ALGER HORATIO JR.

MARK MANNING'S MISSION

Horatio Alger

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Alger H.

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Содержание

Horatio Alger Jr.
Mark Manning's Mission / The Story of a Shoe Factory Boy

CHAPTER I.
THREE YOUNG HUNTERS

Two boys, with guns on their shoulders, were crossing a meadow towards the Pecasset woods. These were situated about a mile from the village, and were quite extensive. The two boys were James Collins and Tom Wyman, the first, the son of a large shoe manufacturer, the other the son of the village postmaster. They were about of a size, and had the appearance of being sixteen years of age. They were very intimate, the second being a satellite of the first, who in right of his father's wealth considered himself the first boy in Pecasset. Tom flattered his vanity by acknowledging his pretensions, and this gave him his position of favorite with the young aristocrat.

"I should like to be a hunter," said Tom, as they walked along.

"A fine hunter you'd be," said James, in a tone by no means complimentary, for he didn't feel it necessary to flatter his humble companion. "You never hit anything, you know."

"Come, James, that's a little too strong," said Tom, in a tone of annoyance. "I don't pretend to be as good a shot as you are, but still I have hit a bird before now."

"When it was perched on a fence, eh?"

"No, on the wing."

"Who saw you do it?"

"I was alone."

"So I thought," said James, laughing.

"I did it, really. Of course I can't shoot as well as you."

"I don't think there is a boy in the village can come up to me in that line," said James.

"Of course not; though Mark Manning isn't a bad shot."

"Mark Manning! He's one of the peggers in my father's shop, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"Son of the poor widow that lives near the schoolhouse?"

"Yes."

"What can he know of gunning? He had better stick to the shop."

"I didn't say he was equal to you," said Tom apologetically, "but I have seen him shoot well."

"Has he a gun of his own?"

"No, but he often gets the loan of Farmer Jones's."

"I suppose he could hit a barn door if he were within fifty feet of it," said James, contemptuously.

Tom was silent. It was not the first time he had noticed how distasteful to James was praise of any other boy.

At this moment, from another direction came a third boy, of about the same size and age as the two already introduced. He also had a gun on his shoulder. He had on a well-worn suit of mixed cloth, which had been darned in one or two places. His face was open and attractive, his form was well-knit and muscular, and he was evidently in vigorous health.

Tom Wyman was the first to notice the newcomer.

"Talk of the—old Harry," he said, "and he is sure to appear."

"What do you mean?" asked James, who had not yet espied the new arrival.

"There's Mark Manning coming towards us."

James condescended to turn his glance in Marks' direction.

"What brings him here, I wonder?" he said, with a curl of the lip.

"The same errand that brings us, I should judge, from the gun on his shoulder," answered Tom.

By this time Mark was within calling distance.

"Hallo, boys!" he said. "Have you shot anything yet?"

"No," answered Tom. "Have you?"

"No, I have only just come."

"Why are you not in the shop?" demanded James, with the air of a young lord.

"Because we work only half-time to-day."

"I suppose you were glad of the holiday?"

"No, I would rather have worked. Half-work, half-pay, you know."

"I suppose that's quite an important consideration for a—a working boy like you," drawled James, with an air of patronage.

Mark surveyed James, with a quizzical smile, for he had a genuine boy's disdain for affectation, and James was a very good specimen of a self-conceited dude, though the latter term had not yet come into use.

"Yes," he said, after a slight pause, "it is a consideration—to a working boy like me."

"How much now does my father pay you?" inquired James, with gracious condescension.

"Seventy-five cents a day—that's the average."

"Very fair pay! I suppose you take it home to your mother?"

"Yes, I do," answered Mark.

"She's—ah—very poor, I hear."

Mark began to find his patronage on the whole rather oppressive. He had a sturdy independence of feeling that grew restive under the young patrician's condescension.

"We are poor," he answered, "but we have enough to eat, and to wear, and a roof to cover us—"

"Exactly. You are indebted to my father for that."

"I don't see how."

"Doesn't he employ you and pay you wages?"

"Yes, but don't I earn my wages by good work?"

"Really, my good fellow, I can't say. I presume you do passably well, or he wouldn't keep you in his employ."

"Then it seems to me we are even on that score. However, I didn't come here to talk about myself."

Here there was a sudden diversion.

"Look, James! See that bird!" exclaimed Tom, in excitement.

The other two boys looked in the direction indicated, and saw a hawk flying swiftly, perhaps two hundred feet above them. The three simultaneously raised their guns, and Tom and James fired. But Mark, upon second thought reserved his fire, in order to give his two companions a chance.

Their guns were discharged, but in vain. The bird flew on, apparently unconcerned, considerably to their disappointment.

"Now it is my turn!" reflected Mark.

He raised his gun, and quickly pulled the trigger; the effect was soon seen. The bird fluttered its wings, then dropped quickly through the air.

"By Jove, Mark's hit him!" exclaimed Tom in excitement.

James frowned in evident displeasure.

"Yes, he was lucky!" he said significantly.

Mark had run forward to pick up the bird.

"I told you Mark was a good shot!" said Tom, who had not so much vanity to wound as James.

"I suppose you think him a better shot than I, because he hit the bird and I didn't?" said James, reddening.

"No, I don't say that!"

"I tell you it was pure luck. I've heard of a man who shut his eyes when he fired, but he succeeded when all his companions failed. You can't judge of one by a single shot."

Here Mark came up with his trophy.

"I congratulate you on your success," said James, unpleasantly. "I suppose this is the first bird you ever shot?"

"Oh, no!" answered Mark smilingly. "I have shot a few before now."

"A fly lit on my nose just when I was pulling the trigger, or I should have brought him down."

"That was lucky for me," said Mark.

"Come, Tom," said James, drawing his companion away to the left. "We'd better separate, or we shall all be shooting at the same object."

"Good luck to you then!" said Mark, as the two left him.

"Thanks!" said Tom, but James deigned no notice of Mark's civility.

CHAPTER II.
THE HERMIT'S CABIN

Mark smiled to himself as the boys left him.

"James doesn't care to associate with us working boys," he thought. "Well, I fancy he cares as much for my company as I do for his."

Mark was thoroughly independent and self-reliant, and had no disposition to trouble himself because a particular boy didn't care to associate with him.

He was not self-conceited, but he respected himself, and never would have been willing, like Tom Wyman, to play the part of an humble satellite to the son of a wealthy shoe manufacturer.

He reached the edge of the woods, and plunged into their shaded recesses. Here and there were paths more or less worn. One of these he took. It was a considerable time before he found anything to shoot at. Finally he fired at a squirrel, but the active little animal eluded him, and made his way to some covert, whence possibly he peeped out with twinkling eyes at his enemy.

