

**STRATEMEYER EDWARD, ALGER
HORATIO JR.**

**OUT FOR
BUSINESS OR
ROBERT FROST'S
STRANGE CAREER**

Edward Stratemeyer

**Out For Business or Robert
Frost's Strange Career**

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Horatio Alger Jr. Out For Business / or Robert Frost's Strange Career

PREFACE

"Out for Business" is a complete tale in itself, but forms the first of two companion stories, the second being entitled "Falling in with Fortune."

In this tale are related the various haps and mishaps which befall a sturdy country youth, of high moral aim, who, by the harsh actions of his step-father, is compelled to leave what had once been the best of homes, and go forth into the world to make his own way.

Robert Frost finds his path to fortune no easy one to tread. The thorns of adversity line the way, and there is many a pitfall to be avoided. But the lad is possessed of a good stock of hard, common sense, and in the end we find him on the fair road to success—and a success richly deserved.

The two stories, "Out for Business" and "Falling in with Fortune," give to the reader the last tales begun by that prince of juvenile writers, Mr. Horatio Alger, Jr., whose books have sold to the extent of hundreds of thousands of copies, not only in America, but also in England and elsewhere. The gifted writer was stricken when on the point of finishing the stories, and when he saw that he could not complete them himself, it was to the present writer that he turned, and an outline for a conclusion was drawn up which met with his approval,—and it is this outline which has now been filled out in order to bring the tales to a finish, so that both stories might be as nearly as possible what Mr. Alger intended they should be. It may be that the stories will not be found as interesting as if Mr. Alger had written them entirely, nevertheless the present writer trusts that they will still hold the reader's attention to the end.

Arthur M. Winfield.

March 1st, 1900.

CHAPTER I. A GREAT SURPRISE

Robert Frost, with his books under his arm, turned into the front yard of a handsome residence in the village of Granville. He was a boy of sixteen, strongly built, and with a handsome, expressive face.

"I wish mother were at home," he soliloquized. "It seems very lonesome when she is away."

He opened the front door and let himself into the house. It was a handsome and spacious hall. Two paintings hung on the walls, and both were portraits. One represented a lady, with a pretty, but rather weak face. She looked as if she had very little resolution, and might easily be influenced by one with stronger will. The other picture was that of a man of near forty. It was an attractive face. The strong resemblance which it bore to the boy made it probable that it was his father, and such was the case. Robert looked up to it regretfully, for he had not yet got over the loss of his father, hardly twelve months dead.

"I wish dad were alive," he thought sadly, "we were such good friends, he and I."

Mr. Frost had not died of disease. He was cut off in the full vigor of life, the victim of a railroad accident. Robert remembered well when he was taken home, mangled and hardly to be recognized.

His death did not entail any privation upon his little family—Robert was the only child—for he left a considerable fortune and was heavily insured besides, so that they were still able to live in handsome style.

"When will supper be ready, Jane?" Robert asked of the servant, as he passed into the dining-room.

"At half-past five o'clock, Master Robert."

"All right, Jane. I will be on hand, and with a good appetite."

He put on his hat, after laying down his books, and was about to go out, when Jane arrested his steps.

"Wait a minute, Master Robert. There's a telegram for you."

He took the yellow envelope in some surprise.

"When was it left?" he asked.

"Half an hour since."

"It must be from mother," he said thoughtfully.

"Very likely—I hope it isn't bad news."

Robert echoed the wish, but did not say a word. He took out his penknife and opened the envelope.

There it was—just a few words, but they puzzled him.

"What is it?" asked Jane, whose curiosity was excited.

Robert read the telegram. It ran thus:

"Gloucester, June 5.

"Shall be at home to-morrow. Prepare for a great surprise.

"Mother."

Robert looked surprised and bewildered.

"What can it mean, Jane, do you think?" he asked.

"I don't know, I'm sure, Master Robert. Perhaps your mother is going to bring you a present."

"But she wouldn't call that a great surprise."

"I don't know then. You'll know to-morrow."

Yes, he would know to-morrow, but he could not help letting his mind dwell on the mystery. It occurred to him that it might be a gold watch, which he had long wanted, and which his mother had promised to get him very soon. But this would scarcely be considered a great surprise.

"Well, there's no use guessing," he decided at length. "I'll only have to wait till to-morrow, and then I shall know."

The next day was Saturday, and school did not keep. Robert looked over the railroad timetable, and concluded that his mother would arrive about twelve o'clock. This would bring her in time for dinner, which was usually on the table at half past twelve. He suggested to Jane to get a better dinner than usual, as his mother would probably be present to partake of it.

This suggestion proved unnecessary, for about ten o'clock Jane herself received a telegram to this effect.

"Have a good dinner ready at the usual time. I shall reach home in time for it, and bring another with me."

"So that's the surprise!" reflected Jane. "She is going to bring a friend with her. I wonder who it is. Maybe it's the lady she's been visiting. I hope it isn't, for lady visitors are so fussy."

However, Jane went to the market and ordered a pair of chickens, with a variety of vegetables, and prepared apple dumplings, which she knew Mrs. Frost always enjoyed.

"Now," she said, "I'll have a dinner good enough for anybody."

Robert intended to go to the depot to meet his mother, but he went on an expedition with one of his schoolmates, and found that he would scarcely have time to do so. So he returned home.

"Has mother come, Jane?" he asked.

"No, Master Robert, not yet."

He posted himself at the front window, and five minutes later he saw the depot carriage approaching the house.

"She's coming, Jane!" he called out in excitement.

"I forgot to tell you that she's going to bring a visitor."

"How do you know?"

"Because I received a telegraph this morning," answered Jane.

"Did she say who was coming with her?"

"No; can you see anyone in the carriage?"

By this time the carriage had reached the entrance to the neat graveled path which led from the gate to the front door.

The door of the carriage was opened, and a man got out—a man of less than medium size.

Robert was surprised.

"Why, Jane" he said, "it's a gentleman!"

"Go out and meet them, Master Robert."

Robert opened the front door quickly, and hurried out. Meanwhile, the gentleman had helped Mrs. Frost out, and she was advancing up the walk, leaning on the arm of her companion. Mrs. Frost smiled, and turning to the man at her side, said, "This is my son Robert, James."

"Ah, indeed!" said the other with a smile. "He looks like a stout, strong boy."

"I wonder who he is," thought Robert. But he was soon to learn.

"Did you have a pleasant visit, mother?" he asked.

"Yes, very pleasant," answered his mother, with a meaning glance at her companion. "Robert, did you receive my telegram?"

"Yes, mother."

"You remember what I said about the great surprise?"

"Yes, mother."

"Well, this gentleman is the great surprise," she said, simpering.

By this time the whole party had entered the house.

"I don't understand you, mother," said the boy, but a sudden suspicion had entered his mind, and he was afraid that he did understand. He waited in painful suspense for his mother to speak.

"I have brought you a new father, Robert. This is my husband, Mr. Talbot."

