

ALGER

HORATIO JR.

STRUGGLING UPWARD,
OR LUKE LARKIN'S LUCK

Horatio Alger

**Struggling Upward, or
Luke Larkin's Luck**

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CHAPTER I

THE WATERBURY WATCH

One Saturday afternoon in January a lively and animated group of boys were gathered on the western side of a large pond in the village of Groveton. Prominent among them was a tall, pleasant-looking young man of twenty-two, the teacher of the Center Grammar School, Frederic Hooper, A. B., a recent graduate of Yale College. Evidently there was something of importance on foot. What it was may be learned from the words of the teacher.

"Now, boys," he said, holding in his hand a Waterbury watch, of neat pattern, "I offer this watch as a prize to the boy who will skate across the pond and back in the least time. You will all start together, at a given signal, and make your way to the mark which I have placed at the western end of the lake, skate around it, and return to this point. Do you fully understand?"

"Yes, sir!" exclaimed the boys, unanimously.

Before proceeding, it may be well to refer more particularly to some of the boys who were to engage in the contest.

First, in his own estimation, came Randolph Duncan, son of Prince Duncan, president of the Groveton Bank, and a prominent town official. Prince Duncan was supposed to be a rich man, and lived in a style quite beyond that of his neighbors. Randolph was his only son, a boy of sixteen, and felt that in social position and blue blood he was without a peer in the village. He was a tall, athletic boy, and disposed to act the part of boss among the Groveton boys.

Next came a boy similar in age and physical strength, but in other respects very different from the young aristocrat. This was Luke Larkin, the son of a carpenter's widow, living on narrow means, and so compelled to exercise the strictest economy. Luke worked where he could, helping the farmers in hay-time, and ready to do odd jobs for any one in the village who desired his services. He filled the position of janitor at the school which he attended, sweeping out twice a week and making the fires. He had a pleasant expression, and a bright, resolute look, a warm heart, and a clear intellect, and was probably, in spite of his poverty, the most popular boy in Groveton. In this respect he was the opposite of Randolph Duncan, whose assumption of superiority and desire to "boss" the other boys prevented him from having any real friends. He had two or three companions, who flattered him and submitted to his caprices because they thought it looked well to be on good terms with the young aristocrat.

These two boys were looked upon as the chief contestants for the prize offered by their teacher. Opinions differed as to which would win.

"I think Luke will get the watch," said Fred Acken, a younger boy.

"I don't know about that," said Tom Harper. "Randolph skates just as well, and he has a pair of club skates. His father sent to New York for them last week. They're beauties, I tell you. Randolph says they cost ten dollars."

"Of course that gives him the advantage," said Percy Hall. "Look at Luke's old-fashioned wooden skates! They would be dear at fifty cents!"

"It's a pity Luke hasn't a better pair," said Harry Wright. "I don't think the contest is a fair one. Luke ought to have an allowance of twenty rods, to make up for the difference in skates."

"He wouldn't accept it," said Linton Tomkins, the son of a manufacturer in Groveton, who was an intimate friend of Luke, and preferred to associate with him, though Randolph had made advances

toward intimacy, Linton being the only boy in the village whom he regarded as his social equal. "I offered him my club skates, but he said he would take the chances with his own."

Linton was the only boy who had a pair of skates equal to Randolph's. He, too, was a contestant, but, being three years younger than Luke and Randolph, had no expectation of rivaling them.

Randolph had his friends near him, administering the adulation he so much enjoyed.

"I have no doubt you'll get the watch, Randolph," said Sam Noble.

"You're a better skater any day than Luke Larkin."

"Of course you are!" chimed in Tom Harper.

"The young janitor doesn't think so," said Randolph, his lips curling.

"Oh, he's conceited enough to think he can beat you, I make no doubt," said Sam.

"On those old skates, too! They look as if Adam might have used them when he was a boy!"

This sally of Tom's created a laugh.

"His skates are old ones, to be sure," said Randolph, who was quick-sighted enough to understand that any remark of this kind might dim the luster of his expected victory. "His skates are old enough, but they are just as good for skating as mine."

"They won't win him the watch, though," said Sam.

"I don't care for the watch myself," said Randolph, loftily.

"I've got a silver one now, and am to have a gold one when I'm eighteen. But I want to show that I am the best skater.

Besides, father has promised me ten dollars if I win."

"I wish I had ten dollars," said Sam, enviously.

He was the son of the storekeeper, and his father allowed him only ten cents a week pocket-money, so that ten dollars in his eyes was a colossal fortune.

"I have no doubt you would, Sam," said Tom, joyously; "but you couldn't be trusted with so much money. You'd go down to New York and try to buy out A. T. Stewart."

"Are you ready, boys?" asked Mr. Hooper.

Most of the boys responded promptly in the affirmative; but Luke, who had been tightening his straps, said quickly: "I am not ready, Mr. Hooper. My strap has broken!"

"Indeed, Luke, I am sorry to hear it," said the teacher, approaching and examining the fracture. "As matters stand, you can't skate."

Randolph's eyes brightened. Confident as he professed to feel, he knew that his chances of success would be greatly increased by Luke's withdrawal from the list.

"The prize is yours now," whispered Tom.

"It was before," answered Randolph, conceitedly.

Poor Luke looked disappointed. He knew that he had at least an even chance of winning, and he wanted the watch. Several of his friends of his own age had watches, either silver or Waterbury, and this seemed, in his circumstances, the only chance of securing one. Now he was apparently barred out.

"It's a pity you shouldn't skate, Luke," said Mr. Hooper, in a tone of sympathy. "You are one of the best skaters, and had an excellent chance of winning the prize. Is there any boy willing to lend Luke his skates?"

"I will," said Frank Acken.

"My dear boy," said the teacher, "you forget that your feet are several sizes smaller than Luke's."

"I didn't think of that," replied Frank, who was only twelve years old.

"You may use my skates, Luke," said Linton Tomkins. "I think they will fit you."