Farther on he reached a small clearing, in the center of which rose an humble log dwelling, of the most primitive description.

Mark regarded it with curiosity, for, though it was no new object to him, he knew that it was occupied by a man who for five years had baffled the curiosity of the neighborhood.

Now and then he was seen in the village, whither he went to procure supplies of food and other necessaries. A striking figure he was, with his long flowing sandy beard, thickly flecked with gray hairs, high forehead, and long, circular cloak wrapped around his tall, spare form.

On his head he wore a Spanish sombrero, and his appearance in the streets never failed to attract the curious eyes of the children.

Once some rude boys followed him with jeers, but were never tempted to repeat the rudeness. With his long staff upraised, he gave chase to them, looking so terrible that they were panic-stricken, and with pale faces, scattered in all directions.

While Mark was standing near the hermit's cabin, he thought he heard a smothered groan proceeding from within.

"What can be the matter," he thought, "can old Anthony be sick?"

This was the name, correct or not, by which the hermit was known in the village.

He paused a moment in indecision, but on hearing the groan repeated, he overcame his scruples, and pushing open the door, which stood ajar, he entered.

On a pallet, at one corner of the main room, lay the old man, with his limbs drawn up, as if in pain. His back was towards the door.

"Who is there?" he asked, as he heard the door open.

"A friend," answered Mark. "Are you sick?"

"I have a severe attack of rheumatism," answered the old man.

"And you have no one to take care of you?" said Mark, pityingly.

"No; I have no friends," answered the old man, in a tone half sad, half bitter. "Come round to the foot of the bed; let me look at you," he added, after a pause.

Mark complied with his request.

Old Anthony regarded him attentively, and said, half to himself, "a good face! a face to be trusted!"

"I hope so," said Mark, with a feeling of pleasure. "Can I do anything for you?"

"You are willing to help old Anthony? You see I know what they call me in the village."

"Yes. I shall be willing and glad to do anything for you."

"You are a good boy. What is your name?"

"Mark Manning."

"I know who you are. Your mother is a widow."

"Yes."

"And poor."

"We have little money, but we have never wanted for food."

"You work for your mother?"

"Yes; I am employed in the shoe factory."

"A good son will make a good man. You will never repent what you are doing for your mother."

"No; I am sure I shall not," returned Mark, warmly. "I ought not, for she has done everything for me."

"What brings you here?" asked the old man.

"I had a spare afternoon, and came out gunning. I was wandering about these woods and happened to come this way. How long have you been sick?"

"For several days; but I was able to be about till yesterday."

"Have you taken no medicine?"

"No. I thought I might do without it; but I find I am mistaken."

"Shall I call the doctor?"

"No; my disease is of old standing, and I know what to do for it. If you are willing to go to the drug store for me you may take the bottle on yonder shelf and get it filled. The druggist will understand what is wanted. You may also get me a box of rheumatic pills."

"Yes, sir; I will go at once."

"You will want money. Look in the box on yonder shelf, and select a gold piece. Pay for the articles and bring back the change."

"Yes, sir."

Mark went to the shelf, and in a square wooden box found a collection of gold and silver coins from which he selected a five-dollar gold piece.

"I have taken five dollars," he said.

"Very well."

"Are you not afraid to leave this money so exposed while you are sick and helpless?" Mark ventured to inquire.

"I have no visitors," answered old Anthony.

"But you might have. Some tramp–"

"That is true. Perhaps it would be well to provide for that contingency. Will you take it all, and take care of it for me?"

Mark regarded the old man with surprise.

"What—take it away with me?" he asked.

"Yes. I shall have to employ you as my man of business till I get better. I will speak with you about it further when you return with the medicines."

"Do you know how much there is here?" asked Mark.

"No; you may count it, if you like."

Mark did so and announced as the result of his count, "Twenty-nine dollars and thirty cents."

"Very well! You may keep an account of what you expend for me," said the old man, indifferently.

"He seems to put a good deal of confidence in me," Mark reflected, with some satisfaction.

"Is there nothing else you want in the village?" Mark asked, as he prepared to go.

"You may bring me a loaf of fresh bread and a quart of milk, if it will not be too much trouble. You will find a tin measure for the milk on the shelf."

"Here it is, sir."

"Very well."

"If you would like something nourishing—some meat, for instance—I can get my mother to cook you some," continued Mark.

"Not to-day. Another day I may avail myself of your kind offer. You are very kind—to a poor recluse."

"I am afraid you don't pass a very pleasant life," said Mark. "I should be miserable if I lived alone in the woods, like you."

"No doubt, no doubt. You are young and life opens before you bright and cheerful. As for me, I have lived my life. For me no prospect opens but the grave. Why, indeed, should I seek to prolong this miserable life?"

Mark hardly knew how to answer him. He could not enter into the old man's morbid feelings.

"I will be back soon," he said as he left the cabin.

CHAPTER III.
A TIMELY RESCUE

Mark Manning left the cabin and made his way as quickly as possible to the edge of the wood. He hadn't got over his wonder at the hermit's commission and singular confidence in him.

"It seems strange," he said to himself, "to have so much money in my pocket. Nearly thirty dollars! I wonder whether I shall ever have as much of my own?"

In truth, thirty dollars seemed a much larger sum to our hero, brought up in a hand to hand struggle with poverty, than it would have appeared if he had been ten years older.

"He must have more money," thought Mark, "or he would not care so little for this sum as to trust it all to me. How does he know that I will prove honest?"

Nevertheless it was a satisfaction to Mark to reflect that old Anthony was justified in his confidence. Had the sum been ten times as large, he would not have been tempted to retain any of it for his own use.

He kept on his way to the drug store, and asked for the medicines already referred to.

"Is your mother sick?" asked the druggist, who was very well acquainted with Mark and his family.

"No, sir," answered Mark.

"Oh, then it is you who are rheumatic," said the druggist jokingly.

"Wrong again," answered Mark. "I am buying the medicines for old Anthony."

"Then he is sick? That accounts for his not having appeared in the village for several days."

Thereupon Mark described his chance visit to the cabin, and the condition in which he had found the hermit.

"These remedies will do him good," said the druggist, "if he is otherwise kept comfortable. A strange man is old Anthony!" he continued musingly.

Mark produced a gold piece, from which he requested the druggist to take pay for the articles purchased.

"Did the hermit give you this?" asked the druggist.

Mark answered in the affirmative.

"Then it is evident he is not without means. However, I might have known that. During the years that he has lived in the wood, he has always been prompt in his payments for all articles purchased in the village. His expenditures are small, to be sure, but in five years they have amounted to considerable."

"What could have induced him to settle in such a lonely spot?"

"That is more than any one hereabouts can tell. He is very secretive, and never says anything about himself."

