ALGER HORATIO JR.

THE YOUNG BANK MESSENGER

Horatio Alger
The Young Bank Messenger

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Содержание

Jr. Horatio Alger
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CHAPTER I.
THE LONELY CABIN

Just on the edge of the prairie, in western Iowa, some thirty years since, stood a cabin covering quite a little ground, but only one story high. It was humble enough as a home, but not more so than the early homes of some who have become great.

Let us enter.

The furniture was scanty, being limited to articles of prime necessity. There was a stove, a table, three chairs, a row of shelves containing a few articles of crockery and tinware, and a bed in the far corner of the room, on which rested a man. He had a ragged gray beard and hair, and a face long and thin, with preternaturally black eyes.

It was evident that he was sick unto death. His parchment-colored skin was indented with wrinkles; from time to time he coughed so violently as to rack his slight frame, and his hand, thin and wrinkled, as it rested on the quilt that covered him, shook as with palsy.

It was hard to tell how old the man was. He looked over

seventy, but there were indications that he had aged prematurely.

There was one other person in the room, one whose appearance contrasted strongly with that of the old man. It was a boy of sixteen, a boy with dark brown hair, ruddy cheeks, hazel eyes, an attractive yet firm and resolute face, and an appearance of manliness and self-reliance. He was well dressed, and, though the tenant of such an humble home, would have passed muster upon the streets of a city.

"How do you feel, Uncle Peter?" he asked, as he stood by the bedside.

"I shall never feel any better, Ernest," said the old man, in a hollow voice.

"Don't say that, uncle," rejoined Ernest in a tone of concern.

There seemed little to connect him, in his strong, attractive boyhood, with the frail old man, but they had lived together for five years, and habit was powerful.

"Yes, Ernest, I shall never rise from this bed."

"Isn't there anything I can get for you, uncle?"

"Is there is there anything left in the bottle?" asked Peter, wistfully.

Ernest walked to the shelf that held the dishes, and took from a corner a large black bottle. It seemed light and might be empty. He turned out the contents into a glass, but there was only a tablespoonful of whisky left.

"It is almost all gone, Uncle Peter; will you have this much?"

"Yes," answered the old man, tremulously.

Ernest lifted the invalid into a sitting posture, and then put the glass to his mouth.

He drained it, and gave a sigh of satisfaction.

"It is good," he said briefly.

"I wish there were more."

"It goes to the right spot. It puts strength into me."

"Shall I go to the village and buy more?"

"I–I don't know–"

"I can get back very soon."

"Very well–go then, like a good boy."

"I shall have to trouble you for some money, Uncle Peter."

"Go to the trunk. You will find some."

There was a small hair trunk, in another corner. Ernest knew that this was meant, and he knelt down before it and lifted the lid.

There was a small wooden box at the left-hand side. Opening this, Ernest discovered three five-dollar gold pieces. Usually his uncle had gone to the trunk for money, but the boy knew where it was kept.

"There are but three gold pieces, uncle," he announced, looking towards the bed.

"Take one of them, Ernest."

"I wonder if that is all the money he has left?" thought Ernest.

He rose from his kneeling position and went to the door.

"I won't be gone long, uncle," he said. He followed a path which led from the door in an easterly direction to the village. It was over a mile away, and consisted only of a few scattering

houses, a blacksmith's shop, and a store.

It was to the store that Ernest bent his steps. It was a one-story structure, as were most of the buildings in the village. There was a sign over the door which read:

JOE MARKS.

Groceries and Family Supplies.

Joe stood behind the counter; there were two other men in the store, one tall, gaunt, of the average Western type, with a broad-brimmed, soft felt hat on his head, and in the costume of a hunter; he looked rough, but honest and reliable, and that was more than could be said of the other. He may best be described as a tramp, a man who looked averse to labor of any kind, a man without a settled business or home, who picked up a living as he could, caring less for food than for drink, and whose mottled face indicated frequent potations of whisky.

Ernest looked at this man as he entered. He didn't remember to have met him before, nor was there anything to attract him in his appearance.

"How are you, Ernest?" said Joe Marks, cordially. "How's Uncle Peter?"

"He's pretty bad, Joe. He thinks he's going to die."

"Not so bad as that, surely."

"Yes, I guess he's right. He's very weak."

"Well, well, he's a good age. How old is he?"

"I don't know. He never told me."

"He's well on to seventy, I'm thinking. But what can I do for

you?"

"You may fill this bottle, Joe; Uncle Peter is so weak he thinks it will put new life in him."

"So it will, Ernest; there's nothing like good whisky to make an old man strong, or a young man, for that matter."

It may be easy to see that Joe did not believe in total abstinence.

"I don't drink, myself!" said Ernest, replying to the last part of Joe's remark.

"There's nothing like whisky," remarked the tramp in a hoarse voice.

"You've drunk your share, I'm thinking," said Luke Robbins, the tall hunter.

"Not yet," returned the tramp. "I haven't had my share yet. There's lots of people that has drunk more'n me."

"Why haven't you drunk your share? You hadn't no objections, I reckon."

"I hadn't the money," said the tramp, sadly. "I've never had much money. I ain't lucky."

"If you had had more money, you'd maybe not be living now. You'd have drunk yourself to death."

"If I ever do commit suicide, that's the way I'd like to die," said the tramp.

Joe filled the bottle from a keg behind the counter and handed it to Ernest. The aroma of the whisky was diffused about the store, and the tramp sniffed it in eagerly. It stimulated his desire

to indulge his craving for drink. As Ernest, with the bottle in his hand, prepared to leave, the tramp addressed him.

"Say, young feller, ain't you goin' to shout?"

"What do you mean?"

"Ain't you goin' to treat me and this gentleman?" indicating Luke Robbins.

"No," answered Ernest, shortly. "I don't buy it as drink, but as medicine."

"I need medicine," urged the tramp, with a smile.

"I don't," said the hunter. "Don't you bother about us, my boy. If we want whisky we can buy it ourselves."

"I can't," whined the tramp. "If I had as much money as you,"–for he had noticed that Ernest had changed a gold piece–"I'd be happy, but I'm out of luck."

Ernest paid no attention to his words, but left the store, and struck the path homeward.

"Who's that boy?" asked the tramp.

"It's Ernest Ray."

"Where'd he get that gold?"

"He lives with his uncle, a mile from the village."

"Is his uncle rich?"

"Folks think so. They call him a miser."

"Is he goin' to die?"

"That's what the boy says."

"And the boy'll get all his money?"

"It's likely."

"I'd like to be his guardian."

Joe and Luke Robbins laughed. "You'd make a pretty guardian," said Luke.

"I won't get it," said the tramp, mournfully. "I never had no luck."

CHAPTER II.
A DEATHBED REVELATION

Ernest made the best of his way home, for he knew his uncle would be waiting for him.

The old man's eyes were closed, but he opened them when Ernest entered the room.

"Was I gone long?" asked the boy.

"I don't know. I think I fell asleep."

"Shall I give you some of the drink?"

"Yes."

He drank a small amount, and it seemed to brighten him up so much that Ernest said, "You look better, Uncle Peter. You may live some time."

Peter shook his head.