Linton was only thirteen, but he was unusually large for his age.

"You are very kind, Linton," said Luke, "but that will keep you out of the race."

"I stand no chance of winning," said Linton, "and I will do my skating afterward."

"I don't think that fair," said Randolph, with a frown. "Each boy ought to use his own skates."

"There is nothing unfair about it," said the teacher, "except that Luke is placed at disadvantage in using a pair of skates he is unaccustomed to."

Randolph did not dare gainsay the teacher, but he looked sullen.

"Mr. Hooper is always favoring that beggar!" he said in a low voice, to Tom Harper.

"Of course he is!" chimed in the toady.

"You are very kind, Linny," said Luke, regarding his friend affectionately. "I won't soon forget it."

"Oh, it's all right, Luke," said Linton. "Now go in and win!"

CHAPTER II

TOM HARPER'S ACCIDENT

Tom Harper and Sam Noble were not wholly disinterested in their championship of Randolph. They were very ordinary skaters, and stood no chance of winning the match themselves. They wished Randolph to win, for each hoped, as he had a silver watch himself already, he might give the Waterbury to his faithful friend and follower. Nothing in Randolph's character granted such a hope, for he was by no means generous or open-handed, but each thought that he might open his heart on this occasion. Indeed, Tom ventured to hint as much.

"I suppose, Randolph," he said, "if you win the watch you will give it to me?"

"Why should I?" asked Randolph, surveying Tom with a cold glance.

"You've got a nice silver watch yourself, you know."

"I might like to have two watches."

"You'll have the ten dollars your father promised you."

"What if I have? What claim have you on me?"

Tom drew near and whispered something in Randolph's ear.

"I'll see about it," said Randolph, nodding.

"Are you ready?" asked the teacher, once more.

"Aye, aye!" responded the boys.

"One—two—three—go!"

The boys darted off like arrows from a bow. Luke made a late start, but before they were half across the pond he was even with Randolph, and both were leading. Randolph looked sidewise, and shut his mouth tight as he saw his hated rival on equal terms with him and threatening to pass him. It would be humiliating in the extreme, he thought, to be beaten by such a boy.

But beaten he seemed likely to be, for Luke was soon a rod in advance and slowly gaining. Slowly, for Randolph was really a fine skater and had no rival except Luke. But Luke was his superior, as seemed likely to be proved.

Though only these two stood any chance of final success, all the boys kept up the contest.

A branch of a tree had been placed at the western end of the pond, and this was the mark around which the boys were to skate. Luke made the circuit first, Randolph being about half a dozen rods behind. After him came the rest of the boys in procession, with one exception. This exception was Tom Harper, who apparently gave up the contest when half-way across, and began skating about, here and there, apparently waiting for his companions to return.

"Tom Harper has given up his chance," said Linton to the teacher.

"So it seems," replied Mr. Hooper, "but he probably had no expectation of succeeding."

"I should think he would have kept on with the rest. I would have done so, though my chance would have been no better than his."

Indeed, it seemed strange that Tom should have given up so quickly. It soon appeared that it was not caprice, but that he had an object in view, and that a very discreditable one.

He waited till the boys were on their way back. By this time Luke was some eight rods in advance of his leading competitor. Then Tom began to be on the alert. As Luke came swinging on to victory he suddenly placed himself in his way. Luke's speed was so great that he could not check himself. He came into collision with Tom, and in an instant both were prostrate. Tom, however, got the worst of it. He was thrown violently backward, falling on the back of his head, and lay stunned and motionless on the ice. Luke fell over him, but was scarcely hurt at all. He was up again in an instant, and might still have kept the lead, but instead he got down on his knees beside Tom and asked anxiously: "Are you much hurt, Tom?"

Tom didn't immediately answer, but lay breathing heavily, with his eyes still closed.

Meanwhile, Randolph, with a smile of triumph, swept on to his now assured victory. Most of the boys, however, stopped and gathered round Luke and Tom.

This accident had been watched with interest and surprise from the starting-point.

"Tom must be a good deal hurt," said Linton. "What could possibly have made him get in Luke's way?"

"I don't know," said the teacher, slowly; "it looks strange."

"It almost seemed as if he got in the way on purpose," Linton continued.

"He is a friend of Randolph Duncan, is he not?" asked the teacher, abruptly.

"They are together about all the time."

"Ha!" commented the teacher, as if struck by an idea. He didn't, however, give expression to the thought in his mind.

A minute more, and Randolph swept into the presence of the teacher.

"I believe I have won?" he said, with a smile of gratification on his countenance.

"You have come in first," said the teacher coldly.

"Luke was considerably ahead when he ran into Tom," suggested Linton.

"That's not my lookout," said Randolph, shrugging his shoulders.

"The point is that I have come in first."

"Tom Harper is a friend of yours, is he not?" asked the teacher.

"Oh, yes!" answered Randolph, indifferently.

"He seems to be a good deal hurt. It was very strange that he got in Luke's way."

"So it was," said Randolph, without betraying much interest.

"Will you lend me your skates, Randolph?" asked Linton.

"I should like to go out and see if I can help Tom in any way."

If any other boy than Linton had made the request, Randolph would have declined, but he wished, if possible, to add Linton to his list of friends, and graciously consented.

Before Linton could reach the spot, Tom had been assisted to his feet, and, with a dazed expression, assisted on either side by Luke and Edmund Blake, was on his way back to the starting-point.

"What made you get in my way, Tom?" asked Luke, puzzled.

"I don't know," answered Tom, sullenly.

"Are you much hurt?"

"I think my skull must be fractured," moaned Tom.

"Oh, not so bad as that," said Luke, cheerfully. "I've fallen on my head myself, but I got over it."

"You didn't fall as hard as I did," groaned Tom.

"No, I presume not; but heads are hard, and I guess you'll be all right in a few days."

Tom had certainly been severely hurt. There was a swelling on the back of his head almost as large as a hen's egg.