"Oh, mother!" exclaimed Robert in a grief-stricken tone. "How could you marry again?"

Mrs. Talbot, for this was now her name, blushed and looked uncomfortable. Her husband looked angry.

"Really, young man," he said, "it seems to me that is a very improper way of addressing your mother."

For the first time Robert fixed his eyes upon this man whom he was so suddenly called upon to think of as—not his father, for he could not tolerate the thought—but as his mother's husband. As before mentioned, he was a small-sized man, with black hair and side whiskers, a thin face, aquiline nose, and an expression which, so far from attracting, actually repelled the boy. It was a baleful look, which suggested Mephistopheles, though this well-known character in Faust did not occur to Robert, for he had never heard of him. The boy was not accustomed to regard new acquaintances with repugnance, but this was the feeling with which he regarded Mr. Talbot.

"I hate you!" he blazed out in sudden fury. "Oh, mother, why did you marry him?"

This, it must be admitted, was not a very cordial welcome, and the boy's anger was reflected in the face of his new step-father, who bit his nether lip, and glared at our hero with wrathful eyes.

"You are an impudent cub!" he exclaimed. "I won't forget the way you have received me."

"Oh, James, forgive him!" pleaded the mother. "He doesn't realize what he says. He will get over it to-morrow."

"I shall never get over it, mother!" said Robert. "If you must marry again, why at least didn't you marry a gentleman?"

"I'll get even with you for this, young man!" exclaimed Talbot furiously.

Mrs. Talbot screamed and sat upon a couch. Robert seized his hat, and without waiting for dinner, dashed out of the house.

CHAPTER II.

MR. TALBOT AND THE DOG

"You didn't tell me what a violent temper your son had," said James Talbot, when Robert had left the house.

"He has a good temper, James, but I suppose he was taken by surprise."

"I'll take him by surprise!" said Talbot spitefully. "He'll find out that he has a master."

"No, James," pleaded Mrs. Talbot. "Remember that he is my son."

"I will treat him well if he treats me well, not otherwise. He has the temper of a fiend."

"I am so sorry," said the bride, and she indulged in weak tears. "I looked forward with so much pleasure to this day, and now—"

"Perhaps you are sorry you married me," said Talbot, biting his mustache.

"Oh no, not that, but Robert has gone away without his dinner."

"Serves him right. When he gets hungry enough he will come back."

"Promise, James, that you will overlook his rudeness."

James Talbot was silent a moment, and then constrained his harsh features into a smile, which he tried to make pleasant.

"I will remember that he is your son, Sarah," he said, softening his voice. "It will not be my fault if I do not teach him to like me."

"Thank you! How good you are!"

"And now, my love, let me remind you that I am hungry. Won't you order dinner served? Really, I am almost famished."

"Jane, you may put the dinner on the table," said Mrs. Talbot, looking relieved.

Jane followed directions.

"And where is Master Robert, Mrs. Frost—no, I mean Mrs. Talbot?"

"He has gone out for a short time. If he is not back before long, you may save some dinner for him."

"That's queer, his going out just as his mother gets back," thought Jane, but she kept silence.

She looked disapprovingly at the new husband.

"Sure, he looks like a gorilla," she mused. "How could the mistress marry him when her first husband was such a fine handsome man? I mistrusts he and Master Robert won't get along very well together."

James Talbot took the place at the head of the table, and began to carve the fowls. Jane noticed that though he helped his wife first, he reserved the nicest portion of the chicken for himself.

"Sure, he's a selfish beast!" reflected Jane. "If he was a gentleman he wouldn't take all the breast for himself."

She was right. Talbot was selfish and had always been so. Some men can conceal this trait. He did not try to do so. He did not trouble himself about criticism, as long as he got what he wanted.

"I wish Robert were here," said Mrs. Talbot plaintively. "I can't be happy, thinking that he is going without his dinner."

"He'll be all right to-morrow. I'll try to make friends with him."

"Will you really? It will be so good of you."

"I always try to be kind and considerate, my love. Your son is very hasty, but he will soon understand me better."

"Oh, I do hope so."

After dinner Talbot said: "Now, my love, I wish you would show me over the house—our house," he added with cat-like softness.

"I shall be so glad to do so."

They passed out into the hall, and the new husband's attention was drawn to the portrait of Robert's father. He frowned slightly.

"Who is that?" he asked.

"It is my first husband."

James Talbot glanced curiously at the picture. He was displeased to notice that the portrait represented such a handsome man—a man with whom he was not to be compared.

"He was generally considered a fine-looking man," remarked the bride.

"Humph! Tastes differ. No doubt he was a good man, but I don't consider him handsome."

Through the open door Jane heard this remark, and took instant offense, for she had liked Mr. Frost, who was always kind to her.

"He didn't look a gorilla, as you do," she said to herself, and would like to have said aloud.

Meanwhile Robert went down to the village. He was the prey of contending emotions. It looked as if all the happiness of their quiet home was gone. This man—this interloper—would spoil it all.

"How could mother marry him?" he said to himself.

But in spite of his dissatisfaction, he felt hungry. There was a restaurant in the village, and he turned in there. He felt that on this day at least he could not dine at home.

He sat down at the table beside Mr. Jameson, a jeweler, and an old friend of the family. The jeweler regarded Robert with surprise.

"How is it that you don't dine at home?" he asked. "I believe, however, that your mother is away."

"It isn't that, for Jane prepares the meals."

"You want a change then?" said Mr. Jameson smiling.

"No, it isn't that either. Mother has got home," he added bluntly.

"And you go away at such a time?"

"I may as well tell you—everybody will know it soon. She has come home with a new husband."

"You amaze me! And you don't like the arrangement?" he asked, with a keen glance at his young companion.

"No; he's not a gentleman," answered Robert bitterly. "I don't see how she could have married him—or anybody, after my father."

"It is natural for you to feel so. Still, she had a right to do so."

They talked further, and Mr. Jameson gradually modified Robert's excited feelings. He made the boy promise that if Mr. Talbot should show a disposition to be friendly, he would at any rate treat him with courtesy.

About three o'clock in the afternoon Robert met his new step-father in the street. He paused, uncertain how to act. But James Talbot approached him with a soft, ingratiating smile.

"Robert," he said, "I am sorry you have taken such a dislike to me. You will excuse my saying that it is quite unreasonable, as you can't know anything about me."

"Perhaps I was hasty," Robert forced himself to say, "but it was a trial to me to think my mother had married again."

"Quite natural, I am sure, so I shall not look upon your manifestations of dislike as personal to myself."

"I suppose not," said Robert slowly. "Of course, I don't know much about you."

"When you do, I hope you will like me better," said Talbot cheerfully. "Have you had any dinner?"

"Yes, sir."

"I hope you will come home to supper. It makes your mother feel very sad to have you stay away."

"Yes, I will come."

"Shall we take a walk together? I don't know anything of your village. You might show me something of it."

