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LUCK AND PLUCK

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Luck and Pluck

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Jr. Horatio Alger

Luck and Pluck / or John Oakley's Inheritance

PREFACE

"Luck and Pluck" appeared as a serial story in the juvenile department of Ballou's Magazine for the year 1869, and is therefore already familiar to a very large constituency of young readers. It is now presented in book form, as the first of a series of six volumes, designed to illustrate the truth that a manly spirit is better than the gifts of fortune. Early trial and struggle, as the history of the majority of our successful men abundantly attests, tend to strengthen and invigorate the character.

The author trusts that John Oakley, his young hero, will find many friends, and that his career will not only be followed with interest, but teach a lesson of patient fortitude and resolute endeavor, and a determination to conquer fortune, and compel its smiles. He has no fear that any boy-reader will be induced to imitate Ben Brayton, whose selfishness and meanness are likely to meet a fitting recompense.

New York, Nov. 8, 1869.

CHAPTER I. INTRODUCING TWO BOYS AND A HORSE

"What are you going to do with that horse, Ben Brayton?"

"None of your business!"

"As the horse happens to belong to me, I should think it was considerable of my business."

"Suppose you prove that it belongs to you," said Ben, coolly.

"There is no need of proving it. You know it as well as I do."

"At any rate, it doesn't belong to you now," said Ben Brayton.

"I should like to know why not?"

"Because it belongs to me."

"Who gave it to you?"

"My mother."

"It wasn't hers to give."

"You'll find that the whole property belongs to her. Your father left her everything, and she has given the horse to me. Just stand aside there; I'm going to ride."

John Oakley's face flushed with anger, and his eyes flashed. He was a boy of fifteen, not tall, but stout and well-proportioned, and stronger than most boys of his age and size, his strength having been developed by rowing on the river, and playing ball, in both of which he was proficient. Ben Brayton was a year and a half older, and half a head taller; but he was of a slender figure, and, having no taste for vigorous out-of-door amusements, he was not a match in strength for the younger boy. They were not related by blood, but both belonged to the same family, Ben Brayton's mother having three years since married Squire Oakley, with whom she had lived for a year previous as house-keeper. A week since the squire had died, and when, after the funeral, the will had been read, it was a matter of general astonishment that John, the testator's only son, was left entirely unprovided for, while the entire property was left to Mrs. Oakley. John, who was of course present at the reading of the will, was considerably disturbed at his disinheritance; not because he cared for the money so much as because it seemed as if his father had slighted him. Not a word, however, had passed between him and his father's widow on the subject, and things had gone on pretty much as usual, until the day on which our story commences. John had just returned from the village academy, where he was at the head of a class preparing for college, when he saw Ben Brayton, the son of Mrs. Oakley by a former marriage preparing to ride out on a horse which for a year past had been understood to be his exclusive property. Indignant at this, he commenced the conversation recorded at the beginning of this chapter.

"Stand aside there, John Oakley, or I'll ride over you!"

"Will you, though?" said John, seizing the horse by the bridle. "That's easier said than done."

Ben Brayton struck the horse sharply, hoping that John would be frightened and let go; but our hero clung to the bridle, and the horse began to back.

"Let go, I tell you!" exclaimed Ben.

"I won't!" said John, sturdily.

The horse continued to back, until Ben, who was a coward at heart, becoming alarmed, slid off from his back.

"That's right," said John, coolly. "Another time you'd better not meddle with my horse."

"I'll meddle with you, and teach you better manners!" exclaimed Ben, a red spot glowing in each of his pale cheeks.

As he spoke, he struck John smartly over the shoulders with the small riding-whip he carried.

John was not quarrelsome. I am glad to bear this testimony to his character, for I have a very poor opinion of quarrelsome boys; but he had a spirit of his own, and was not disposed to submit

tamely to a blow. He turned upon Ben instantly, and, snatching the whip from his hand, struck him two blows in return for the one he had received.

"I generally pay my debts with interest, Ben Brayton," he said, coolly. "You ought to have thought of that before you struck me."

A look of fierce vindictiveness swept over the olive face of his adversary as he advanced for another contest.

"Stand back there!" exclaimed John, flourishing the whip in a threatening manner. "I've paid you up, and I don't want to strike you again."

"I'll make you smart for your impudence!" fumed Ben, trying to get near enough to seize the whip from his hands.

"I didn't strike first," said John, "and I shan't strike again, unless I am obliged to in self-defence."

"Give me that whip!" screamed Ben, livid with passion.

"You can't have it."

"I'll tell my mother."

"Go and do it if you like," said John, a little contemptuously.

"Let go that horse."

"It's my own, and I mean to keep it."

"It is not yours. My mother gave it to me."

"It wasn't hers to give."

John still retained his hold of the saddle, and kept Ben at bay with one hand. He watched his opportunity until Ben had retreated sufficiently far to make it practicable, then, placing his foot in the stirrup, lightly vaulted upon the horse, and, touching him with the whip, he dashed out of the yard. Ben sprang forward to stop him; but he was too late.

"Get off that horse!" he screamed.

"I will when I've had my ride," said John, turning back in his saddle. "Now, Prince, do your best."

This last remark was of course addressed to the horse, who galloped up the street, John sitting on his back, with easy grace, as firmly as if rooted to the saddle; for John was an admirable horseman, having been in the habit of riding ever since he was ten years old.

Ben Brayton looked after him with a face distorted with rage and envy. He would have given a great deal to ride as well as John; but he was but an indifferent horseman, being deficient in courage, and sitting awkwardly in the saddle. He shook his fist after John's retreating form, muttering between his teeth, "You shall pay for this impudence, John Oakley, and that before you are twenty-four hours older! I'll see whether my mother will allow me to be insulted in this way!"

Sure of obtaining sympathy from his mother, he turned his steps towards the house, which he entered.

"Where's my mother?" he inquired of the servant.

"She's upstairs in her own room, Mr. Benjamin," was the answer.

Ben hurried upstairs, and opened the door at the head of the staircase. It was a spacious chamber, covered with a rich carpet, and handsomely furnished. At the time of his mother's marriage to Squire Oakley, she had induced him to discard the old furniture, and refurnish it to suit her taste. There were some who thought that what had been good enough for the first Mrs. Oakley, who was an elegant and refined lady, ought to have been good enough for one, who, until her second marriage, had been a house-keeper. But, by some means,—certainly not her beauty, for she was by no means handsome,—she had acquired an ascendancy over the squire, and he went to considerable expense to gratify her whim.

Mrs. Oakley sat at the window, engaged in needlework. She was tall and thin, with a sallow complexion, and pale, colorless lips. Her eyes were gray and cold. There was a strong personal resemblance between Ben and herself, and there was reason to think that he was like her in his

character and disposition as well as in outward appearance. She was dressed in black, for the husband who had just died.

"Why have you not gone out to ride, Ben?" she asked, as her son entered the room.

"Because that young brute prevented me."

"Whom do you mean?" asked his mother.

"I mean John Oakley, of course."

"How could he prevent you?"

"He came up just as I was going to start, and told me to get off the horse,—that it was his."

"And you were coward enough to do it?" said his mother, scornfully.

"No. I told him it was not his any longer; that you had given it to me."

"What did he say then?"

"That you had no business to give it away, as it was his."

"Did he say that?" demanded Mrs. Oakley, her gray eyes flashing angrily.

"Yes, he did."

"Why didn't you ride off without minding him?"

"Because he took the horse by the bridle, and made him contrary; I didn't want to be thrown, so I jumped off."

"Did you have the whip in your hand?"

"Yes."

"Then why didn't you lay it over his back? That might have taught him better manners."

"So I did."

"You did right," said his mother, with satisfaction; for she had never liked her husband's son. His frank, brave, generous nature differed too much from her own to lead to any affection between them. She felt that he outshone her own son, and far exceeded him in personal gifts and popularity with the young people of the neighborhood, and it made her angry with him. Besides, she had a suspicion that Ben was deficient in courage, and it pleased her to think that he had on this occasion acted manfully.

"Then I don't see why you didn't jump on the horse again and ride away," she continued.

"Because," said Ben, reluctantly, "John got the whip away from me."

"Did he strike you with it?" asked Mrs. Oakley, quickly.

"Yes," said Ben, vindictively. "He struck me twice, the ruffian! But I'll be even with him yet!"

"You shall be even with him," said Mrs. Oakley, pressing her thin lips firmly together. "But I'm ashamed of you for standing still and bearing the insult like a whipped dog."

"I tried to get at him," said Ben; "but he kept flourishing the whip, so that I couldn't get a chance."

"Where is he now?"

"He's gone to ride."

"Gone to ride! You let him do it?"

"I couldn't help it; he was too quick for me. He jumped on the horse before I knew what he was going to do, and dashed out of the yard at full speed."