"You've lost the watch, Luke," said Frank Acken. "Randolph has got in first."

"Yes, I supposed he would," answered Luke, quietly.

"And there is Linton Tomkins coming to meet us on Randolph's skates."

"Randolph is sitting down on a log taking it easy. What is your loss, Luke, is his gain."

"Yes."

"I think he might have come back to inquire after you, Tom, as you are a friend of his."

Tom looked resentfully at Randolph, and marked his complacent look, and it occurred to him also that the friend he had risked so much to serve was very ungrateful. But he hoped now, at any rate, to get the watch, and thought it prudent to say nothing.

The boys had now reached the shore.

"Hope you're not much hurt, Tom?" said Randolph, in a tone of mild interest.

"I don't know but my skull is fractured," responded Tom, bitterly.

"Oh, I guess not. It's the fortune of war. Well, I got in first."

Randolph waited for congratulations, but none came. All the boys looked serious, and more than one suspected that there had been foul play. They waited for the teacher to speak.

CHAPTER III

RANDOLPH GETS THE WATCH

"It is true," said the teacher, slowly. "Randolph has won the race."

Randolph's face lighted up with exultation.

"But it is also evident," continued Mr. Hooper, "that he would not have succeeded but for the unfortunate collision between Luke Larkin and Tom Harper."

Here some of Luke's friends brightened up.

"I don't know about that," said Randolph. "At any rate, I came in first."

"I watched the race closely," said the teacher, "and I have no doubt on the subject. Luke had so great a lead that he would surely have won the race."

"But he didn't," persisted Randolph, doggedly.

"He did not, as we all know. It is also clear that had he not stopped to ascertain the extent of Tom's injuries he still might have won."

"That's so!" said half a dozen boys.

"Therefore I cannot accept the result as indicating the superiority of the successful contestant."

"I think I am entitled to the prize," said Randolph.

"I concede that; but, under the circumstances, I suggest to you that it would be graceful and proper to waive your claim and try the race over again."

The boys applauded, with one or two exceptions.

"I won't consent to that, Mr. Hooper," said Randolph, frowning.

"I've won the prize fairly and I want it."

"I am quite willing Randolph should have it, sir," said Luke. "I think I should have won it if I had not stopped with Tom, but that doesn't affect the matter one way or the other. Randolph came in first, as he says, and I think he is entitled to the watch."

"Then," said Mr. Hooper, gravely, "there is nothing more to be said.

Randolph, come forward and receive the prize."

Randolph obeyed with alacrity, and received the Waterbury watch from the hands of Mr. Hooper. The boys stood in silence and offered no congratulations.

"Now, let me say," said the teacher, "that I cannot understand why there was any collision at all. Tom Harper, why did you get in Luke's way?"

"Because I was a fool, sir," answered Tom, smarting from his injuries, and the evident indifference of Randolph, in whose cause he had incurred them.

"That doesn't answer my question. Why did you act like a fool, as you expressed it?"

"I thought I could get out of the way in time," stammered Tom, who did not dare to tell the truth.

"You had no other reason?" asked the teacher, searchingly.

"No, sir. What other reason could I have?" said Tom, but his manner betrayed confusion.

"Indeed, I don't know," returned the teacher, quietly. "Your action, however, spoiled Luke's chances and insured the success of Randolph."

"And got me a broken head," muttered Tom, placing his hand upon the swelling at the back of his head.

"Yes, you got the worst of it. I advise you to go home and apply cold water or any other remedy your mother may suggest."

Randolph had already turned away, meaning to return home. Tom joined him. Randolph would gladly have dispensed with his company, but had no decent excuse, as Tom's home lay in the same direction as his.

"Well, Randolph, you've won the watch," said Tom, when they were out of hearing of the other boys.

"Yes," answered Randolph, indifferently. "I don't care so much for that as for the ten dollars my father is going to give me."

"That's what I thought. You've got another watch, you know—more valuable."

"Well, what of it?" said Randolph, suspiciously.

"I think you might give me the Waterbury. I haven't got any."

"Why should I give it to you?" answered Randolph, coldly.

"Because but for me you wouldn't have won it, nor the ten dollars, neither."

"How do you make that out?"

"The teacher said so himself."

"I don't agree to it."

"You can't deny it. Luke was seven or eight rods ahead when I got in his way."

"Then it was lucky for me."

"It isn't lucky for me. My head hurts awfully."

"I'm very sorry, of course."

"That won't do me any good. Come, Randolph, give me the watch, like a good fellow."

"Well, you've got cheek, I must say. I want the watch myself."

"And is that all the satisfaction I am to get for my broken head?" exclaimed Tom, indignantly.

Randolph was a thoroughly mean boy, who, if he had had a dozen watches, would have wished to keep them all for himself.

"I've a great mind to tell Luke and the teacher of the arrangement between us."

"There wasn't any arrangement," said Randolph, sharply. "However, as I'm really sorry for you, I am willing to give you a quarter. There, now, don't let me hear any more about the matter."

He drew a silver quarter from his vest pocket and tendered it to Tom.

Tom Harper was not a sensitive boy, but his face flushed with indignation and shame, and he made no offer to take the money.

"Keep your quarter, Randolph Duncan," he said scornfully. "I think you're the meanest specimen of a boy that I ever came across. Any boy is a fool to be your friend. I don't care to keep company with you any longer."

"This to me!" exclaimed Randolph, angrily. "This is the pay I get for condescending to let you go with me."

"You needn't condescend any longer," said Tom, curtly, and he crossed to the other side of the street.

Randolph looked after him rather uneasily. After all, he was sorry to lose his humble follower.

"He'll be coming round in a day or two to ask me to take him back," he reflected. "I would be willing to give him ten cents more, but as for giving him the watch, he must think me a fool to part with that."