Robert hesitated, but he was naturally polite, and, though rather reluctantly, he walked through different parts of the village and pointed out the churches and the public library, the center school-house, and other buildings. Gradually they approached the outskirts of the village till they reached a house occupied by an eccentric old bachelor, who kept a large dog of an uncertain temper. As the two passed, the dog bounded from the yard and ran after them. This gave Robert a chance to judge of his step-father's courage.

James Talbot turned pale with fright, and started to run.

"Save me, Robert!" he called out, in tremulous accents. "Will he—will he bite?"

"I don't think so, Mr. Talbot," said Robert manfully, not exhibiting the least alarm. "What do you mean, Tige?" he continued sternly, addressing the dog.

He snatched a stout stick from the side of the road, and made threatening demonstrations.

The dog stood still, evidently cowed.

"I don't think he is dangerous, Mr. Talbot," Robert started to say, but he looked in vain for his step-father.

"Here I am, Robert," he heard in quavering accents.

James Talbot had managed, with an agility hardly to be expected of a man of forty-five, to climb into a tree by the roadside.

"I—I thought I should be safer here," he said, Robert wanted to laugh, but he was polite, and refrained.

"I—I hope he won't bite you."

"I'll risk it, sir."

"What a terrible situation! I don't dare to come down."

"I think you may, sir; I will protect you."

"How can you? You wouldn't be a match for a dog like that."

By this time Tiger had got over his fierce demonstrations, and seemed quite friendly.

"You see he has got over his fierceness. You had better come down."

"Do you really think it would be safe?"

"I am sure of it."

James Talbot got down from the tree cautiously, eyeing the dog askance.

"Now let us get away from here at once," he said nervously.

"Very well, sir."

They took the road for home, the dog making no hostile demonstrations.

"I—I was always afraid of dogs," said Talbot, half ashamed. "If it had been a man I wouldn't have cared." And then he began to tell Robert how he had once frightened a burglar from the house where he was lodging; but Robert didn't believe him. He felt contempt for his step-father as a coward.

CHAPTER III. THE LITTLE PLOT AGAINST ROBERT

Robert resumed his place in the home circle. Between him and his step-father there was no cordiality, but formal politeness, though at times Mrs. Talbot tried to cultivate more friendly relations. He was somewhat ashamed of the cowardice he displayed during their walk through the village. It was partly because Robert had been a witness of his humiliation that he grew to dislike him the more and determined, when occasion offered, to get even with the boy. He was somewhat afraid of the spirited boy, but gradually plucked up courage for an encounter.

When Robert came home from school three days later, he found his step-father in the hall, standing on a chair, engaged in taking down the portrait of Mr. Frost.

"What are you doing, Mr. Talbot," he demanded indignantly.

Talbot turned his head, and answered curtly, "I apprehend that is my business."

"Are you going to take down my father's portrait?"

"That's exactly what I am going to do."

"Why?" asked Robert sternly.

"It is not fitting, now that your mother is my wife, that the picture of her first husband should hang here."

"Are you going to put yours in its place?"

"As soon as I have one painted."

Robert paused for a moment. After all, why should he interfere? His mother had transferred her love and allegiance to another husband, and his father's face would be a silent reproach to her.

"Did my mother authorize this removal?" he asked.

"Certainly."

"Then I have only one request to make, that the portrait be hung up in my chamber. I still revere the memory of my father."

"I have no objections. You can take it up to your room when you please."

The portrait was taken down, and Robert received it. He at once carried it upstairs. His heart swelled within him, and a look of bitterness came over his young face.

"I can't stand it long," he said to himself. "The sight of that man fills me with indignation and disgust. I would as soon see a serpent."

As yet, however, there had been no open outbreak, but it was to come very soon.

"May I ask a favor of you, James?" said his wife at the breakfast table.

"What is it, my dear?"

"I find that our woodpile needs replenishing. Will you stop at Mr. Webber's on your way to the post-office and ask him to call? I want to speak to him about sawing and splitting a new supply."

"My dear," said her husband, "let me make a suggestion. Why employ Mr. Webber when you have a strong, able-bodied boy in the house?"

"Do you mean Robert?"

"There is no other boy in the house, I take it."

"But," expostulated Mrs. Talbot, "there is no occasion to put Robert at such work. I am quite able to employ and pay Mr. Webber."

"And bring up the boy in idleness. That's a very bad plan. He will be getting lazy."

"He has his studies to attend to."

"He needs physical exercise."

"He plays ball and foot-ball."

"His time is thrown away. He could get quite as healthful exercise in sawing and splitting wood, and it would save money."

Mrs. Talbot was of a gentle, yielding temper, but she was not disposed to adopt her husband's views. She still ventured to expostulate.

"Robert is not lazy, James," she said. "If I were poor and there were any need of it, he would willingly saw and split the wood."

"Perhaps he would and perhaps he wouldn't. From what I have seen of him, I am decidedly of the opinion that he has been pampered and spoiled. He has a very bad temper—"

"Oh, James!"

"It is true, but it is partly because of his bringing-up. He needs to have his will broken. He has always had his own way, and it is quite time that he learned who is master here."

"You are very hard and cruel, James," said his wife, the tears filling her eyes.

"You think so, but I am only seeking the boy's good. I am quite decided on this point. We will drop the discussion."

"Oh, what will happen?" thought the poor mother. "Robert will never submit, and there will be serious trouble."

The next morning was Saturday, and Robert had a holiday from school. He was out in the yard, after breakfast, and was about to leave the premises, when his step-father appeared in the doorway.

"Stop a minute," he called out in a tone of command.

Robert looked back in surprise.

"What is wanted?" he asked.

"Where are you going?"

"Out fishing with Harry Baker."

"I think you had better postpone it."

"Why?" demanded Robert in surprise.

"Come out in the back-yard and I will tell you."

Very much surprised, Robert followed his step-father out into the back-yard.

"What does all this mean?" he thought.

"I want you to spend the forenoon in sawing and splitting wood. Your mother tells me there is need of a fresh supply."

"I don't understand you, sir," said Robert coldly. "Mr. Webber always saws and splits wood for us."

"He always has hitherto, but this arrangement is to be changed."

Robert's eyes flashed. He was beginning to understand now.

"Why? Is my mother unable to pay him?"

"That is not the point. You are strong and well able to do the work. There is no need of going to unnecessary expense."

Robert's lip curled.

"You really expect me to work at the woodpile?" he said.

"I do. What is more, I command you to go to work at once."

Robert looked his step-father firmly in the face.

"You command me to go to work?" he repeated slowly.

"Yes, I do," blustered Mr. Talbot, thinking by his loud voice to intimidate the boy.

But he didn't understand the boy with whom he had to deal. Robert eyed his step-father contemptuously. James Talbot, though perhaps an inch taller, was less heavily built, and looked thin and puny beside the sturdy boy whom he was trying to coerce. He felt the contempt which Robert's face so plainly expressed, and it enraged him, for he was a man of violent temper.

"I think, Mr. Talbot," said Robert, after a pause, "that you will have hard work in getting your orders obeyed."