"He is an impertinent young rebel!" said Mrs. Oakley, angrily. "I am ashamed of you for letting him get the advantage of you; but I am very angry with him. So he said that I had no business to give you the horse, did he?"

"Yes; he has no more respect for you than for a servant," said Ben, artfully, knowing well that nothing would be so likely to make his mother angry as this. Having once been in a subordinate position, she was naturally suspicious, and apprehensive that she would not be treated with a proper amount of respect by those around her. It was Ben's object to incense his mother against John, feeling that in this way he would best promote his own selfish ends.

"So he has no respect for me?" exclaimed Mrs. Oakley, angrily.

"None at all," said Ben, decisively. "He says you have no right here, nor I either."

This last statement was an utter fabrication, as Ben well knew; for John, though he had never liked his father's second wife, had always treated her with the outward respect which propriety required. He was not an impudent nor a disrespectful boy; but he had a proper spirit, and did not choose to be bullied by Ben, whom he would have liked if he had possessed any attractive qualities. It had never entered his mind to grudge him the equal advantages which Squire Oakley, for his mother's sake, had bestowed upon her son. He knew that his father was a man of property, and that there was enough for both. When, however, Ben manifested a disposition to encroach upon his rights, John felt that the time for forbearance had ceased, and he gave him distinctly to understand that there was a limit beyond which he must not pass. Very soon after Ben first entered the family John gave him a thrashing,—in self-defence, however,—of which he complained to his mother. Though very angry, she feared to diminish her influence with his father by moving much in the matter, and therefore contented herself by cautioning Ben to avoid him as much as possible.

"Some time or other he shall be punished," she said; "but at present it is most prudent for us to keep quiet and bide our time."

Now, however, Mrs. Oakley felt that the power was in her own hands. She had no further necessity for veiling her real nature, or refraining from gratifying her resentment. The object for which she had schemed—her husband's property—was hers, and John Oakley was dependent upon her for everything. If she treated him ungenerously, it would create unfavorable comments in the neighborhood; but for this she did not care. The property was hers by her husband's will, and no amount of censure would deprive her of it. She would now be able to enrich Ben at John's expense, and she meant to do it. Henceforth Ben would be elevated to the position of heir, and John must take a subordinate position as a younger son, or, perhaps, to speak still more accurately, as a poor relation with a scanty claim upon her bounty.

"I'll break that boy's proud spirit," she said to herself. "He has been able to triumph over Ben; but he will find that I am rather more difficult to deal with."

There was an expression of resolution upon her face, and a vicious snapping of the eyes, which boded ill to our hero. Mrs. Oakley undoubtedly had the power to make him uncomfortable, and she meant to do it, unless he would submit meekly to her sway. That this was not very likely may be judged from what we have already seen of him.

Mrs. Oakley's first act was to bestow on Ben the horse, Prince, which had been given to John a year before by his father. John had been accustomed to take a daily ride on Prince, whom he had come to love. The spirited horse returned his young master's attachment, and it was hard to tell which enjoyed most the daily gallop, the horse or his rider. To deprive John of Prince was to do him a grievous wrong, since it was, of all his possessions, the one which he most enjoyed. It was the more unjustifiable, since, at the time Prince had been bought for John, Squire Oakley, in a spirit of impartial justice, had offered to buy a horse for Ben also; but Ben, who had long desired to own a gold watch and chain, intimated this desire to his mother, and offered to relinquish the promised horse if the watch and chain might be given him. Squire Oakley had no objection to the substitution, and accordingly the same day that Prince was placed in the stable, subject to John's control, a valuable gold watch and chain, costing precisely the same amount, was placed in Ben's hands. Ben was delighted with his new present, and put on many airs in consequence. Now, however, he coveted the horse as well as the watch, and his mother had told him he might have it. But it seemed evident that John would not give up the horse without a struggle. Ben, however, had enlisted his mother as his ally, and felt pretty confident of ultimate victory.

CHAPTER II.

JOHN RECEIVES SOME PROFESSIONAL ADVICE

John Oakley had triumphed in his encounter with Ben Brayton, and rode off like a victor. Nevertheless he could not help feeling a little doubtful and anxious about the future. There was no doubt that Ben would complain to his mother, and as it was by her express permission that he had taken the horse, John felt apprehensive that there would be trouble between himself and his stepmother. I have already said, that, though a manly boy, he was not quarrelsome. He preferred to live on good terms with all, not excepting Ben and his mother, although he had no reason to like either of them. But he did not mean to be imposed upon, or to have his just rights encroached upon, if he could help it.

What should he do if Ben persevered in his claim and his mother supported him in it? He could not decide. He felt that he must be guided by circumstances. He could not help remembering how four years before Mrs. Brayton (for that was her name then) answered his father's advertisement for a house-keeper; how, when he hesitated in his choice, she plead her poverty, and her urgent need of immediate employment; and how, influenced principally by this consideration, he took her in place of another to whom he had been more favorably inclined. How she should have obtained sufficient influence over his father's mind to induce him to make her his wife after the lapse of a year, John could not understand. He felt instinctively that she was artful and designing, but his own frank, open nature could hardly be expected to fathom hers. He remembered again, how, immediately after the marriage, Ben was sent for, and was at once advanced to a position in the household equal to his own. Ben was at first disposed to be polite, and even subservient to himself, but gradually, emboldened by his mother's encouragement, became more independent, and even at times defiant. It was not, however, until now that he had actually begun to encroach upon John's rights, and assume airs of superiority. He had been feeling his way, and waited until it would be safe to show out his real nature.

John had never liked Ben,—nor had anybody else except his mother felt any attachment for him,—but he had not failed to treat him with perfect politeness and courtesy. Though he had plenty of intimations from the servants and others that it was unjust to him that so much expense should be lavished upon Ben, he was of too generous a nature to feel disturbed by it, or to grudge him his share of his father's bounty.

"There's enough for both of us," he always said, to those who tried to stir up his jealousy.

"But suppose your father should divide his property between you? How would you like to see Ben Brayton sharing the estate?"

"If my father chooses to leave his property in that way, I shan't complain," said John. "Fortunately there is enough for us both, and half will be enough to provide for me."

But John had never anticipated such a contingency as Ben and his mother claiming the whole property, and, frank and unsuspecting as he was, he felt that his father would never have left him so entirely dependent upon his stepmother unless improper means had been used to influence his decision. There was a particular reason which he had for thinking thus. It was this: Three days before his father died, he was told by the servant, on entering the house, that the sick man wished to see him. Of course he went up instantly to the chamber where, pale and wasted, Squire Oakley lay stretched out on the bed.

He was stricken by a disease which affected his speech, and prevented him from articulating anything except in a whisper. He beckoned John to the bedside, and signed for him to place his ear close to his mouth. John did so. His father made a great effort to speak, but all that John could make out was, "My will."

"Your will, father?" he repeated.

The sick man nodded, and tried to speak further. John thought he could distinguish the word "drawer," but was not certain. He was about to inquire further, when his stepmother entered the room, and looked at him suspiciously.

"Why have you come here to disturb your sick father?" she asked, coldly.

"I did not come here to disturb him," said John. "I came because he wished to speak to me."

"Has he spoken to you?" she asked, hastily.

"He tried to, but did not succeed."

"You should not allow him to make the effort. It can only do him harm. The doctor says he must be kept very quiet. You had better leave the room. He is safest in my care."

John did leave the room, and though he saw his father afterwards, it was always in his stepmother's presence, and he had no farther opportunity of communicating with him.

He could not help thinking of this as he rode along, and wondering what it was that his father wished to say. He knew that it must be something of importance, from the evident anxiety which the dying man manifested to speak to him. But whatever it was must remain unknown. His father's lips were hushed in death, and with such a stepmother John felt himself worse than alone in the world. But he had a religious nature, and had been well trained in the Sunday school, and the thought came to him that whatever trials might be in store for him he had at least one Friend, higher than any earthly friend, to whom he might look for help and protection. Plunged in thought, he had suffered Prince to subside into a walk, when, all at once, he heard his name called.

"Hallo, John!"

Looking up, he saw Sam Selwyn, son of Lawyer Selwyn, and a classmate of his at the academy.

"Is that you, Sam?" he said, halting his horse.

"That is my impression," said Sam, "but I began to think it wasn't just now, when my best friend seemed to have forgotten me."

"I was thinking," said John, "and didn't notice."

"Where are you bound?"

"Nowhere in particular. I only came out for a ride."

"You're a lucky fellow, John."

"You forget, Sam, the loss I have just met with;" and John pointed to his black clothes.

"Excuse me, John, you know I sympathize with you in that. But I'm very fond of riding, and never get any chance. You have a horse of your own."

