ALGER HORATIO JR.

PAUL PRESCOTT'S CHARGE

Horatio Alger
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Содержание

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PREFACE

"PAUL PRESCOTT'S CHARGE" is presented to the public as the second volume of the Campaign Series. Though wholly unlike the first volume, it is written in furtherance of the same main idea, that every boy's life is a campaign, more or less difficult, in which success depends upon integrity and a steadfast adherence to duty.

How Paul Prescott gained strength by battling with adverse circumstances, and, under all discouragements, kept steadily before him the charge which he received from his dying father, is fully told; and the author will be glad if the record shall prove an incentive and an encouragement to those boys who may have a similar campaign before them.

I
SQUIRE NEWCOME

"HANNAH!"

The speaker was a tall, pompous-looking man, whose age appeared to verge close upon fifty. He was sitting bolt upright in a high-backed chair, and looked as if it would be quite impossible to deviate from his position of unbending rigidity.

Squire Benjamin Newcome, as he was called, in the right of his position as Justice of the Peace, Chairman of the Selectmen, and wealthiest resident of Wrenville, was a man of rule and measure. He was measured in his walk, measured in his utterance, and measured in all his transactions. He might be called a dignified machine. He had a very exalted conception of his own position, and the respect which he felt to be his due, not only from his own household, but from all who approached him. If the President of the United States had called upon him, Squire Newcome would very probably have felt that he himself was the party who conferred distinction, and not received it.

Squire Newcome was a widower. His wife, who was as different from himself as could well be conceived, did not live long after marriage. She was chilled to death, as it was thought, by the dignified iceberg of whose establishment she had become a part. She had left, however, a child, who had now grown to be

a boy of twelve. This boy was a thorn in the side of his father, who had endeavored in vain to mould him according to his idea of propriety. But Ben was gifted with a spirit of fun, sometimes running into mischief, which was constantly bursting out in new directions, in spite of his father's numerous and rather prosy lectures.

"Han-nah!" again called Squire Newcome, separating the two syllables by a pause of deliberation, and strongly accenting the last syllable,—a habit of his with all proper names.

Hannah was the Irish servant of all work, who was just then engaged in mixing up bread in the room adjoining, which was the kitchen.

Feeling a natural reluctance to appear before her employer with her hands covered with dough, she hastily washed them. All this, however, took time, and before she responded to the first summons, the second "Han-nah!" delivered with a little sharp emphasis, had been uttered.

At length she appeared at the door of the sitting-room.

"Han-nah!" said Squire Newcome, fixing his cold gray eye upon her, "when you hear my voice a calling you, it is your duty to answer the summons IMMEJIATELY."

I have endeavored to represent the Squire's pronunciation of the last word.

"So I would have come IMMEJOUSLY," said Hannah, displaying a most reprehensible ignorance, "but me hands were all covered with flour."

"That makes no difference," interrupted the Squire. "Flour is an accidental circumstance."

"What's that?" thought Hannah, opening her eyes in amazement.

"And should not be allowed to interpose an obstacle to an IMMEJIATE answer to my summons."

"Sir," said Hannah, who guessed at the meaning though she did not understand the words, "you wouldn't have me dirty the door-handle with me doughy hands?"

"That could easily be remedied by ablution."

"There ain't any ablution in the house," said the mystified Hannah.

"I mean," Squire Newcome condescended to explain, "the application of water—in short, washing."

"Shure," said Hannah, as light broke in upon her mind, "I never knew that was what they called it before."

"Is Ben-ja-min at home?"

"Yes, sir. He was out playin' in the yard a minute ago. I guess you can see him from the winder."

So saying she stepped forward, and looking out, all at once gave a shrill scream, and rushed from the room, leaving her employer in his bolt-upright attitude gazing after her with as much astonishment as he was capable of.

The cause of her sudden exit was revealed on looking out of the window.

Master Benjamin, or Ben, as he was called everywhere except

in his own family, had got possession of the black kitten, and appeared to be submerging her in the hogshead of rainwater.

"O, you wicked, cruel boy, to drown poor Kitty!" exclaimed the indignant Hannah, rushing into the yard and endeavoring to snatch her feline favorite—an attempt which Ben stoutly resisted.

Doubtless the poor kitten would have fared badly between the two, had not the window opened, and the deliberate voice of his father, called out in tones which Ben saw fit to heed.

"What?"

"Come into my presence immejiately, and learn to answer me with more respect."

Ben came in looking half defiant.

His father, whose perpendicularity made him look like a sitting grenadier, commenced the examination thus:—

"I wish you to inform me what you was a doing of when I spoke to you."

It will be observed that the Squire's dignified utterances were sometimes a little at variance with the rule of the best modern grammarians.

"I was trying to prevent Hannah from taking the kitten," said Ben.

"What was you a doing of before Hannah went out?"

"Playing with Kitty."

"Why were you standing near the hogshead, Benjamin?"

"Why," said Ben, ingenuously, "the hogshead happened to be near me—that was all."

"Were you not trying to drown the kitten?"

"O, I wouldn't drown her for anything," said Ben with an injured expression, mentally adding, "short of a three-cent piece."

"Then, to repeat my interrogatory, what was you a doing of with the kitten in the hogshead?"

"I was teaching her to swim," said Ben, looking out of the corner of his eye at his father, to see what impression this explanation made upon him.

"And what advantageous result do you think would be brought about by teaching of the kitten to swim, Benjamin?" persisted his father.

"Advantageous result!" repeated Ben, demurely, pretending not to understand.

"Certingly."

"What does that mean?"

"Do you not study your dictionary at school, Benjamin?"

"Yes, but I don't like it much."

"You are very much in error. You will never learn to employ your tongue with elegance and precision, unless you engage in this beneficial study."

"I can use my tongue well enough, without studying grammar," said Ben. He proceeded to illustrate the truth of this assertion by twisting his tongue about in a comical manner.

"Tongue," exclaimed his father, "is but another name for language I mean your native language."

"Oh!"

Ben was about to leave the room to avoid further questions of an embarrassing nature, when his father interrupted his exit by saying—

"Stay, Benjamin, do not withdraw till I have made all the inquiries which I intend."

The boy unwillingly returned.

"You have not answered my question."

"I've forgotten what it was."

"What good would it do?" asked the Squire, simplifying his speech to reach Ben's comprehension, "what good would it do to teach the kitten to swim?"

"O, I thought," said Ben, hesitating, "that some time or other she might happen to fall into the water, and might not be able to get out unless she knew how."

"I think," said his father with an unusual display of sagacity, "that she will be in much greater hazard of drowning while learning to swim under your direction than by any other chance likely to befall her."

"Shouldn't wonder," was Ben's mental comment, "Pretty cute for you, dad."

Fortunately, Ben did not express his thoughts aloud. They would have implied such an utter lack of respect that the Squire would have been quite overwhelmed by the reflection that his impressive manners had produced no greater effect on one who had so excellent a chance of being impressed by them.

"Benjamin," concluded his father, "I have an errand for you to execute. You may go to Mr. Prescott's and see if he is yet living. I hear that he is a lying on the brink of the grave."

An expression of sadness stole over the usually merry face of Ben, as he started on his errand.

"Poor Paul!" he thought, "what will he do when his father dies? He's such a capital fellow, too. I just wish I had a wagon load of money, I do, and I'd give him half. That's so!"

II
PAUL PRESCOTT'S HOME

We will precede Ben on his visit to the house of Mr. Prescott.

It was an old weather-beaten house, of one story, about half a mile distant from 'Squire Newcome's residence. The Prescott family had lived here for five years, or ever since they had removed to Wrenville. Until within a year they had lived comfortably, when two blows came in quick succession. The first was the death of Mrs. Prescott, an excellent woman, whose loss was deeply felt by her husband and son. Soon afterwards Mr. Prescott, a carpenter by trade, while at work upon the roof of a high building, fell off, and not only broke his leg badly, but suffered some internal injury of a still more serious nature. He had not been able to do a stroke of work since. After some months it became evident that he would never recover. A year had now passed. During this time his expenses had swallowed up the small amount which he had succeeded in laying up previous to his sickness. It was clear that at his death there would be nothing left. At thirteen years of age Paul would have to begin the world without a penny.

Mr. Prescott lay upon a bed in a small bedroom adjoining the kitchen. Paul, a thoughtful-looking boy sat beside it, ready to answer his call.

There had been silence for some time, when Mr. Prescott called feebly—

"Paul!"

"I am here, father," said Paul.