If James Talbot had not been beside himself with rage, he would not have dared to act as he did. He seized a stout stick lying on the ground and sprang towards his disobedient step-son.

Robert instantly seized the ax, which was conveniently near, and brandished it in a threatening manner.

"Don't you dare to touch me!" he exclaimed in excitement.

James Talbot turned pale.

"Are you insane?" he demanded, drawing back in affright.

"No, but I don't propose to be bulldozed. Just lay down that stick, if you please."

Mechanically Talbot dropped it.

"You have a terrible temper!" he exclaimed.

"I hope not, but I am quite prepared to defend myself, Mr. Talbot."

"How old are you, sir?"

"Sixteen."

"Then you are under authority. You are bound to obey me."

"Am I? I don't recognize you as having any authority over me."

"Evidently you have a good deal to learn. Once more, will you obey me?"

"Once more, I won't," returned Robert firmly.

"You will be sorry for your disobedience. You haven't seen the end of this."

He turned and walked back to the house, feeling with mortification that he had been worsted in this first encounter with his step-son.

"I'd like to flog that boy within an inch of his life," he muttered spitefully. "I—I wish I dared to grapple with him."

Robert and his step-father didn't meet at dinner or supper, as the latter had to go away on business.

"Mother," said Robert, "do you wish me to take Mr. Webber's place at the woodpile?"

"No, Robert. It was Mr. Talbot's idea. He thought it would be healthful exercise for you."

"Why not for him?"

"I will try to get him off the idea."

"It makes no difference. He can't make me do it, though he threatened me with a stick this morning."

"Surely he did not strike you?" said his mother nervously.

"No, I guess not. He did not dare to."

It so happened that James Talbot did not reach home till a late hour in the evening, when Robert was already in bed. He went upstairs softly, ascertained from Robert's regular breathing that he was sound asleep, then taking the key from the lock inside, locked the door from the outside, and went downstairs with a smile.

"When the boy wakes up, he will find himself a prisoner," he said. "I shall get even with him, after all."

CHAPTER IV.

MR. TALBOT IS MYSTIFIED

Robert slept soundly, and didn't wake till near breakfast-time. He jumped out of bed and hastily dressed himself. Then he went to the door of his chamber, and tried to open it. To his surprise, he found himself unable to do so. For the first time he noticed that the key was not in the lock.

"What does this mean?" he asked himself.

He peered through the key-hole and detected the key sticking in from the other side of the door.

"This is Mr. Talbot's work," he decided. "What does he expect to gain by it?"

Robert was quite cool, and upon the whole, rather amused. It seemed to him a childish trick to play upon him.

"What a contemptible fellow he is!" he said to himself. "It mortifies me to think he is my mother's husband."

Robert's room was a large front apartment on the third floor. It was quite as handsome as any on the second floor. It was directly over the room occupied by his mother. She, however, must already be downstairs.

"I am sure mother can't know of this," he decided.

Just then the breakfast bell rang, and Robert wondered whether anyone would come up to see why he did not come down.

Presently he heard a step on the stairs, and a minute later he heard the voice of his step-father.

"Robert!" he called out, "are you up?"

"Yes, Mr. Talbot. Why did you lock me in?"

"I had my reasons. You were disobedient to me yesterday."

Robert laughed, a little to Mr. Talbot's annoyance. He hoped to find the boy in a state of alarm, ready to submit to his orders.

"About the wood, I suppose you mean."

"Yes."

"Are you going to unlock the door?"

His voice was quite calm, and he showed no nervousness nor excitement.

"I will upon one condition."

"You have no right to lock me up here, and no right to make conditions."

"That is for me to say. I will unlock the door on condition that you agree to saw and split the wood, as I required yesterday."

"To-day is Sunday. Do you expect me to work to-day?"

Mr. Talbot was rather taken aback. He had forgotten when the evening before he locked the door of Robert's chamber that the next day would be Sunday.

"No, but next week."

"I don't agree," said Robert firmly.

"All right; I will come up in an hour, and see if you have changed your mind."

With a malicious chuckle James Talbot drew the key from the lock, put it in his pocket, and went downstairs. His wife was already sitting in her place at the breakfast table.

"What makes you so late, James," she asked.

"I have been having a little interview with your son, my dear."

"He is late, too. Is he coming down?"

"No doubt he would like to," said her husband, chuckling.

"I don't understand you, James. If he would like to come, why doesn't he?"

"Because he is locked in his chamber."

"Who locked him there?"

"I did."

Mrs. Talbot was a meek woman, but this excited her to anger.

"I will go right up and let him out," she said.

James Talbot laughed, but allowed his wife to leave the room without a word.

She hurried up to Robert's chamber.

"Robert!" she called through the key-hole.

"Is it you, mother?"

"Yes. Are you locked in?"

"Yes."

"Where is the key?"

"In Mr. Talbot's pocket, I presume."

"Why did he lock you in?"

"Because I would not agree to saw and split the wood in place of Mr. Webber next week."

"That is shameful. Poor boy! and you have had no breakfast."

"And am not likely to have, unless you can pass some through the key-hole. You see what sort of a man you have married, mother."

Mrs. Talbot was silent. She began to realize it herself.

"How is this going to end?" she asked, half crying.

"Don't mind me, mother. I'll get out some way."

"I will ask James—Mr. Talbot for the key."

"He won't give it to you. Let things take their course. I will consider what is best to be done. But first, is there any other key in the house that will fit this door?"

"No, I don't think so."

When Mrs. Talbot went downstairs her husband was half through breakfast.

"I am afraid your breakfast will be cold, my dear," he said.

"How can you act so meanly, James?"

"It is all for Robert's good. He has been too much indulged. I want to make a man of him. What did he say to you?"

"He told me not to mind—that he would get out some way."

"Perhaps through the key-hole," laughed James Talbot, apparently much amused.

"You are real mean," whimpered his wife. "The poor boy has had no breakfast."

"Don't let that interfere with your breakfasting, Mrs. T."

"How can I eat when he is hungry?"

"You see it doesn't affect my appetite. Really, this steak is unusually good."

Meanwhile Robert was considering how he was to escape. It was rather a puzzling question to consider, and he could not think of any way. But as he was looking out of the window he saw Sam Jones, a school friend, pass by. An idea came to him. Sam's father was a carpenter, and the owner of a tall ladder.

"I say, Sam!" he called out.

Sam looked up in the direction of the voice, and to his surprise saw Robert at the window.

"What's up?" he asked.

"I am."

"Why don't you come down?"

"For a very good reason—because I am locked in."

"What's that for?" asked Sam in natural surprise.

Robert explained.

"What are you going to do?"

"Get out, if you will help me."

"What shall I do?"

"Ask your father to bring his tall ladder. I am sure it will reach up to my window. Only be quick about it. I want to get out before Mr. Talbot is through breakfast."

"I'll do it. It will be good fun to circumvent the old rascal."