By this time Mark was ready to return. He went to the grocery store, where he obtained the milk and loaf of bread, which he had also been commissioned to procure. Then he set out for old Anthony's lonely cabin.

Before doing so, he heard something from the grocer that aroused his curiosity.

"There was a man in here only twenty minutes since," said the storekeeper, "who was asking after Anthony."

"Was it a stranger?"

"Yes. It was a man I never saw before. He was a stout, broad-shouldered man with a bronzed face, who looked as if he might be a sailor."

"Did he say who he was?"

"Only that Anthony was a relation of his, and that he had not seen him for years."

"Did he say he meant to call upon him?" asked Mark.

"He did not say so, but as he inquired particularly for the location of the cabin, I took it for granted that this was his intention."

"Then probably I shall see him, as I am going directly back to the wood."

"He will probably be there unless he loses his way."

Leaving Mark to return by the same way he came, we will precede him, and make acquaintance with the man who had excited the grocer's curiosity by inquiring for the old hermit.

Old Anthony lay on his pallet waiting for the return of Mark.

"I like the boy," he said to himself. "He has an honest face. He looks manly and straightforward. He has never joined the other village boys in jeering. If my nephew had been like him he might have been a comfort to me."

The old man sighed. What thoughts passed through his mind were known only to him; but that they were sad ones seemed clear from the expression of his face.

Time passed as he lay quiet. Then he heard a noise at the door and the step of one entering the cabin.

"Is that you, Mark?" he inquired.

There was a pause. Then a harsh voice answered: "No; it isn't Mark, whoever he may be. It is some one who ought to be nearer to you than he."

Old Anthony started in evident excitement, and by an effort managed to turn round his head so as to see the intruder.

His eyes rested on a man rather above the middle height, shabbily clad, with a dark face and threatening expression.

"Lyman Taylor!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, Lyman Taylor," returned the other, mockingly. "Are you glad to see your nephew?"

"Heaven knows I am not!" said old Anthony bitterly.

"So I judged from your expression. Yet they say blood is thicker than water."

"That there is any tie of blood between us I regret deeply. A man more utterly unworthy I have never known."

"Come, Uncle Anthony, isn't that a little strong. I am no angel–"

"You are a worthless scoundrel," said the hermit bitterly.

"Look here, old man," said his nephew fiercely, "I didn't come here to be insulted and called bad names. Considering that you are alone and in my power, it is a little impertinent in you to talk in that way. I might kill you."

"You are quite capable of it," said Anthony. "Do so, if you choose. Life is not a possession that I greatly prize."

"I have a great mind to take you at your word," said Taylor coolly, "but it wouldn't suit my purpose. Your death would do me no good unless you have made me your heir. I am desperately in need of money."

"Work for it, then!"

"Thank you! You are very kind; but employers are rather shy of me. I have no recommendations to offer. I don't mind telling you that I have spent the last four years in prison."

"A very suitable place for you," said the old man in a caustic tone.

"Thank you again! You are complimentary."

"This is the reason why you have not found me out before?"

"Precisely. You don't suppose I would otherwise have kept away from you so long, my most affectionate uncle!"

"Do you recall the circumstances of our last parting? I awoke in California to find myself robbed of the large sum of money I had with me. Of course, you took it."

"I don't mind owning that I did. But I haven't a cent of it left."

"That I can easily believe. Why have you sought me out?"

"I want more money."

"So I supposed. You can judge from my way of living whether I am likely to have any for you."

"You don't appear to be living in luxury. However, it costs something to keep body and soul together even in this den. Of course, you have some money. However little it is, I want it."

"Then you will be disappointed."

"Where do you keep your money?" demanded Lyman Taylor, roughly.

"Even if I had any. I wouldn't tell you!" said the brave old man.

"Look here, old man, no trifling! Either you will find some money for me, or I will choke you?"

He got down on one knee and stooped menacingly over the hermit.

At that moment Mark Manning, who had returned from his errand, reached the doorway, and stood a surprised and indignant witness of this exciting scene.

Old Anthony struggled, but ineffectually in the grasp of the ruffian who had attacked him. Even if he had not been disabled by disease he would not have been a match for Lyman Taylor, who was at least twenty-five years younger.

"Don't touch me, you scoundrel!" said Anthony, whose spirit exceeded his bodily strength.

"Then tell me where you keep your money!"

"That I will not do!"

"Then I'll see if I can't find a way to make you."

As he spoke the young man grabbed the hermit by the throat. He concluded too hastily that old Anthony was in his power. He was destined to a surprise.

"Let the old man alone!" cried Mark, indignantly.

Lyman Taylor looked up in surprise and some alarm. But when he saw that the words proceeded from a boy, he laughed derisively.

"Mind your own business, you young bantam, or I'll wring your neck!" he said contemptuously. "Now, let me know where you keep your money," he said, turning once more to the old man, and preparing to choke him into an avowal of his secret.

"Let go, instantly, or I will shoot!" exclaimed Mark, now thoroughly aroused.

Once more the ruffian turned, and this time his countenance changed, for Mark, boyish but resolute, had dropped his bundles, and had the musket pointed directly at him.

Taylor rose to his feet suddenly.

"Take care, there!" he said, nervously. "Put down that gun!"

"Then leave old Anthony alone!" returned Mark, resolutely.

"Are you my uncle's guardian?" demanded Lyman, with a sneer.

"If he is your uncle, the more shame to you to treat him brutally!"

"I didn't come here to be lectured by a boy," said Taylor, angrily. "Put down that gun!"

CHAPTER IV.
THE HERMIT EXPLAINS

Mark did not obey directly, but turning to the hermit said, "Do you want this man to leave the cabin?"

"Yes," answered the old man, "but beware of him! He is all that is bad!"

"A pretty recommendation to come from your uncle," said Taylor, sullenly. "Uncle Anthony, I ask you once more to give me money. I am penniless, and am a desperate man."

"There is no money in this cabin, and you would search for it in vain, but if you will promise to leave this place and trouble me no more, I will provide you with five dollars."

"What are five dollars?"

"All that you will get. Do you make the promise?"

"Well, yes—"

"Mark, you may give this man five dollars on my account."

"Is he your treasurer!" inquired Taylor, in surprise.

"He has charge of some funds out of which he buys me what I need."

"How much money have you got of my uncle's, boy?"

"I don't care to answer the question. Ask your uncle."

"A small sum only. It won't be worth your while, Lyman, to plot for its possession."

"Have you no other money?"

"None that you are likely to get hold of. I will save you the trouble of searching the cabin, or prowling round it, by repeating that I have no money concealed here. You know me well enough to know that I am not deceiving you."