"I am almost gone, Paul, I don't think I shall last through the day."

"O, father," said Paul, sorrowfully, "Don't leave me."

"That is the only grief I have in dying—I must leave you to struggle for yourself, Paul. I shall be able to leave you absolutely nothing."

"Don't think of that, father. I am young and strong—I can earn my living in some way."

"I hoped to live long enough to give you an education. I wanted you to have a fairer start in the world than I had."

"Never mind, father," said Paul, soothingly, "Don't be uneasy about me. God will provide for me."

Again there was a silence, broken only by the difficult breathing of the sick man.

He spoke again.

"There is one thing, Paul, that I want to tell you before I die."

Paul drew closer to the bedside.

"It is something which has troubled me as I lay here. I shall feel easier for speaking of it. You remember that we lived at Cedarville before we came here."

"Yes, father."

"About two years before we left there, a promising speculation

was brought to my notice. An agent of a Lake Superior mine visited our village and represented the mine in so favorable a light that many of my neighbors bought shares, fully expecting to double their money in a year. Among the rest I was attacked with the fever of speculation. I had always been obliged to work hard for a moderate compensation, and had not been able to do much more than support my family. This it seemed to me, afforded an excellent opportunity of laying up a little something which might render me secure in the event of a sudden attack of sickness. I had but about two hundred dollars, however, and from so scanty an investment I could not, of course, expect a large return; accordingly I went to Squire Conant; you remember him, Paul?"

"Yes, father."

'I went to him and asked a loan of five hundred dollars. After some hesitation he agreed to lend it to me. He was fond of his money and not much given to lending, but it so happened that he had invested in the same speculation, and had a high opinion of it, so he felt pretty safe in advancing me the money. Well, this loan gave me seven hundred dollars, with which I purchased seven shares in the Lake Superior Grand Combination Mining Company. For some months afterwards, I felt like a rich man. I carefully put away my certificate of stock, looking upon it as the beginning of a competence. But at the end of six months the bubble burst—the stock proved to be utterly worthless,—Squire Conant lost five thousand dollars. I lost seven hundred,

five hundred being borrowed money. The Squire's loss was much larger, but mine was the more serious, since I lost everything and was plunged into debt, while he had at least forty thousand dollars left.

"Two days after the explosion, Squire Conant came into my shop and asked abruptly when I could pay him the amount I had borrowed. I told him that I could not fix a time. I said that I had been overwhelmed by a result so contrary to my anticipations, but I told him I would not rest till I had done something to satisfy his claim. He was always an unreasonable man, and reproached me bitterly for sinking his money in a useless speculation, as if I could foresee how it would end any better than he."

"Have you ever been able to pay back any part of the five hundred dollars, father?"

"I have paid the interest regularly, and a year ago, just before I met with my accident, I had laid up a hundred and fifty dollars which I had intended to pay the Squire, but when my sickness came I felt obliged to retain it to defray our expenses, being cut off from earning anything."

"Then I suppose you have not been able to pay interest for the last year."

"No."

"Have you heard from the Squire lately?"

"Yes, I had a letter only last week. You remember bringing me one postmarked Cedarville?"

"Yes, I wondered at the time who it could be from."

"You will find it on the mantelpiece. I should like to have you get it and read it."

Paul readily found the letter. It was enclosed in a brown envelope, directed in a bold hand to "Mr. John Prescott, Wrenville."

The letter was as follows:—

CEDARVILLE, APRIL 15, 18—, MR. JOHN PRESCOTT:—

SIR: I have been waiting impatiently to hear something about the five hundred dollars in which sum you are indebted to me, on account of a loan which I was fool enough to make you seven years since. I thought you an honest man, but I have found, to my cost, that I was mistaken. For the last year you have even failed to pay interest as stipulated between us. Your intention is evident. I quite understand that you have made up your mind to defraud me of what is rightfully mine. I don't know how you may regard this, but I consider it as bad as highway robbery. I do not hesitate to say that if you had your deserts you would be in the Penitentiary. Let me advise you, if you wish to avoid further trouble, to make no delay in paying a portion of this debt. Yours, etc. EZEKIEL CONANT.

Paul's face flushed with indignation as he read this bitter and cruel letter.

"Does Squire Conant know that you are sick, father?" he inquired.

"Yes, I wrote him about my accident, telling him at the same

time that I regretted it in part on account of the interruption which it must occasion in my payments."

"And knowing this, he wrote such a letter as that," said Paul, indignantly, "what a hard, unfeeling wretch he must be!"

"I suppose it is vexatious to him to be kept out of his money."

"But he has plenty more. He would never miss it if he had given it to you outright."

"That is not the way to look at it, Paul. The money is justly his, and it is a great sorrow to me that I must die without paying it."

"Father," said Paul, after a pause, "will it be any relief to you, if I promise to pay it,—that is, if I am ever able?"

Mr. Prescott's face brightened.

"That was what I wanted to ask you, Paul. It will be a comfort to me to feel that there is some hope of the debt being paid at some future day."

"Then don't let it trouble you any longer, father. The debt shall be mine, and I will pay it."

Again a shadow passed over the sick man's face, "Poor boy," he said, "why should I burden your young life with such a load? You will have to struggle hard enough as it is. No, Paul, recall your promise. I don't want to purchase comfort at such a price."

"No, father," said Paul sturdily, "it is too late now. I have made the promise and I mean to stick to it. Besides, it will give me something to live for. I am young—I may have a great many years before me. For thirteen years you have supported me. It is only right that I should make what return I can. I'll keep my promise,

father."

"May God help and prosper you, my boy," said Mr. Prescott, solemnly. "You've been a good son; I pray that you may grow up to be a good man. But, my dear, I feel tired. I think I will try to go to sleep."

Paul smoothed the comforter, adjusting it carefully about his father's neck, and going to the door went out in search of some wood to place upon the fire. Their scanty stock of firewood was exhausted, and Paul was obliged to go into the woods near by, to obtain such loose fagots as he might find upon the ground.

He was coming back with his load when his attention was drawn by a whistle. Looking up he discovered Ben Newcome approaching him.

"How are you, Paul?"

"Pretty well, Ben."

"How precious lonesome you must be, mewed up in the house all the time."

"Yes, it is lonesome, but I wouldn't mind that if I thought father would ever get any better."

"How is he this morning?"

"Pretty low; I expect he is asleep. He said he was tired just before I went out."

"I brought over something for you," said Ben, tugging away at his pocket.

Opening a paper he displayed a couple of apple turnovers fried brown.

"I found 'em in the closet," he said.

"Won't Hannah make a precious row when she finds 'em gone?"

"Then I don't know as I ought to take them," said Paul, though, to tell the truth, they looked tempting to him.

"O, nonsense," said Ben; "they don't belong to Hannah. She only likes to scold a little; it does her good."

The two boys sat on the doorstep and talked while Paul ate the turnovers. Ben watched the process with much satisfaction.

"Ain't they prime?" he said.

"First rate," said Paul; "won't you have one?"

"No," said Ben; "you see I thought while I was about it I might as well take four, so I ate two coming along."

In about fifteen minutes Paul went into the house to look at his father. He was lying very quietly upon the bed. Paul drew near and looked at him more closely. There was something in the expression of his father's face which terrified him.

Ben heard his sudden cry of dismay, and hurriedly entered.

Paul pointed to the bed, and said briefly, "Father's dead!"

Ben, who in spite of his mischievous propensities was gifted with a warm heart, sat down beside Paul, and passing his arm round his neck, gave him that silent sympathy which is always so grateful to the grief-stricken heart.

III
PAUL'S BRILLIANT PROSPECTS

Two days later, the funeral of Mr. Prescott took place.

Poor Paul! It seemed to him a dream of inexpressible sorrow. His father and mother both gone, he felt that he was indeed left alone in the world. No thought of the future had yet entered his mind. He was wholly occupied with his present sorrow. Desolate at heart he slipped away from the graveyard after the funeral ceremony was over, and took his way back again to the lonely dwelling which he had called home.

As he was sitting in the corner, plunged in sorrowful thought, there was a scraping heard at the door, and a loud hem!

Looking up, Paul saw entering the cottage the stiff form of Squire Benjamin Newcome, who, as has already been stated, was the owner.

"Paul," said the Squire, with measured deliberation.

"Do you mean me, sir?" asked Paul, vaguely conscious that his name had been called.

"Did I not address you by your baptismal appellation?" demanded the Squire, who thought the boy's question superfluous.

"Paul," pursued Squire Newcome, "have you thought of your future destination?"