Sam started on a run, and in less than ten minutes came back with his father and the ladder. Mr. Jones was very ready to lend his assistance, for he had taken a dislike to Mr. Talbot, who had beaten him down on the price of some repairs he had made to the barn.

The two together put up the ladder against the window, and Robert stepping through the opening, put his foot on the top rung and quickly descended.

He breathed a sigh of relief and exultation as he set foot on the ground.

"That's the first time I was ever a prisoner, and I don't like it," he said. "I wish I had old Talbot up there. He wouldn't dare to escape as I did, for he is an awful coward."

He told the story of the dog, and how frightened his step-father had been. Sam and his father enjoyed the story.

"Now, take away the ladder quick. I don't want Mr. Talbot to know how I got out. I mustn't forget to thank you for your kindness."

"You can do as much for me if father ever locks me up," said Sam.

"I don't think there's much danger."

Meanwhile, Mr. Talbot having got through breakfast went upstairs to enjoy the uncomfortable position of his step-son.

"Robert!" he called through the key-hole.

There was no answer.

"You needn't be sullen. It will do you no good."

Still there was no answer.

"I would open the door," thought the man, "but he may be lying in wait for me, and he is very strong for a boy."

A third time he called, but still there was no answer.

"I hope he hasn't done anything desperate," thought James Talbot.

Finally he summoned up courage to unlock the door. Lo, the bird was flown, and the window was open.

"I wonder if he has jumped out!" said Talbot in alarm.

He went to the window and looked out, but could see nothing of Robert.

"It is very strange," he muttered. "If he had broken a limb, he would be lying on the lawn."

He went downstairs considerably perturbed. Hearing noise in the dining-room, he looked in, and saw Robert sitting at the table.

"Good morning, Mr. Talbot," said Robert, with much politeness. "You will excuse my being late to breakfast, but circumstances prevented my being on time."

James Talbot sank into a chair and stared at Robert open-mouthed.

"Did you get out of the window?" he asked.

"Yes, but next time I'd rather go through the door."

"What a very remarkable boy!" thought his step-father.

CHAPTER V. A CRISIS

Nothing more was said about the woodpile. Apparently Mr. Talbot concluded that he was not likely to carry his point, and prudently withdrew from the conflict. But his sense of defeat only made him the more incensed against his rebellious step-son.

"I would give five dollars to see that boy thrashed," he said to himself moodily, as from the window he watched Robert playing ball in the street with his friend Sam Jones.

As Robert seemed to be enjoying himself, he could not resist the temptation to interfere.

So he opened the window and called out, "Robert, I wish you would stop playing ball in the street."

"Why?" asked his step-son.

"Because the ball might come this way and break one of the windows."

"There is no chance of it, Mr. Talbot. We are sending the ball up and down the street."

"Still there is danger."

"I don't see it."

"Will you be guided by my wishes?" demanded Talbot querulously.

"I would if they were reasonable. I don't think they are."

"I am the best judge of that. I don't want you to play ball in front of my house."

"Your house? How long has it been yours? It belongs to my mother."

"Your mother is my wife."

"I am sorry to say that you are right. But that doesn't make the house yours."

"I have no wish to quibble. I represent your mother, and I have a right to ask you to stop playing ball in front of the house."

"Even if the house were yours, you don't own the street. Go ahead, Sam!"

Mr. Talbot banged the door and went into the house.

"That is the most impudent cub I ever saw," he muttered. He was worsted again, and he felt angry and provoked.

"What a sweet step-father you've got, Robert," said Sam.

"Isn't he? But don't call him my step-father. I want to forget that he is connected with me in any way. He is constantly nagging me. I don't think I can stand it much longer."

"How does your mother stand it?"

"Mother has a very sweet temper, and she has no will of her own."

"Unlike you," said Sam, smiling.

"Yes, I have a will of my own. I don't think a boy or man can succeed who hasn't."

"You say you can't stand it. What will that lead to?"

"It may lead to my leaving the house, and going out into the world to seek my fortune. Our house is a large one, but it isn't large enough to contain Mr. Talbot and myself."

"I hope you won't have to go, Robert. I should miss you awfully."

"And I should miss you, Sam. But time will show."

Probably no persons could be more incompatible, or less likely to get along together, than Robert and Mr. Talbot. The presence of one was a constant irritation to the other. This could have but one issue. One day, perhaps a week after the dispute about ball-playing, Robert entered the gate on his way back from the village. Mr. Talbot was standing on the lawn. He had scarcely entered the yard when a man reeling under the influence of drink staggered by.

"That man has more than he can carry," observed Robert.

"Yes," answered Talbot with a smile. "Take care that you don't fall into the same habit."

"Why do you caution me," asked Robert curtly. "Do you think there is any need of it?"

"Yes, if all that I have heard is true."

"What have you heard?"

"That your father was an intemperate man."

Robert's eyes flashed with intense anger.

"It is a lie," he said. "Take it back."

"I have every reason to believe it is true, and I won't take it back."

This was too much for Robert, who was a boy of spirit, and had been devotedly attached to his father.

"Take it back!" he repeated in a tone of menace.

"Do you think I would take it back at the order of a whipper-snapper like you?" sneered his step-father.

Robert waited to hear no more. His affection and reverence for his father were so strong that he felt outraged by the insult to his memory. He made a sudden attack upon his step-father, so impetuous that it dashed Mr. Talbot to the ground.

The man was very much frightened. His encounter with the dog showed that he was a coward, and though he, a grown person, was attacked by a boy, he seemed helpless and over-whelmed.

"Ah—what does this mean?" he gasped.

"It means that I won't allow you or any other man to insult my father's memory," answered Robert fiercely.

"I will have you arrested," said Talbot venomously.

"Do as you please," returned Robert contemptuously.

He sprang to his feet, and without waiting for Mr. Talbot to rise, entered the house and sought his mother, who had not witnessed the fracas.

The time had been brief, but he had already made up his mind to do what had been in his mind for some time. He would leave home and seek his fortune in the great world. He felt that to stay at home any longer—to live under the same roof as his step-father—would be absolutely impossible. He was not afraid to depend upon his own exertions. He was young, well-educated, strong, and had confidence in his own ability to earn a living. He would be sorry to leave his mother of course, but his mother didn't seem to belong to him now that she was the wife of a man whom he despised.

Leaving James Talbot to pick himself up at his leisure, he sought his mother, who was in the sitting room, engaged in sewing. She noticed the flush upon Robert's face, and his excited air, and asked at once, "What's the matter, Robert? You look disturbed."

"I am disturbed, mother."

"What is it? Tell me about it."

"I got into a dispute with Mr. Talbot."

"I wish you could be friendly with him."

"It is impossible, mother. He is always irritating me. This time he insulted my father's memory."

"How did he do that?"

"He said father was a man of intemperate habits."

"Surely he did not mean it," said his mother, looking troubled.

"I don't know whether he meant it or not. I only know that he said it. And now, mother, you mustn't take too hard what I am going to say to you."