Lyman Taylor listened in sullen disappointment. He did know that his uncle's word could be relied upon implicitly, and that the hopes which he had built up of securing a large fund from the uncle he had once robbed, were not destined to be realized.

"It seems you are a pauper, then," he said.

"I have not been compelled to ask for charity yet," answered Anthony. "I live here for next to nothing, and have not suffered yet for the necessities of life."

Lyman Taylor looked around him contemptuously.

"You must have a sweet time living here," he said, "in this lonely old cabin."

"I would not exchange it for the place in which you confess that you have passed the last four years."

Taylor frowned, but did not otherwise notice the old man's retort.

"Give me the five dollars, boy," he said, "and I will go. It seems I am wasting time here."

Mark drew a gold piece from his pocket and passed it to him.

"Have you many more of these?" he demanded, his eyes gleaming with cupidity.

"No."

"Give me another."

"They are not mine to give."

"Not another one, Mark," said Anthony. "He does not deserve even that."

"Make way, then, and I will go," said the nephew, convinced that he had no more to expect.

Mark moved aside, and he strode out of the cabin.

"Good-bye, Uncle Anthony," he said. "You haven't treated me very generously, considering how long it is since you did anything for me."

"Are you utterly shameless, Lyman?" said the hermit. "I hope never to set eyes on you again."

"Thank you, you are very kind. Boy, what is your name?"

"Mark Manning."

"Well, Mark, as you appear to be in charge of my uncle, I shall be glad to have you write me if anything happens to him. As his nearest relative and heir, I ought to be notified."

Mark looked to the hermit for directions.

"Give him your address, Lyman," said Anthony. "If there is any news to interest you, he shall write. But don't calculate on my speedy death. It is hardly likely to benefit you."

"I may want to visit your grave, uncle," said Lyman, jeeringly.

"Give him an address where a letter will reach you then."

"No. – Third Avenue, New York," said Taylor. "Write soon."

He left the cabin, and old Anthony and Mark were alone.

"He is my nearest relative," said the old man, "and a relative to be proud of, eh, Mark?"

"No, sir."

"Years since we were in California together, I had two thousand dollars in gold dust under my pillow. My nephew was my companion, but none of the gold belonged to him. I woke one morning to find my nephew gone, and my gold also. From that time I have not set eyes on him till to-day."

"It was a shabby trick," said Mark, warmly. "Were you left destitute?"

"So far as money went, yes. But I was the owner of a claim which my nephew thought exhausted. I resumed work on it, and three days later made a valuable find. Within a month I took out ten thousand dollars, and sold it for five thousand more."

"Your nephew does not know this, does he?"

"No; if he had, I should not have got rid of him so easily. But I have not told you all. I remained in California a year longer, and left it worth forty thousand dollars."

"Then why—excuse me for asking—have you come to this poor cabin to live?" asked Mark.

"I had one other relative than Lyman, a daughter—I left her at a boarding-school in Connecticut. I returned to find that she had married an adventurer a month previous. Two years later I heard of her death. Life had lost its charm for me. I would not deprive myself of it, but in a fit of misanthropy I buried myself here."

Old Anthony seemed weary, and Mark questioned him no more, but set before him the milk and loaf which he had brought with him.

CHAPTER V.
LYMAN TAYLOR MAKES A NEW ACQUAINTANCE

On leaving the cabin Mark promised to call again the next afternoon, bringing from the village such articles as Anthony might require. This he could readily do as the shoe manufactory was not running full time.

"I will see that you are paid for your trouble," said the hermit.

"That will be all right," said Mark, cheerfully.

"I am able to pay you, and will employ you only on that condition," persisted Anthony.

"I shall not object to that part of the bargain," said Mark, smiling. "Money never comes amiss to me."

"I have plenty of money, though I would not admit it to my nephew," continued the sick man. "He would persecute me till I bought him off. Fortunately he thinks I am poor."

"But," said Mark, "suppose he should come back. Would not your money be in danger?"

"He would find none here. I do not keep any in this cabin. I did have some, but it is in your hands."

"Shall I not return it to you, sir?"

"No; I prefer that you should keep it. You will be using money for me daily, and for the present you shall be my treasurer."

"I am very much obliged to you for reposing so much confidence in me," said Mark.

"I trust you entirely. You have an honest face."

"Thank you, sir. I will endeavor to deserve your confidence."

It was past four o'clock when Mark left the cabin and started on his way homeward. He walked along thoughtfully, carrying his gun over his shoulder.

"It seems I have a near friend," he reflected; "and one who may be of service to me. Now that the shop is no longer running full time, it will be convenient to earn a little extra money, old Anthony must be rich, judging from what he said about his success in California."

Mark could not help wondering where the hermit kept his money. But for Anthony's positive assurance, he would have conjectured that he kept it somewhere concealed about the cabin, but that being left out of the question he was at a loss to fix upon any probable place of deposit.

Leaving Mark for a brief time; we go back to the other two young hunters, from whom he had separated two hours before.

"I don't like that boy," said James Collins. "He puts on too many airs for a poor boy. I suppose he will be crowing over his successful shot."

"Very likely," chimed in his companion, who made it a point to flatter James by agreeing with everything he said.

"It was only a lucky accident," continued James. "He couldn't do it again."

"Of course not. I don't think he is really as good a shot as you or I."

"You can hardly class yourself with me," said James egotistically. "However. I agree with you that he is inferior to you."

"Quick, James!" said Tom Wyman. "There is a squirrel—shoot! I'll give you the first chance."

James pulled the trigger, but the squirrel was not destined to fall by his hands. He scampered away, looking back saucily at the baffled young hunter.

"Was ever anything more provoking?" asked James in evident chagrin.

Later in the afternoon when the two boys were slowly strolling homewards, they saw a strange man issuing from the woods. It was Lyman Taylor, returned from his only partially successful visit to his uncle.

He waited till the boys came up.

"Good afternoon, young gentlemen," he said by way of greeting.

"Good afternoon," returned James stiffly.

He doubted whether the newcomer was a man whom it was worth while to notice.

"What luck have you had? I see you have been out hunting."

"We didn't shoot anything we thought worth bringing home," said Tom.

"I met another boy out with a gun. Perhaps he is a friend of yours."

James and Tom exchanged glances. They understood very well that Mark Manning was meant.

"I think I know the boy you met," said James. "It is a poor boy who works in my father's manufactory."

"What is his name?" asked Lyman Taylor.

"Mark Manning."

"Does he live in the village?"

"Yes; his mother is a poor widow."

"Where did you meet him?" asked Tom.

"At a cabin in the woods."

"Old Anthony's?"

"Yes; the hermit is an uncle of mine."

The two boys regarded the speaker with interest. All the villagers had some curiosity about the man who had settled so near them.

"What is his name?" inquired Tom.