"No, sir," said Paul, "I suppose I shall live here."

"That arrangement would not be consistent with propriety. I suppose you are aware that your deceased parent left little or no worldly goods."

"I know he was poor."

"Therefore it has been thought best that you should be placed in charge of a worthy man, who I see is now approaching the house. You will therefore accompany him without resistance. If you obey him and read the Bible regularly, you will—ahem!—you will some time or other see the advantage of it."

With this consolatory remark Squire Newcome wheeled about and strode out of the house.

Immediately afterwards there entered a rough-looking man arrayed in a farmer's blue frock.

"You're to come with me, youngster," said Mr. Nicholas Mudge, for that was his name.

"With you?" said Paul, recoiling instinctively.

In fact there was nothing attractive in the appearance or manners of Mr. Mudge. He had a coarse hard face, while his head was surmounted by a shock of red hair, which to all appearance had suffered little interference from the comb for a time which the observer would scarcely venture to compute. There was such an utter absence of refinement about the man, that Paul, who had been accustomed to the gentle manners of his father, was repelled by the contrast which this man exhibited.

"To be sure you're to go with me," said Mr. Mudge. "You did

not calc'late you was a goin' to stay here by yourself, did you? We've got a better place for you than that. But the wagon's waitin' outside, so just be lively and bundle in, and I'll carry you to where you're a goin' to live."

"Where's that?"

"Wal, some folks call it the Poor House, but it ain't any the worse for that, I expect. Anyhow, them as has no money may feel themselves lucky to get so good a home. So jest be a movin', for I can't be a waitin' here all day."

Paul quietly submitted himself to the guidance of Mr. Mudge. He was so occupied with the thought of his sad loss that he did not realize the change that was about to take place in his circumstances.

About half a mile from the village in the bleakest and most desolate part of the town, stood the Poor House. It was a crazy old building of extreme antiquity, which, being no longer considered fit for an ordinary dwelling-house, had been selected as a suitable residence for the town's poor. It was bleak and comfortless to be sure, but on that very account had been purchased at a trifling expense, and that was, of course, a primary consideration. Connected with the house were some dozen acres of rough-looking land, plentifully overspread with stones, which might have filled with despair the most enterprising agriculturist. However, it had this recommendation at least, that it was quite in character with the buildings upon it, which in addition to the house already described, consisted of a barn of equal antiquity

and a pig pen.

This magnificent domain was under the superintendence of Mr. Nicholas Mudge, who in consideration of taking charge of the town paupers had the use of the farm and buildings, rent free, together with a stipulated weekly sum for each of the inmates.

"Well, Paul," said Mr. Mudge, as they approached the house, in a tone which was meant to be encouraging, "this is goin' to be your home. How do you like it?"

Thus addressed, Paul ventured a glance around him.

"I don't know," said he, doubtfully; "it don't look very pleasant."

"Don't look very pleasant!" repeated Mr. Mudge in a tone of mingled amazement and indignation. "Well, there's gratitude for you. After the town has been at the expense of providin' a nice, comfortable home for you, because you haven't got any of your own, you must turn up your nose at it."

"I didn't mean to complain," said Paul, feeling very little interest in the matter.

"Perhaps you expected to live in a marble palace," pursued Mr. Mudge, in an injured tone. "We don't have any marble palaces in this neighborhood, we don't."

Paul disclaimed any such anticipation.

Mr. Mudge deigned to accept Paul's apology, and as they had now reached the door, unceremoniously threw it open, and led the way into a room with floor unpainted, which, to judge from its appearance, was used as a kitchen.

IV
LIFE IN A NEW PHASE

Everything was "at sixes and sevens," as the saying is, in the room Mr. Mudge and Paul had just entered. In the midst of the scene was a large stout woman, in a faded calico dress, and sleeves rolled up, working as if her life or the world's destiny depended upon it.

It was evident from the first words of Mr. Mudge that this lady was his helpmeet.

"Well, wife," he said, "I've brought you another boarder. You must try to make him as happy and contented as the rest of 'em are."

From the tone of the speaker, the last words might be understood to be jocular.

Mrs. Mudge, whose style of beauty was not improved by a decided squint, fixed a scrutinizing gaze upon Paul, and he quite naturally returned it.

"Haven't you ever seen anybody before, boy? I guess you'll know me next time."

"Shouldn't wonder if he did," chuckled Mr. Mudge.

"I don't know where on earth we shall put him," remarked the lady. "We're full now."

"Oh, put him anywhere. I suppose you won't be very particular

about your accommodations?" said Mr. Mudge turning to Paul.

Paul very innocently answered in the negative, thereby affording Mr. Mudge not a little amusement.

"Well, that's lucky," he said, "because our best front chamber's occupied just now. We'd have got it ready for you if you'd only wrote a week ago to tell us you were coming. You can just stay round here," he said in a different tone as he was about leaving the room, "Mrs. Mudge will maybe want you to do something for her. You can sit down till she calls on you."

It was washing day with Mrs. Mudge, and of course she was extremely busy. The water was to be brought from a well in the yard, and to this office Paul was at once delegated. It was no easy task, the full pails tugging most unmercifully at his arms. However, this was soon over, and Mrs. Mudge graciously gave him permission to go into the adjoining room, and make acquaintance with his fellow-boarders.

There were nine of them in all, Paul, the newcomer making the tenth. They were all advanced in years, except one young woman, who was prevented by mental aberration from supporting herself outside the walls of the Institution.

Of all present, Paul's attention was most strongly attracted towards one who appeared more neatly and scrupulously attired than any of the rest.

Aunt Lucy Lee, or plain Aunt Lucy, for in her present abode she had small use for her last name, was a benevolent-looking old lady, who both in dress and manners was distinguished from

her companions. She rose from her knitting, and kindly took Paul by the hand. Children are instinctive readers of character, and Paul, after one glance at her benevolent face, seated himself contentedly beside her.

"I suppose," said the old lady, socially, "you've come to live with us. We must do all we can to make you comfortable. Your name is Paul Prescott, I think Mrs. Mudge said."

"Yes, ma'am," answered Paul, watching the rapid movement of the old lady's fingers.

"Mine is Aunt Lucy," she continued, "that is what everybody calls me. So now we know each other, and shall soon be good friends, I hope. I suppose you have hardly been here long enough to tell how you shall like it."

Paul confessed that thus far he did not find it very pleasant.

"No, I dare say not," said Aunt Lucy, "I can't say I think it looks very attractive myself. However, it isn't wholly the fault of Mr. and Mrs. Mudge. They can't afford to do much better, for the town allows them very little."

Aunt Lucy's remarks were here interrupted by the apparition of the worthy landlady at the door.

"Dinner's ready, folks," said that lady, with little ceremony, "and you must come out quick if you want any, for I'm drove with work, and can't be hindered long."

The summons was obeyed with alacrity, and the company made all haste to the dining-room, or rather the kitchen, for it was here that the meals were eaten.

In the center of the room was set a table without a cloth, a table-cloth being considered a luxury quite superfluous. Upon this were placed several bowls of thin, watery liquid, intended for soup, but which, like city milk, was diluted so as hardly to be distinguishable. Beside each bowl was a slice of bread.

Such was the bill of fare.

"Now, folks, the sooner you fall to the better," exclaimed the energetic Mrs. Mudge, who was one of those driving characters, who consider any time spent at the table beyond ten minutes as so much time wasted.

The present company appeared to need no second invitation. Their scanty diet had the positive advantage of giving them a good appetite; otherwise the quality of their food might have daunted them.

Paul took his place beside Aunt Lucy. Mechanically he did as the rest, carrying to his mouth a spoonful of the liquid. But his appetite was not sufficiently accustomed to Poor House regime to enable him to relish its standing dish, and he laid down his spoon with a disappointed look.

He next attacked the crust of bread, but found it too dry to be palatable.

"Please, ma'am," said he to Mrs. Mudge, "I should like some butter."

Paul's companions dropped their spoons in astonishment at his daring, and Mrs. Mudge let fall a kettle she was removing from the fire, in sheer amazement.

"What did you ask for?" she inquired, as if to make sure that her ears did not deceive her.

"A little butter," repeated Paul, unconscious of the great presumption of which he had been guilty.

"You want butter, do you?" repeated Mr. Mudge. "Perhaps you'd like a slice of beefsteak and a piece of plum-pudding too, wouldn't you?"

"I should very much," said Paul, resolved to tell the truth, although he now began to perceive the sarcasm in his landlady's tone.