"No, boy," he replied; "my time has come to die. I know it. I would like to live for your sake. You will miss me when I am gone, Ernest?"

"Yes, uncle, I shall miss you very much."

The old man seemed gratified. Ernest was the only one he cared for in all the world.

"I don't care so much about dying, but I am anxious for you. I wish I had money to leave you, Ernest, but I haven't much."

"I am young and strong. I can get along."

"I hope so. You will go away from here."

"Yes, uncle. I don't think I shall care to stay here after you are gone."

"You will need money to take you away."

"There is a little more in the trunk."

"But only a little. It is not quite all I have. I have a hundred dollars in gold laid away for you."

Ernest looked surprised.

"I must tell you where it is while I still have life. Do you remember the oak tree on the little knoll half a mile away?"

"Yes, I know it."

"Dig under that tree five feet in a westerly direction. There is a wooden box about half a foot below the surface of the earth. There's nothing to mark the spot, for it was buried a year since, and the grass has grown over it, hiding all traces of the earth's being disturbed. After I am gone go there and get the money."

"Yes, uncle."

"Don't let any one see you when you visit the spot. It will be best to go at night. There are evil-disposed men who would rob you of it if they had the chance. I am sorry it is so little, Ernest."

"But it seems to me a good deal."

"To a boy it may seem so. Once I thought I might have a good deal more to leave you. Go to the trunk and search till you find a paper folded in an envelope, and inscribed with your name."

"Shall I search now?"

"Yes."

Ernest went to the trunk, and followed the old man's directions. He found the envelope readily, and held it up.

"Is that it, uncle?"

"Yes. Put it in your pocket, and read it after I am gone. Then be guided by circumstances. It may amount to something hereafter."

"Very well, uncle."

"I have told you, Ernest, that I do not expect to live long. I have a feeling that twenty-four hours from now I shall be gone."

"Oh, no, uncle, not so soon!" exclaimed Ernest, in a shocked tone.

"Yes, I think so. If you have any questions to ask me while I yet have life, ask, for it is your right."

"Yes, Uncle Peter, I have long wished to know something about myself. Have I any relatives except you?"

"I am not your relative," answered the old man slowly.

Ernest was amazed.

"Are you not my uncle?" he asked.

"No; there is no tie of blood between us."

"Then how does it happen that we have lived together so many years?"

"I was a servant in your father's family. When your father died, the care of you devolved upon me."

"Where was I born?"

"In a large town in the western part of New York State. Your grandfather was a man of wealth, but your father incurred his displeasure by his marriage to a poor but highly-educated and

refined girl. A cousin of your father took advantage of this and succeeded in alienating father and son. The estate that should have descended to your father was left to the cousin."

"Is he still living?"

"Yes."

"But my father died?"

"Yes; he had a fever, which quickly carried him off when you were five years of age."

"Was he very poor?"

"No; he inherited a few thousand dollars from an aunt, and upon this he lived prudently, carrying on a small business besides. Your mother died when you were three years old, your father two years later."

"And then you took care of me?"

"Yes."

"And I have been a burden to you these many years!"

"No! Don't give me too much credit. A sum of money was put into my hands to spend for you. We lived carefully, and it lasted. We have been here three years, and it has cost very little to live in that time. The hundred dollars of which I spoke to you are the last of your inheritance. You are not indebted to me for it. It is rightfully yours."

"What is my uncle's name?"

"Stephen Ray. He lives a few miles from Elmira, on the Erie road."

"And is he quite rich?"

"Yes; he is probably worth a quarter of a million dollars. It is money which should have gone to your father."

"Then the wicked are sometimes prospered in this world!"

"Yes, but this world is not all."

"Has there been any communication with my cousin in all these years?"

"Yes, two years ago I wrote to him."

"What did you write?"

"You must forgive me, Ernest, but I saw you growing up without an education, and I felt that you should have advantages which I could not give you. I wrote to your cousin asking if he would pay your expenses in a preparatory school and afterward at college."

"What did he reply?"

"Go to the trunk. You will find his letter there. It is in the tray, and addressed to me."

Ernest found it readily.

"May I read it?" he asked.

"Yes, I wish you to do so."

It ran thus:

PETER BRANT.

Sir: I have received your letter making an appeal to me in behalf of Ernest Ray, the son of my cousin. You wish me to educate him. I must decline to do so. His father very much incensed my revered uncle, and it is not right that any of his money should go to him or his heirs. He must reap the reward of

his disobedience. So far as I am personally concerned I should not object to doing something for the boy, but I am sure that my dead uncle would not approve it. Besides, I have myself a son to whom I propose to leave the estate intact.

It is my advice that you bring up the boy Ernest to some humble employment, perhaps have him taught some trade by which he can earn an honest living. It is not at all necessary that he should receive a collegiate education. You are living at the West. That is well. He is favorably situated for a poor boy, and will have little difficulty in earning a livelihood. I don't care to have him associate with my boy Clarence. They are cousins, it is true, but their lots in life will be very different.

I do not care to communicate with you again.

STEPHEN RAY.

Ernest read this letter with flushed cheeks.

"I hate that man," he said hotly, "even if he is a relative. Uncle Peter, I am sorry you ever applied to him in my behalf."

"I would not, Ernest, if I had understood what manner of man he was."

"I may meet him some time," said Ernest, thoughtfully.

"Would you claim relationship?"

"Never!" declared Ernest, emphatically. "It was he, you say, who prejudiced my grandfather against my poor father?"

"Yes."

"In order to secure the estate himself?"

"Undoubtedly that was his object."

"Nothing could be meaner. I would rather live poor all my life than get property by such means."

"If you have no more questions to ask, Ernest, I will try to sleep. I feel drowsy."

"Do so, Uncle Peter."

The old man closed his eyes, and soon all was silent. Presently Ernest himself lay down on a small bed near by. When he awoke, hours afterward, he lit a candle and went to Peter's bedside.

The old man lay still–very still. With quick suspicion Ernest placed his hand on his cheek.

It was stone cold.

"He is dead!" cried Ernest, and a feeling of desolation came over him.

"I am all alone now," he murmured.

But he was not wholly alone. There was a face glued against the window-pane a face that he did not see. It was the tramp he had met during the day at the village store.

CHAPTER III.
A SUCCESSFUL ROBBERY

The tramp stood with his face glued to the pane, looking in at the boy. He could not quite understand what had taken place, but gathered that the old man was dead.

"So much the better!" he said. "It will make my task easier."

He had hoped to find both asleep, and decided to wait near the house till the boy went to bed. He had made many inquiries at the store of Joe Marks, and the answers to his questions led him to believe that old Peter had a large amount of money concealed in his cabin.

Now, Tom Burns was a penniless tramp, who had wandered from Chicago on a predatory trip, ready to take any property he could lay his hands on. The chance that presented itself here was unusually tempting to a man of his character.

Earlier in the evening he had reached the cabin, but thought it best to defer his plans until later, for Ernest was awake and stirring about the room.

The tramp withdrew to some distance from the cabin and lay down under a tree, where he was soon fast asleep. Curiously, it was the very oak tree under which Peter's little hoard was concealed, but this, of course, he did not know. Had he been aware that directly beneath him was a box containing a hundred

dollars in gold he would have been electrified and full of joy.