"What is it?" inquired Mrs. Talbot nervously.

"I have made up my mind to leave home."

"Surely you would not do that," said his mother startled.

"Yes, it is the best way. I can't live under the same roof as Mr. Talbot. Besides I am now sixteen. It is time I was earning my own living."

"But that is not necessary, Robert. I have enough for you."

"I know it, but I can't live on you all my life. I want to go out into the world, and see what I can do for myself."

"Take time to think it over, Robert. You are not through school."

"I shall be very soon. I have a good education already, and I can get along."

"What do you want to do?"

"I don't know yet. Something will open up for me."

"Wait till next week," pleaded his mother.

"No, I must go this very day. I have had a fight with Mr. Talbot, and I can't stay in the house any longer."

"Oh, Robert, you will make me very unhappy."

"I am sorry for that, mother, but I don't see how I can help it. Look on the bright side. I think things will turn out well for me."

"If you must go, you must let me give you some money," and Mrs. Talbot, rising, went to her secretary.

"No, mother; I have twenty dollars laid by. That will do for the present. When that is gone I will write you for some more."

"Will you promise to do it, Robert?"

"Yes, mother?"

"Where do you think of going?"

"To Chicago, first."

"But you don't know anyone there, and I am told there are a great many bad men there who might lead you into temptation."

"I hope I am strong enough to resist them. But I must go upstairs and get ready."

Robert went up to his chamber and drew out from a closet a large grip-sack. Into this he put hurriedly a supply of shirts, socks, handkerchiefs, and underclothing.

"I came near forgetting a comb and brush," he said to himself, unlocking the grip-sack after it was closed. "I am not used to traveling, but I suppose I shall be in time."

Meanwhile, Mr. Talbot after taking time to recover his equanimity, sought his wife.

"Mrs. T.," he said, "your promising son is getting worse and worse."

"Explain yourself," she said coldly.

"He sprang upon me with the ferocity of a tiger, after I had made an inoffensive remark, and taking me unawares, actually threw me down. I can't endure his presence."

"You won't be obliged to. He has decided to leave home."

"Where will he go?"

"He is going out into the world to seek his fortune," she answered sadly.

"He will fetch up in jail," said his step-father savagely.

"I think, Mr. Talbot, we will drop the subject. I do not feel equal to discussing it when my dear and only child is about to leave home, driven from it by you."

She rose and left the room.

"Well, I'm glad he's going," thought Talbot. "I can the better carry out my plans."

CHAPTER VI. ON THE TRAIN

His valise filled with a stock of necessary underwear, Robert walked to the railway station. It was a very sudden start, and he had no time to consider what he was to do, for the train moved off five minutes after his arrival.

He selected a seat by a window, and placed his valise on the seat beside his own.

It was not till the train had fairly started that he began to realize the importance of the step that he was taking. He was leaving a comfortable, nay, a luxurious home, where he was provided with every comfort, and by his own choice was undertaking to earn his own living. It was enough to make any boy feel serious. But Robert was manly and resolute, and he decided that anything would be better than to live under the same roof with his odious step-father.

Five minutes later a tall thin man walked over from the opposite side of the car, and said, "Will you allow me to sit beside you?"

"Certainly," answered Robert courteously, and removed his grip-sack.

"Thank you. I am tired of sitting alone, and thought I should like a chat with an intelligent young man."

Robert smiled.

"So you think I am an intelligent young man?" he said.

"I am sure of it."

"I am very much obliged, but what makes you think so?"

"I am well versed in character reading, being a professional phrenologist and a student of physiognomy. Are you going to the city?"

"Yes, sir. I think so."

"So am I. Are you connected with any business house there?"

"Not yet, sir. I may be before long."

"I may be able to help you get a place. I am extensively acquainted with business firms. But perhaps you have a place already secured?"

"No, sir."

"Are you well acquainted in Chicago?"

"I know scarcely anyone there—no one of any prominence."

"You may have to wait for a position. Pardon me—it is none of my business—but you ought to have money enough to carry you on a few weeks in case you have to wait."

"I have some money," said Robert cautiously.

"That is well. I am glad to hear it. Are you well educated?"

"Tolerably so."

"Do you know anything about bookkeeping?"

"Yes, sir."

"I have a brother-in-law who is a commission merchant. Indeed I may say that Mr. Claflin, the great merchant, is a cousin of mine."

"Indeed, sir."

"I was once in Claflin's employ," continued the stranger. "I was head of one of the departments, with a salary of five thousand dollars a year."

"What made you leave so good a place?"

"I don't wonder you ask. It was because Claflin interfered with me. I felt that I ought to have full charge of my department, and would tolerate no interference. He interfered with me, and in a fit of anger I threw up my position. I dare say you think me foolish?"

"Yes, I do," answered Robert frankly.

"You are right, but an angry man doesn't stop to consider. Claflin seemed surprised, and no doubt he was sorry, but he is a proud man and he wouldn't demean himself by asking me to stay. So I put on my coat and left."

"Have you got on well since?"

"I went over to a rival merchant, but had to take less pay. Still I got on very well, till last spring, when I had an attack of malaria. That broke me down in health and pocket, and now I am what you call hard up."

"Hadn't you saved up anything from your large salary?"

"Yes, but I invested in running stock, and lost all."

"I wonder what he is telling me all this for?" mused Robert.

"I have about recovered my health, and now I shall soon get a good place," went on the stranger. Here Robert took out his watch—it was an excellent Waltham silver watch—and consulted it.

"Let me look at your watch!" said the stranger.

Robert put it in his hands.

"A very good watch! Let me show you mine."

He drew from his pocket a showy gold watch—at least it was yellow, and had a good appearance.

"What do you think of it?"

"It is showy."

"Yes, and is of high grade. It is well worth seventy-five dollars, though I have had it for three years."

Robert was not especially interested. His own watch had cost but twenty-five, but it was a gift from his father, and as such he valued it.

"I have a great mind to offer you a bargain," said his companion.

Robert looked at him inquiringly.

"If you will give me ten dollars to boot, I will exchange with you."

"Why should you do that? You say your watch is worth seventy-five dollars."

"So it is, but, my young friend, I am very short of money. The silver watch would keep as good time, and the money would be of great service to me."

Robert shook his head.

"My watch was a present," he said, "I should not care to part with it."

"Of course, that is a consideration," said the stranger, appearing disappointed.

"Besides I could not very well spare ten dollars."

"You could easily pawn the watch for forty dollars."

"Why don't you do that?"

"Egad! I didn't think of it. I believe I will. By the way, will you do me a favor?"

"What is it?"

"Will you keep the watch for fifteen minutes? I am going out into the smoking-car, and I may go to sleep. That is the way smoking affects me. I might get robbed, but if you hold the watch I shall feel easy."

This seemed a strange proposal to make, but after all it was plausible. It seemed a trifling favor to grant. Why should he object?

"But how do you know I am honest," asked Robert. "You have only known me a few minutes."

"Didn't I tell you I was skilled in reading character? You have an honest face."