"There isn't anything more you would like, is there?" inquired the lady, with mock politeness.

"No, ma'am," returned Paul after a pause, "I believe not, to-day."

"Very moderate, upon my word," exclaimed Mrs. Mudge, giving vent at length to her pentup indignation. "You'll be contented with butter and roast beef and plum-pudding! A mighty fine gentleman, to be sure. But you won't get them here, I'll be bound."

"So will I," thought Aunt Lucy.

"If you ain't satisfied with what I give you," pursued Mrs. Mudge, "you'd better go somewhere else. You can put up at some of the great hotels. Butter, forsooth!"

Having thus given expression to her feelings, she left the room, and Paul was left to finish his dinner with the best appetite he could command. He was conscious that he had offended Mrs.

Mudge, but the thoughts of his recent great sorrow swallowed up all minor annoyances, so that the words of his estimable landlady were forgotten almost as soon as they were uttered. He felt that he must henceforth look for far different treatment from that to which he had been accustomed during his father's lifetime.

His thoughts were interrupted in a manner somewhat ludicrous, by the crazy girl who sat next to him coolly appropriating to herself his bowl of soup, having already disposed of her own.

"Look," said Aunt Lucy, quickly, calling Paul's attention, "you are losing your dinner."

"Never mind," said Paul, amused in spite of his sadness, "she is quite welcome to it if she likes it; I can't eat it."

So the dinner began and ended. It was very brief and simple, occupying less than ten minutes, and comprising only one course —unless the soup was considered the first course, and the bread the second. Paul left the table as hungry as he came to it. Aunt Lucy's appetite had become accustomed to the Mudge diet, and she wisely ate what was set before her, knowing that there was no hope of anything better.

About an hour after dinner Ben Newcome came to the door of the Poor House and inquired for Paul.

Mrs. Mudge was in one of her crusty moods.

"You can't see him," said she.

"And why not?" said Ben, resolutely.

"Because he's busy."

"You'd better let me see him," said Ben, sturdily.

"I should like to know what's going to happen if I don't," said Mrs. Mudge, with wrathful eyes, and arms akimbo.

"I shall go home and report to my father," said Ben, coolly.

"Who is your father?" asked Mrs. Mudge, for she did not recognize her visitor.

"My father's name is Newcome—Squire Newcome, some call him."

Now it so happened that Squire Newcome was Chairman of the Overseers of the Poor, and in that capacity might remove Mr. Mudge from office if he pleased. Accordingly Mrs. Mudge softened down at once, on learning that Ben was his son.

"Oh," said she, "I didn't know who it was. I thought it might be some idle boy from the village who would only take Paul from his work, but if you have a message from your father–"

This she said to ascertain whether he really had any message or not, but Ben, who had in fact come without his father's knowledge, only bowed, and said, in a patronizing manner, "I accept your apology, Mrs. Mudge. Will you have the goodness to send Paul out?"

"Won't you step in?" asked Mrs. Mudge with unusual politeness.

"No, I believe not."

Paul was accordingly sent out.

He was very glad to meet his schoolmate and playfellow, Ben, who by his gayety, spiced though it was with roguery, had made

himself a general favorite in school.

"I say, Paul," said Ben, "I'm sorry to find you in such a place."

"It isn't very pleasant," said Paul, rather soberly.

"And that woman—Mrs. Mudge—she looks as if she might be a regular spitfire, isn't she?"

"Rather so."

"I only wish the old gentleman—meaning of course, the Squire—would take you to live with me. I want a fellow to play with. But I say, Paul, go and get your hat, and we'll go out for a walk."

"I don't know what Mrs. Mudge will say," said Paul, who had just come from turning the handle of a churn.

"Just call Mrs. Mudge, and I'll manage it."

Mrs. Mudge being summoned, made her appearance at the door.

"I presume, ma'am," said Ben, confidently, "you will have no objection to Paul's taking a walk with me while I deliver the message I am entrusted with."

"Certainly," said Mrs. Mudge, rather unwillingly, but not venturing to refuse.

"It takes me to come it over the old lady," said Ben, when they were out of hearing.

"Now, we'll go a fishing."

V
A CRISIS

Before sunrise the next morning Paul was awakened by a rude shake from Mr. Mudge, with an intimation that he had better get up, as there was plenty of work before him.

By the light of the lantern, for as yet it was too dark to dispense with it, Paul dressed himself. Awakened from a sound sleep, he hardly had time to collect his thoughts, and it was with a look of bewilderment that he surveyed the scene about him. As Mrs. Mudge had said, they were pretty full already, and accordingly a rude pallet had been spread for him in the attic, of which, with the exception of nocturnal marauders, he was the only occupant. Paul had not, to be sure, been used to very superior accommodations, and if the bed had not been quite so hard, he would have got along very well. As it was he was separated from slats only by a thin straw bed which did not improve matters much. It was therefore with a sense of weariness which slumber had not dissipated, that Paul arose at the summons of Mr. Mudge.

When he reached the kitchen, he found that gentleman waiting for him.

"Do you know how to milk?" was his first salutation.

"I never learned," said Paul.

"Then you'll have to, in double-quick time," was the reply,

"for I don't relish getting up so early, and you can take it off my hands."

The two proceeded to the barn, where Paul received his first lesson in this important branch of education.

Mr. Mudge kept five cows. One might have thought he could have afforded a moderate supply of milk to his boarders, but all, with the exception of a single quart, was sold to the milkman who passed the door every morning.

After breakfast, which was on the same economical plan with the dinner of the day previous, Paul was set to work planting potatoes, at which he was kept steadily employed till the dinner-hour.

Poor Paul! his back ached dreadfully, for he had never before done any harder work than trifling services for his father. But the inexorable Mr. Mudge was in sight, and however much he wished, he did not dare to lay aside his hoe even for a moment.

Twelve o'clock found him standing beside the dinner-table. He ate more heartily than before, for his forenoon's labor made even poorhouse fare palatable.

Mrs. Mudge observed the change, and remarked in a satisfied tone. "Well, my fine gentleman, I see you are coming to your appetite. I thought you wouldn't hold out long."

Paul, who had worn off something of his diffidence, could not help feeling indignant at this speech; unaccustomed to be addressed in this way, the taunt jarred upon his feelings, but he only bit his lip and preserved silence.

Aunt Lucy, too, who had come to feel a strong interest in Paul, despite her natural mildness, could not resist the temptation of saying with some warmth, "what's the use of persecuting the child? He has sorrows enough of his own without your adding to them."

Mrs. Mudge was not a little incensed at this remonstrance.

"I should like to know, ma'am, who requested you to put in your oar!" she said with arms akimbo. "Anybody wouldn't think from your lofty airs that you lived in the poorhouse; I'll thank you to mind your own business in the future, and not meddle with what don't concern you."

Aunt Lucy was wise enough to abstain from provoking further the wrath of her amiable landlady, and continued to eat her soup in silence. But Mrs. Mudge neer forgot this interference, nor the cause of it, and henceforth with the malignity of a narrow-minded and spiteful woman, did what she could to make Paul uncomfortable. Her fertile ingenuity always found some new taunt, or some new reproach, to assail him with. But Paul, though at first he felt indignant, learned at last to treat them as they deserved, with silent disdain. Assured of the sympathy of those around him, he did not allow his appetite to be spoiled by any remark which Mrs. Mudge might offer.

This, of course, only provoked her the more, and she strove to have his daily tasks increased, in the amiable hope that his "proud spirit" might be tamed thereby.

Mr. Mudge, who was somewhat under petticoat government,

readily acceded to his wife's wishes, and henceforth Paul's strength was taxed to its utmost limit. He was required to be up with the first gray tint of dawn and attend to the cattle. From this time until night, except the brief time devoted to his meals, he was incessantly occupied. Aunt Lucy's society, his chief comfort, was thus taken from him; since, in order to rise early, he was obliged to go to bed as soon as possible after day's work was finished.

The effects of such incessant labor without a sufficient supply of nourishing food, may easily be imagined. The dry bread and meagre soup which constituted the chief articles of diet in Mrs. Mudge's economical household, had but one recommendation, —they were effectual preventives of gluttony. It was reported that on one occasion a beggar, apparently famishing with hunger, not knowing the character of the house, made application at the door for food. In an unusual fit of generosity, Mrs. Mudge furnished him with a slice of bread and a bowl of soup, which, however, proved so far from tempting that the beggar, hungry as he was, left them almost untouched.