"Just at present."

"Just at present! You're not going to lose him, are you?"

"Sam, I am expecting a little difficulty, and I shall feel better if I advise with some friend about it. You are my best friend in school, and I don't know but in the world, and I've a great mind to tell you."

"I'll give you the best advice in my power, John, and won't charge anything for it either, which is more than my father would. You know he's a lawyer, and has to be mercenary. Not that I ought to blame him, for that's the way he finds us all in bread and butter."

"I'll turn Prince up that lane and tie him, and then we'll lie down under a tree, and have a good talk."

John did as proposed. Prince began to browse, apparently well contented with the arrangement, and the two boys stretched themselves out lazily beneath a wide-spreading chestnut-tree, which screened them from the sun.

"Now fire away," said Sam, "and I'll concentrate all my intellect upon your case gratis."

"I told you that Prince was mine for the present," commenced John. "I don't know as I can say even that. This afternoon when I got home I found Ben Brayton just about to mount him."

"I hope you gave him a piece of your mind."

"I ordered him off," said John, quietly, "when he informed me that the horse was his now,—that his mother had given it to him."

"What did you say?"

"That it was not hers to give. I seized the horse by the bridle, till he became alarmed and slid off. He then came at me with his riding-whip, and struck me."

"I didn't think he had pluck enough for that. I hope you gave him as good as he sent."

"I pulled the whip away from him, and gave him two blows in return. Then watching my opportunity I sprang upon the horse, and here I am."

"And that is the whole story?"

"Yes."

"And you want my advice?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll give it. Sink or swim, live or die, survive or perish, stick to that horse, and defy Ben Brayton to do his worst."

"It seems to me I've heard part of that speech before," said John, smiling. "As to the advice, I'll follow it if I can. I'm not afraid of anything Ben Brayton can do; but suppose his mother takes his part?"

"Do you think she will?"

"I am afraid she will."

"Then defy her too," said Sam, hastily.

"I don't know about that," said John. "I am only a boy of fifteen, and she is my father's widow. If she chooses to take the horse away, I don't know that I can do anything."

"Ben Brayton is a mean rascal. Didn't he get a gold watch at the same time that you got the horse?"

"Yes; he might have had a horse too, but he preferred the watch and chain. They cost as much as Prince."

"And now he wants the horse too?"

"So it seems."

"That's what I call hoggish. I only wish Ben Brayton would come to school, and sit next to me."

"What for?" asked John, a little surprised at this remark.

"Wouldn't I stick pins into him, that's all. I'd make him yell like—a locomotive," said Sam, the simile being suggested by the sound of the in-coming train.

John laughed.

"That's an old trick of yours," he said, "I remember you served me so once. And yet you profess to be my friend."

"I didn't stick it in very far," said Sam, apologetically; "it didn't hurt much, did it?"

"Didn't it though?"

"Well, I didn't mean to have it. Maybe I miscalculated the distance."

"It's all right, if you don't try it again. And now about the advice."

"I wouldn't be imposed upon," said Sam. "Between you and me I don't think much of your stepmother."

"Nor she of you," said John, slyly. "I heard her say the other day that you were a disgrace to the neighborhood with your mischievous tricks."

"That is the 'most unkindest' cut of all," said Sam. "I'd shed a few tears if I hadn't left my handkerchief at home. I have a great mind to tell you something," he added, more gravely.

"Well?" said John, inquiringly.

"It's something that concerns you, only I happened to overhear it, which isn't quite fair and aboveboard, I know. Still I think I had better tell you. You know my father was your father's lawyer?"

"Yes."

"Well, he as well as everybody else was surprised at the will that left everything to your stepmother, only he had the best reason to be surprised. I was sitting out on our piazza when I heard him tell my mother that only three months ago your father came to his office, and had a will drawn up, leaving all the property to you, except the thirds which your stepmother was entitled to."

"Only three months ago?" said John, thoughtfully.

"Yes."

"And did he take away the will with him?"

"Yes; he thought at first of leaving it in my father's charge, but finally decided to keep it himself."

"What can have become of it? He must have destroyed it since."

"My father doesn't think so," said Sam.

"What does he think?"

"Mind you don't say a word of what I tell you," said Sam, lowering his voice. "He thinks that Mrs. Oakley has put it out of the way, in order to get hold of the whole property herself."

"I can hardly think she would be so wicked," said John, shocked at the supposition.

"Isn't it easier to believe that of her, than to believe that your father would deal so unjustly by you?"

"I won't call it unjustly, even if he has really left her the whole property," said John. "Still, I was surprised at being left out of the will. Besides," he added, with a sudden reflection, "there's something that makes me think that the will you speak of is still in existence."

"What's that?" asked Sam.

In reply John gave the particulars of his father's attempt to communicate with him, and the few words he was able to make out.

"I understand it all now," said Sam, quickly.

"Then you're ahead of me."

"It's plain as a pike-staff. Your father hid the will, fearing that your stepmother would get hold of it and destroy it. He wanted to tell you where it was. Do you know of any secret drawer in your house?"

John shook his head.

"There must be one somewhere. Now, if you want my advice, I'll give it. Just hunt secretly for the drawer, wherever you think it may possibly be, and if you find it, and the will in it, just bring it round to my father, and he'll see that justice is done you. Come, I'm not a lawyer's son for nothing. What do you say?"

"I shouldn't wonder if you were right, Sam."

"You may depend upon it I am. I'm your lawyer, remember, and you are my client. I give advice on the 'no cure no pay' system. If it don't amount to anything I won't charge you a cent."

"And if it does?"

"If you get your property by my professional exertions, I trust to your generosity to reward me."

"All right, Sam."

"Of course you won't let your stepmother suspect what you're after. Otherwise she might get the start of you, and find it herself, and then much good it would do you."

"I'm glad to think it is still in existence, and that she hasn't destroyed it."

"She would if she could, you may depend on that."

"Well, Sam, I'm much obliged to you for your advice. I think I must be going now."

"Well, good-by, old fellow. Keep a stiff upper lip, and don't give up the ship—horsemanship, I mean. I must go round to the office, and see if father doesn't need a little professional assistance."

John leaped on Prince's back, and turned him in the direction of home. The revelation which Sam had made gave a new direction to his thoughts. If his father had really intended to give him a

share of the estate, he felt that he ought to have it, and determined to institute a search as cautiously as possible.

Driving into the yard he saw Ben sitting sullenly on the door-step. He eyed John with no very friendly glance.

"Where've you been?" he demanded.

"Up the road," said John, briefly.

"It's the last time you'll ride *my* horse."

"It's not your horse."

"You'll find out whose horse it is," muttered Ben.

"I don't care about disputing with you," said John, quietly, turning towards the stable.

"My mother wishes to see you at once; do you hear?" said Ben, unpleasantly. "She's going to make you apologize to me for your impudence."

"I'll go in and see her as soon as I have put the horse in the stable," John answered, quietly.

"I hate that fellow," muttered Ben, following our hero with lowering eyes; "he puts on too many airs altogether. But my mother'll fix him."

CHAPTER III. JOHN'S TROUBLES BEGIN

After putting Prince in the stable, John went into the house slowly, for he was in no hurry to anticipate what he feared would be an unpleasant interview.

"Where is Mrs. Oakley, Jane?" he asked of a servant whom he met in the hall.

"She's in the sitting-room, Master John," said Jane. "She wants to see you immediately."

"Very well; I'll go in."

He heard steps behind him, and, turning, found that Ben was following him.

"He wants to hear me scolded," thought John. "However, I won't take any notice."

Mrs. Oakley was sitting in a rocking-chair. She looked up with a frown as John entered. She had never liked him, but since Ben had declared, falsely, as we know, that John had no more respect for her than a servant, this dislike was greatly increased.

She was inwardly determined to make his life as uncomfortable as possible.

"Well, sir," she said, "so you have come at last."

"I came as soon as Ben told me you wished to see me," said John. "I only waited till I had put my horse into the stable."

"*His* horse!" repeated Ben, by way of calling his mother's attention to the claim to ownership expressed in those words.

"I suppose I ought to consider it lucky that you paid any attention to my words," said Mrs. Oakley.

"I hope I have not failed in proper respect," said John.

"It was very respectful in you to ride off with the horse, when I had told Ben he might use it."

"It was my horse," said John, firmly. "If Ben wanted it, he might ask me."

"Ask you, indeed!" repeated Ben, scornfully; "you won't catch me doing that."

"It was enough that I told him that he might ride. Didn't he tell you that?"

"Yes."

"Then what right had you to refuse?"

"The horse is mine," said John. "It was given me by my father."

"He allowed you to use it."

"He gave it to me. At the same time he gave Ben a watch, which he is wearing now. He has no more right to demand my horse than I have to claim his watch."