Tom Burns in his long and varied career had many times slept in the open air, and he had no difficulty in falling asleep now. But asleep he took no note of time, and when he woke up it was much later than he intended. However, without delay he made his way to the cabin, and arrived just as Ernest discovered the death of the old man whom he had supposed to be his uncle.

What time it was the tramp did not know, for it was years since he had carried a watch; but as he stood with his face glued to the window-pane he heard a clock in the cabin striking the hour of three.

"Three o'clock," he ejaculated. "Well, I did have a nap!"

The boy was awake and he thought it best to wait a while.

"Why didn't I get here a little sooner?" he grumbled. "Then I could have ransacked the cabin without trouble. Probably the old man has been dead some time."

He watched to see what Ernest would do.

"He won't be such a fool as to sit up with the corpse," he muttered, a little apprehensively. "That wouldn't do no good."

Apparently Ernest was of this opinion, for after carefully covering up the inanimate body he lay down again on his own bed.

He did not fall asleep immediately, for the thought that he was in the presence of death naturally affected his imagination. But gradually his eyes closed, and his full, regular breathing gave notice that he was locked in slumber.

He had left the candle burning on the table. By the light which it afforded the tramp could watch him, and at the end of twenty minutes he felt satisfied that he could safely enter.

He lifted the window, and passed into the room noiselessly. He had one eye fixed on the sleeping boy, who might suddenly awake. He had taken off his shoes, and left them on the grass just under the window.

When Tom Burns found himself in the room, he made his way at once to the trunk, which his watchful eye had already discovered.

"That's where the old man keeps his gold, likely," he muttered. "I hope it isn't locked."

Usually the trunk would have been fastened, but the conversation which Ernest had had with old Peter so engrossed his mind as to make him less careful than usual. Tom Burns therefore had no difficulty in lifting the lid.

With eager fingers he explored the contents, and was not long in discovering the box which contained the two gold coins.

The discovery pleased and yet disappointed him.

"Only ten dollars!" he muttered. "There ought to have been a pile of these yellow boys. Perhaps there are more somewhere."

Meanwhile he slipped the two coins into his vest pocket It was not much, but it was more than he had had in his possession for months.

He continued his search, but failed to discover any more money. He felt indignant. It seemed to him that he was badly

used. That a miser should have but a paltry ten dollars in his trunk was very discreditable.

"He must have some more somewhere," Burns reflected.

It occurred to him that there might be hoards hidden under the floor, or in the immediate neighborhood of the cabin. But it was night, and there would be no profit in pursuing the search now.

"To-morrow," he reflected, "the boy will be off making preparations for buryin' the old man, and then I can make another visit."

He closed the lid of the trunk, and with a general glance to see if there was anything more worth taking, he rose to his feet and prepared to leave the room.

Just at this moment Ernest, who was probably dreaming of the old man, spoke in his sleep.

"Uncle Peter," he murmured.

The tramp stood still, apprehensive that Ernest would open his eyes and detect his presence. But the boy did not speak again.

"I had better get," soliloquized Burns.

He got out of the window quietly, but as the boy stirred again, he hurried away with out stopping to shut it.

When, a little after seven o'clock, Ernest woke up, the sun was streaming in at the open window, and the cool air entered with it.

"How came the window up?" thought Ernest, wondering. "I am sure I didn't leave it open last night."

There was nothing else to indicate that the cabin had been entered. But the more Ernest thought it over, the more convinced

he was that there had been a visitor.

What could have been his motive?

With sudden suspicion, he went to the trunk and opened it. It was evident that things had been disturbed. His eyes sought out the box that contained the gold pieces. He opened it, and found that he had been robbed.

"Who could have done it?" he asked himself.

He could not think of any one. He was acquainted with every one in the little village, and he knew none that would be capable of theft. He never thought of the ill-looking tramp whom he had met in Joe Marks' store.

Ten dollars was a considerable loss to him, for he had estimated that it would defray the expenses of old Peter's interment. It was not so bad as it might have been, however, for the hundred dollars of which Peter had told him were still safe.

"When I get that I must be careful," he said to himself.

Though his rest had been disturbed, he felt ready to get up. There was work for him to do. He must arrange for the burial of the old man with whom he had lived so long, the only friend he felt he could claim.

Ernest rose, and after dressing himself, made a frugal breakfast. He looked sadly at Peter. Death was to him something new and strange, for he did not remember ever having seen a dead man before. He must get help, and with that object in view he went to the village, and sought the store of Joe Marks.

"What brings you out so early, my lad?" asked Joe.

"Matter enough, Joe. My uncle is dead."

He still called him uncle, though he knew now that Peter was no kin to him.

"Old Peter dead!" ejaculated Marks. "When did he die?"

"Some time during the night. I wish you'd help me, for I don't know what to do."

"So I will, boy. We'll stand by you, won't we, Luke?"

This was said as Luke Robbins entered the store.

"To be sure we will, Ernest. We all like you."

"Oh, I forgot to say," continued Ernest, "the cabin was entered last night, and some money taken."

CHAPTER IV.
ALONE IN THE WORLD

Joe Marks and Luke Robbins looked at each other in amazement.

"Your cabin entered!" exclaimed Joe. "What do you say to that, Luke?"

"I did not know there were any thieves around here," answered Luke. "What was taken?"

"An old trunk was opened–I carelessly left it unlocked–and two five-dollar gold pieces were stolen out of it. At any rate I couldn't find them this morning."

"Two five-dollar gold pieces?" said Joe quickly. "Then I know who took them."

"What do you mean, Joe?" said Luke. "Out with it!"

"You know that tramp who was here yesterday, Luke?"

"Yes."

"He came round an hour ago, just after I had opened, and called for a glass of whisky. 'Where is your money?' I asked. 'I've got plenty. You needn't be afraid,' he said. Then I called upon him to show it, and he pulled out a five-dollar gold piece. Of course I was surprised. 'Where did you get it?' I asked, suspiciously. 'Yesterday you said you had no money.' 'I had that,' he answered, 'but I didn't want to spend it. You see it was a gift from my dyin'

mother, and I wanted to keep it for her sake.' With that he rolled up his eyes and looked sanctimonious. Then I asked him how it happened that he was ready to spend it now."

"What did he say?"

"He said that he was so parched with thirst that he felt obliged to do it."

"Did you take his money?"

"No. I was short of change. You see I changed a gold piece for the boy yesterday. Besides, I wasn't sure the piece was good, seeing who offered it. I thought it might be bogus."

"Then he didn't get his whisky?"

"No. He went away disappointed. I don't doubt, Ernest, that the gold piece was one of yours. How did the fellow get in?"

"Through the window. I found it open when I woke up."

"You must have slept sound?"

"I did. I slept an hour later than I generally do."

"Was anything else taken?"

"Not that I could discover."

"Do you mean to say that your uncle had but ten dollars?" asked Joe incredulously.

"It was all he had in the trunk."

"I always thought him a rich man."

"He was not," said Ernest quietly.

"Was that all the money he had? He had the reputation of being a miser, with hoards of gold hidden in or near the cabin."

"I know of one sum of money he had concealed, but it was

not a large amount. He told me about it before he died."