CHAPTER IV

LUKE'S NIGHT ADVENTURE

"I am sorry you have lost the watch, Luke," said the teacher, after Randolph's departure. "You will have to be satisfied with deserving it."

"I am reconciled to the disappointment, sir," answered Luke. "I can get along for the present without a watch."

Nevertheless, Luke did feel disappointed. He had fully expected to have the watch to carry home and display to his mother. As it was, he was in no hurry to go home, but remained for two hours skating with the other boys. He used his friend Linton's skates, Linton having an engagement which prevented his remaining.

It was five o'clock when Luke entered the little cottage which he called home. His mother, a pleasant woman of middle age, was spreading the cloth for supper. She looked up as he entered.

"Well, Luke?" she said inquiringly.

"I haven't brought home the watch, mother," he said. "Randolph Duncan won it by accident. I will tell you about it."

After he had done so, Mrs. Larkin asked thoughtfully. "Isn't it a little singular that Tom should have got in your way?"

"Yes; I thought so at the time."

"Do you think there was any arrangement between him and Randolph?"

"As you ask me, mother, I am obliged to say that I do."

"It was a very mean trick!" said Mrs. Larkin, resentfully.

"Yes, it was; but poor Tom was well punished for it. Why, he's got a bunch on the back of his head almost as large as a hen's egg."

"I don't pity him," said Mrs. Larkin.

"I pity him, mother, for I don't believe Randolph will repay him for the service done him. If Randolph had met with the same accident I am not prepared to say that I should have pitied him much."

"You might have been seriously injured yourself, Luke."

"I might, but I wasn't, so I won't take that into consideration.

However, mother, watch or no watch, I've got a good appetite.

I shall be ready when supper is."

Luke sat down to the table ten minutes afterward and proved his words good, much to his mother's satisfaction.

While he is eating we will say a word about the cottage. It was small, containing only four rooms, furnished in the plainest fashion. The rooms, however, were exceedingly neat, and presented an appearance of comfort. Yet the united income of Mrs. Larkin and Luke was very small. Luke received a dollar a week for taking care of the schoolhouse, but this income only lasted forty weeks in the year. Then he did odd jobs for the neighbors, and picked up perhaps as much more. Mrs. Larkin had some skill as a dressmaker, but Groveton was a small village, and there was another in the same line, so that her income from this source probably did not average more than three dollars a week. This was absolutely all that they had to live on, though there was no rent to pay; and the reader will not be surprised to learn that Luke had no money to spend for watches.

"Are you tired, Luke?" asked his mother, after supper.

"No, mother. Can I do anything for you?"

"I have finished a dress for Miss Almira Clark. I suppose she will want to wear it to church tomorrow. But she lives so far away, I don't like to ask you to carry it to her."

"Oh, I don't mind. It won't do me any harm."

"You will get tired."

"If I do, I shall sleep the better for it."

"You are a good son, Luke."

"I ought to be. Haven't I got a good mother?"

So it was arranged. About seven o'clock, after his chores were done—for there was some wood to saw and split—Luke set out, with the bundle under his arm, for the house of Miss Clark, a mile and a half away.

It was a commonplace errand, that on which Luke had started, but it was destined to be a very important day in his life. It was to be a turning-point, and to mark the beginning of a new chapter of experiences. Was it to be for good or ill? That we are not prepared to reveal. It will be necessary for the reader to follow his career, step by step, and decide for himself.

Of course, Luke had no thought of this when he set out. To him it had been a marked day on account of the skating match, but this had turned out a disappointment. He accomplished his errand, which occupied a considerable time, and then set out on his return. It was half-past eight, but the moon had risen and diffused a mild radiance over the landscape. Luke thought he would shorten his homeward way by taking a path through the woods. It was not over a quarter of a mile, but would shorten the distance by as much more. The trees were not close together, so that it was light enough to see. Luke had nearly reached the edge of the wood, when he overtook a tall man, a stranger in the neighborhood, who carried in his hand a tin box. Turning, he eyed Luke sharply.

"Boy, what's your name?" he asked.

"Luke Larkin," our hero answered, in surprise.

"Where do you live?"

"In the village yonder."

"Will you do me a favor?"

"What is it, sir?"

"Take this tin box and carry it to your home. Keep it under lock and key till I call for it."

"Yes, sir, I can do that. But how shall I know you again?"

"Take a good look at me, that you may remember me."

"I think I shall know you again, but hadn't you better give me a name?"

"Well, perhaps so," answered the other, after a moment's thought.

"You may call me Roland Reed. Will you remember?"

"Yes, sir."

"I am obliged to leave this neighborhood at once, and can't conveniently carry the box," explained the stranger. "Here's something for your trouble."

Luke was about to say that he required no money, when it occurred to him that he had no right to refuse, since money was so scarce at home. He took the tin box and thrust the bank-bill into his vest pocket. He wondered how much it was, but it was too dark to distinguish.

"Good night!" said Luke, as the stranger turned away.

"Good night!" answered his new acquaintance, abruptly.

If Luke could have foreseen the immediate consequences of this apparently simple act, and the position in which it would soon place him, he would certainly have refused to take charge of the box. And yet in so doing it might have happened that he had made a mistake. The consequences of even our simple acts are oftentimes far-reaching and beyond the power of human wisdom to foreknow.

Luke thought little of this as, with the box under his arm, he trudged homeward.

CHAPTER V

LUKE RECEIVES AN INVITATION

"What have you there, Luke?" asked Mrs. Larkin, as Luke entered the little sitting-room with the tin box under his arm.

"I met a man on my way home, who asked me to keep it for him."

"Do you know the man?" asked his mother, in surprise.

"No," answered Luke.

"It seems very singular. What did he say?"

"He said that he was obliged to leave the neighborhood at once, and could not conveniently carry the box."

"Do you think it contains anything of value?"

"Yes, mother. It is like the boxes rich men have to hold their stocks and bonds. I was at the bank one day, and saw a gentleman bring in one to deposit in the safe."