"You seem to forget," said Mrs. Oakley, coldly, "that your father saw fit to leave me his property. The horse forms a part of that property, and belongs to me, and it is for me to say who shall ride on it. Ben, you may ride on the horse to-morrow."

"Do you hear that?" demanded Ben, triumphantly, looking towards John.

"I suppose," said John, quietly, "you will order Ben to let me have his watch to-morrow."

"I shall do no such thing," said Mrs. Oakley, sharply, "and it is impudent in you to ask such a thing."

"I don't see why it isn't fair," said John. "It appears to me rather mean in Ben to want both, and leave me neither."

"That is for me to decide," said Mrs. Oakley. "There is one thing more I have to speak to you about. My son tells me you were brutal enough to strike him with the whip. Do you deny that?"

"I never deny what's true."

"Then you did strike him."

"Yes, I struck him twice."

"And you have the impudence to stand there, and say it to my face!"

"You asked me, and I have answered you. I don't see why that should be called impudent."

"You glory in your disgraceful action," said Mrs. Oakley, sharply.

"Did Ben tell you that he struck me first?" asked John.

"I am very glad to hear it. It was what you deserved," said Mrs. Oakley.

"Then," said John, firmly, "I gave him what he deserved. You can't expect me to stand still and be struck without returning it."

"The only fault I find with Ben is, that he did not strike you more than once," said Mrs. Oakley, in an excited tone.

John glanced from the mother to her son, who was evidently pleased with the reproaches John was receiving, and said, quietly:—

"I think Ben had better not attempt it."

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Mrs. Oakley, quickly.

"I don't want to strike Ben, or injure him in any way," said John; "but I mean to defend myself if I am attacked."

And Ben, though he chose to sneer, knew very well that, quietly as John spoke, he was thoroughly in earnest, and would do precisely as he said. He knew very well, too, that, though he was older and taller than John, he would very likely be worsted in an encounter. He preferred, therefore, that his mother should fight his battles for him.

"You hear, mother," he said. "He defies you. I knew he would. You remember what I told you."

Mrs. Oakley did remember very well, and the recollection made her angry.

"John Oakley," she said, "you will find that it won't do to insult me."

"I have no wish to insult you, Mrs. Oakley," said John. "I have not forgotten who you are, and I shall try to treat you accordingly."

"What do you mean by that?" said Mrs. Oakley, turning pale with rage.

She was misled by the statement Ben had made, and she thought John referred to the fact that she had been his father's house-keeper,—a point on which she felt sensitive.

"I mean," said John, a little surprised at this outburst, "that I have not forgotten that you are my father's widow, and as such are entitled to my respect."

"Was that what you meant?" asked Mrs. Oakley, suspiciously.

"Certainly," said John. "What else could I mean?"

Mrs. Oakley turned to Ben, who shrugged his shoulders, intimating that he did not believe it.

"All very fine," said his mother, "but words are cheap. If you think I am entitled to your respect, you will do as I require. Will you promise this?"

"I would rather not promise," said John. "If it is anything I ought to do, I will do it."

"It *is* something you ought to do," said Mrs. Oakley.

"What is it?"

"I require you immediately to apologize to my son Benjamin, for the blows you struck him with the whip this afternoon."

"I cannot do this," said John, firmly.

"Why can't you do it?"

"Because I had a good reason for striking him. He ought to apologize to me for striking me first."

"Catch me doing it!" said Ben, scornfully.

"I have no fault to find with him for striking you," said Mrs. Oakley. "On the contrary, I think him perfectly justified in doing so. You forced him off the horse after I had given him permission to ride, and I should have been ashamed of him if he had not resisted. I am glad he gave you such a lesson."

Once more John looked at Ben, and was not surprised to see the smile of triumph that rose to his face as he listened to these words of his mother.

"Well," said Mrs. Oakley, impatiently, "what have you to say?"

"What can I say? You are determined to find me in the wrong."

"It is because you *are* wrong. I demand once more, John Oakley, will you apologize to my son?"

"I will not," said John, firmly.

"Please to remember that you are left dependent upon me, and that your future comfort will be a good deal affected by the way in which you decide."

"Whatever happens," said John, who partly understood the threat, "I refuse to apologize, unless —"

"Unless what?"

"If Ben will say that he is sorry that he struck me, I will say the same to him."

"Ben will do nothing of the kind," said Mrs. Oakley, promptly. "I should be ashamed of him if he did."

"Catch me apologizing to such a whipper-snapper as you!" muttered Ben.

"Then I have no more to say," said John.

"But I have," said Mrs. Oakley, angrily. "You have chosen to defy me to my face, but you will bitterly repent of it. I'll break your proud spirit for you!"

John certainly did not feel very comfortable as he left the room. He was not afraid of what his stepmother could do, although he knew she could annoy him in many ways, but it was disagreeable to him to feel at variance with any one.

"If my poor father had only lived," he thought, "how different all would have been!"

But it was useless to wish for this. His father was no longer on earth to protect and shield him from the malice of Ben and his mother. Trials awaited him, but he determined to be true to himself, and to the good principles which he had been taught.

As for Mrs. Oakley, having once resolved to annoy John, she lost no time in beginning her persecutions. She had a small, mean nature, and nothing was too petty for her to stoop to.

John and Ben had been accustomed to occupy bedrooms on the second floor, very prettily furnished, and alike in every respect. It had been the policy of Squire Oakley to treat the two boys precisely alike, although Ben had no claim upon him, except as the son of the woman whom he had married. Now that he was dead, Mrs. Oakley determined that Ben should occupy a superior position, and should be recognized throughout the house as the eldest son and heir. After her unsatisfactory interview with John, just described, in which he had refused to apologize, she summoned Jane, and said:—

"Jane, you may remove John's clothes from the bedchamber where he has slept to the attic room next to your own."

"Is Master John going to sleep there?" asked Jane, in amazement.

"Certainly."

"And shall I move Master Ben's things upstairs, also?"

"Of course not," said Mrs. Oakley, sharply. "What made you think of such a thing?"

"Beg pardon, ma'am; but who is going to have Master John's room?"

"You ask too many questions, Jane. It is no concern of yours that I am aware of."

Jane did not venture to reply, but went out muttering:—

"It's a shame, so it is, to put Master John upstairs in that poor room, while Ben stays downstairs. He's a young reprobate, so he is, just for all the world, like his mother."

The fact was, that John was a favorite in the house, and Ben was not. The latter was in the habit of domineering over the servants, and making all the trouble in his power, while John was naturally considerate, and always had a pleasant word for them. However, Mrs. Oakley's commands must be obeyed, and Jane, much against her will, found herself obliged to remove John's things to the attic. She found John already in his chamber.

"Excuse me, Master John," she said, "but I have orders to move your things up to the attic."

"What!" exclaimed John, in amazement.

Jane repeated her words.

"Did Mrs. Oakley tell you to do that?"

"Yes, Master John, and a shame it is."

"Is Ben to go up into the attic too?"

"The mistress said no."

"Wait a minute, Jane; I'll go and speak to Mrs. Oakley."

John went downstairs, and found his stepmother in the room where he had left her.

"May I speak to you a moment, Mrs. Oakley?" he said.

"Have you come to apologize for your impertinence to me, and your rudeness to my son?"

"No, I have not," said John.

"Then I don't care to speak to you."

"Excuse me, Mrs. Oakley, but Jane tells me that you have ordered her to remove my things to the attic."

"Well?"

"Is Ben to go into the attic too?"

"No, he is not."

"Then why are you driving me from my room?"

"You seem to forget that you are only a boy. This house is mine, and I shall make what arrangements I please."

"The room in the attic is not nearly as good as my present room."

"It is good enough for you."

"I am willing to go up there if Ben goes up, but I claim to be treated as well as he."

"Ben is older than you. Besides, he is respectful and dutiful, while you are impertinent and disobedient. I shall treat you as well as you deserve."

"Why did you not make this change while my father was alive, Mrs. Oakley?" said John, significantly.

Mrs. Oakley colored, for she understood very well the meaning of this question.

"I do not intend to be catechised by you," she said, sharply. "I intend to do what I please in my own house, and I shall not submit to have my arrangements questioned."

"May I ask how my room is going to be used?" said John, who wanted to be sure whether his stepmother had any motive for the change except hostility to himself.

"No, you may not ask," she said, angrily; "or if you do, you need not expect any answer. And now I will thank you to leave the room, as I have something else to do besides answering impertinent questions."

There was nothing more to say, and John left the room.

"Well, Master John," said Jane, who had waited till his return, "what will I do?"

"You may move the things upstairs, Jane," said John.

"It's a shame," said Jane, warmly.