"I'm glad you won't be left penniless, lad; did he own the cabin?"

"Nobody owned it," said Joe Marks. "It was built years ago by a man who suddenly left it and went away, nobody knew where. It wasn't worth much, and no one ever took the trouble to claim it. When your uncle came here he found it empty and took possession of it, and there he has lived ever since. So you'll have some money, Ernest?"

"Only a hundred dollars."

"What will you do? What are your plans?"

"I don't know. I haven't had time to think."

"I might find a place for you in the store. We wouldn't like to have you go away."

"Thank you, Joe. You are very kind. But there's no chance for me around here. I'll take the money, and go somewhere. But first I must see Uncle Peter buried. Will you help me?"

"To be sure we will. Was he your only relation?"

"He was not my relation at all."

"Why, you have always called him uncle."

"I supposed him to be my uncle, but yesterday he told me that he was only a servant in my father's family, and that on my father's death he was placed in charge of me."

"I reckon that's so. You didn't favor the old man at all. You look as if you came from better stock."

"All the same I shall miss him," said Ernest sadly. "He was a

good friend to me, Peter was."

"Did he tell you whether you had any kin?"

"Yes; I have a cousin of my father's living in New York State. He is a rich man. He inherited the property that ought to have gone to my father."

"How did that happen?"

"He prejudiced my grandfather against my father, and so the estate was willed to him."

"The mean scoundrel!" exclaimed Luke indignantly. "I'd like to have him in my hands for a few minutes; I'd give him a lesson."

"I should pity him if ever you got hold of him, Luke," said Joe Marks. "But we must consider what we can do for the boy."

"I wish we could get hold of that thief of a tramp!"

"Probably we shall. He'll find his way back here sooner or later."

But the burial of Peter Brant was the first consideration. No undertaker was called, for in that small settlement one would not have been supported. The ceremonies of death were few and simple. A rude wooden box was put together, and Peter was placed in it, dressed as he was at the time of his death. There was an itinerant minister who preached in the village once in four weeks, but he was away now, and so there could be no religious ceremony beyond reading a chapter from the New Testament. Joe Marks, who had received a decent education, officiated as reader. Then the interment took place. In the forenoon of the second day Peter's body was laid away, and Ernest was left

practically alone in the world.

Meanwhile some account must be given of Tom Burns, the tramp.

When he found it impossible to obtain whisky with the gold he had stolen, he felt very despondent. His throat was parched, and his craving became intolerable. He felt that he had been decidedly ill-used. What was the use of money unless it could be converted into what his soul desired? But there was no way of changing the coin except at the store of Joe Marks. To ask any of the villagers would only have excited surprise and suspicion. Besides, the tramp felt sure that Ernest would soon discover that he had been robbed. He would naturally be suspected, especially as Joe Marks had knowledge of a gold piece being in his possession.

There was a small settlement about five miles off, called Daneboro. It was probably the nearest place where he could get a glass of whisky. He must walk there. It was not a pleasant prospect, for the tramp was lazy and not fond of walking, though he had been compelled to do a good deal of it. Still, it seemed to be a necessity, and when he left the store of Joe Marks he set out for Daneboro.

Thirst was not the only trouble with Tom Burns. He had not eaten anything for about twenty-four hours, and his neglected stomach rebelled. He tightened a girdle about his waist, and walked on in great discomfort. He had perhaps gone two miles when he came to a cabin similar in appearance to that of old

Peter Brant. A woman stood in the door-way.

"My good lady," said Tom, putting on a pitiful expression, "I am a very unfortunate man."

"Are you?" said the woman, scanning him critically. "You look like a tramp."

"I do, madam, yet I was once a thriving merchant."

"You don't look like it."

"I don't; I acknowledge it."

"How did you lose your property, if you ever had any?"

"By signin' notes for my brother. It swept off all my possessions."

"Then I pity you. That's the way my man lost five hundred dollars, nearly all he had. What can I do for you?"

"Madam, I am hungry, very hungry."

"Set right down on the settle, and I'll give you what's left of our breakfast."

Tom Burns obeyed with alacrity.

A plate of cold bacon, a cold potato, and some corn bread were placed before him, and he ate them almost voraciously. There had been times in his life when he would have turned up his nose at such fare, but not now.

"My good lady," he said, "you have saved my life."

"Well, you must 'a' been hungry," said the woman. "A man that'll eat cold vittles, especially cold potato, ain't shammin'."

"I wish I had money to offer you–"

"Oh, never mind that, you're welcome. Can I do anything

more for you?"

"I feel sick, and sometimes, though I am a temperance man, I take whisky for my health. If you had just a sup–"

"Well, we haven't, and if we had I wouldn't give you any."

"You misjudge me, madam. You must not think I am a drinker."

"It's no matter what I think. You can't get any whisky here."

At Daneboro Tom fared better. He changed his gold piece, drank a pint of whisky, and the next day retraced his steps to old Peter's cabin. He felt satisfied that somewhere near the cabin there were treasures concealed, and he meant to secure them.

CHAPTER V.
THE TRAMP TURNS UP AGAIN

When Peter Brant was laid away under a tree not far from the cabin where he had ended his days, Ernest felt that he was at liberty to begin the new life that lay before him. Despite the natural sadness which he felt at parting with his old friend, he looked forward not without pleasant anticipations to the future and what it might have in store for him.

Oak Forks had few attractions for him. Time had often dragged wearily with him. He had a literary taste, but could not get hold of books. Peter Brant had about a dozen volumes, none of which he had read himself, but Ernest had read them over and over again. None of the neighbors owned any books. Occasionally a newspaper found its way into the settlement, and this, when it came into Ernest's hands, was devoured, advertisements and all.

How, then, was his time passed? Partly in hunting, partly in fishing, for there was a small river two miles away; but one could not fish or hunt all the time. He had often felt a vague yearning to go to Chicago, or New York, or anywhere where there would be a broader field and large opportunities, and he had broached the subject to Peter.

"I can't afford to go, Ernest," the old man would reply. "I must

live on the little I have, for I am too old to work."

"But I am young. I can work," the boy would answer.

"A boy like you couldn't earn much. Wait till I am dead and then you can go where you like."

This would always close the discussion, for Ernest did not like to consider such a contingency. Peter represented his world, for he had no one to cling to except the man whom he supposed to be his uncle.

Now, however, the time had come when he could go forth and enter upon a career. Accordingly he declined Joe Marks' offer to take him into the store. He understood very well that it was only meant in kindness, and that he was not really needed.

"You don't need me, Joe," he said. "You are very kind, but there must be real work for me somewhere."

"Well, my lad, I won't stand in your way, but I've known you a long time, and I shall hate to lose sight of you."

"I'll come back some day, Joe–that is, if I am prosperous, and can."

"If you are not prosperous, if you fall sick, and need a home and a friend, come back, then. Don't forget your old friend Joe Marks."

"I won't, Joe," said Ernest heartily.

"You've got another friend here, Ernest," added Luke Robbins. "I'm a poor man, and my friendship isn't worth much, but you have it, all the same."

Ernest grasped the hands of both. He felt that each was a

friend worth having.

"You may be sure that I won't forget either of you," he said.

"When do you expect to go, Ernest, and where?" asked Joe Marks.