"Thank you for your favorable opinion."

"Do you consent?"

"Yes. How long will you be gone?"

"I shall come back before we reach the city."

"Very well, if you are anxious to have me take charge of it."

"Yes; I shall feel safe if it is in your hands."

"All right, sir."

Robert wore a sack coat with pockets on each side. He put the watch in one of these pockets, and resumed looking out of the window.

His companion left the car and went to the car in the rear, which was the smoking-car.

Half an hour passed, and then a stout, thick-set man of thirty-five entered the car and walked through it, looking at the passengers as he passed along.

He paused in front of Robert's seat.

"Young man," he said, "show me your watch."

Robert looked at him in astonishment.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean that I have had my watch stolen, and I am sure some passenger has taken it."

"What kind of a watch was it?"

"It was a gold watch. Have you such a watch about you?"

"Yes, but—"

"Never mind about any buts," said the other fiercely. "I can tell by your expression that you have got my watch. Let me have it at once."

"A gentleman, now in the smoking-car, gave me a watch to keep for him."

"And you have it about you?"

"Yes."

"Give it to me at once."

"I couldn't, without his permission."

"That won't go down. Either give me the watch, or I will have you arrested."

"I have no right to give you the watch. If it is yours it was stolen by the man who handed it to me to keep for him."

"I give you two minutes to produce the watch. If you will do this, and pay me ten dollars besides, I will overlook your offense."

Robert's face flushed. He felt that he was in a tight place. This man might be a confederate of the other. But how was he to prove it?

CHAPTER VII. BAFFLED

The charge had come upon Robert so suddenly that he hardly knew what to say. Gradually, his presence of mind returned to him.

"What made you fix upon me as the one likely to have the watch?" he asked. "Why didn't you select some other passenger?"

The stout man hesitated. He could not say what was the truth, that Robert had been described to him by his confederate.

"It was your guilty look," he answered, after a pause.

"So you think I look guilty?" said our hero, with an amused smile.

"Yes, I do," said the other defiantly. "I have had a great deal to do with crooks in my time."

"No doubt of it," chimed in a new voice.

Both Robert and the man who accused him looked round. The voice proceeded from a tall, rough-looking man who sat behind Robert.

The accuser looked a little uneasy.

"As I said, I know a crook when I see him."

"So do I," said the rough-looking man, who had the appearance of a Western miner.

"My friend," said the claimant of the watch severely, "will you do me the favor to mind your own business?"

"That's good advice. I hope you follow it yourself."

"Will you give me the watch, or are you prepared to be arrested?"

"Describe the watch," said Robert composedly.

"I have. It is a gold watch."

"So is this," said the miner, producing a heavy gold watch from his fob.

"You needn't put in your oar," said the claimant, frowning.

"The boy is right. Describe the watch."

"I have already said that it is a gold watch."

"So is this. Do you claim this watch as yours?"

"No. I suppose it is your watch. The watch in the boy's pocket is not his."

"Correct, squire. But that doesn't prove it is yours."

"Where is the man who handed it to me?" asked Robert.

"I don't know. I don't believe there is any such man."

"Bring him here, and I will hand it to him."

"That's where your head's level, boy," said the miner. "If this man wants any proof that he asked you to keep it for him, he can call on me. I saw him do it."

"No doubt!" sneered the accuser. "I presume you are in league with the boy."

The miner coolly lifted the window beside his seat.

"Do you see that window," he asked.

"Yes. What of it?"

"Have you any particular desire to be thrown out?"

"No," answered the other, in evident alarm.

"Then don't you dare to insinuate that I am in league with anybody for crooked work."

As he spoke, he rose to his full height, showing a muscular figure, rather more than six feet in length. Robert's antagonist was about six inches shorter.

"No offense, mister," he said meekly.

"You seem to be coming to your senses. Now, is this watch yours?"

"What watch?"

"The watch in the boy's pocket."

"Yes."

"How did the other man get hold of it?"

"If he had it at all, he stole it from me."

"Very good; we'll investigate this. My young friend, come with me into the smoking-car."

The claimant protested uneasily, but the miner insisted.

He and Robert left the car and went into the one behind.

There about the middle of the car sat the man from whom Robert had received the watch.

"Give it back to him," said the miner.

Robert walked up to his first acquaintance.

"I want you to take back your watch," he said. "This man says it belongs to him."

The tall, thin man looked at his confederate. He saw that their little plan of frightening Robert into giving them ten dollars had failed.

"Did you send him in to me?" went on Robert.

"There is some mistake. I sent him in for it, but he misunderstood me."

He looked askance at the miner, who he saw was disposed to be a friend of Robert.

"Look here," said the miner sternly, "you are a precious pair of rascals. Your little game hasn't worked. I have seen such men as you before. I was on the vigilance committee in San Francisco some years ago, and such fellows as you we strung up to the nearest lamp-post. Can you make it convenient to get off at the next station?"

"That's where we intend to stop," said the tall man meekly.

"That is fortunate. It will save you a good deal of trouble. Now, boy, come back into the other car. We have no further business with these gentlemen."

Going back, they sat down in the same seat.

"I am very much obliged to you for getting me out of the scrape," said Robert gratefully.

"Don't mention it."

"Do you really think they were—?"

"Crooks? Yes. They had all the signs. I've rubbed against such fellows before now. These fellows are not smart. They don't understand the rudiments of the business."

"You spoke of San Francisco. Have you been there?" asked Robert with interest.

"I lived there and at the mines for five years."

"Were you lucky?"

"You mean, did I strike it rich? Well, I had middling luck. I didn't go there for nothing. How much do you think I had when I landed at Frisco?"

"A hundred dollars?"

"I had just three dollars and a half. I had one extra shirt, and that was about all."

"That wasn't a very large supply. Where did you go from?"

"I was raised in Vermont. Worked on a farm for dad till I was twenty-two. Then with fifty dollars, which I had in the savings bank, I started for California. Well, I got there at last, but my funds were almost gone. I got a chance to do some rough work till I had enough to go to the mines. There I made something of a pile, enough to pay off the mortgage on the old farm, and have ten thousand dollars left. I've just come from there."

"Do you ever expect to go back to the mines?"

"Yes. I should not be satisfied now to remain at the East. Where are you going?"

"To the city."

"To get a place?"

"Yes, if I can."

"Have you parents living?"

"I have a mother," said Robert slowly.

"And you want to get work to help support her?"

"No, she has plenty of money."

"Then why do you leave home?"

Robert looked at his companion. His plain, honest face impressed him favorably. He felt that he was a man in whom he could confide.

"I have a step-father," he said briefly.

"I understand. You and he don't hitch horses. Is that so?"

"You are right."

"Tell me all about it."

"I will. I should like to ask somebody's advice. I want to know whether I have done right."

"Go ahead, my lad."

Robert told the story, and the miner listened attentively.

"Do you know what I think of that step-father of yours?"

"Tell me."