"I can't understand that at all, Luke. You say you did not know this man?"

"I never met him before."

"And, of course, he does not know you?"

"No, for he asked my name."

"Yet he put what may be valuable property in your possession."

"I think," said Luke, shrewdly, "he had no one else to trust it to. Besides, a country boy wouldn't be very likely to make use of stocks and bonds."

"No, that is true. I suppose the tin box is locked?"

"Yes, mother. The owner—he says his name is Roland Reed—wishes it put under lock and key."

"I can lock it up in my trunk, Luke."

"I think that will be a good idea."

"I hope he will pay you for your trouble when he takes away the tin box."

"He has already. I forgot to mention it," and Luke drew from his vest pocket, the bank-note he had thrust in as soon as received. "Why, it's a ten-dollar bill!" he exclaimed. "I wonder whether he knew he was giving me as much?"

"I presume so, Luke," said his mother, brightening up. "You are in luck!"

"Take it, mother. You will find a use for it."

"But, Luke, this money is yours."

"No, it is yours, for you are going to take care of the box."

It was, indeed, quite a windfall, and both mother and son retired to rest in a cheerful frame of mind, in spite of Luke's failure in the race.

"I have been thinking, Luke," said his mother, at the breakfast-table, "that I should like to have you buy a Waterbury watch out of this money. It will only cost three dollars and a half, and that is only one-third."

"Thank you, mother, but I can get along without the watch. I cared for it chiefly because it was to be a prize given to the best skater. All the boys know that I would have won but for the accident, and that satisfies me."

"I should like you to have a watch, Luke."

"There is another objection, mother. I don't want any one to know about the box or the money. If it were known that we had so much property in the house, some attempt might be made to rob us."

"That is true, Luke. But I hope it won't be long before you have a watch of your own."

When Luke was walking, after breakfast, he met Randolph Duncan, with a chain attached to the prize watch ostentatiously displayed on the outside of his vest. He smiled complacently, and rather triumphantly, when he met Luke. But Luke looked neither depressed nor angry.

"I hope your watch keeps good time, Randolph," he said.

"Yes; it hasn't varied a minute so far. I think it will keep as good time as my silver watch."

"You are fortunate to have two watches."

"My father has promised me a gold watch when I am eighteen," said Randolph, pompously.

"I don't know if I shall have any watch at all when I am eighteen."

"Oh, well, you are a poor boy. It doesn't matter to you."

"I don't know about that, Randolph. Time is likely to be of as much importance to a poor boy as to a rich boy."

"Oh, ah! yes, of course, but a poor boy isn't expected to wear a watch."

Here the conversation ended. Luke walked on with an amused smile on his face.

"I wonder how it would seem to be as complacent and self-satisfied as Randolph?" he thought.

"On the whole, I would rather be as I am."

"Good morning, Luke!"

It was a girl's voice that addressed him. Looking up, he met the pleasant glance of Florence Grant, considered by many the prettiest girl in Groveton. Her mother was a widow in easy circumstances, who had removed from Chicago three years before, and occupied a handsome cottage nearly opposite Mr. Duncan's residence. She was a general favorite, not only for her good looks, but on account of her pleasant manner and sweet disposition.

"Good morning, Florence," said Luke, with an answering smile.

"What a pity you lost the race yesterday!"

"Randolph doesn't think so."

"No; he is a very selfish boy, I am afraid."

"Did you see the race?" asked Luke.

"No, but I heard all about it. If it hadn't been for Tom Harper you would have won, wouldn't you?"

"I think so."

"All the boys say so. What could have induced Tom to get in the way?"

"I don't know. It was very foolish, however. He got badly hurt."

"Tom is a friend of Randolph," said Florence significantly.

"Yes," answered Luke; "but I don't think Randolph would stoop to such a trick as that."

"You wouldn't, Luke, but Randolph is a different boy.

Besides, I hear he was trying for something else."

"I know; his father offered him ten dollars besides."

"I don't see why it is that some fare so much better than others," remarked Florence, thoughtfully. "The watch and the money would have done you more good."

"So they would, Florence, but I don't complain. I may be better off some day than I am now."

"I hope you will, Luke," said Florence, cordially.

"I am very much obliged to you for your good wishes," said Luke, warmly.

"That reminds me, Luke, next week, Thursday, is my birthday, and I am to have a little party in the evening. Will you come?"

Luke's face flushed with pleasure. Though he knew Florence very well from their being schoolfellows, he had never visited the house. He properly regarded the invitation as a compliment, and as a mark of friendship from one whose good opinion he highly valued.

"Thank you, Florence," he said. "You are very kind, and I shall have great pleasure in being present. Shall you have many?"

"About twenty. Your friend Randolph will be there."

"I think there will be room for both of us," said Luke, with a smile.

The young lady bade him good morning and went on her way.

Two days later Luke met Randolph at the dry-goods store in the village.

"What are you buying?" asked Randolph, condescendingly.

"Only a spool of thread for my mother."

"I am buying a new necktie to wear to Florence Grant's birthday party," said Randolph, pompously.

"I think I shall have to do the same," said Luke, enjoying the surprise he saw expressed on Randolph's face.

"Are you going?" demanded Randolph, abruptly.

"Yes."

"Have you been invited?"

"That is a strange question," answered Luke, indignantly. "Do you think I would go without an invitation?"

"Really, it will be quite a mixed affair," said Randolph, shrugging his shoulders.

"If you think so, why do you go?"

"I don't want to disappoint Florence."

Luke smiled. He was privately of the opinion that the disappointment wouldn't be intense.

CHAPTER VI

PREPARING FOR THE PARTY

The evening of the party arrived. It was quite a social event at Groveton, and the young people looked forward to it with pleasant anticipation. Randolph went so far as to order a new suit for the occasion. He was very much afraid it would not be ready in time, but he was not to be disappointed. At five o'clock on Thursday afternoon it was delivered, and Randolph, when arrayed in it, surveyed himself with great satisfaction. He had purchased a handsome new necktie, and he reflected with pleasure that no boy present—not even Linton—would be so handsomely dressed as himself. He had a high idea of his personal consequence, but he was also of the opinion that "fine feathers make fine birds," and his suit was of fine cloth and stylish make.