"I shall get away to-morrow, I think, but where I shall go I can't tell yet."

"Do you need any money?"

"No; my uncle left me some."

Ernest had not yet secured the gold, but he knew exactly where it was, and now that all his business was ended, he felt that it was time to possess himself of it. Accordingly he took a spade from the house and bent his steps in the direction of the old oak tree.

He went alone, for he thought it best not to take anyone into his confidence. Indeed the only persons whom he would have thought of trusting were Joe Marks and Luke Robbins, and they were both employed, Joe in his store and Luke on a hunting expedition.

Arrived at the tree, Ernest measured off five feet in the direction mentioned by Peter and began to dig. It did not take him long to reach the box, for it was only a foot beneath the surface of the ground.

It proved to be a cigar-box, for Peter was fond of smoking, though he usually smoked a pipe, as being more economical. Ernest lifted the lid and saw a small roll enclosed in brown wrapping-paper, which, on being removed, revealed twenty five-dollar gold pieces. He regarded them with satisfaction, for they

afforded him the means of leaving Oak Forks and going out into the great world which he had such a curiosity to enter.

But Ernest was not the only one who regarded the gold pieces with satisfaction.

Hidden behind a tree only a few feet away was a person with whom we are already acquainted. It was Tom Burns, the tramp and vagabond.

He, too, was out in search of gold. He had come from Daneboro and was prowling round the neighborhood, searching for old Peter's hidden treasure. He had deliberated as to whether the cabin or the fields was the more likely place to have been selected. He had nothing in particular to guide him. He did not, however, venture to approach the house just yet, as it would probably be occupied by Ernest.

"I wish I knowed where the old man hid his boodle," soliloquized Tom. "I can't dig all over."

In fact digging was not in Tom's line. It was too much like work, and if there was anything to which Tom was bitterly opposed it was work of any kind.

"The boy must know. Likely the old man told him," he finally concluded. "I'll watch the boy."

He feared he might be too late. Had it been his own case, he would have searched for the gold immediately after the funeral. He naturally supposed that Ernest would do the same. He therefore lost no time in prowling around the cabin, with the especial object of watching Ernest's movements. He was

especially favored, as he thought, when from a distance he saw Ernest leaving the cabin with the spade in his hand.

The tramp's heart was filled with joy.

"He is going to dig for the treasure," he said. "I'll keep him in sight."

Tom Burns had no difficulty in doing this, for Ernest bent his steps in his direction.

"I hope he won't discover me," thought Burns; "at any rate, not till I find out where he's going to dig."

All things seemed to favor the tramp. Ernest stopped when he came to the oak tree, and it was evident this was the spot of which he was in search.

"Why, that's where I was lying the other night!" thought Burns. "If I had only knowed! Why, the gold was right under me all the time. If I'd found it then, I should have gone off with it before this time. How ever, it isn't too late now."

He watched with subdued eagerness while Ernest was digging. He no longer doubted that this was the place where the gold was hidden. Ernest could have no other object in digging in this place.

"I wonder how much there is," thought Burns. "There ought to be as much as a thousand dollars. Perhaps there's two or three. But even if there is only a thousand, it will set me on my feet. I'll soon get out of this neighborhood. I'll go to Chicago or New York, and I'll live in clover. I'll make up for lost time. I've been a vagabond long enough. I'll buy some new clothes, and set up as a respectable man."

When Ernest found the roll of coins, and taking them out, put them in his pocket, he was not disappointed, for he knew what to expect, but Tom Burns was in dismay.

"Only a hundred dollars?" he soliloquized. "What's a hundred dollars? The old man ought to be ashamed of himself. Why, it isn't respectable!"

However, one thing was certain. A hundred dollars was better than nothing. It would take him to Chicago, and enable him to live in comfort for a while. Besides, he might multiply it many times at the gaming table, for Tom Burns had been a gambler in his day. He certainly did not propose to disdain the sum which fortune had placed in his way simply because it was so small. Oh, no, Tom Burns was not that sort of a man.

Ernest put the gold pieces in his pocket and turned to go back to the cabin, when a voice reached him.

"Look here, boy, I'll trouble you to hand over that money."

CHAPTER VI.
A CRITICAL SITUATION

Ernest turned and regarded the tramp in amazement.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"I want that money you just dug up," replied Tom Burns boldly.

Instantly Ernest comprehended his danger. He was a stout boy, but the tramp was a large man, weighing probably fifty pounds more than himself. Moreover, he looked desperate and reckless. The boy felt that in strength he was no match for the thief who confronted him.

Yet he could not bear the thought of allowing himself to be robbed. Left penniless, how could he carry out the plans which he had in view? He tried to gain time.

"Do you want to rob me?" he asked.

"I have just as much right to that money as you," said the tramp.

"How do you make that out?"

"The man who put it there owed me money."

"Do you think I am a fool to believe that ridiculous story?"

"You'd better be careful how you talk," said Burns menacingly. "What I say I mean."

"Then all I can say is that you have told a falsehood. You are

the man, I suppose, who entered our cabin at night and stole money out of a trunk."

"I don't know anything about your trunk," said Burns mendaciously. "But I have no time to talk–I want that money."

Ernest looked about him, hoping to see some one to whom he could appeal for help, but no one appeared in sight. Next he looked at the tramp, to note if he were armed. To his relief Burns did not appear to have any weapon with him. Rapidly he determined not to give up the money without a struggle.

"I won't give up the money to a thief," he said boldly.

As he spoke he turned and ran as fast as he was able.

Tom Burns uttered an execration and prepared to pursue him.

Winged with fear of losing his gold, Ernest flew rather than ran, not heeding the direction he was taking. The tramp accepted the challenge and put forth his utmost speed in the hope of overtaking him.

"You'll pay for this, boy," he growled. "Just let me catch you."

But Ernest did not mean to be caught. Being a fast runner for a boy of his size, he bade fair to out-distance his pursuer. But directly in his path was an excavation of considerable size and depth. Ernest paused on the brink to consider whether to descend the sloping sides or to go round it. The delay was fatal. The tramp saw his advantage, and, pushing forward, seized him by the collar.

"I've caught you!" he cried, triumphantly. "Now give me the money."

There was a brief struggle, but a boy, even a strong boy, was no match for a man taller and heavier than himself. The gold pieces were snatched from him, and the tramp, releasing his hold, was about to make off in triumph when he found himself seized in turn.

"Why, you contemptible thief!" exclaimed Luke Robbins, for it was he whose opportune coming had saved Ernest from being plundered. "Are you trying to rob the boy?"

He seized the tramp by the collar, forced him to give up the gold he had just snatched from Ernest, and flung him on his back.

The tramp's surprise deepened to dismay when, looking up, he saw the stalwart hunter with stern face looking down upon him.

"It was my money," he whined.

"Your money, you owdacious liar! Don't tell me that or I'll treat you worse."

"But it was. I had hidden it under a tree. I came along just as the boy dug it up. I told him to give it to me, for it was mine, but he wouldn't, and then I chased him."

"What's the truth of the matter, Ernest?" asked Luke.

"It was money that Peter Brant had hidden away. He told me on his deathbed where to look for it."

"I thought it was Peter's."