"Never mind, Jane," said John. "I don't like it much myself, but I dare say it'll all come out right after a while. I'll help you with that trunk. It's rather heavy to carry alone."

"Thank you, Master John. Ben wouldn't offer to help if he saw me breakin' my back under it. It's easy to see which is the gentleman."

The room to which John's things were removed was uncarpeted, the floor being painted yellow. It had been used during Squire Oakley's life by a boy who was employed to run errands, but who had been dismissed by Mrs. Oakley, who was disposed to be economical and save his wages. The bed was a common cot bedstead, comfortable indeed, but of course quite inferior to the neat French bed in which John had been accustomed to sleep. There was a plain pine table and bureau, in which John stored his things. There was a small cracked mirror, and a wash-stand with the paint rubbed

off in spots. Altogether it was hardly suitable for a gentleman's son to sleep in. John, however, was not proud, and would not have minded if there had not been malice on the part of his stepmother. He had scarcely got moved when a step was heard on the attic stairs, and Ben came up to enjoy the sight of John's humiliation.

"So you've got a new room, John?" he said, smiling maliciously.

"So it seems," said John, quietly.

"I'm sorry to lose so agreeable a neighbor," he continued.

"Are you?" said John, looking at him searchingly.

"But you'll be more at home up here," said Ben.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean it's more suitable for you."

"Ben Brayton," said John, his eyes flashing, "if you have come up here to insult me, the sooner you go down the better. Your mother has moved me up here, for what reason I don't know. The only satisfaction I have in the change is, that it removes me further from you."

"You're uncommon polite since you've moved into this elegant apartment," said Ben, tauntingly.

"Elegant or not, it is mine, and I want it to myself," said John. "Leave the room!"

He advanced towards Ben as he spoke. Ben thought a moment of standing his ground, but there was something in John's eye that looked threatening, and he concluded that it would be the best policy to obey. With a parting taunt he backed out of the chamber, and John was left to himself.

CHAPTER IV. BEN BRAYTON'S RIDE

John took his place at the supper-table as usual; but neither Mrs. Oakley nor Ben, though they spoke freely to each other, had a word to say to him. If John had been conscious of deserving such neglect, he would have felt disturbed; but as he felt that all the blame for what had occurred rested with Ben and his mother, he ate with his usual appetite, and did not appear in the least troubled by their silence, nor by the scornful looks which from time to time Mrs. Oakley directed towards him. After supper he went up into his little room, and prepared his lesson in Virgil for the next day. He was at the head of his class, and was resolved to let no troubles at home interfere with his faithful preparation of his lessons.

Ben did not attend school. In fact, he was not very partial to study, and though Squire Oakley had offered to bear his expenses at the academy, and afterwards at college, Ben had persuaded his mother that his health was not firm enough to undertake a long course of study. While, therefore, John was occupied daily for several hours at the academy, Ben had lived like a gentleman of leisure, spending considerable time at the billiard rooms in the village, and in lounging on the hotel piazza. He managed to get through considerable money, but his mother had always kept him well supplied.

Although he did not wish to go to college himself, he did not fancy the idea of John's going, since this would increase the superiority of the latter over him. He knew very well that a liberal education would give John a certain position and influence which he was not likely to attain, and he determined to prevent his obtaining it. When, therefore, John had gone to school the next morning, Ben attacked his mother on the subject.

"Are you going to send John to college, mother?" he asked.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I don't want him to go."

"Why not?"

"He'll put on no end of airs if he goes, and turn up his nose at me, because I don't happen to know so much about Latin and Greek, and such rigmarole."

"I wish you would make up your mind to go to college, Ben," said his mother, earnestly, for she was very ambitious for her son.

"It's of no use, mother. I'm seventeen, and it would take three years to get ready, and hard study at that."

"You have studied Latin already."

"I don't remember anything about it. I should have to begin all over again."

"Well," said Mrs. Oakley, reluctantly giving up the idea, "you might study law without going to college."

"I don't think I should like to be a lawyer. It's too hard work."

"You needn't be, but you could go to the Law School, and study long enough to get a degree. You would make some aristocratic acquaintances, and it would be an honorable profession to belong to."

"Well," said Ben, "I don't know but I'll enter the Law School in a year, or two. There is no hurry. I suppose you'll give me enough money so that I won't have to earn my living? I say, mother, how much property did old Oakley leave?"

Considering the obligations under which Mrs. Oakley was placed to her late husband it might have been supposed that she would reprove Ben for the disrespectful manner in which he spoke of him; but, as may be guessed, she cared nothing for her husband, except for what she could get out of him, and was not in the least disturbed by the manner in which Ben referred to him.

"This house and the land around it," she said, "are estimated at ten thousand dollars. There are, besides, stocks, bonds, and mortgages to the amount of fifty thousand dollars."

"Sixty thousand dollars in all!" exclaimed Ben, his eyes sparkling. "You're quite a rich woman, mother."

"Yes," said Mrs. Oakley, complacently, "I suppose I am."

"It's a little different from when you came here four years ago on a salary of twenty dollars a month. You were pretty hard up, then."

"Yes, Ben, but we can hold up our heads with anybody now."

"I say, mother," said Ben, persuasively, "as I'm your only son, I think you might give me ten thousand dollars right out. You'd have fifty thousand left."

Mrs. Oakley shook her head.

"You're too young, Ben," she said. "Some time or other you shall be well provided for."

"I'm seventeen," grumbled Ben. "I'm old enough to look after property."

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Ben," said Mrs. Oakley. "I will give you an allowance of ten dollars a week from now till you are twenty-one. Then, if you behave well, I will make over to you twenty thousand dollars."

"You might say thirty. You're not saving a third for John Oakley, are you?"

Mrs. Oakley's face hardened.

"No," she said; "he's been too insolent to me. I suppose I must give him something, but he shall never have a third."

"Five hundred dollars will be enough for him," said Ben, with contemptible meanness, considering that but for the accident of his father's second marriage the whole property—one hundred and twenty times as much—would have gone to John.

"I can't tell you how much he will get," said Mrs. Oakley. "It depends on how he behaves. If he had treated us with greater respect, his chances would be a great deal better."

"He's a proud upstart!"

"But his pride shall be broken. I'm determined upon that."

"Then you won't send him to college? That would make him prouder still. Besides," added Ben, his habitual meanness suggesting the thought, "it costs a good deal to keep a fellow at college."

"No," said Mrs. Oakley, "he shan't go to college."

"Good!" said Ben, his eyes sparkling; "that will be a bitter pill for him, for he wants to go."

"How soon would he be ready?"

"In about a year."

"You may set your mind at rest on that point. He shan't go."

"All right, mother. When are you going to pay me my allowance?" he said, insinuatingly.

Mrs. Oakley took out her purse, and placed a ten-dollar bill in his hand.

"That's for the first week," she said.

"Couldn't you make it fifteen, mother?"

"No, ten must do for the present."

"Are you going to allow John anything?"

"He doesn't deserve anything. When he does, I will allow him fifty cents a week."

Ben strolled over to the billiard rooms, and spent the forenoon playing billiards with another young fellow as idle and unpromising as himself. He then walked over to the hotel, and bought a dozen cigars, one of which he began to smoke. At one o'clock he returned home to dinner. John was not present at this meal. The intermission between morning and afternoon schools at the academy was but an hour, and he had been accustomed to carry his lunch with him. He was not released until four o'clock in the afternoon.

"Well, mother," said Ben, "how about the horse? Are you going to give up to John?"

"Certainly not; you may consider the horse yours," said Mrs. Oakley.

"John'll make a fuss."

"Let him," said Mrs. Oakley. "He'll find that I can make a fuss too."

"I'll go out to ride this afternoon," said Ben, with satisfaction. "I'll get started just before four o'clock, so as to meet John on his way from school. He'll look mad enough when he sees me;" and Ben laughed, as he fancied John's looks.

"It is a very good plan," said Mrs. Oakley, approvingly. "We'll see if he dares to interfere with you again."

The more Ben thought of it, the better he was pleased with this plan. All the academy boys knew that the horse was John's, and they would now see him upon it. He would be likely to meet many of them, and this would make John's humiliation the greater. At half-past three he went out to the barn.

"Mike," he said, to the hostler, "you may saddle Prince. I am going to ride out."

"Master John's horse?"

"No, *my* horse."

"Your horse, sir? Prince belongs to Master John."

"How dare you stand there contradicting me?" said Ben, haughtily. "The horse is mine. My mother has given it to me."

"It's a shame, then," said Mike to himself, "for Master John sets a sight by that horse. The old woman's mighty queer."

It was lucky for Mike that Mrs. Oakley was not aware of the disrespectful term applied to her in Mike's thoughts, or he would probably have been discharged at short notice. But the fact was, that none of the servants liked her. Feeling a little doubtful of her own position, she always spoke to them in a haughty tone, as if they were far beneath her, and this, instead of increasing their respect, only diminished it.