"You called him old Anthony," said Lyman, smiling. "That is his name."

"But his other name?"

"His last name is Taylor, I have not seen him before for five years. Does he often come into the village?"

"About twice a week."

"I suppose he comes to buy food?"

"Yes; I suppose so."

"Does he appear to be provided with money?" asked Taylor with some eagerness.

"Yes, I believe so," replied Tom. "He has sometimes come into our place—father is the postmaster—to get a gold piece changed. But I don't suppose he has much money. It doesn't cost him much to live."

"Does he ever get any letters—as your father is postmaster, you can probably tell."

"I don't think so; my father has never mentioned it, and I think he would if any had been received."

"What sort of a boy is this Mark Manning?" asked Taylor abruptly.

"I don't think much of him," answered James. "He is poor and proud. He is only a pegger in our shop, but he puts on airs with the best."

"Do you think he is honest?"

The two boys looked surprised; that question had never occurred to them.

"What makes you ask?" inquired James.

"Only that he has in his possession a sum of money belonging to my uncle."

"Did he tell you so? did you see it?" were the questions quickly asked.

"I met him at my uncle's cabin. My uncle owed me a small sum, and instead of paying me himself, he asked this boy to pay me. The boy took the money from his pocket, and handed it to me."

Both boys were surprised.

"I didn't know he had anything to do with the hermit," said Tom. "Did you, James?"

"No; but then I don't trouble myself about Mark Manning's affairs."

Lyman Taylor regarded James shrewdly, he had no difficulty in detecting the boy's dislike towards Mark.

"Excuse my troubling you with questions, young gentlemen," he said. "My uncle is a simple-minded old man, and it would be easy to rob him, though I fancy he hasn't much money. This boy Mark appeared to me an artful young rogue, who might very probably cheat him out of the small sum he has."

"I never saw the two together," said Tom, musingly. "Old Anthony has generally paid his bills himself."

"He is sick just now, and perhaps that accounts for it. The boy Mark has been making purchases for him in the village. However, I must leave the place, as important business calls me elsewhere. Since you," addressing Tom, "are the postmaster's son, may I ask a favor of you?"

"Certainly."

"If my uncle should die, can I trouble you to send me a note informing me, as I should feel called upon, as his only relative, to see that he was properly buried."

"Yes, sir; I will write you, if you will leave me your address."

Lyman Taylor gave Tom the same address he had already given Mark. He then bade the boys good-bye, and walked on.

"Uncle Anthony *may* have some money," he soliloquized, "and if he dies, I shall see if I can find it. I am pretty sure to hear through one of the boys."

CHAPTER VI.
A TRAGEDY IN THE PASTURE

On their way home the two boys had occasion to cross a pasture belonging to Deacon Miller, an old farmer whose house and barn were about a furlong distant on a rising ground.

They sauntered along in single file. James had a careless way of carrying his gun, which made some of the boys unwilling to accompany him, unless it was unloaded. Tom had two or three times cautioned him on this very afternoon, but James did not receive his remonstrance in good part.

"Don't trouble yourself so much about my gun, Tom Wyman," he said. "I guess I know how to carry my gun as well as you do."

"I don't doubt that in the least, James, but you must admit that you handle it rather carelessly. Some of the boys don't like to go hunting with you."

"Then they are cowards. I never shot any boy yet," answered James, with some heat.

"No, but you might."

"You are making a great deal of fuss about nothing. I didn't think you were so timid."

"I don't know that I am particularly timid, but I shouldn't like to be riddled with shot," returned Tom, good-humoredly.

"Then you'd better get your life insured when you go out with me next," sneered James.

"I don't know but I shall," said Tom, declining to take offense.

For a very brief period James carried his gun more carefully. Then he forgot his caution, and in transferring his gun from one shoulder to the other somehow he touched the hammer, and the gun was discharged.

It was most unfortunate, but when the gun went off it was pointed directly at a white-faced cow belonging to Deacon Miller.

The small shot penetrated both the poor animal's eyes, and with a moan of anguish the cow sank to the ground.

Both boys stared in dismay at the victim of carelessness.

"There, you've gone and done it now, James," said Tom. "You've shot Deacon Miller's cow."

"I don't see how I happened to do it," stammered James, really frightened.

"I told you not to carry your gun so carelessly."

"You told me! Of course you want to get me into trouble about this!" exclaimed James, irritably.

"No, I don't."

"Then," said James, quickly, "don't say a word about it. We'll get home as soon as we can, and won't know anything about it. Mum's the word!"

"Of course I'll be mum, but it will be known that we have been out with guns this afternoon."

"So has Mark Manning."

James looked significantly at Tom, and Tom understood.

Poor Mark was to bear the blame for a deed he didn't do, and all to screen James.

"It's mean!" Tom said to himself, "but I can't go back on James. I want to keep in with him, and I suppose I must consent."

"Well?" demanded James, impatiently.

"It won't come out through me," answered Tom, but not with alacrity.

"And if Mark is accused you won't say anything?"

"N-o!" said Tom, slowly.

"Then let us put for home!"

James suited the action to the word, and the two boys hurried across the pasture, never venturing to look back at the suffering animal.

Fifteen minutes later, when James and Tom were already at home, Mark Manning entered the narrow foot-path that led across the pasture.

He was immersed in thought, the hermit and his strange experience at the cabin being the subject of his reflections, when he heard a pitiful moaning, not far from him.

Looking up he observed that it proceeded from old Whitey, as the deacon was accustomed to call his favorite cow.

"What's the matter with you, old Whitey?" said Mark, who was always moved by distress, whether in man or beast.

Coming nearer, he was not long left in doubt. The nature of the injury which the poor cow had received was evident to him.

"Poor old Whitey!" he said, pitifully. "Who has shot you in this cruel manner?"

The sole answer was a moan of anguish from the stricken animal.

"I am afraid she will have to be killed!" thought Mark, sadly. "It is only torture for her to live with this injury, and of course there is no cure."

He was still standing beside the cow, gun in hand, when a harsh voice became audible.

"What have you done to my cow, Mark Manning?"

Looking up, he saw the deacon but four rods distant.

Deacon Miller was an old man, of giant form, and harsh, irregular features. He was a very unpopular man in the neighborhood, and deservedly so. He had made home so disagreeable that his only son had gone away fifteen years before, and the deacon had never heard from him since.

"What have you been doin' to my cow?" he demanded, in a still harsher tone.

"Nothing, Deacon Miller," answered Mark, calmly.

"You don't mean to tell me the critter's makin' all this fuss for nothin', do you?"

"No; the poor animal has been shot."

"Has been what?" snarled the deacon.

"Shot! Shot in the face, and I am afraid its eyes are put out," replied Mark.