"I had just dug it up and put it in my pocket when this man came along. He ordered me to give it him."

"Did he say he hid it there?"

"No. He said that Peter owed him money, and he wanted it."

"You appear to be a very ingenious liar," remarked Luke, turning to the tramp. "Which of these stories do you want me to believe?"

"I hid it there!" said the tramp, doggedly.

"Then why did you tell the boy that Peter owed you money?"

"Because I didn't think he would believe that I hid it."

"You are right there. He don't believe it, nor do I. One thing more–were you the man that broke into his cabin and stole two gold pieces from his trunk?"

"No. I don't know anything about it."

"Of course you would deny it. All the same, I have no doubt that you were the man."

"If I had done it he would have seen me."

"That won't go down. He was asleep. Ernest, what shall I do with this fellow? Shall I shoot him?" and Luke Robbins pulled out a revolver, which he handled in a significant way.

"Don't shoot! Spare my life, Mr. Robbins!" cried the tramp, in great alarm.

"Humph! I don't see the good. Your life is of no value to the world."

"Let him go, Luke," said Ernest, "but tell him to clear out of this neighborhood."

"It is treating him too well. Still, I will do as you say. Hark, you fellow, what is your name?"

"Tom Burns."

"You are a disgrace to the name of Burns. If I spare your life

will you leave this neighborhood and never come back?"

"Yes, yes," answered the tramp, earnestly.

"You'd better keep that promise. If I ever catch sight of you again, I'll shoot with out asking you any questions. Now *get!*"

Tom Burns got up and started away with celerity. He thought it wise to put as great a distance as possible between himself and the tall and stalwart hunter, fearing that he would repent his leniency and end his life by a stray bullet.

"I'll scare him a little," said Luke.

He fired after the fugitive, taking care not to hit him, however. Tom Burns heard the bullet whistling by his head, and with a cry of terror increased his speed till he reached a place where he felt secure. Then, sinking down on the ground, he uttered an ejaculation of relief.

"That is a terrible man!" he panted. "He'd as soon take my life as not. I won't get in his way again if I can help it."

Luke Robbins laughed.

"That is my parting message," he said. "Well, Ernest, where do you want to go? What are your plans?"

"I don't know," answered Ernest, gravely. "I am not sure that I have any plans. I feel upset completely."

"Sit down here and I'll talk to you."

He pointed to a little ridge which would serve as a seat.

The two sat down together.

"Now, how much money have you got?"

"A hundred dollars,"

"It isn't much. Is that all your uncle left?"

"I think so. He said nothing about having more."

"It isn't much to begin the world with. I wish for your sake, boy, that I had some to give you, but I never knew how to get together money."

"I guess it will do, Luke. I have health and strength. I think I can make my way."

"But you have no trade."

"Have you?"

"No, Ernest. You've got me there. I am only a hunter, but I don't make much of a living. I don't recommend you to follow in my steps. I'd like to keep you with me, but it wouldn't pay you."

"One thing is certain, Luke. I must get away from here. There is nothing I can do in Oak Forks."

"Where do you want to go, lad?"

"I don't know. I might go eastward to Chicago or New York, or I might go West to California. Have you ever been to either place, Luke?"

"No, lad, but if I had my choice I'd go westward. I've heard fine stories of California. I think I should like to see that land, and push on to the Pacific ocean."

"Why don't you go?"

"Stop a minute! Let me think!"

The hunter assumed a thoughtful look. He remained silent for five minutes. Then he said, as if to himself, "Why not?"

Ernest still kept silence, but his eyes were fixed upon the face

of the hunter.

Finally Luke looked up.

"How do you want to go, lad?" he asked. "Do you want to go by the railroad, or are you in for a tramp over the mountains and plains?"

"That depends on whether I am to go alone or not. If I go alone I shall prefer to go by rail."

"Are you in for a long tramp with me?" asked Luke, his face glowing with new-born enthusiasm.

"I will go anywhere with you, Luke."

"Then it is agreed. We will start to-morrow."

CHAPTER VII.
ON THE ROAD

Nothing could have pleased Ernest better than to travel with the companionship of Luke Robbins. He felt that he should be safe with the sturdy hunter, who was strong, resolute, and reliable.

True, he was not a man who had succeeded, as men reckon success. He had lived comfortably, but it had never occurred to him to lay up money, nor indeed had he had any opportunity to do so. He mentioned this as an objection to the trip which he had himself proposed.

"My lad," he said, "I am afraid I can't go with you, after all."

"Why not, Luke?"

"Because you're rich, compared with me."

"I have but a hundred dollars."

"And I well, lad, I'm ashamed to say so, but I have only fifteen."

"We'll share and share alike, Luke."

"No, lad. Luke Robbins is too proud to live upon a boy. I reckon I'd better stay at home."

"But I want you to go and take care of me, Luke. How can I travel alone?"

Luke brightened up.

"That puts a different face on it, Ernest. If you think you need me, I'll go."

"I do need you."

"Then go I will; but one thing is understood–I won't take any of your money."

"There won't be any trouble on that score, Luke."

So the two prepared for their trip. Ernest, with Luke's help, purchased an outfit, and on the morning of the third day the two started out together, neither having a very definite idea where they were going except that their course was westward.

Luke knew very little of the States and Territories that lay between Oak Forks and the Pacific coast. Ernest, whose education was decidedly superior to his companion's, was able to give him some information. So they plodded on, making slow progress, but enjoying the unconventional life, and the scenery on the way.

They were in no hurry. They stopped to hunt and fish, and when the weather was unfavorable they stayed overnight at some wayside cabin. When the nights were fine they camped out, and enjoyed a sound rest under the open canopy of heaven.

Part of their way led through woods and over prairies, but here and there they came to a thriving village. There was little occasion to spend money, but still they were compelled to use some.

One day–it was some weeks from the time when they started–Luke turned to Ernest with a sober face.

"Ernest," he said, "I think you'll have to leave me at the next poor-house."

"Why, Luke?"

"Because my money is nearly all gone. I started with fifteen dollars. Now I have but one."

"But I have plenty left."

"That doesn't help me."

"I want to share it with you, Luke."

"Don't you remember what I said when we set out, lad?"

"What was it?"

"That I would not touch a dollar of your money."

"Then do you mean to leave me alone, Luke?" pleaded Ernest reproachfully.

"You are a boy and I am a man. I'm forty years old, Ernest. Is it right that I should live on a boy less than half my age?"

Ernest looked at him in perplexity.

"Is there no way of getting more money?" he asked.

"If we were in California now, and at the mines, I might make shift to fill my purse; but there are no mines hereabouts."

"Let us keep on, and something may turn up."

When this conversation took place they were approaching Emmonsville, a thriving town in Nebraska. As they walked through the principal street, it was clear that something had happened which had created general excitement. Groups of people were talking earnestly, and their faces wore a perturbed and anxious look.

"What's the matter?" asked Luke, addressing a well-to-do appearing man.

"Haven't you heard of the bank robbery over at Lee's Falls?"

"No."

"Two men, fully armed, rode up to the door, and, dismounting, entered the bank. One stepped up to the window of the paying teller, and covering him with his revolver, demanded five thousand dollars. At the same time the other stood in the doorway, also with a loaded revolver."