Mike saddled Prince, and led him out into the yard.

"You must be careful, Master Ben," he said. "The horse has got a spirit of his own, and he isn't used to you."

Ben was a poor horseman, and he knew it; but he was too proud to admit it to Mike.

"Don't trouble yourself," he said, haughtily. "If John can manage him, I can."

"He's used to Master John."

"Well, he's got to get used to me," said Ben. "If he don't behave well it will be the worse for him. You haven't given me the whip."

"You'd better not use it much, Master Ben. He won't stand a whip very well."

"Keep your advice till it is asked for," said Ben.

"All right, sir," said Mike, and handed him the whip. He followed him with his eyes as he rode out of the yard. "He don't sit like Master John. It wouldn't take much to throw him off. However, I've warned him, and he must have his own way if he breaks his neck."

Although Ben had spurned Mike's warning with so much disdain, he thought of it as he rode up the street, and let Prince take his own gait. The truth was, he did not feel very secure in his seat, and did not feel very much confidence in his own horsemanship. Indeed, he would not have cared to ride out this afternoon, but for the anticipated pleasure of mortifying John.

He rode leisurely along, taking the direction of the academy, which was nearly a mile distant. He looked at his watch, and estimated that he would meet the pupils of the academy as they emerged from school.

He was right in his reckoning. At precisely four o'clock there was a bustle about the doors, and with merry shouts the boys poured out into the street. Among them were John Oakley and Sam Selwyn, who, as intimate friends and classmates, generally were found in company. They turned up the street which led by Mr. Selwyn's office, and in the direction of John Oakley's home.

"John," said Sam, suddenly, "I do believe that is Ben Brayton riding on your horse."

John looked up the street, and saw that Sam was right.

"You are right, Sam," he said.

"Did you tell him he might ride on it?"

"No."

"Then what business has he with it?"

"His mother told him he might take it. She has taken it from me."

"She's an old—"

"Don't call names, Sam. I'll tell you more about it another time."

Meanwhile Ben had seen the boys coming from the academy. Among others he recognized John and Sam, and his eyes flashed with anticipated triumph. Hitherto he had been content to let the horse go on at his own rate, but now he thought it was time to make a display. He thought it would annoy John to have him dash by at gallant speed, while he, the rightful owner, was obliged to stand out of the path, unable to interfere. He therefore brought the whip down with considerable emphasis upon Prince's side. Unfortunately he had not foreseen the consequences of the blow. Prince took the bit between his teeth, and darted forward with reckless speed, while Ben, seeing his mistake too late, pale and terrified, threw his arms around the horse's neck, and tried to keep his seat.

John started forward, also in alarm, for though he had no reason to like Ben, he did not want him to be hurt, and called "Prince!"

The horse recognized his master's voice, and stopped suddenly,—so suddenly that Ben was thrown off, and landed in a puddle of standing water in a gully by the side of the road. Prince stopped quietly for his master to come up.

"Are you hurt, Ben?" asked John, hurrying up.

Ben rose from the puddle in sorry plight. He was only a little bruised, but he was drenched from head to foot with dirty water, and patches of yellow mud adhered to his clothes.

"You did this!" he said, furiously to John.

"You are entirely mistaken. I hope you are not hurt," said John, calmly.

"You frightened the horse on purpose."

"That's a lie, Ben," said Sam, indignantly. "It's a lie, and you know it."

"I understand it all. You don't deceive me," said Ben, doggedly.

"Will you ride home?" asked John.

Ben refused. In fact, he was afraid to trust himself again on Prince's back.

"Then I suppose I must." And John sprang lightly upon the horse's back, and rode towards home, followed by Ben in his soiled clothes.

Mrs. Oakley, looking from her window, beheld, with wondering anger, John riding into the yard, and her son following in his soiled clothes.

"What's he been doing to Ben?" she thought, and hurried downstairs in a furious rage.

CHAPTER V. BEN IS COMFORTED

"What have you been doing to my son, you young reprobate?" demanded Mrs. Oakley of John. Her hands trembled convulsively with passion, as if she would like to get hold of our hero, and avenge Ben's wrongs by inflicting punishment on the spot.

John was silent.

"Why don't you speak, you young rascal?" demanded Mrs. Oakley, furiously.

"I am neither a reprobate nor a rascal, Mrs. Oakley," said John, calmly, "and I do not choose to answer when addressed in that way."

"Ben," said Mrs. Oakley, turning to her son, "what has he done to you? How happens it that you come home in such a plight?"

"I was thrown over the horse's head into a mud-puddle," said Ben.

"Didn't *he* have anything to do with it?" asked Mrs. Oakley, determined to connect John with Ben's misfortune, if possible.

"He spoke to the horse," said Ben.

"And then he threw you?"

"Yes."

Ben answered thus, being perfectly willing that his mother should charge his fall upon John, as this would create additional prejudice between them. It was contemptible meanness on his part, but meanness was characteristic of him, and he had no hesitation in stooping to falsehood, direct or indirect, if by so doing he could compass his object.

"It is as I thought," said Mrs. Oakley, thinking it unnecessary to inquire further. "Of course, as soon as you were thrown, he jumped on the horse and rode home. You're carrying matters with a high hand, young man; but you'll find that I'm your match. Get off that horse, directly."

"That was my intention," said John. "I am sorry, Mrs. Oakley," he continued, "that Ben has not seen fit to give you a correct account of what has happened. If he had, it would have been unnecessary for me to speak."

"It is unnecessary for you to speak now, John Oakley," said his stepmother, sharply. "Do you mean to charge my son with telling a falsehood? If that is the case, take care what you say."

"Ben has not told a falsehood, but he is trying to make you believe that I caused his fall."

"I have no doubt you did."

"Then you are mistaken. Why didn't he tell you that when I first saw the horse he was running at great speed, in consequence of Ben's having imprudently struck him severely with the whip? He is a spirited horse, and won't stand the whip."

"He is like you in that, I suppose," said Mrs. Oakley, sneering.

"He *is* like me in that," said John, quietly.

"You would both be better if you had to stand it," said his stepmother, angrily.

John did not see fit to reply to this.

"Is this true, Ben?" she asked.

"Yes," said Ben, reluctantly. "I struck the horse; but it was not till John spoke to him that he threw me off."

"So I supposed," said Mrs. Oakley, significantly.

"I see, Mrs. Oakley," said John, "you are determined to find me guilty of causing Ben's fall. If I could be mean enough to do such a thing, and so risk his life, I should despise myself. Prince was rushing up the street with tremendous speed, and I was frightened at Ben's danger; I called out

to Prince, but he stopped so suddenly that Ben was thrown into the puddle, or he might have been seriously hurt."

There was so much sincerity in what John said, that Mrs. Oakley, though very much against her will, could hardly help believing him. Determined, however, to make out a case against him, she said:—

"As soon as you saw him off, you jumped on the horse and rode home, leaving him to get home as he could. That was a very generous and noble thing to do!"

"Ask Ben if I did not ask him to ride home," said John.

Ben, in answer to his mother's glance, said, rather unwillingly:—

"Yes, he asked me to ride home, but he knew I wouldn't after being thrown once. I won't get on the brute's back again, I promise you."

Mrs. Oakley was disappointed to find that the case she was trying to make out against John had failed at all points, and that he was cleared even by the testimony of her principal witness.

"You had better come in and change your clothes, Ben," she said. "I am afraid you will take cold. And do you"—turning to John—"take the horse round to the stable. He's an ugly brute, and I'll take care that he doesn't endanger your life any more."

John led Prince round to the stable, and delivered him into the hands of Mike.

"Where's Master Ben?" inquired Mike.

"He got thrown off."

"I thought how it would be," said Mike. "He can't ride no more'n a stick. I told him not to take the whip, but he wouldn't heed a word I said."

"That's how he got thrown. He struck the horse violently, and he was running away with him when he heard my voice and stopped."

"Did Master Ben get hurt?"

"Not much. He fell into a puddle, and dirtied his clothes."

"Maybe he'll be wiser next time."

"He says he won't ride Prince again."

"All the better for you, Master John."

"I don't know, Mike," said John, soberly. "I'm afraid Mrs. Oakley will sell him. She says he is an ugly brute, and she won't have any more lives endangered."

"Ugly brute!" repeated Mike, indignantly. "There's not a bit of ugliness about him. He wants to be treated well, and I'd like to know who don't. And he's so attached to you, Master John!"