One day, as Paul was working in the field at a little distance from Mr. Mudge, he became conscious of a peculiar feeling of giddiness which compelled him to cling to the hoe for support, —otherwise he must have fallen.

"No laziness there," exclaimed Mr. Mudge, observing Paul's cessation from labor, "We can't support you in idleness."

But the boy paid no regard to this admonition, and Mr.

Mudge, somewhat surprised, advanced toward him to enforce the command.

Even he was startled at the unusual paleness of Paul's face, and inquired in a less peremptory tone, "what's the matter?"

"I feel sick," gasped Paul.

Without another word, Mr. Mudge took Paul up in his arms and carried him into the house.

"What's the matter, now?" asked his wife, meeting him at the door.

"The boy feels a little sick, but I guess he'll get over it by-and by. Haven't you got a little soup that you can give him? I reckon he's faint, and that'll brighten him up."

Paul evidently did not think so, for he motioned away a bowl of the delightful mixture, though it was proffered him by the fair hands of Mrs. Mudge. The lady was somewhat surprised, and said, roughly, "I shouldn't wonder if he was only trying to shirk."

This was too much even for Mr. Mudge; "The boy's sick," said he, "that's plain enough; if he don't get better soon, I must send for the doctor, for work drives, and I can't spare him."

"There's no more danger of his being sick than mine," said Mrs. Mudge, emphatically; "however, if you're fool enough to go for a doctor, that's none of my business. I've heard of feigning sickness before now, to get rid of work. As to his being pale, I've been as pale as that myself sometimes without your troubling yourself very much about me."

"'Twon't be any expense to us," alleged Mr. Mudge, in a tone

of justification, for he felt in some awe of his wife's temper, which was none of the mildest when a little roused, "'Twon't be any expense to us; the town has got to pay for it, and as long as it will get him ready for work sooner, we might as well take advantage of it."

This consideration somewhat reconciled Mrs. Mudge to the step proposed, and as Paul, instead of getting better, grew rapidly worse, Mr. Mudge thought it expedient to go immediately for the village physician. Luckily Dr. Townsend was at home, and an hour afterwards found him standing beside the sick boy.

"I don't know but you'll think it rather foolish, our sending for you, doctor," said Mrs. Mudge, "but Mudge would have it that the boy was sick and so he went for you."

"And he did quite right," said Dr. Townsend, noticing the ghastly pallor of Paul's face. "He is a very sick boy, and if I had not been called I would not have answered for the consequences. How do you feel, my boy?" he inquired of Paul.

"I feel very weak, and my head swims," was the reply.

"How and when did this attack come on?" asked the doctor, turning to Mr. Mudge.

"He was taken while hoeing in the field," was the reply.

"Have you kept him at work much there lately?"

"Well, yes, I've been drove by work, and he has worked there all day latterly."

"At what time has he gone to work in the morning?"

"He has got up to milk the cows about five o'clock. I used to

do it, but since he has learned, I have indulged myself a little."

"It would have been well for him if he had enjoyed the same privilege. It is my duty to speak plainly. The sickness of this boy lies at your door. He has never been accustomed to hard labor, and yet you have obliged him to rise earlier and work later than most men. No wonder he feels weak. Has he a good appetite?"

"Well, rather middlin'," said Mrs. Mudge, "but it's mainly because he's too dainty to eat what's set before him. Why, only the first day he was here he turned up his nose at the bread and soup we had for dinner."

"Is this a specimen of the soup?" asked Dr. Townsend, taking from the table the bowl which had been proffered to Paul and declined by him.

Without ceremony he raised to his lips a spoonful of the soup and tasted it with a wry face.

"Do you often have this soup on the table?" he asked abruptly.

"We always have it once a day, and sometimes twice," returned Mrs. Mudge.

"And you call the boy dainty because he don't relish such stuff as this?" said the doctor, with an indignation he did not attempt to conceal. "Why, I wouldn't be hired to take the contents of that bowl. It is as bad as any of my own medicines, and that's saying a good deal. How much nourishment do you suppose such a mixture would afford? And yet with little else to sustain him you have worked this boy like a beast of burden,—worse even, for they at least have abundance of GOOD food."

Mr. and Mrs. Mudge both winced under this plain speaking, but they did not dare to give expression to their anger, for they knew well that Dr. Townsend was an influential man in town, and, by representing the affair in the proper quarter, might render their hold upon their present post a very precarious one. Mr. Mudge therefore contented himself with muttering that he guessed he worked as hard as anybody, and he didn't complain of his fare.

"May I ask you, Mr. Mudge," said the doctor, fixing his penetrating eye full upon him, "whether you confine yourself to the food upon which you have kept this boy?"

"Well," said Mr. Mudge, in some confusion, moving uneasily in his seat, "I can't say but now and then I eat something a little different."

"Do you eat at the same table with the inmates of your house?"

"Well, no," said the embarrassed Mr. Mudge.

"Tell me plainly,—how often do you partake of this soup?"

"I aint your patient," said the man, sullenly, "Why should you want to know what I eat?"

"I have an object in view. Are you afraid to answer?"

"I don't know as there's anything to be afraid of. The fact is, I aint partial to soup; it don't agree with me, and so I don't take it."

"Did you ever consider that this might be the case with others as well as yourself?" inquired the doctor with a glance expressive of his contempt for Mr. Mudge's selfishness. Without waiting for a reply, Dr. Townsend ordered Paul to be put to bed immediately,

after which he would leave some medicine for him to take.

Here was another embarrassment for the worthy couple. They hardly knew where to put our hero. It would not do for them to carry him to his pallet in the attic, for they felt sure that this would lead to some more plain speaking on the part of Dr. Townsend. He was accordingly, though with some reluctance, placed in a small bedroom upstairs, which, being more comfortable than those appropriated to the paupers, had been reserved for a son at work in a neighboring town, on his occasional visits home.

"Is there no one in the house who can sit in the chamber and attend to his occasional wants?" asked Dr. Townsend. "He will need to take his medicine at stated periods, and some one will be required to administer it."

"There's Aunt Lucy Lee," said Mrs. Mudge, "she's taken a fancy to the boy, and I reckon she'll do as well as anybody."

"No one better," returned the doctor, who well knew Aunt Lucy's kindness of disposition, and was satisfied that she would take all possible care of his patient.

So it was arranged that Aunt Lucy should take her place at Paul's bedside as his nurse.

Paul was sick for many days,—not dangerously so, but hard work and scanty fare had weakened him to such a degree that exhausted nature required time to recruit its wasted forces. But he was not unhappy or restless. Hour after hour he would lie patiently, and listen to the clicking of her knitting needles. Though not provided with luxurious food, Dr. Townsend had

spoken with so much plainness that Mrs. Mudge felt compelled to modify her treatment, lest, through his influence, she with her husband, might lose their situation. This forced forbearance, however, was far from warming her heart towards its object. Mrs. Mudge was a hard, practical woman, and her heart was so encrusted with worldliness and self-interest that she might as well have been without one.

One day, as Paul lay quietly gazing at Aunt Lucy's benevolent face, and mentally contrasting it with that of Mrs. Mudge, whose shrill voice could be heard form below, he was seized with a sudden desire to learn something of her past history.

"How long have you been here, Aunt Lucy?" he inquired.

She looked up from her knitting, and sighed as she answered, "A long and weary time to look back upon, Paul. I have been here ten years."

"Ten years," repeated Paul, thoughtfully, "and I am thirteen. So you have been here nearly all my lifetime. Has Mr. Mudge been here all that time?"

"Only the last two years. Before that we had Mrs. Perkins."

"Did she treat you any better than Mrs. Mudge?"

"Any better than Mrs. Mudge!" vociferated that lady, who had ascended the stairs without being heard by Aunt Lucy of Paul, and had thus caught the last sentence. "Any better than Mrs. Mudge!" she repeated, thoroughly provoked. "So you've been talking about me, you trollop, have you? I'll come up with you, you may depend upon that. That's to pay for my giving you

tea Sunday night, is it? Perhaps you'll get some more. It's pretty well in paupers conspiring together because they aint treated like princes and princesses. Perhaps you'd like to got boarded with Queen Victoria."

The old lady sat very quiet during this tirade. She had been the subject of similar invective before, and knew that it would do no good to oppose Mrs. Mudge in her present excited state.

"I don't wonder you haven't anything to say," said the infuriated dame. "I should think you'd want to hide your face in shame, you trollop."

Paul was not quite so patient as his attendant. Her kindness had produced such an impression on him, that Mrs. Mudge, by her taunts, stirred up his indignation.