"Why didn't the teller shoot him down?" asked Luke.

"My friend, bank officers are not provided with loaded revolvers when on duty. Besides, the ruffian had the drop on him."

"Well?" asked Luke.

"What could the teller do? Life is more than money, and he had no alternative. The fellow got the money."

"Did he get away with it?"

"Yes; they both mounted their horses and rode off, no one daring to interfere. Each held his revolver in readiness to shoot the first man that barred his way."

"Where did you say this happened?"

"At Lee's Falls."

"Is it near at hand?"

"It is fifteen miles away."

"But why should that robbery create excitement here?"

"Because we have a bank here, and we are expecting a visit

from the same parties."

"Who are they?"

"They are supposed to be the Fox brothers, two of the most notorious criminals in the West. Numberless stories are told of their bold robberies, both from individuals and from banks."

"How long have these fellows been preying upon the community?"

"We have heard of them hereabouts for three years. It is said they came from Missouri."

"Is there no one brave enough or bold enough to interfere with them?"

"More than one has tried it, but no one has succeeded. Twice they were captured by a posse of men, but in each case they broke jail before it was time for the trial.

"It seems to me you haven't many men of spirit in Nebraska."

"Perhaps you think you would be a match for them," said the citizen in a sarcastic tone.

Luke Robbins smiled and handled his revolver in a significant way.

"If you think you can kill or capture them, stranger, there's a chance to make a good sum of money."

"How is that?"

"A thousand dollars is offered for either, dead or alive."

"A thousand dollars!" repeated Luke, his face glowing with excitement. "Is that straight?"

"It will be paid cheerfully. You can bet on that."

"Who offers it?"

"The Governor of the State."

Luke Robbins became thoughtful and remained silent.

"Did you hear that, lad?" he asked, when he and Ernest were alone.

"Yes, Luke."

"A thousand dollars would do us a great deal of good."

"That is true, Luke, but it would be as much as your life is worth to hunt the rascals."

"Don't try to make a coward of me, Ernest."

"I couldn't do that, Luke. I only want you to be prudent."

"Listen, lad. I want that thousand dollars, and I'm going to make a try for it. Come along with me."

"Where are you going?"

"To the bank. I'm going to have a talk with the officers, and then I'll decide what to do."

CHAPTER VIII.
THE QUAKER DETECTIVE

At the Emmonsville bank they were on their guard. The expectation of a visit from the Fox brothers caused anxiety and apprehension. The evil reputation of these men, and their desperate character, made them formidable.

When Luke Robbins entered the place he was regarded with suspicion. His hunting-costume was not unlike that of a bandit. But the fact that he had a young companion tended to disarm suspicion. No one could suspect Ernest of complicity with outlaws, and the Fox brothers had never been known to carry a boy with them.

Luke was unused to banks. So far as he knew, he had never entered one before. He looked around him in uncertainty, and finally approached the window of the receiving teller.

"Are you the boss of this institution?" he asked.

The teller smiled.

"No," he said. "Perhaps you want to see the president?"

"I guess he's the man."

"If you will give me a hint of the nature of your business, I will speak to him."

"I hear you're expectin' a visit from the Fox brothers."

"Have you anything to do with them?" asked the teller with

some suspicion.

"I want to have something to do with them," returned Luke.

"I don't understand you."

"Then I'll tell you what I mean. I hear there's a big reward out for their capture."

"A thousand dollars."

"I want that thousand dollars, and I want it bad."

"I shall be very glad if you become entitled to it. Any one who will rid the State of either of these notorious outlaws will richly deserve it."

"That's the business I came about. Now can I see the president, if that's what you call him?"

"Wait a minute and I will find out."

The teller went to an inner room, and returned with a stout, gray-headed man of about fifty.

He looked curiously at Luke through the window. Then, as if reassured, he smiled.

"I understand you want to see me," he said.

"Yes."

"About the Fox brothers?"

"You're right there, squire."

"Go to the last door and I will admit you."

Luke Robbins did as directed, and soon found himself in the office of the president of the bank.

"You are anxious to secure the reward offered for the capture of these outlaws, I believe."

"That's straight."

"Why do you come to me, then?"

"Because a man told me you expected a visit from them."

"That is not quite exact. I don't expect a visit, but I am afraid they may take it into their heads to call here."

"Suppose they do."

A shade of anxiety appeared upon the face of the president.

"We should try to foil their plans," he answered.

"Wouldn't you like to have me on hand when they come?"

The president looked over Luke Robbins carefully. He was impressed by his bold, resolute air, and muscular figure. Evidently he would be a dangerous man to meet.

"You are a strong, resolute fellow, I judge," he said thoughtfully.

"Try me and see."

"You would not be afraid to meet these villains single-handed?"

"I never saw the man yet that I was afraid to meet."

"So far, so good, but it is not so much strength that is needed as quickness. A weak man is more than a match for a strong one if he gets the drop on him."

"That's so, but I reckon it'll take a smart man to get the drop on me.

"What have you to propose? I suppose you have formed some plan."

"I would like to stay around the bank, and be on the watch for

these fellows."

"Remain here and I will consult with the cashier."

Five minutes later the president rejoined his visitor.

"I have no objection to securing your services," he said, "if it can be done without exciting suspicion. In your present dress your mission would at once be guessed, and the outlaws would be on their guard. Have you any objection to changing your appearance?"

"Not a particle. All I want is to get a lick at them outlaws."

"Then I think we shall have to make you a little less formidable. Have you any objections to becoming a Quaker?"

Luke Robbins laughed.

"What! one of those broad-brimmed fellows?" he said.

"Yes."

"Will I look the character?"

"Dress will accomplish a good deal. I will tell you what put the idea into my head. We used to employ as janitor an old Quaker– a good, honest, reliable man. He was about your build. A year since he died, but we have hanging up in my office the suit he was accustomed to wear. Put it on, and it will make a complete change in your appearance. Your face will hardly correspond to your dress, but those who see the garb won't look any further."

"That's all right, boss. I don't care how you dress me up. But what will I do?"

"I think it will be well for you to keep near the bank, watching carefully all who approach. You never saw the Fox brothers, I

presume?"

"I never had that pleasure."

"Most people don't regard it as a pleasure. I will give you some description of them, which may help you to identify them. One is a tall man, very nearly as tall as yourself; the other is at least three inches shorter. Both have dark hair, which they wear long. They have a swaggering walk, and look their real characters."

"I don't think it'll be hard to spot them. They generally ride on horseback, don't they?"

"Generally, but not always. They rode into Lee's Falls and up to the bank entrance on horseback. Perhaps for that reason they may appear in different guise here."

"You haven't any pictures of them, have you?"

The president laughed.

"No one was ever bold enough to invite them into a photographer's to have their pictures taken," he said.

"I see. Well, I think I shall know them."

"Perhaps not. They often adopt disguises."

"They won't come as Quakers?"

"That is hardly likely. I can give you one help. However they may be dressed, their eyes will betray them. They have flashing black ones, and sharp, aquiline noses."

"I'll know them," said Luke confidently.

"I observe that you have a boy with you?

"Yes."

"Is it your son?"

"No; I wish he were. I'd be proud to have such a son as that."