"I think he is about as mean a skunk as I ever heard mentioned. What made your mother marry him?"

"I don't know. She must have been infatuated."

"I suppose you had an easy time at home."

"Yes, I did."

"And now you will have to work for a living?"

"Yes, but I don't mind that."

"I see you're the right sort," said the miner approvingly.

They had reached the next station. In the next car there was a tumult and a noise as of men scuffling. The miner rose and opened the door of the car.

He and Robert saw the two men who had tried to swindle our hero in the hands of two angry men, who hustled them out of the car with such violence that they fell prostrate beside the track.

"What's the matter?" asked the miner.

"These men tried to relieve me of my watch. They won't try it again in a hurry."

Bruised by the fall, the two men picked themselves up and slunk away.

"They're a precious pair of rascals," said the miner. "If we had them at the mines, they would soon dangle from the branch of a tree."

CHAPTER VIII. PERIL

Jones and Barlow, the two men who had been so ignominiously expelled from the train, picked themselves up, and with faces flaming with anger shook their fists at the train in impotent wrath.

"This is an outrage, Jones," said Barlow, the taller of the two.

"So it is," said Jones, rubbing his knee, which had received an abrasion from falling on a flinty stone.

"They don't know how to treat a gentleman."

"No, they don't. You're right, Barlow."

"I suppose the boy and that long-legged miner are laughing in their sleeves."

As he spoke, both turned their glances upon the car in which Robert and the miner were located, and saw both looking out of a car window. The miner's face wore a look of amusement and satisfaction, which was enough to anger the two adventurers.

"Good-by, boys!" he said. "You're leaving us in a hurry, but we won't forget you."

In reply, Jones, who was the more choleric of the two, shook his fist at the miner, but did not indulge himself in any remarks. His feelings were probably too deep for words.

"What shall we do, Barlow?" he asked.

"Foot it to the next station, I reckon. I'm used to walkin', aint you?"

"I've done a little of it in my time," said Jones, with a grin.

"Then we can take the next train that comes along. That cursed miner won't be on board, and we can be received as gentlemen."

"Say, have you got a clothes-brush, Barlow? My knees—that is the knees of my pants—are all over mud."

"So are mine. Yes, I believe I have, but don't let us repair damages here. They will be looking out of the car-windows and laughing at us."

"Go ahead, then. I'll follow."

They started in the direction in which the train was going. Two minutes later they fell in with a young Irish boy, who surveyed their dilapidated appearance with amusement.

"Say," he remarked, "have youse been racin' wid de train?"

"Why do you ask, boy?" inquired Barlow with lofty dignity.

"I take it all back. I guess you've been on your knees prayin'."

"Boy, don't you know how to address a gentleman?"

"Where's the gentleman?" inquired the youth, with a vacant look.

"Jones, chase that boy and give him a lesson."

Jones undertook to do so, but he was short and fat, and the boy easily eluded him. He climbed over a fence on one side of the railway, and began to make faces at the pair.

"What would you have done to me if you had caught me?" he asked in a mocking and derisive tone.

"Given you a first-class thrashing," growled Jones.

"Then I'm glad you didn't catch me. Say, I saw you get out of the train."

"Suppose you did?"

"You were kicked out. What had you been doin'?"

Angry as the two adventurers were at their humiliating treatment, their feeling of indignation was intensified by the boy's taunts. Jones was about to make an angry retort, when Barlow stopped him.

"Don't mind the boy," he said. "We'd better be getting on."

They walked briskly till they had probably got a quarter of a mile on their way to the next station. Then they paused and looked back, for on the way they had passed the train.

"What's the matter with the train?" asked Barlow.

"Don't know. It's making quite a stop."

"I wish it would get wrecked."

This gave an idea to Jones.

"So I say. We'd get even with that miner, and the men that hustled us off the train. What do you say to wrecking it?"

"We can do it. See that switch?"

"Yes. What of it?"

"I'm an old switchman. Tended switch for three years on a Western road. All we'll have to do is to reverse that switch," pointing to one a hundred feet farther on, "and there'll be a smash."

Barlow's breath came quick. He was not as daring a rascal as his companion.

"Do you really mean it, Jones?" he said.

"Yes, I do."

"Suppose we get caught?"

"We won't get caught."

"Somebody may see us."

"There's no one around. Look and satisfy yourself."

"If you think it safe?"

"Of course it's safe. Besides, if there's a wreck, there'll be booty for us. I'd like to rifle the pockets of that miner."

The train had been detained at a signal tower by a telegram, and this allowed the two adventurers to arrange their plans for wrecking it. But on trying to move the switch, Jones found a difficulty. He had not the necessary appliances.

"Can't you move it?" asked Barlow.

"No."

"Then we must give up the plan."

"No, there's another way. Do you see that rock?"

He pointed to a square rock, weighing not far from a hundred pounds, by the side of the railroad.

"Yes, that'll do the business. But there's no time to lose. The train may come along at any moment. I don't know why it has been so delayed."

"Come along then, and help me move it. It is heavy."

The two rascals bent over and lifted the rock in concert.

They grumbled over the weight, neither of them being used to hard labor.

"I should think it weighed most half a ton," grumbled Barlow.

"Never mind. We will soon have it in position. Quick! I hear the train!"

The rumbling of the train could be heard at a considerable distance. The two scoundrels didn't trouble themselves about the possible, or probable consequences of their dastardly plot. They only thought of revenging themselves upon the men who had ejected them from the train, and they felt, besides, an animosity against Robert and his miner friend.

They thought themselves without a witness, but in this they were mistaken. The boy already mentioned, whom they had pursued ineffectually, had followed them at a distance, having a feeling of curiosity about them.

"I wonder what they're up to?" he soliloquized, as he watched them tampering with the switch. He could not quite understand the meaning of their movements. But when they took the rock, and between them conveyed it to the railroad track, and put it in the way of the coming train, he understood.

"I believe the mean chaps want to wreck the train," he said to himself.

What should he do?

He bethought himself of calling out to them, and trying to prevent their plot. But he was sure they would pay no attention to him, and besides there was no time. He could already hear the thundering sound of the approaching train.

Tommy was on a bluff about fifteen feet above the roadbed. To descend the bank and run to meet the train would consume more time than he had at command.

"Oh, dear!" muttered Tommy. "There'll be a smash, and lots of people will be killed."

But there was one thing that neither Tommy nor the two scoundrels had seen. It was a cow that somehow or other had found its way through a gap in the fence from a pasture to the left, and was leisurely walking along the track, full in the path of the approaching train.

The engineer could not see the rock, for it was too small an object, but by great good luck he did see the cow.

With a tremendous effort, he stopped the engine just in time. When the train halted, it was only ten feet away from the animal, who was looking with startled eyes at the coming train.

The shock of the sudden stop was such that the passengers started to their feet, and the engineer leaped from the engine.

By this time Tommy had descended the bank, and was standing only a few feet away.

"We have had a narrow escape," said the miner, wiping the perspiration from his brow.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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