"She's no more of a trollop than you are," said he, with spirit.

Mrs. Mudge whirled round at this unexpected attack, and shook her fist menacingly at Paul—

"So, you've put in your oar, you little jackanapes," said she, "If you're well enough to be impudent you're well enough to go to work. You aint a goin' to lie here idle much longer, I can tell you. If you deceive Dr. Townsend, and make him believe you're sick, you can't deceive me. No doubt you feel mighty comfortable, lyin' here with nothing to do, while I'm a slavin' myself to death down stairs, waitin' upon you; (this was a slight exaggeration, as Aunt Lucy took the entire charge of Paul, including the preparation of his food;) but you'd better make the most of it, for you won't lie here much longer. You'll miss not bein' able to

talk about me, won't you?"

Mrs. Mudge paused a moment as if expecting an answer to her highly sarcastic question, but Paul felt that no advantage would be gained by saying more.. He was not naturally a quick-tempered buy, and had only been led to this little ebullition by the wanton attack by Mrs. Mudge.

This lady, after standing a moment as if defying the twain to a further contest, went out, slamming the door violently after her.

"You did wrong to provoke her, Paul," said Aunt Lucy, gravely.

"How could I help it?" asked Paul, earnestly. "If she had only abused ME, I should not have cared so much, but when she spoke about you, who have been so kind to me, I could not be silent."

"I thank you, Paul, for your kind feeling," said the old lady, gently, "but we must learn to bear and forbear. The best of us have our faults and failings."

"What are yours, Aunt Lucy?"

"O, a great many."

"Such as what?"

"I am afraid I am sometimes discontented with the station which God has assigned me."

"I don't think you can be very much to blame for that. I should never learn to be contented here if I lived to the age of Methuselah."

Paul lay quite still for an hour or more. During that time he formed a determination which will be announced in the next

chapter.

VI
PAUL'S DETERMINATION

At the close of the last chapter it was stated that Paul had come to a determination.

This was,—TO RUN AWAY.

That he had good reason for this we have already seen.

He was now improving rapidly, and only waited till he was well enough to put his design into execution.

"Aunt Lucy," said he one day, "I've got something to tell you."

The old lady looked up inquiringly.

"It's something I've been thinking of a long time,—at least most of the time since I've been sick. It isn't pleasant for me to stay here, and I've pretty much made up my mind that I sha'n't."

"Where will you go?" asked the old lady, dropping her work in surprise.

"I don't know of any particular place, but I should be better off most anywhere than here."

"But you are so young, Paul."

"God will take care of me, Aunt Lucy,—mother used to tell me that. Besides, here I have no hope of learning anything or improving my condition. Then again, if I stay here, I can never do what father wished me to do."

"What is that, Paul?"

Paul told the story of his father's indebtedness to Squire Conant, and the cruel letter which the Squire had written.

"I mean to pay that debt," he concluded firmly. "I won't let anybody say that my father kept them out of their money. There is no chance here; somewhere else I may find work and money."

"It is a great undertaking for a boy like you, Paul," said Aunt Lucy, thoughtfully. "To whom is the money due?"

"Squire Conant of Cedarville."

Aunt Lucy seemed surprised and agitated by the mention of this name.

"Paul," said she, "Squire Conant is my brother."

"Your brother!" repeated he in great surprise. "Then why does he allow you to live here? He is rich enough to take care of you."

"It is a long story," said the old lady, sadly. "All that you will be interested to know is that I married against the wishes of my family. My husband died and I was left destitute. My brother has never noticed me since."

"It is a great shame," said Paul.

"We won't judge him, Paul. Have you fixed upon any time to go?"

"I shall wait a few days till I get stronger. Can you tell me how far it is to New York?"

"O, a great distance; a hundred miles at least. You can't think of going so far as that?"

"I think it would be the best plan," said Paul. "In a great city like New York there must be a great many things to do which

I can't do here. I don't feel strong enough to work on a farm. Besides, I don't like it. O, it must be a fine thing to live in a great city. Then too," pursued Paul, his face lighting up with the hopeful confidence of youth, "I may become rich. If I do, Aunt Lucy, I will build a fine house, and you shall come and live with me."

Aunt Lucy had seen more of life than Paul, and was less sanguine. The thought came to her that her life was already declining while his was but just begun, and in the course of nature, even if his bright dreams should be realized, she could hardly hope to live long enough to see it. But of this she said nothing. She would not for the world have dimmed the brightness of his anticipations by the expression of a single doubt.

"I wish you all success, Paul, and I thank you for wishing me to share in your good fortune. God helps those who help themselves, and he will help you if you only deserve it. I shall miss you very much when you are gone. It will seem more lonely than ever."

"If it were not for you, Aunt Lucy, I should not mind going at all, but I shall be sorry to leave you behind."

"God will care for both of us, my dear boy. I shall hope to hear from you now and then, and if I learn that you are prosperous and happy, I shall be better contented with my own lot. But have you thought of all the labor and weariness that you will have to encounter? It is best to consider well all this, before entering upon such an undertaking."

"I have thought of all that, and if there were any prospect of

my being happy here, I might stay for the present. But you know how Mrs. Mudge has treated me, and how she feels towards me now."

"I acknowledge, Paul, that it has proved a hard apprenticeship, and perhaps it might be made yet harder if you should stay longer. You must let me know when you are going, I shall want to bid you good-by."

"No fear that I shall forget that, Aunt Lucy. Next to my mother you have been most kind to me, and I love you for it."

Lightly pressing her lips to Paul's forehead Aunt Lucy left the room to conceal the emotion called forth by his approaching departure. Of all the inmates of the establishment she had felt most closely drawn to the orphan boy, whose loneliness and bereavement had appealed to her woman's heart. This feeling had been strengthened by the care she had been called to bestow upon him in his illness, for it is natural to love those whom we have benefited. But Aunt Lucy was the most unselfish of living creatures, and the idea of dissuading Paul from a course which he felt was right never occurred to her. She determined that she would do what she could to further his plans, now that he had decided to go. Accordingly she commenced knitting him a pair of stockings, knowing that this would prove a useful present. This came near being the means of discovering Paul's plan to Mrs. Mudge The latter, who notwithstanding her numerous duties, managed to see everything that was going on, had her attention directed to Aunt Lucy's work.

"Have you finished the stockings that I set you to knitting for Mr. Mudge?" she asked.

"No," said Aunt Lucy, in some confusion.

"Then whose are those, I should like to know? Somebody of more importance than my husband, I suppose."

"They are for Paul," returned the old lady, in some uneasiness.

"Paul!" repeated Mrs. Mudge, in her haste putting a double quantity of salaeratus into the bread she was mixing; "Paul's are they? And who asked you to knit him a pair, I should like to be informed?"

"No one."

"Then what are you doing it for?"

"I thought he might want them."

"Mighty considerate, I declare. And I shouldn't be at all surprised if you were knitting them with the yarn I gave you for Mr. Mudge's stockings."

"You are mistaken," said Aunt Lucy, shortly.

"Oh, you're putting on your airs, are you? I'll tell you what, Madam, you'd better put those stockings away in double-quick time, and finish my husband's, or I'll throw them into the fire, and Paul Prescott may wait till he goes barefoot before he gets them."

There was no alternative. Aunt Lucy was obliged to obey, at least while her persecutor was in the room. When alone for any length of time she took out Paul's stockings from under her apron, and worked on them till the approaching steps of Mrs.

Mudge warned her to desist.

Three days passed. The shadows of twilight were already upon the earth. The paupers were collected in the common room appropriated to their use. Aunt Lucy had suspended her work in consequence of the darkness, for in this economical household a lamp was considered a useless piece of extravagance. Paul crept quietly to her side, and whispered in tones audible to her alone, "I AM GOING TO-MORROW."

"To-morrow! so soon?"

"Yes," said Paul, "I am as ready now as I shall ever be. I wanted to tell you, because I thought maybe you might like to know that this is the last evening we shall spend together at present."

"Do you go in the morning?"

"Yes, Aunt Lucy, early in the morning. Mr. Mudge usually calls me at five; I must be gone an hour before that time. I suppose I must bid you good-by to-night."

"Not to-night, Paul; I shall be up in the morning to see you go."

"But if Mrs. Mudge finds it out she will abuse you."

"I am used to that, Paul," said Aunt Lucy, with a sorrowful smile. "I have borne it many times, and I can again. But I can't lie quiet and let you go without one word of parting. You are quite determined to go?"

