly reconciled. "You won't forget it now, Mr. Frank?"

"No, Richard, I promise you."

Frank left the stable and went thoughtfully into the house.

CHAPTER IX
THE NEW OWNER OF AJAX

Frank and Mark took supper alone, Mr. Manning having left word that he would not return till later in the evening.

After supper, Frank decided to go over to call upon Col. Vincent, the new owner of Ajax. His estate was distant about three-quarters of a mile from the Cedars.

As Frank started, Mark inquired:

"Where are you going, Frank?"

"To see Ajax," answered our hero.

"Do you mean to make any fuss about him? I wouldn't advise you to."

"Thank you for your advice."

"I wonder what he is going to do?" thought Mark. "Of course he can't do anything now."

He did not venture to propose to accompany Frank, knowing that his company would not be acceptable.

"Is Col. Vincent at home?" asked Frank, at the door of a handsome house.

"Yes, Mr. Courtney," replied the colored servant, pleasantly, for Frank was a favorite among all classes in the neighborhood. "Come right in, sir. De colonel am smoking a cigar on de back piazza."

Frank followed the servant through the hall which intersected the house, and stepped out on the back piazza.

A stout, elderly gentleman was taking his ease in a large rustic rocking chair.

"Good-evening, Col. Vincent," our hero said.

"Good-evening, Frank, my boy," said the colonel, heartily. "Glad to see you. Haven't you gone back to school?"

"Yes, sir; but I came home to spend Sunday. It doesn't seem much like home now," he added, as his lip quivered.

"You have suffered a great loss, my dear boy," said the colonel, feelingly.

"The greatest, sir. My mother was all I had."

"I suppose Mr. Manning will keep up the establishment?"

"I suppose so, sir; but it is no longer home to me."

"Don't take it too hard, Frank. I was sorry about the will."

"So was I, sir; because it makes me dependent on a man whom I dislike."

"Don't be too prejudiced, Frank. I never took any fancy to your stepfather myself; but then we don't need to like everybody we associate with."

"I hear you have bought my horse, Col. Vincent," said Frank, desiring to change the subject.

"Was Ajax your horse?"

"Yes. It was given to me as a birthday present by my mother."

"I had some such idea, and expressly asked Mr. Manning whether the horse was not yours."

"What did he answer?"

"That it was only nominally yours, and that he thought it best to sell it, as both you and Mark were absent at school, and had no time to use it."

"I am not surprised at anything Mr. Manning may say," said Frank.

"It's too bad! I'll tell you what I will do, Frank. I haven't paid for the horse yet. I will return it to Mr. Manning, and tell him that I bought it under a misapprehension of the ownership. I don't think he will make any fuss."

"I would rather have you keep it, sir."

"You would!" exclaimed the colonel, in surprise.

"Yes, sir. If you should return Ajax, Mr. Manning would sell him to some one else, and you, I know, will treat him well."

"But you will lose the use of him. No, you won't, though. Come over to my stable when you like, and, if he is not in use, you can take him out."

"Thank you, sir! You are very kind. While I am in the neighborhood, I won't forget your kind offer. But I mean to go away."

"You mean to go away! Where?"

"Out into the world. Anywhere, where I can find work and make a living."

"But surely this is not necessary. Your stepfather will provide for you without your working."

"I have no reason to doubt it, Col. Vincent; but I shall be happier in the world outside."

"Of course you will let Mr. Manning know of your intention to leave home?"

"I shall ask his permission to go at the end of my school term. That comes in a couple of weeks."

"Where will you go?"

"A cousin of my father is at Newark, New Jersey. I think I shall go to him first, and ask his advice about getting a place either there or in New York."

"You will need some money to start with. Do you think Mr. Manning will give you any?"

"I don't know, sir! That won't prevent my going. I have fifty dollars in a savings bank, saved up from my allowance, and that will be all I shall need."

"If you have any difficulty on that score, Frank, remember that I was your father's friend, and mean to be yours. Apply to me at any time when you are in a strait."