"Yes, Mike, it'll be hard to part with him." And John's lips quivered as he looked with affection at the noble horse, to which he had become much attached. Besides, it was his father's gift, and as such had an additional value for him, as, owing to his disinheritance, he had nothing else of value by which he could remember the parent whose loss he was made to feel more and more, as his stepmother's injustice and harsh treatment, and Ben's meanness and hostility served daily to increase. It almost seemed to him as if Prince was the only friend he had left, and that he must be parted even from him.

Meanwhile Ben was changing his clothes in his room. The adventure which had just happened to him did not make him feel very pleasant. In the first place, it is rather disagreeable to be thrown violently into a puddle of dirty water, and Ben might be excused for not liking that. Ben's pride was touched, since it had been demonstrated in the most public manner that he could not manage Prince, while it was well known that John could. Ben knew boys well enough to feel sure that he would be reminded from time to time of his adventure, and he did not like to be laughed at. Why was it that John always seemed to get the better of him? He went out expressly to triumph over John in presence of his schoolmates, and this had been the humiliating result.

"Why was I such a fool as to use the whip?" thought Ben, vexed with himself. "If it had not been for that, it would have been all right."

But he had used the whip, and it was all wrong. As to using the horse any more, he did not care to do it. To tell the truth, Ben, who, as we know, was not very courageous, was afraid of Prince. He suspected that the horse would remember the blow he had given him, and would be likely to serve him the same trick the next time he mounted him. So he resolved that he would never ride out on Prince again; but he was equally anxious that John should also be prevented from using him. The words that his mother had last used led him to hope that she would agree to sell him, and, what was still more important in his eyes, *give him the money* resulting from the sale. Under these circumstances the triumph would still be his, and he would enjoy John's grief for the loss of his horse.

When Ben descended from his chamber, in a clean suit, he found that his mother had taken measures to console him for his mortifying adventure. The tea-table was spread, and two or three delicacies such as he particularly liked were set before his plate. Ben surveyed this with satisfaction, for he was something of a gourmand.

"I thought you might be hungry, Ben," said his mother; "so I got some of that marmalade that you like so well, and here is some hot mince-pie."

"That's just what I like, mother."

"We will sit down at once. John can come when he gets ready."

"What are you going to do about that horse, mother?" asked Ben, rather indistinctly, for his mouth was full.

"I did intend to keep him for your use; but if he is likely to play such tricks as he has to-day, I suppose I had better sell him."

"Yes, mother, sell him. I'll never mount such a vicious brute again, and I suppose you won't keep him just for John's use."

"Of course not. It costs considerable to keep a horse. Besides, he'd be flinging out that he could manage the horse, and you couldn't."

"Of course he would. But the horse is used to him, you know, and that is why he doesn't find any trouble with him. But you gave me the horse, you know, mother."

"But you don't want him."

"No, I don't; but I suppose you'll give me the money you sell him for."

"I don't know about that," said Mrs. Oakley, hesitatingly. "He cost a hundred and fifty dollars. That is too much money for you to have."

"Why is it?" said Ben.

"I give you ten dollars a week now."

"Yes; but that goes for small expenses. If I wanted now to buy anything expensive, I couldn't do it."

"What is there you want?"

"I don't know yet," said Ben; "I haven't thought, but I should like to have the money."

Mrs. Oakley still hesitated.

"I know it would make John awful mad," said Ben, cunningly appealing to his mother's hatred of our hero, "to think that Prince was sold, and that I had the money. Perhaps it's that you're thinking of. But I didn't suppose you'd be influenced by anything he could say or do."

"John may be angry or not; it is entirely indifferent to me," said Mrs. Oakley, falling into the trap laid for her. "I was only thinking whether it would be well for you. I don't know but I will let you have the money,—that is, I will put it in the savings-bank in your name, and you can let me know when you want to use it, and what for."

"All right," said Ben, who determined that when he once got hold of the money he would not consult anybody as to its disposal. "When will you sell it, mother?"

"To-morrow, perhaps. I hear that Mr. Barnes, the livery stable-keeper, has just lost a valuable horse. Perhaps he may like to buy it."

"He'll buy it fast enough," said Ben. "I heard him say the other day that he should like to have Prince. He likes fast horses. How surprised John will be when he comes home, and finds Prince is missing!"

Ben laughed as he fancied John's anger, and this thought, together with the money which would so soon be placed to his account, quite restored his spirits, somewhat to John's surprise, who did not understand the reasons which he had for being cheerful.

So Prince's fate was decided, and a new trial awaited John.

CHAPTER VI. OPEN HOSTILITIES

From his early boyhood John had been intended by his father to receive a collegiate education. If he should acquit himself with credit in college, he was afterwards to have his choice of studying a profession, or entering mercantile life. At the age of eleven he commenced Latin at the academy, and two years afterwards Greek, and in these he had advanced so far that in a year he would be qualified to enter college. There were six boys in the preparatory class to which he belonged, among them being Sam Selwyn, his intimate friend, who has already been introduced to the reader. From the first John had stood at the head of the class, both in Latin and Greek, Sam ranking second. Although they were rivals in scholarship, there had never been the shadow of a difference between them arising from this cause. Both were of a generous nature, and were strongly attached to each other, and it had long been understood between them that when admitted to college they would room together.

John had often talked with his father about going to college, and Squire Oakley had strong hopes of John's maintaining a high position in his college class, and doing him credit at the institution where he had himself graduated. This made it all the more remarkable that John's interests had been so entirely neglected in the disposition of his property made by his will.

As John was on his way to school, on the morning succeeding Ben's fall from the horse, he was overtaken by Sam Selwyn.

"How's your amiable brother this morning, John?" asked Sam.

"Meaning Ben?"

"Of course. I hope his health hasn't suffered seriously from his unexpected bath. Poor fellow! he had a pretty good fright."

"Yes, I don't think he'll trouble Prince very soon again."

"I shan't soon forget how frightened he looked with both arms around the horse's neck. I should have felt like laughing, only I was afraid he might come to harm. Now you'll have Prince to yourself."

"I don't know about that, Sam. I rather think, from something Mrs. Oakley said, that she means to sell Prince."

"Sell *your* horse!" exclaimed Sam, indignantly.

"She says it isn't mine. She's given it to Ben. As Ben don't dare to use it, I am afraid Prince will have to go," said John, sadly.

"I wouldn't stand it!" exclaimed Sam, in excitement. "It's an imposition."

"But what can I do?"

"The horse is yours."

"Not legally, I am afraid. I can't prove it, and Mrs. Oakley says it was only mine to use."

"Whether you can prove it or not, the horse is yours, and I say it will be an outrageous thing if it is sold. At any rate you ought to demand the money that is received for it."

"I'll tell you what I have made up my mind to do. Mrs. Oakley may say that the horse is expensive to keep, but as Ben received a watch and chain at the same time I got the horse, it is only fair that I should have a watch in place of it, if it is sold."

"Of course, that is only reasonable."

"Not that a watch would pay me for the loss of Prince. I'd rather have him than three watches; but it doesn't cost anything to keep a watch."

"That's true; but I hope you'll be able to keep the horse."

"So do I," said John; but he had very little expectation of it.

"Well, there's hope ahead, old fellow," said Sam, cheerfully. "Next year we'll enter college, and then you'll be out of the way of Master Ben and your kind stepmother, for forty weeks in the year, at any rate."

"I hope so," said John, slowly.

"You *hope so*?" repeated Sam. "You don't expect Mrs. Oakley will remove to Cambridge, so that you may still be favored with her charming company?"

"I don't feel sure of going to Cambridge myself," said John, soberly.

"You don't mean to say you're afraid you won't pass the examination? If you don't, there'll be precious little chance for the rest of us."

"That isn't what I mean," said John. "I think I should pass the examination. At any rate I am not afraid of it."

"What *are* you afraid of then?" asked Sam, in surprise.

"I am afraid Mrs. Oakley won't let me go."

"But your father always meant you to go. She knows that."

"Yes, she knows it, for father used often to refer to the time when I would be in college, in her presence. But I am afraid that won't make much difference with her."

"Has she said anything about it?"

"No, not yet; but it will cost considerable to keep me at Cambridge."

"Well, your father left a good deal of property."

"Yes; but it was left to Mrs. Oakley."

"There's enough to pay your expenses at college, and maintain Mrs. Oakley and Ben handsomely."

"I know that, but I am sorry to say that Mrs. Oakley and Ben both dislike me, and it will be reason enough with them to keep me at home because they know I am anxious to go."

"It's a burning shame," said Sam, indignantly, "that such a woman as that should have the control over you. As for Ben Brayton, I always did despise him. He's a mean fellow, and a coward to boot."

"I don't like Ben much," said John.

"And he returns the compliment."

"Yes, he has taken a dislike to me, I don't know why, for I have always treated him well, though I couldn't like him."

"I say, John," said Sam, "if you don't go to college, it'll knock all my plans into a cocked hat. You were to room with me, you know."