"Quite, Aunt Lucy. I never could stay here. There is no pleasure in the present, and no hope for the future. I want to see something of life," and Paul's boyish figure dilated with enthusiasm.

"God grant that you do not see too much!" said Aunt Lucy, half to herself.

"Is the world then, so very sad a place?" asked Paul.

"Both joy and sorrow are mingled in the cup of human life," said Aunt Lucy, solemnly:

"Which shall preponderate it is partly in our power to determine. He who follows the path of duty steadfastly, cannot be wholly miserable, whatever misfortunes may come upon him. He will be sustained by the conviction that his own errors have not brought them upon him."

"I will try to do right," said Paul, placing his hand in that of his companion, "and if ever I am tempted to do wrong, I will think of you and of my mother, and that thought shall restrain me."

"It's time to go bed, folks," proclaimed Mrs Mudge, appearing at the door. "I can't have you sitting up all night, as I've no doubt you'd like to do."

It was only eight o'clock, but no one thought of interposing an objection. The word of Mrs. Mudge was law in her household, as even her husband was sometimes made aware.

All quietly rose from their seats and repaired to bed. It was an affecting sight to watch the tottering gait of those on whose heads the snows of many winters had drifted heavily, as they meekly obeyed the behest of one whose coarse nature forbade her sympathizing with them in their clouded age, and many infirmities.

"Come," said she, impatient of their slow movements, "move a

little quicker, if it's perfectly convenient. Anybody'd think you'd been hard at work all day, as I have. You're about the laziest set I ever had anything to do with. I've got to be up early in the morning, and can't stay here dawdling."

"She's got a sweet temper," said Paul, in a whisper, to Aunt Lucy.

"Hush!" said the old lady. "She may hear you."

"What's that you're whispering about?" said Mrs. Mudge, suspiciously. "Something you're ashamed to have heard, most likely."

Paul thought it best to remain silent.

"To-morrow morning at four!" he whispered to Aunt Lucy, as he pressed her hand in the darkness.

VII
PAUL BEGINS HIS JOURNEY

Paul ascended the stairs to his hard pallet for the last time. For the last time! There is sadness in the thought, even when the future which lies before us glows with brighter colors than the past has ever worn. But to Paul, whose future was veiled in uncertainty, and who was about to part with the only friend who felt an interest in his welfare, this thought brought increased sorrow.

He stood before the dirt-begrimed window through which alone the struggling sunbeams found an inlet into the gloomy little attic, and looked wistfully out upon the barren fields that surrounded the poorhouse. Where would he be on the morrow at that time? He did not know. He knew little or nothing of the great world without, yet his resolution did not for an instant falter. If it had, the thought of Mrs. Mudge would have been enough to remove all his hesitation.

He threw himself on his hard bed, and a few minutes brought him that dreamless sleep which comes so easily to the young.

Meanwhile Aunt Lucy, whose thoughts were also occupied with Paul's approaching departure, had taken from the pocket of her OTHER dress—for she had but two—something wrapped in a piece of brown paper. One by one she removed the many folds

in which it was enveloped, and came at length to the contents.

It was a coin.

"Paul will need some money, poor boy," said she, softly to herself, "I will give him this. It will never do me any good, and it may be of some service to him."

So saying she looked carefully at the coin in the moonlight.

But what made her start, and utter a half exclamation?

Instead of the gold eagle, the accumulation of many years, which she had been saving for some extraordinary occasion like the presents she held in her hand—a copper cent.

"I have been robbed," she exclaimed indignantly in the suddenness of her surprise.

"What's the matter now?" inquired Mrs Mudge, appearing at the door, "Why are you not in bed, Aunt Lucy Lee? How dare you disobey my orders?"

"I have been robbed," exclaimed the old lady in unwonted excitement.

"Of what, pray?" asked Mrs. Mudge, with a sneer.

"I had a gold eagle wrapped up in that paper," returned Aunt Lucy, pointing to the fragments on the floor, "and now, to-night, when I come to open it, I find but this cent."

"A likely story," retorted Mrs. Mudge, "very likely, indeed, that a common pauper should have a gold eagle. If you found a cent in the paper, most likely that's what you put there. You're growing old and forgetful, so don't get foolish and flighty. You'd better go to bed."

"But I did have the gold, and it's been stolen," persisted Aunt Lucy, whose disappointment was the greater because she intended the money for Paul.

"Again!" exclaimed Mrs. Mudge. "Will you never have done with this folly? Even if you did have the gold, which I don't for an instant believe, you couldn't keep it. A pauper has no right to hold property."

"Then why did the one who stole the little I had leave me this?" said the old lady, scornfully, holding up the cent which had been substituted for the gold.

"How should I know?" exclaimed Mrs. Mudge, wrathfully. "You talk as if you thought I had taken your trumpery money."

"So you did!" chimed in an unexpected voice, which made Mrs. Mudge start nervously.

It was the young woman already mentioned, who was bereft of reason, but who at times, as often happens in such cases, seemed gifted with preternatural acuteness.

"So you did. I saw you, I did; I saw you creep up when you thought nobody was looking, and search her pocket. You opened that paper and took out the bright yellow piece, and put in another. You didn't think I was looking at you, ha! ha! How I laughed as I stood behind the door and saw you tremble for fear some one would catch you thieving. You didn't think of me, dear, did you?"

And the wild creature burst into an unmeaning laugh.

Mrs. Mudge stood for a moment mute, overwhelmed by this

sudden revelation. But for the darkness, Aunt Lucy could have seen the sudden flush which overspread her face with the crimson hue of detected guilt. But this was only for a moment. It was quickly succeeded by a feeling of intense anger towards the unhappy creature who had been the means of exposing her.

"I'll teach you to slander your betters, you crazy fool," she exclaimed, in a voice almost inarticulate with passion, as she seized her rudely by the arm, and dragged her violently from the room.

She returned immediately.

"I suppose," said she, abruptly, confronting Aunt Lucy, "that you are fool enough to believe her ravings?"

"I bring no accusation," said the old lady, calmly, "If your conscience acquits you, it is not for me to accuse you."

"But what do you think?" persisted Mrs. Mudge, whose consciousness of guilt did not leave her quite at ease.

"I cannot read the heart," said Aunt Lucy, composedly. "I can only say, that, pauper as I am, I would not exchange places with the one who has done this deed."

"Do you mean me?" demanded Mrs. Mudge.

"You can tell best."

"I tell you what, Aunt Lucy Lee," said Mrs. Mudge, her eyes blazing with anger, "If you dare insinuate to any living soul that I stole your paltry money, which I don't believe you ever had, I will be bitterly revenged upon you."

She flaunted out of the room, and Aunt Lucy, the first

bitterness of her disappointment over, retired to bed, and slept more tranquilly than the unscrupulous woman who had robbed her.

At a quarter before four Paul started from his humble couch, and hastily dressed himself, took up a little bundle containing all his scanty stock of clothing, and noiselessly descended the two flights of stairs which separated him from the lower story. Here he paused a moment for Aunt Lucy to appear. Her sharp ears had distinguished his stealthy steps as he passed her door, and she came down to bid him good-by. She had in her hands a pair of stockings which she slipped into his bundle.

"I wish I had something else to give you, Paul," she said, "but you know that I am not very rich."

"Dear Aunt Lucy," said Paul, kissing her, "you are my only friend on earth. You have been very kind to me, and I never will forget you, NEVER! By-and-by, when I am rich, I will build a fine house, and you will come and live with me, won't you?"

Paul's bright anticipations, improbable as they were, had the effect of turning his companion's thoughts into a more cheerful channel.

She bent down and kissed him, whispering softly, "Yes, I will, Paul."

"Then it's a bargain," said he, joyously, "Mind you don't forget it. I shall come for you one of these days when you least expect it."

"Have you any money?" inquired Aunt Lucy.

Paul shook his head.

"Then," said she, drawing from her finger a gold ring which had held its place for many long years, "here is something which will bring you a little money if you are ever in distress."

Paul hung back.

"I would rather not take it, indeed I would," he said, earnestly, "I would rather go hungry for two or three days than sell your ring. Besides, I shall not need it; God will provide for me."

"But you need not sell it," urged Aunt Lucy, "unless it is absolutely necessary. You can take it and keep it in remembrance of me. Keep it till you see me again, Paul. It will be a pledge to me that you will come back again some day."

"On that condition I will take it," said Paul, "and some day I will bring it back."