"I wonder what the janitor will wear?" he said to himself, with a curl of the lip. "A pair of overalls, perhaps. They would be very appropriate, certainly."

This was just the question which was occupying Luke's mind. He did not value clothes as Randolph did, but he liked to look neat. Truth to tell, he was not very well off as to wardrobe. He had his every-day suit, which he wore to school, and a better suit, which he had worn for over a year. It was of mixed cloth, neat in appearance, though showing signs of wear; but there was one trouble. During the past year Luke had grown considerably, and his coat-sleeves were nearly two inches too short, and the legs of his trousers deficient quite as much. Nevertheless, he dressed himself, and he, too, surveyed himself, not before a pier-glass, but before the small mirror in the kitchen.

"Don't my clothes look bad, mother?" he asked anxiously.

"They are neat and clean, Luke," said his mother, hesitatingly.

"Yes, I know; but they are too small."

"You have been growing fast in the last year, Luke," said his mother, looking a little disturbed. "I suppose you are not sorry for that?"

"No," answered Luke, with a smile, "but I wish my coat and trousers had grown, too."

"I wish, my dear boy, I could afford to buy you a new suit."

"Oh, never mind, mother," said Luke, recovering his cheerfulness. "They will do for a little while yet. Florence didn't invite me for my clothes."

"No; she is a sensible girl. She values you for other reasons."

"I hope so, mother. Still, when I consider how handsomely Randolph will be dressed, I can't help thinking that there is considerable difference in our luck."

"Would you be willing to exchange with him, Luke?"

"There is one thing I wouldn't like to exchange."

"And what is that?"

"I wouldn't exchange my mother for his," said Luke, kissing the widow affectionately. "His mother is a cold, proud, disagreeable woman, while I have the best mother in the world."

"Don't talk foolishly, Luke," said Mrs. Larkin; but her face brightened, and there was a warm feeling in her heart, for it was very pleasant to her to hear Luke speak of her in this way.

"I won't think any more about it, mother," said Luke. "I've got a new necktie, at any rate, and I will make that do."

Just then there was a knock at the door, and Linton entered.

"I thought I would come round and go to the party with you, Luke," he said.

Linton was handsomely dressed, though he had not bought a suit expressly, like Randolph. He didn't appear to notice Luke's scant suit. Even if he had, he would have been too much of a gentleman to refer to it.

"I think we shall have a good time," he said. "We always do at Mrs. Grant's. Florence is a nice girl, and they know how to make it pleasant. I suppose we shall have dancing."

"I don't know how to dance," said Luke, regretfully. "I should like to have taken lessons last winter when Professor Bent had a class, but I couldn't afford it."

"You have seen dancing?"

"Oh, yes."

"It doesn't take much knowledge to dance a quadrille, particularly if you get on a side set. Come, we have an hour before it is time to go. Suppose I give you a lesson?"

"Do you think I could learn enough in that time to venture?"

"Yes, I do. If you make an occasional mistake it won't matter. So, if your mother will give us the use of the sitting-room, I will commence instructions."

Luke had looked at some dancers in the dining-room at the hotel, and was not wholly a novice, therefore. Linton was an excellent dancer, and was clear in his directions. It may also be said that Luke was a ready learner. So it happened at the end of the hour that the pupil had been initiated not only in the ordinary changes of the quadrille, but also in one contra dance, the Virginia Reel, which was a great favorite among the young people of Groveton.

"Now, I think you'll do, Luke," said Linton, when the lesson was concluded. "You are very quick to learn."

"You think I won't be awkward, Linton?"

"No, if you keep cool and don't get flustered."

"I am generally pretty cool. But I shall be rather surprised to see myself on the floor," laughed Luke.

"No doubt others will be, but you'll have a great deal more fun."

"So I shall. I don't like leaning against the wall while others are having a good time."

"If you could dance as well as you can skate you would have no trouble, Luke."

"No; that is where Randolph has the advantage of me."

"He is a very great dancer, though he can't come up to you in skating. However, dancing isn't everything. Dance as well as he may, he doesn't stand as high in the good graces of Florence Grant as he would like to do."

"I always noticed that he seemed partial to Florence."

"Yes, but it isn't returned. How about yourself, Luke?"

Luke, being a modest boy, blushed.

"I certainly think Florence a very nice girl," he said.

"I was sure of that," said Linton, smiling.

"But I don't want to stand in your way, Linton," continued Luke, with a smile.

"No danger, Luke. Florence is a year older than I am. Now, you are nearly two years older than she, and are better matched. So you needn't consider me in the matter."

Of course, this was all a joke. It was true, however, that of all the girls in Groveton, Luke was more attracted by Florence Grant than by any other, and they had always been excellent friends. It was well known that Randolph also was partial to the young lady, but he certainly had never received much encouragement.

Finally the boys got out, and were very soon at the door of Mrs. Grant's handsome cottage. It was large upon the ground, with a broad veranda, in the Southern style. In fact, Mrs. Grant was Southern by birth, and, erecting the house herself, had it built after the fashion of her Southern birthplace.

Most of the young visitors had arrived when Luke and Linton put in an appearance. They had been detained longer than they were aware by the dancing-lesson.

Randolph and Sam Noble were sitting side by side at one end of the room, facing the entrance.

"Look," said Randolph, with a satirical smile, to his companion, "there comes the young janitor in his dress suit. Just look at his coat-sleeves and the legs of his trousers. They are at least two inches too short. Any other boy would be ashamed to come to a party in such ridiculous clothes."

Sam looked and tittered. Luke's face flushed, for, though he did not hear the words, he guessed their tenor. But he was made to forget them when Florence came forward and greeted Linton and himself with unaffected cordiality.