"Yes, Sam, I have been looking forward to that a long time."

"What a jolly time we should have! I shan't have half so much pleasure in going to college if you don't go with me. You're such a good scholar, too, it would be a great pity. But perhaps it may not be so bad as you think. Mrs. Oakley may be only too glad to get rid of you."

By this time they had reached the door of the academy. The bell sounded, summoning the pupils to their morning exercises, and John and Sam had other things to think of, for a while at least.

At the close of the afternoon John returned home. He went into the house to carry his Virgil and Greek Reader, being accustomed to prepare a part of his lessons out of school. On going out into the yard, he saw Ben lounging lazily against a fence, whittling.

"Are you going out to ride, John?" he asked, in an unusually friendly tone.

"I think I will ride a little way," said John.

"I got enough of it yesterday," said Ben.

"You were unlucky. If you had not struck Prince it would have been all right."

"I don't care about trying it again. I hope you'll have a pleasant ride."

"Thank you," said John, unsuspectingly.

He went out to the barn, and opened the door that led to the stables. He made his way at once to Prince's stall, and looked in.

It was empty!

Surprised, but not yet suspecting what had really happened, he called out to Mike, whom he saw outside:—

"Where's Prince, Mike?"

"Shure, sir, didn't you know he was sold?"

"Sold? When?"

"This morning, Master John."

"Who bought him?"

"Mr. Barnes, the man that keeps the livery stable. He was here this morning. He and the mistress came in, and they soon struck a bargain."

John's heart swelled with anger and sorrow, but he asked, calmly:—

"Do you know what price Mr. Barnes gave for Prince?"

"Yes, Master John; I heard him say that he would give one hundred and ninety dollars. The mistress wanted two hundred; but she finally let him have Prince at that, and a good bargain it is to him too."

John left the stable outwardly calm, but much disturbed in mind.

"Mrs. Oakley might at least have let me know what she meant to do," he said, bitterly. "My poor father's gift too."

Ben waited for John's return with malicious interest. He wanted to witness and enjoy his disappointment.

"I thought you were going to ride?" he said, with a smile of mockery.

"Can you tell me where your mother is?" asked John, coldly.

"She's in the house, I suppose. Do you want to see her?"

"Yes."

John entered the house without taking any further notice of Ben. He found his stepmother in the sitting-room. She looked up, as he entered, with a glance of satisfaction, for she saw that she had made him unhappy.

"Mike tells me you have sold Prince, Mrs. Oakley," he commenced.

"Yes. What of it?"

"As he was my horse, I think you might have let me know what you intended to do."

"Prince was not your horse," she said, sharply.

"He was my poor father's gift to me."

"Nonsense! He merely let you call him yours. The horse was mine."

"He was as much mine as Ben's watch is his. Are you going to sell Ben's watch?"

"No, I am not. If that is all you have to say, you may leave the room."

"It is not. I will not object to your selling the horse, because it would cost something to keep him; but it is only fair that the money for which he was sold should be given to me, or enough to buy a watch and chain like Ben's."

"You are very modest in your expectations, young man," sneered Mrs. Oakley.

"I'm only asking what is just."

"You seem to forget whom you are speaking to. If you think you can bully me, you will find yourself entirely mistaken."

"I am not in the habit of bullying anybody. I only want my rights," said John.

"Then you'll have to want. You may as well understand, first as last, John Oakley,"—and his stepmother raised her voice angrily,—"that I am mistress in this house, and owner of this property. You are entirely dependent upon me for the bread you eat and the clothes you wear, and it will be prudent for you to treat me respectfully, if you want any favors. Do you understand that?"

"I understand what you say, Mrs. Oakley," said John, indignantly. "You seem to have forgotten that every cent of this property belonged to my father, and would now be mine, if my father had not

married you. You had better remember *that*, when you talk about my being dependent upon you, and favor Ben at my expense."

Mrs. Oakley turned white with rage.

"What do you mean by your impertinence, you young rascal?" she shrieked, rising to her feet, and glaring at John.

"I mean this," he exclaimed, thoroughly provoked, "that I don't believe my father ever intended to leave you all his property. I believe there is another will somewhere, and I mean to find it."

"Leave the room!" exclaimed Mrs. Oakley, in a voice almost inarticulate with rage. "You'll repent those words, John Oakley. You're in my power, and I'll make you feel it."

John left the room, his anger hot within him. When he reflected coolly upon what had passed, he did repent having spoken about the will. It might set Mrs. Oakley upon the track, and if she found it, he feared that she would have no scruples in destroying it, and then his last chance of obtaining his rights would be gone.

CHAPTER VII.

MRS. OAKLEY DECIDES WHAT TO DO

Mrs. Oakley was not only angry, but very much disturbed at the words which John had imprudently uttered. They startled her, because they intimated John's suspicion of something which she had good reason for knowing to be a fact.

Mrs. Oakley knew that her husband had executed a later will, and, though she did not know where it was, she believed it still to be in existence!

The will under which she inherited bore a date only two months after her marriage with Squire Oakley. She had cunningly influenced him to make it. He did so without proper consideration, and gave the will into her custody. But, though his wife carefully concealed from him her real character, she could not do so entirely. Little things, which came under his observation, led him to believe that she entertained a secret dislike for John, and, only three months before his death, Squire Oakley, to protect John's interests, made a second will, which superseded the first, and limited his wife to that portion of his property which she could legally claim,—that is, one third.

He did not see fit to apprise his wife of this step. But she was watchful and observant, and something led her to suspect what had been done. She determined to find out secretly, and with this end went to the desk where her husband kept his private papers, one day when she supposed him to be absent, and began to search for the suspected will. After a while she found it, and, spreading it open, began to read:—

"I, Henry Oakley, being of sound mind," etc.

She had read so far, when a heavy hand was laid upon her shoulder. Turning with a start, she saw her husband, his face dark with anger, looking sternly at her.

"Give me that document, Mrs. Oakley," he said, abruptly.

She did not dare do otherwise than obey.

"By what right do you come here to pry into my private papers?" he demanded.

"I am your wife," she said.

"That is true. You are my wife; but that does not authorize your stealing in here like a thief, and secretly examining papers, which would have been shown you if they had been intended for your eyes."

"Does not that paper relate to me?" she asked, boldly.

"It relates to my property."

"It is your will."

"Yes."

"And it makes the one which I hold of no value."

"It does."

"So you are secretly plotting against my interests," she said, angrily. "I suspected as much, and I determined to find out."

"The will of which you speak never ought to have been made. It disinherits my son, and places him in your power."

"Could you not trust me to provide for him?" asked Mrs. Oakley.

"I fear not," said her husband. And her eyes fell before his steady glance. She felt that she was better understood than she had supposed.

"So you have placed me in John's power," she said, bitterly.

"I have done nothing of the kind."

"Have you not left the property to him?"

"You well know that you are entitled by law to one-third of my estate."

"One-third!"

"Yes."

"And he is to have two-thirds?"

"Why should he not? If I had not married a second time he would have had the whole."

"And my son Ben is left unprovided for?" questioned Mrs. Oakley, in a tone of mingled anger and disappointment.

"Ben has no claim upon me."

"Poor boy! so he will be penniless."

"You appear to forget that your share of the property will amount to twenty thousand dollars. He need not suffer, unless his mother should refuse to provide for him."

But this did not suit Mrs. Oakley's views. She was not at all reconciled to the thought that John Oakley, whom she disliked, would inherit forty thousand dollars, while she and Ben must live on half that sum. She was fond of money and the position it would bring, and although twenty thousand dollars would once have seemed to her a great fortune, her desires had increased with her prosperity, and she now thought it a hardship that she should be limited to such a trifle. She was by no means reconciled to the thought that Ben must play second fiddle to his rich stepbrother. Still John was young, and if she were his guardian that would be something. So she smoothed her face and said:—

"I suppose you have appointed me John's guardian?"

Squire Oakley shook his head.

"I have appointed Mr. Selwyn to that position. It is more fitting that a lawyer should have the care of property," he said.

There was another reason which he did not mention. He thought that John's interests would be safer in Mr. Selwyn's hands than in those of his wife.

"This is an insult to me," said Mrs. Oakley, angry and disappointed. "It will be declaring to the world that you have no confidence in me."

"Nothing of the kind. Even were you his real mother, there would be nothing strange in my leaving him to the guardianship of another."

But Mrs. Oakley looked angry, and for days afterwards wore an offended and injured look. She appeared to forget from what poverty and dependence Squire Oakley had delivered her, and how many favors he had lavished upon Ben, who had no claim upon him save in his relationship to her.

Three days afterwards, Squire Oakley asked his wife for the will which she had had in her possession for nearly three years.

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