"Old Whitey shot in the eye," repeated the deacon, in a fury. "Then it's you that did it."

"You are mistaken, sir," said Mark, with dignity. "I have just come up, and this is the condition in which I found Whitey."

"What's that you are carryin' in your hand?" demanded the deacon, sternly.

"My gun."

"I am glad you are willin' to tell the truth. I didn't know but you'd say it was a hoe," exploded the deacon in angry irony.

"Your cow has received no injury from my gun, if that's what you're hinting at, Deacon Miller."

"Let me take the gun!"

In some surprise Mark put it into his hands. The deacon raised it, and pulled the trigger.

No report was heard. The gun was not loaded.

"Just what I thought," said the deacon, triumphantly. "If it had been loaded, I might have thought you told me the truth. Now I know as well as I want to that you shot my cow in the face with it."

"I assure you, Deacon Miller," said Mark, earnestly, beginning to comprehend the extent to which he was implicated, although innocent. "I assure you, Deacon Miller, that I have had nothing to do with harming poor Whitey."

"Anyway, I shall hold you responsible, and I reckon you'll have hard work to prove yourself innocent," said the deacon, grimly. "I ain't going to lose a forty-five dollar cow, and say nothin' about it. You jest tell your mother when you go home to see about raisin' forty-five dollars to make up old Whitey's loss. As she's a poor widder I'll give her thirty days to do it in. Do you hear?"

"Yes, Deacon Miller, I hear, but I repeat that I didn't harm your cow, and I shan't pay you a cent."

"We'll see!" was the only answer the deacon gave, nodding his head with emphasis.

Poor Mark! he had never felt so miserable, as he plodded slowly home. He was innocent, but circumstances were against him, and the deacon was implacable.

CHAPTER VII.
MARK AT HOME

Mark's home was a small cottage of a story and a half, surmounted by a sloping roof. It was plainly furnished, but looked comfortable. His mother was a pleasant looking woman of middle age, who managed well their scanty income, consisting chiefly of Mark's earnings.

"Are you not later than usual, Mark?" she inquired.

"Yes, mother; I went out gunning, and did an errand for old Anthony, who is laid up with the rheumatism in his cabin."

"Poor man! I hope he won't suffer."

"Thanks to me, he probably will not."

"What can you do for him, Mark? You have no money to spare."

"Haven't I, mother?" asked Mark, with a smile, as he drew from his pocket a large handful of silver and gold.

"What do you say to that?"

"Oh, Mark! I hope you came honestly by that money," said the widow, nervously.

"I haven't been robbing a bank, if that's what you mean, mother. I couldn't very well, as there is none within ten miles."

"Then, Mark, where did the money come from?"

"It belongs to old Anthony. He asked me to take charge of it, as I shall need to be buying things for him in the village for a few days to come."

"For mercy's sake, be careful of it, Mark, as, if you lost it, we couldn't make up the loss."

"I'll look after that. In fact, I think it will be safer with me than with the owner. If any dishonest person should enter his cabin, he could not help being robbed in his present condition."

"That would be very unfortunate, as the old man is probably very poor."

Mark was about to undeceive his mother, but, reflecting that Lyman Taylor might still be in the village, he thought it not prudent to betray the hermit's secret.

"I heard a report to-day, Mark," said his mother, as she was setting the supper table, "that the shoe-shop was to be closed for a month."

"I hope not," said Mark, startled. "That would be serious for us."

"And for others too, Mark."

"Yes. It isn't as if there were other employments open, but there is absolutely nothing, unless I could get a chance to do some farm work."

"Perhaps Deacon Miller may need a boy."

"He's about the last man I would work for. He wouldn't pay me a cent."

"Why not, Mark? He wouldn't expect you to work for nothing."

"He claims that I owe him forty-five dollars, and would expect me to work it out."

"What do you mean, Mark? How can you owe the deacon forty-five dollars?"

"I don't, but he claims I do."

Mark then told his mother the story of the cow.

"Deacon Miller expects me to pay for it," he concluded, "but I think he'll have to take it out in expecting."

"Oh, Mark, I am afraid this will lead to serious trouble," said Mrs. Manning, looking distressed. "He may go to law about it."

"He can't make me pay for the damage somebody else did, mother."

"But if he makes out that you shot the cow?"

"I won't trouble about it. It might spoil my appetite for supper. I've got a healthy appetite to-night, mother."

"Your story has taken away mine, Mark."

"Don't worry, mother; it will all come right."

"I am afraid worrying comes natural to me, Mark. I've seen more trouble than you have, my son."

"Forget it all till supper is over, mother."

Supper was scarcely over when a knock was heard at the door, and John Downie entered. He was a boy of Scotch descent, and lived near by.

"How are you, Johnny," said Mark, "won't you have some supper?"

"Thank you, Mark, I've had some. Have you heard about Deacon Miller's cow?"

"What about her?" asked Mark, eagerly.

"You know old Whitey?"

"Yes, yes."

"Her eyes are put out by an accidental discharge of a gun, and I guess she will have to be killed."

"Do you know who shot her?" asked Mark, with intense interest.

"Yes, I do, but the deacon doesn't," answered John.

"Who was it?"

"James Collins. He and Tom Wyman were coming through the pasture, when James, in handling his gun awkwardly, managed to discharge it full in poor Whitey's face."

"How do you know it was James?"

"Because I saw it. I was in the next field and saw it all."

"Did the boys see you?"

"No; they hurried away as fast as they could go."

"Johnny, you're a trump!" exclaimed Mark, rising and shaking the boy's hand vigorously.

"Why am I a trump?" asked Johnny, astonished.

"Because your testimony will clear me. The deacon charges me with shooting the cow, and wants me to pay forty-five dollars."

"Gosh!" exclaimed Johnny. "But what makes him think you shot old Whitey?"

Mark briefly explained.

"But," said Mrs. Manning, "surely James Collins would not permit you to suffer for his fault?"

"You don't know James, mother. That's just what he would do, I feel sure. What do you say, Johnny?"

"Jim Collins is just mean enough to do it," answered John.

"He can't do it now, however. Mr. Collins is abundantly able to pay for the cow, and I guess he'll have to."

"I don't know how we could ever have paid so large a sum," said the widow.

"We shan't have to, mother, that's one comfort."

"There's the deacon coming!" exclaimed Johnny, suddenly.

"So he is! Johnny, just run into the kitchen, and I'll call you when you're wanted. We'll have some fun. Mother, don't say a word till we hear what the deacon has to say."

By this time the deacon had knocked. Mrs. Manning admitted him, and he entered with a preliminary cough.

"Are your family well, deacon?" asked the mother.