A slight noise above, as of some one stirring in sleep, excited the apprehensions of the two, and warned them that it was imprudent for them to remain longer in conversation.

After a hurried good-by, Aunt Lucy quietly went upstairs again, and Paul, shouldering his bundle, walked rapidly away.

The birds, awakening from their night's repose, were beginning to carol forth their rich songs of thanksgiving for the blessing of a new day. From the flowers beneath his feet and the blossom-laden branches above his head, a delicious perfume floated out upon the morning air, and filled the heart of the young wanderer with a sense of the joyousness of existence, and inspired him with a hopeful confidence in the future.

For the first time he felt that he belonged to himself. At the age of thirteen he had taken his fortune in his own hand, and was about to mold it as best he might.

There were care, and toil, and privations before him, no doubt, but in that bright morning hour he could harbor only cheerful and trusting thoughts. Hopefully he looked forward to the time when he could fulfil his father's dying injunction, and lift from his name the burden of a debt unpaid. Then his mind reverting to another thought, he could not help smiling at the surprise and anger of Mr. Mudge, when he should find that his assistant had taken French leave. He thought he should like to be concealed somewhere where he could witness the commotion excited by his own departure. But as he could not be in two places at the same time, he must lose that satisfaction. He had cut loose from the Mudge household, as he trusted, forever. He felt that a new and brighter life was opening before him.

VIII
A FRIEND IN NEED

Our hero did not stop till he had put a good five miles between himself and the poorhouse. He knew that it would not be long before Mr. Mudge would discover his absence, and the thought of being carried back was doubly distasteful to him now that he had, even for a short time, felt the joy of being his own master. His hurried walk, taken in the fresh morning air, gave him quite a sharp appetite. Luckily he had the means of gratifying it. The night before he had secreted half his supper, knowing that he should need it more the next morning. He thought he might now venture to sit down and eat it.

At a little distance from the road was a spring, doubtless used for cattle, since it was situated at the lower end of a pasture. Close beside and bending over it was a broad, branching oak, which promised a cool and comfortable shelter.

"That's just the place for me," thought Paul, who felt thirsty as well as hungry, "I think I will take breakfast here and rest awhile before I go any farther."

So saying he leaped lightly over the rail fence, and making his way to the place indicated, sat down in the shadow of the tree. Scooping up some water in the hollow of his hand, he drank a deep and refreshing draught. He next proceeded to pull out of his

pocket a small package, which proved to contain two small pieces of bread. His long morning walk had given him such an appetite that he was not long in despatching all he had. It is said by some learned physicians, who no doubt understand the matter, that we should always rise from the table with an appetite. Probably Paul had never heard of this rule. Nevertheless, he seemed in a fair way of putting it into practice, for the best of reasons, because he could not help it.

His breakfast, though not the most inviting, being simply unbuttered bread and rather dry at that, seemed more delicious than ever before, but unfortunately there was not enough of it. However, as there seemed likely to be no more forthcoming, he concluded in default of breakfast to lie down under the tree for a few minutes before resuming his walk. Though he could not help wondering vaguely where his dinner was to come from, as that time was several hours distant, he wisely decided not to anticipate trouble till it came.

Lying down under the tree, Paul began to consider what Mr. Mudge would say when he discovered that he had run away.

"He'll have to milk the cows himself," thought Paul. "He won't fancy that much. Won't Mrs. Mudge scold, thought? I'm glad I shan't be within hearing."

"Holloa!"

It was a boy's voice that Paul heard.

Looking up he saw a sedate company of cows entering the pasture single file through an aperture made by letting down

the bars. Behind them walked a boy of about his own size, flourishing a stout hickory stick. The cows went directly to the spring from which Paul had already drunk. The young driver looked at our hero with some curiosity, wondering, doubtless, what brought him there so early in the morning. After a little hesitation he said, remarking Paul's bundle, "Where are you traveling?"

"I don't know exactly," said Paul, who was not quite sure whether it would be politic to avow his destination.

"Don't know?" returned the other, evidently surprised.

"Not exactly; I may go to New York."

"New York! That's a great ways off. Do you know the way there?"

"No, but I can find it."

"Are you going all alone?" asked his new acquaintance, who evidently thought Paul had undertaken a very formidable journey.

"Yes."

"Are you going to walk all the way?"

"Yes, unless somebody offers me a ride now and then."

"But why don't you ride in the stage, or in the cars? You would get there a good deal quicker."

"One reason," said Paul, hesitating a little, "is because I have no money to pay for riding."

"Then how do you expect to live? Have you had any breakfast, this morning?"

"I brought some with me, and just got through eating it when you came along."

"And where do you expect to get any dinner?" pursued his questioner, who was evidently not a little puzzled by the answers he received.

"I don't know," returned Paul.

His companion looked not a little confounded at this view of the matter, but presently a bright thought struck him.

"I shouldn't wonder," he said, shrewdly, "if you were running away."

Paul hesitated a moment. He knew that his case must look a little suspicious, thus unexplained, and after a brief pause for reflection determined to take the questioner into his confidence. He did this the more readily because his new acquaintance looked very pleasant.

"You've guessed right," he said; "if you'll promise not to tell anybody, I'll tell you all about it."

This was readily promised, and the boy who gave his name as John Burgess, sat down beside Paul, while he, with the frankness of boyhood, gave a circumstantial account of his father's death, and the ill-treatment he had met with subsequently.

"Do you come from Wrenville?" asked John, interested. "Why, I've got relations there. Perhaps you know my cousin, Ben Newcome."

"Is Ben Newcome your cousin? O yes, I know him very well; he's a first-rate fellow."

"He isn't much like his father."

"Not at all. If he was"—

"You wouldn't like him so well. Uncle talks a little too much out of the dictionary, and walks so straight that he bends backward. But I say, Paul, old Mudge deserves to be choked, and Mrs. Mudge should be obliged to swallow a gallon of her own soup. I don't know but that would be worse than choking. I wouldn't have stayed so long if I had been in your place."

"I shouldn't," said Paul, "if it hadn't been for Aunt Lucy."

"Was she an aunt of yours?"

"No, but we used to call her so, She's the best friend I've got, and I don't know but the only one," said Paul, a little sadly.

"No, she isn't," said John, quickly; "I'll be your friend, Paul. Sometime, perhaps, I shall go to New York, myself, and then I will come and see you. Where do you expect to be?"

"I don't know anything about the city," said Paul, "but if you come, I shall be sure to see you somewhere. I wish you were going now."

Neither Paul nor his companion had much idea of the extent of the great metropolis, or they would not have taken it so much as a matter of course that, being in the same place, they should meet each other.

Their conversation was interrupted by the ringing of a bell from a farmhouse within sight.

"That's our breakfast-bell," said John rising from the grass. "It is meant for me. I suppose they wonder what keeps me so long.

Won't you come and take breakfast with me, Paul?"

"I guess not," said Paul, who would have been glad to do so had he followed the promptings of his appetite. "I'm afraid your folks would ask me questions, and then it would be found out that I am running away."

"I didn't think of that," returned John, after a pause. "You haven't got any dinner with you?" he said a moment after.

"No."

"Well, I'll tell you what I'll do. Come with me as far as the fence, and lie down there till I've finished breakfast. Then I'll bring something out for you, and maybe I'll walk along a little way with you."

"You are very kind," said Paul, gratefully.

"Oh, nonsense," said John, "that's nothing. Besides, you know we are going to be friends."

"John! breakfast's ready."

"There's Nelson calling me," said John, hurriedly. "I must leave you; there's the fence; lie down there, and I'll be back in a jiffy."

"John, I say, why don't you come?"

"I'm coming. You mustn't think everybody's got such a thundering great appetite as you, Nelson."

"I guess you've got enough to keep you from pining away," said Nelson, good-naturedly, "you're twice as fat as I am."

"That's because I work harder," said John, rather illogically.

The brothers went in to breakfast.

But a few minutes elapsed before John reappeared, bearing under his arm a parcel wrapped up in an old newspaper. He came up panting with the haste he had made.

"It didn't take you long to eat breakfast," said Paul.

"No, I hurried through it; I thought you would get tired of waiting. And now I'll walk along with you a little ways. But wait here's something for you."

So saying he unrolled the newspaper and displayed a loaf of bread, fresh and warm, which looked particularly inviting to Paul, whose scanty breakfast had by no means satisfied his appetite. Besides this, there was a loaf of molasses ginger-bread, with which all who were born in the country, or know anything of New England housekeeping, are familiar.

"There," said John, "I guess that'll be enough for your dinner."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.