CHAPTER VII

FLORENCE GRANT'S PARTY

Luke's uncomfortable consciousness of his deficiencies in dress soon passed off. He noticed the sneer on Randolph's face and heard Sam's laugh, but he cared very little for the opinion of either of them. No other in the company appeared to observe his poor dress, and he was cordially greeted by them all, with the two exceptions already named.

"The janitor ought to know better than to intrude into the society of his superiors," said Randolph to Sam.

"He seems to enjoy himself," said Sam.

This was half an hour after the party had commenced, when all were engaged in one of the plays popular at a country party.

"I am going to have a party myself in a short time," continued Randolph, "but I shall be more select than Florence in my invitations.

I shall not invite any working boys."

"Right you are, Randolph," said the subservient Sam. "I hope you won't forget me."

"Oh, no; I shall invite you. Of course, you don't move exactly in my circle, but, at any rate, you dress decently."

If Sam Noble had had proper pride he would have resented the insolent assumption of superiority in this speech, but he was content to play second fiddle to Randolph Duncan. His family, like himself, were ambitious to be on good terms with the leading families in the village, and did not mind an occasional snub.

"Shall you invite Tom Harper?" he asked.

He felt a little jealous of Tom, who had vied with him in flattering attentions to Randolph.

"No, I don't think so. Tom isn't here, is he?"

"He received an invitation, but ever since his accident he has been troubled with severe headaches, and I suppose that keeps him away."

"He isn't up to my standard," said Randolph, consequentially. "He comes of a low family."

"You and he have been together a good deal."

"Oh, I have found him of some service, but I have paid for it."

Yet this was the boy who, at his own personal risk, had obtained for Randolph the prize at the skating-match. Privately, Sam thought Randolph ungrateful, but he was, nevertheless, pleased at having distanced Tom in the favor of the young aristocrat.

After an hour, spent in various amusements, one of the company took her place at the piano, and dancing began.

"Now is your time, Luke," said Linton. "Secure a partner. It is only a quadrille."

"I feel a little nervous," said Luke. "Perhaps I had better wait till the second dance."

"Oh, nonsense! Don't be afraid."

Meanwhile, Randolph, with a great flourish, had invited Florence to dance.

"Thank you," she answered, taking his arm.

Randolph took his place with her as head couple. Linton and Annie Comray faced them. To Randolph's amazement, Luke and Fanny Pratt took their places as one of the side couples. Randolph, who was aware that Luke had never taken lessons, remarked this with equal surprise and disgust. His lip curled as he remarked to his partner: "Really, I didn't know that Luke Larkin danced."

"Nor I," answered Florence.

"I am sorry he is in our set."

"Why?" asked Florence, regarding him attentively.

"He will probably put us out by his clownish performance."

"Wouldn't it be well to wait and see whether he does or not?" responded Florence, quietly.

Randolph shrugged his shoulders.

"I pity his partner, at any rate," he said.

"I can't join in any such conversation about one of my guests," said Florence, with dignity.

Here the first directions were given, and the quadrille commenced.

Luke felt a little nervous, it must be confessed, and for that reason he watched with unusual care the movements of the head couples. He was quick to learn, and ordinarily cool and self-possessed. Besides, he knew that no one was likely to criticize him except Randolph. He saw the latter regarding him with a mocking smile, and this stimulated him to unusual carefulness. The result was that he went through his part with quite as much ease and correctness as any except the most practiced dancers. Florence said nothing, but she turned with a significant smile to Randolph. The latter looked disappointed and mortified. His mean disposition would have been gratified by Luke's failure, but this was a gratification he was not to enjoy.

The dance was at length concluded, and Luke, as he led his partner to a seat, felt that he had scored a success.

"May I have the pleasure of dancing with you next time, Florence?" asked Randolph.

"Thank you, but I should not think it right to slight my other guests," said the young lady.

Just then Luke came up and preferred the same request. He would not have done so if he had not acquitted himself well in the first quadrille.

Florence accepted with a smile.

"I was not aware that dancing was one of your accomplishments, Luke," she said.

"Nor I, till this evening," answered Luke. "There stands my teacher," and he pointed to Linton.

"You do credit to your teacher," said Florence. "I should not have known you were such a novice."

Luke was pleased with this compliment, and very glad that he had been spared the mortification of breaking down before the eyes of his ill-wisher, Randolph Duncan. It is hardly necessary to say that he did equally well in the second quadrille, though he and Florence were head couple.

The next dance was the Virginia Reel. Here Florence had Linton for a partner, and Luke secured as his own partner a very good dancer. From prudence, however, he took his place at some distance from the head, and by dint of careful watching he acquitted himself as well as in the quadrilles.

"Really, Luke, you are doing wonderfully well," said Linton, when the dance was over. "I can hardly believe that you have taken but one lesson, and that from so poor a teacher as I am."

"I couldn't have had a better teacher, Lin," said Luke. "I owe my success to you."

"Didn't you say Luke couldn't dance?" asked Sam Noble of Randolph, later in the evening.

"He can't," answered Randolph, irritably.

"He gets along very well, I am sure. He dances as well as I do."

"That isn't saying much," answered Randolph, with a sneer. He could not help sneering even at his friends, and this was one reason why no one was really attached to him.

Sam walked away offended.

The party broke up at half-past ten. It was an early hour, but late enough considering the youth of the participants. Luke accompanied home one of the girls who had no brother present, and then turned toward his own home.

He had nearly reached it, when a tall figure, moving from the roadside, put a hand on his shoulder.

"You are Luke Larkin?" said the stranger, in questioning tone.

"Yes, sir."

"Is the tin box safe?"

"Yes, sir."

"That is all—for the present," and the stranger walked quickly away.

"Who can he be," thought Luke, in wonder, "and why should he have trusted a complete stranger—and a boy?"