"They're middlin', widder, which is a comfort. Families are often a source of trouble," and here the deacon glanced sharply at Mark, who, rather to his surprise, looked cool and composed.

"That may be, Deacon Miller, but I am thankful that Mark never gives me any trouble."

"Don't be too sure of that, ma'am," said the deacon, grimly. "It's about that very thing I've come here now. Your son has shot my most valuable cow, old Whitey, and I regret to say, widder,

that he'll have to make it good for me. Forty-five dollars is what the critter is worth, and I wouldn't have taken that for her."

"Are you sure Mark shot your cow?" asked Mrs. Manning.

"As sure as I need to be. I caught him standin' by the cow with his gun in his hand. The barrel was empty, for I tried it to see."

"What have you to say to this charge, Mark?"

"That Deacon Miller is mistaken. I did not shoot his cow."

"I reckon you'll have to pay for it all the same. Mark Manning. I don't want to be hard on a poor widder, but it stands to reason that I should be paid for my cow."

"I agree to that," said Mark, "but I'm not the one."

"Mebbe the cow shot herself!" said the deacon, sarcastically. "It may be nat'ral for cows to commit suicide, but I never saw one do it as far as I can remember. Young man, your story is too thin."

CHAPTER VIII.
DEACON MILLER GETS A CLUE

Mark was forced to smile at the idea of old Whitey committing suicide. The deacon observed his smile, and it provoked him.

"Do you mean to say, Mark Manning, that you think the critter shot herself in the face?" he demanded, sharply.

"No, Deacon Miller, I have no such idea."

"That's the same as admittin' that you shot her," said the deacon, triumphantly.

"No, it isn't, deacon. I didn't shoot her, but I have no doubt some one else did."

"It may have been the cat," remarked the deacon, with a return to sarcasm.

"It was probably a two-legged cat," said Mark.

"Jest my idee!" remarked the deacon, quickly, "An' that brings it home to you. You was out with a gun, an' I caught you standin' beside the cow."

"As to catching me," returned Mark, "there was no catching about it. I was crossing the pasture, and was attracted by the poor animal's moans. That is the way I happened to be near when you came up."

"That all sounds very smooth," said the deacon, impatiently, "but if you didn't shoot the cow, who did?"

"I think that question can be answered, Deacon Miller; John Downie!"

To the deacon's surprise, John came into the room at this summons.

"Johnny," said Mark, "will you tell the deacon who shot his cow!"

"I don't like to tell," objected John; "it wasn't done on purpose."

"Did you do it?" queried the deacon, sharply.

"No, *sir*. I never fired a gun in my life."

"Who did it, then?"

"Must I tell, Mark?"

"Yes, Johnny; Deacon Miller has a right to know; even if it was not done on purpose, the one who did it ought to make good the loss."

"That's where you speak sense, Mark," said the deacon, approvingly.

"Then it was Jim Collins."

"James Collins—the squire's son!" repeated the deacon, astonished.

"Yes."

John proceeded to tell the story once more. The deacon, it is needless to say, listened very attentively.

"So the boys run away, did they?" he inquired, grimly.

"Yes, sir."

"And I s'pose you'd have run away, too, if you had done it, hey?"

"Perhaps I might," answered John, ingenuously. "I s'pose they were scared."

"I'll scare 'em," growled the deacon. "Squire Collins is able to make up the loss to me, and I mean he shall." Then, with a momentary suspicion, "This ain't a story you an' Mark have got up between you, to get him off, is it?"

"I will answer that, Deacon Miller," said Mark firmly. "If I had shot your cow, I wouldn't have run away, but I'd have gone right to you and told you about it, and I'd have paid you just as soon as I could."

"That's right, that's right," said the deacon, approvingly, beginning to regard Mark with more favor. "Well, I must go and see the squire. Here, you John Downie, come along with me."

"I've got to go home," said John.

"But I can't prove it without you."

"You can tell the squire that I saw it done, and am ready to swear to it, if he wants me to."

"Mebbe that'll do if I send for you, you'll come, hey?"

"Yes, sir."

The deacon did not feel disposed to postpone what he regarded as important business, and he left the cottage, taking the shortest direction to the squire's more imposing dwelling. We will precede him.

James Collins and his friend, as already described, ran away as fast as their legs could carry them, when they ascertained what damage had been done.

No one, so far as they knew, had seen them, and they hoped to escape, scot free.

Tom accompanied James home, and stayed to supper. After supper the boys went out, and had a conference together.

James felt a little nervous, though he believed that he was safe from incurring suspicion.

"I wonder if the deacon has found old Whitey yet?" said James.

"I guess so," answered Tom. "He usually goes after the cows before this."

"I wonder how he'll think it happened?"

"Maybe he'll lay it to Mark."

James was not very much disturbed at this supposition.

"That would be a good joke!" he said.

"Not for Mark."

"Mark can take care of himself. He was out with a gun as well as we."

"His mother couldn't afford to pay for the cow," said Tom, who was rather more considerate than his companion.

"That's none of my business. And, Tom, there's something I want to say to you."

"Go ahead!"

"If Mark is accused, don't you go to saying it's a mistake. Remember it's none of your business."

Tom looked uncomfortable, having some conscience.

"It would be rough on a poor woman like Mrs. Manning having to pay for the deacon's cow."

"You're mighty considerate, Tom. You might consider me a little. If it were known that I shot the cow, father would make me pay at least half the bill out of my money in the savings' bank. I thought you were my friend!"

"So I am."

"Then you won't betray me. As for Mark, the deacon can't prove it against him, so he won't have to pay."

"Then the deacon will lose his cow, and get no pay."

"He can afford it. He's a stingy old lunks, anyway."

"That's true enough."

"And it won't ruin him if he does lose the cow. He's able to buy another."

It struck Tom, though he was not over conscientious, that this was not exactly the way to regard the matter, but he did not like to offend James, and he had ventured to oppose him more than usual already. So he remained silent.

James was not quite satisfied with his friend. He was not altogether sure of his fidelity.

"I've got only one thing to say, Tom," he added. "If you go back on me, and breathe a word of what happened in the pasture, I'll never speak to you again as long as I live."

"Who's going back on you? did I say I was?" demanded Tom rather irritably.

"All right, then; I only wanted to have the thing understood between us, I didn't really think you would be mean enough to tell."

So a satisfactory understanding was established between the two boys, and it looked as if Mark was likely to be the victim of their alliance.

But just when James was beginning to feel secure, he was startled by an apparition just looming in sight on the highway. It was not a formidable figure—that of Deacon Miller—but under the circumstances James turned pale and his heart began to beat.

"Tom," he gasped; "isn't that Deacon Miller coming up the road?"

"It's the deacon sure enough!" answered Tom, looking disconcerted.

"Do you think he's coming here?" queried James nervously.