"Perhaps we can use him. The bank messenger–a young man–is sick, and he can take his place temporarily."

"Is there any pay for such work?"

"Yes, but it is small. We will give him ten dollars a week. Of course he must be honest and trustworthy."

"I'll stake my life on that boy, boss," said Luke warmly.

"His appearance is in his favor. Will you call him?"

Ernest was waiting in the doorway. He was anxious to learn the result of Luke's interview with the president of the bank. He had thought it very doubtful whether his proposal would be looked upon favorably, but hoped some good might come of it.

"The boss wants to see you," announced Luke.

"All right; I will follow you. What luck are you meeting with, Luke?"

"Good. I've hired out to the bank as a Quaker detective."

Ernest stared at his companion in astonishment. He thought it was a joke.

When he came into the presence of the president the latter said, "I understand from your friend here that you would like employment?"

"I should," answered Ernest promptly.

"The post of bank messenger is temporarily vacant. Would you like it?"

"Yes, sir, if you think I can fill it."

"You are rather young for the place, but I think you will fill it

satisfactorily. We will instruct you in the duties."

"Very well, sir; I accept it with thanks."

"Of course it is necessary that you should be honest and reliable. But upon those points I have no doubt. Your face speaks for you."

"Thank you, sir. When do you wish me to begin my duties?"

"To-morrow. I suppose you are not as yet provided with a boarding-place. You can get settled to-day, and report at the bank to-morrow morning at nine."

"Wait here a minute, Ernest," said Luke. "I will join you at once."

When Luke emerged from the president's room he was attired in the Quaker costume of his predecessor. Ernest stared at him for a moment, then burst into a loud laugh.

"Why does thee laugh?" asked Luke mildly.

This sent Ernest into a second convulsion.

"Do I look like a man of peace?" asked Luke.

"Yes; shall you live up to the character?"

"Until I see the Fox brothers. Then the lamb will become a lion."

CHAPTER IX.
AN ARMED ESCORT

Luke Robbins entered at once upon his duties as janitor of the Emmonsville bank. It was rather difficult, however, to supply him with employment enough to account for his being in constant attendance.

He was provided with a broom, and in the morning swept the bank. Sometimes he washed the windows; at other times he sat on a bench in the rear of the bank, ready for any call upon his services. So far as garb went, he resembled a Quaker, but his brown face and sharp eyes hardly harmonized with his assumed character. Still less did the revolver which he carried in an inside pocket.

Several days passed, and though Luke kept a sharp lookout for the Fox brothers, he did not catch a glimpse of anyone who suggested or resembled them.

Then one morning Luke went to the bank as usual and put on his Quaker garb.

About eleven o'clock an elderly man appeared and presented a check for five hundred dollars. The money was paid him, and then he lingered a moment, ill at ease.

"I don't like to have so much money about me," he said, in a tone that betrayed anxiety.

"No doubt you will find plenty who would be willing to relieve you of it," rejoined the paying teller, with a smile.

"That's what I am afraid of. They do say that the Fox brothers have been seen not far away."

"Is it absolutely necessary that you should have the money in your possession? You could leave it in the bank, or most of it."

"I shall want to use some of it to-morrow, and I live ten miles away–in Claremont."

"How are you going back?"

"I have a buggy outside."

"The road to Claremont is rather lonely, I believe."

"Yes."

"Why don't you get some one to go with you?"

"I don't know any one I could get."

"I can find you a companion, but he would want to be paid."

"I'll pay him if he'll see me through all right."

"I have the very man for you. Here, Luke!"

Luke Robbins heard the call and approached.

"The farmer looked at him doubtfully.

"A Quaker?" he said, in a disappointed tone.

"He is no more a Quaker than you are. He is a detective, and very anxious to meet either of the Fox brothers."

The farmer brightened up.

"He's the man I'm after, then."

A bargain was struck between Luke and Ezekiel Mason, whereby the farmer promised to pay him five dollars to

accompany him home and remain over night at the farm-house until he had disposed of the money the way he intended.

Luke was glad to accept the proposal. It promised variety, and possibly adventure. The farmer climbed into the buggy, and the Quaker detective, following, took a seat by his side.

After they had driven some time they reached a part of the road where for a clear mile in advance there was not a house or building of any kind to be seen.

"This is the place I was most afraid of," said the farmer.

"Yes, it seems to be lonely. I wish one of the Fox brothers would happen along."

"Why?" asked the farmer, in a tone of alarm.

"Because I would like to tackle him."

"Why are you so anxious to tackle him? I cannot understand."

"Then I'll tell you, my honest friend. There is a reward of a thousand dollars offered for the capture of one of these famous outlaws, dead or alive."

Ezekiel Mason shrugged his shoulders.

"I'd rather earn the money some other way!" he said.

"You are only a peaceful farmer, while I am a fighting Quaker," responded Luke.

As he spoke he looked up the road, and his glance fell upon a short, compactly built man, in a gray suit, who was walking towards them. He seemed a quiet, commonplace person, but there was something about him that attracted Luke's attention.

"Do you know that man?" he asked abruptly.

"No," answered Mason, after a rapid glance.

"Are the Fox brothers tall men?" asked Luke.

"One only."

"The other?"

"Is about the size of the man who is approaching."

Luke did not reply, but examined still more critically the advancing pedestrian.

"If this should be one of the Foxes," he began.

"Do you think it is?" asked the farmer in a terrified tone.

"I can't tell. If it proves to be, do exactly as I tell you."

"Yes," replied the farmer, now thoroughly alarmed.

By this time the new-comer was but twenty feet distant. Though his appearance and dress were commonplace, his eyes, as they could see, were dark and glittering.

He made a halt.

"Friends," he said, "can you oblige me with the time?"

The farmer was about to produce his big, old-fashioned, silver watch, when Luke nudged him sharply.

"Leave him to me," he whispered, in a tone audible only to the farmer.

"Thee has asked the wrong party," he said aloud. "We don't carry watches."

The pedestrian regarded him with contempt. Whoever he might be, he looked upon a Quaker as a mild, inoffensive person, hardly deserving the name of man.

"I didn't speak to you," he said scornfully.

CHAPTER X.
THE ASTONISHED OUTLAW

The pedestrian's next move was a bold one.

"I am tired," he said. "Give me a ride."

"Will thee excuse us?" said the Quaker meekly.

"Oh, shut up!" cried the assumed pedestrian. "Quakers should be seen and not heard."

Then, to the farmer, "I am tired. Let me into your carriage."

"There is no room," said the farmer nervously.

"Then tell the Quaker to get out, and I will take his place."

Ezekiel Mason was by no means a brave man, and he did not know what to say to this impudent proposal.

He looked appealingly at Luke.

"I will accommodate the gentleman," said the latter meekly. With the words he rose from his seat and jumped to the ground.

"Shall I assist thee?" he asked the stranger in a mild voice.

"No; I am quite capable of getting into the carriage without help from a meddlesome Quaker."

"Indeed, thee does me injustice."

The stranger did not immediately get into the buggy.

"I don't care to ride, after all," he said coolly. "Just hand me your money, you old clodhopper."

The worst had come. The new arrival was evidently one of the

Fox brothers, after all.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.