"I will, sir, and thank you heartily."

"That was a strange will, Frank. I don't want to put any ideas into your head to disturb you, but had your mother ever led you to suspect that she intended to leave you dependent on your stepfather?"

"Never, sir!"

"Don't you think she would have done so, had she had such a plan in view?"

"I do," said Frank, quickly.

The colonel's eye met his, and each knew what the other suspected.

"There is nothing for me to do at present, sir," said Frank. "If Mr. Manning does not interfere with my plans, I shall not trouble him."

"I will hint as much when I see him. It may clear the way for you."

"I wish you would, sir."

"Come and see me again, Frank," said the colonel, as Frank rose to go.

"I certainly will, sir."

"Your father's son will always be welcome at my house. When did you say your school term closes?"

"In a fortnight."

"I will see your stepfather within a few days. By the way, Frank, wouldn't you like a gallop on Ajax to-night?"

"Yes, sir; I should enjoy it."

"Come out to the stable with me, then."

Ajax whinnied with delight when he saw his old, or rather his young master, and evinced satisfaction when Frank stroked him caressingly.

"Sam," said Col. Vincent, "Frank is to ride Ajax whenever he pleases. Saddle him for his use whenever he asks you."

"That I will, sir" answered Sam. "Often and often I've seen Mr. Frank on his back. Doesn't he ride well, though?"

"Don't flatter me, Sam," said Frank, laughing.

Five minutes later he was on the back of his favorite horse, galloping down the road.

"I hope I shall meet Mark," thought Frank. "I would like to give him a sensation."

Considering the manner in which Mark had treated his stepbrother, Frank may be excused for the wish to puzzle him a little.

Finding himself lonely, Mark decided to take a walk not long after Frank's departure. He was sauntering along the road, when he heard the sound of hoofs, and, to his surprise, saw his stepbrother on the back of Ajax.

His first thought was that Frank had gone to Col. Vincent's stable and brought away Ajax without permission, in defiance of Mr. Manning's will. He resolved to take him to task for it immediately. Frank purposely slackened the speed of his horse in order to give Mark the chance he sought.

"Why are you riding Ajax?" asked Mark.

"It is a pleasant evening," answered Frank, "and I thought I should enjoy it."

"Where did you get him?"

"From Col. Vincent's stable, where he never ought to have been carried," answered Frank, with spirit.

"You seem to think you can do anything you like, Frank Courtney," said Mark, provoked, deciding that his suspicions were well founded.

"Is there any particular reason why I should not ride Ajax?" demanded Frank.

"You have made yourself liable to arrest for horse stealing," said Mark. "It would serve you right if Col. Vincent should have you arrested and tried."

"I don't think he will gratify your kind wishes, Mark."

"Just wait and see what my father has to say to you."

"I have only done what I had a perfect right to do; but I can't stop to dispute with you. I must finish my ride. Hey, Ajax!"

As he spoke the horse dashed into a gallop, and Mark was left looking after him in a disturbed frame of mind.

"I'll tell my father as soon as he gets home," he decided; and he kept his word.

In consequence, Frank, by that time returned, was summoned into Mr. Manning's presence.

"What is this I hear?" he began. "Did you ride Ajax this evening?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where did you find him?"

"In Col. Vincent's stable."

"This is a high-handed proceeding, Frank Courtney. Have you any excuse to offer?"

"None is needed sir. Col. Vincent has given me permission to ride him whenever I please."

"It appears to me, Mark," said Mr. Manning, sharply, "that you have made a fool of yourself."

"How should I know?" replied Mark, mortified by the collapse of his sensation. "Frank didn't tell me he had leave to use the horse."

And he left the room, looking foolish.

CHAPTER X
MARK YIELDS TO TEMPTATION

There are some boys, as well as men, who cannot stand prosperity.

It appeared that Mark Manning was one of these.

While his stepmother was living and his father's prospects—and consequently his own—were uncertain, he had been circumspect in his behavior and indulged in nothing that could be considered seriously wrong.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.