"Looks like it?" muttered Tom.

"Do you think he can have–heard anything?"

"Perhaps he heard that we were out with guns?" suggested Tom. "He may have come to make inquiries."

"Just so, now, Tom, be careful not to look as if there was anything the matter. We'll be extra polite to the old fellow."

"All right!"

"He may not be coming here after all."

But he was! arrived at the gate Deacon Miller paused, and opening it entered the front yard. He looked sharply at the two boys who were standing on the lawn.

CHAPTER IX.
THE DEACON'S MISSION

Ordinarily James would not have considered Deacon Miller worth any polite attention, but the knowledge of what had happened in the pasture had its effect upon him. He thought it necessary by a little attention to disarm the deacon's suspicions if he had any.

"Good evening, Deacon Miller," he said politely. "Did you wish to see father?"

"Wal," said the deacon deliberately. "I have a little business with him. Is he at home?"

"I am pretty sure he is," answered James. "Come in with me, and I'll see."

The deacon smiled—an inscrutable smile—and followed James, who opened the front door and led him into the parlor.

"You're very obligin'," he said. "I had no idea you was so polite."

"It is the duty of a gentleman to be polite!" said James loftily.

"So 'tis, so 'tis!" returned the old man chuckling in an unaccountable manner. "I'm glad you think so. It's a great thing to be a boy, I had lots of fun when I was a boy. So do you, hey?"

"Oh yes," answered James indifferently. "But not as much as I could have in the city."

"But you couldn't go huntin' and fishin' in the city," said the deacon slyly.

James' heart gave a bound. What did the disagreeable old man mean? was it possible that he suspected?

"I don't care much for either," he said. "But I'll go and call father."

Presently the squire appeared and invited Deacon Miller into the back room, which was used as the family dining and sitting-room.

"Glad to see, you, deacon," said Mr. Collins, who, having political aspirations, thought it worth while to be polite to his neighbors.

"I ain't so sure of that, squire, when you know what I come about," returned the deacon with a crafty smile.

"No bad news, I hope, deacon."

"Wal, it ain't good news. You know my cow, old Whitey?"

"Well?" interrogated the squire, looking puzzled. He had heard nothing as yet of the accident in the pasture.

"She was shot in the face this afternoon—her eyes totally destroyed. I shall have to kill her."

"That's a pity! I sympathize with you, deacon. It must be a great disappointment to you. She was a good milker, wasn't she?"

"Fust-rate! I never had a cow that could beat her. She was worth fifty dollars easy."

"Very likely," said the squire, innocently, quite unaware of the trap which the wily deacon was preparing for him. It will be observed that the deacon, finding he had a case against a rich man, had concluded to raise the value of the cow by five dollars. "Fifty dollars is a considerable loss."

"So 'tis, but I haven't got to lose it. The one that shot old Whitey is responsible."

"Who did shoot her?" asked Squire Collins.

"Your boy, James," answered the deacon, slowly.

Squire Collins was very disagreeably surprised. He was not a man who liked to part with money, and he saw how he had been trapped.

"Did you see James shoot the cow?" he demanded sharply.

"N—o; I can't say I did," replied the deacon, cautiously.

"I don't believe he did it then. Did he admit it to you?"

"N—o. I didn't ask him about it."

"Then, Deacon Miller, permit me to say that you have no case against him, and I am not responsible for your unfortunate loss.

"Somebody else saw it!" remarked the deacon triumphantly.

"Who was it?"

"John Downie."

"John Downie! Pooh, he is a mere boy," said the squire, contemptuously.

"He's got as many eyes as you or I, squire," said the deacon, shrewdly.

This was unquestionably true, and the squire felt that he had made a foolish objection.

"John Downie may not tell the truth," he said, angrily.

"I'm willin' it should come before the court," said the deacon. "Wouldn't it be jest as well to ask your boy about it; he's out in the yard."

James was still in the yard. He had half a mind to go away, but was anxious about the deacon's errand. When he heard his father's voice calling him he turned pale.

"Wait for me, Tom," he said. "If you're asked, don't say I did it."

Tom looked disturbed and uneasy, and did not reply.

James entered his father's presence with a perturbed spirit. He stole a glance at the deacon, who sat with his wizened face calm and imperturbable.

"Did you want me, father?" asked James.

"James," said his father, abruptly, "Deacon Miller tells me that some one has shot his cow, old Whitey, this afternoon, and injured her so seriously that she will have to be killed."

"I am sorry to hear it," said James, nervously.

"Do you know who did it?"

"How should I?" asked James, after a pause.

"Wer'n't you out in the pastur' this afternoon?" asked the deacon, pointedly.

"Yes," answered James, "Tom Wyman and I crossed the pasture."

"With guns on your shoulders?"

"Ye—es," admitted James.

"Did you see anything of old Whitey?" continued the deacon, persevering in his pointed interrogations.

"There were some cows there I remember; I suppose old Whitey was among them."

"Did your gun go off while you were in the pasture?"

"Ye—es, I believe it did. It went off accidentally."

"And hit old Whitey?"

"I don't know about that. It may not have hit anything."

"Then you don't know that you hit my cow?"

"I wasn't the only boy in the pasture this afternoon," said James, evasively.

"I know all about that. Tom Wyman was with you."

"Yes, and so was Mark Manning. He was out gunning most all the afternoon. Have you asked him whether he hit the cow?"

"Yes," answered the deacon; "he says he didn't."

"Of course he would say so," sneered James, more confidently. "He's just as likely to have done it as I."

"That's what I thought myself," returned the deacon; "though Mark's a middlin' keerful boy. But I changed my mind."

"Because he denied it?" asked James, with a return of the sneer.

"Not exactly. There was a boy saw it done, and he told me who did it."

"What boy saw it done?" asked James, all his apprehensions reviving.

"John Downie."

This was startling news to James.

"And who does he say did it," he forced himself to ask.

"You!" answered Deacon Miller, laconically.

"I don't believe I did it," said James, wavering.

"He says after you shot the cow, you and Tom Wyman ran away as fast as your legs could carry you," added the deacon, chuckling.

James turned as red as scarlet, but said nothing. It was clear enough that he was guilty, and knew it.

"Deacon Miller," said Squire Collins, "I will look into this matter, and if I find James shot your cow, we will make some arrangement about payment. Understand clearly, however, that I won't pay any fancy price, such as fifty dollars."

"I won't argy the matter now, squire," said the deacon. "Good-evenin'."

"James," said his father, "I won't scold you for a piece of carelessness, but whatever compensation is paid to the deacon must come from your account in the savings' bank."

This was a sad blow to James, he had a hundred and fifty dollars in the bank, and this would make a heavy draft upon it.

He went out into the yard without a word.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.