Evidently there was some mystery about the matter. Had the stranger come honestly by the box, or was Luke aiding and abetting a thief? He could not tell.

CHAPTER VIII

MISS SPRAGUE DISCOVERS A SECRET

About this time it became known to one person in the village that the Larkins had in their possession a tin box, contents unknown.

This is the way it happened:

Among the best-known village residents was Miss Melinda Sprague, a maiden lady, who took a profound interest in the affairs of her neighbors. She seldom went beyond the limits of Groveton, which was her world. She had learned the business of dressmaking, and often did work at home for her customers. She was of a curious and prying disposition, and nothing delighted her more than to acquire the knowledge of a secret.

One day—a few days after Florence Grant's party—Mrs. Larkin was in her own chamber. She had the trunk open, having occasion to take something from it, when, with a light step, Miss Sprague entered the room. The widow, who was on her knees before the trunk, turning, recognized the intruder, not without displeasure.

"I hope you'll excuse my coming in so unceremoniously, Mrs. Larkin," said Melinda, effusively. "I knocked, but you didn't hear it, being upstairs, and I took the liberty, being as we were so well acquainted, to come upstairs in search of you."

"Yes, certainly," answered Mrs. Larkin, but her tone was constrained.

She quickly shut the lid of the trunk. There was only one thing among its contents which she was anxious to hide, but that Miss Melinda's sharp eyes had already discovered. Unfortunately, the tin box was at one side, in plain sight.

"What on earth does Mrs. Larkin do with a tin box?" she asked herself, with eager curiosity. "Can she have property that people don't know of? I always thought she was left poor."

Melinda asked no questions. The sudden closing of the trunk showed her that the widow would not be inclined to answer any questions.

"I won't let her think I saw anything," she said to herself.

"Perhaps she'll get anxious and refer to it."

"We will go downstairs, Melinda," said Mrs. Larkin. "It will be more comfortable."

"If you have anything to do up here, I beg you won't mind me," said the spinster.

"No, I have nothing that won't wait."

So the two went down into the sitting-room.

"And how is Luke?" asked Miss Sprague, in a tone of friendly interest.

"Very well, thank you."

"Luke was always a great favorite of mine," continued the spinster.

"Such a manly boy as he is!"

"He is a great help to me," said Mrs. Larkin.

"No doubt he is. He takes care of the schoolhouse, doesn't he?"

"Yes."

"How much pay does he get?"

"A dollar a week."

"I hope he will be able to keep the position."

"What do you mean, Melinda?" asked the widow, not without anxiety.

"You know Doctor Snodgrass has resigned on the school committee, and Squire Duncan has been elected in his place."

"Well?"

"Mrs. Flanagan went to him yesterday to ask to have her son Tim appointed janitor in place of Luke, and I heard that she received considerable encouragement from the squire."

"Do they find any fault with Luke?" asked Mrs. Larkin, jealously.

"No, not as I've heard; but Mrs. Flanagan said Luke had had it for a year, and now some one else ought to have the chance."

"Are you quite sure of this, Melinda?"

Miss Sprague, though over forty, was generally called by her first name, not as a tribute to her youth, but to the fact of her being still unmarried.

"Yes, I am; I had it from Mrs. Flanagan herself."

"I don't think Tim would do as well as Luke. He has never been able to keep a place yet."

"Just so; but, of course, his mother thinks him a polygon." Probably Miss Sprague meant a paragon—she was not very careful in her speech, but Mrs. Larkin did not smile at her mistake. She was too much troubled at the news she had just heard. A dollar a week may seem a ridiculous trifle to some of my readers, but, where the entire income of the family was so small, it was a matter of some consequence.

"I don't think Luke has heard anything of this," said the widow. "He has not mentioned it to me."

"Perhaps there won't be any change, after all," said Melinda. "I am sure Tim Flanagan wouldn't do near as well as Luke."

Miss Melinda was not entirely sincere. She had said to Mrs. Flanagan that she quite agreed with her that Luke had been janitor long enough, and hoped Tim would get the place. She was in the habit of siding with the person she chanced to be talking with at the moment, and this was pretty well understood.

Luke, however, had heard of this threatened removal. For this, it may be said, Randolph was partly responsible. Just after Mrs. Flanagan's call upon the squire to solicit his official influence, Prince Duncan mentioned the matter to his son.

"How long has Luke Larkin been janitor at the schoolhouse?" he asked.

"About a year. Why do you ask?"

"Does he attend to the duties pretty well?"

"I suppose so. He's just fit to make fires and sweep the floor," answered Randolph, his lip curling.

"Mrs. Flanagan has been here to ask me to appoint her son Tim in Luke's place."

"You'd better do it, pa," said Randolph, quickly.

"Why? You say Luke is well fitted for the position."

"Oh, anybody could do as well, but Luke puts on airs. He feels too big for his position."

"I suppose Mrs. Larkin needs the money."

"So does Mrs. Flanagan," said Randolph.

"What sort of a boy is Tim? I have heard that he is lazy."

"Oh, I guess he'll do. Of course, I am not well acquainted with a boy like him," said the young aristocrat. "But I'm quite disgusted with Luke. He was at Florence Grant's party the other evening, and was cheeky enough to ask her to dance with him."

"Did she do so?"

"Yes; I suppose it was out of pity. He ought to have known better than to attend a party with such a suit. His coat and pantaloons were both too small for him, but he flourished around as if he were fashionably dressed."

Squire Duncan made no reply to his son's comments, but he felt disposed, for reasons of his own, to appoint Tim Flanagan. He was hoping to be nominated for representative at the next election, and thought the appointment might influence the Irish vote in his favor.

"Shall you appoint Tim, pa?" asked Randolph.

"I think it probable. It seems only right to give him a chance."

Rotation in office is a principle of which I approve."

"That's good!" thought Randolph, with a smile of gratification. "It isn't a very important place, but Luke will be sorry to lose it. The first time I see him I will give him a hint of it."

Randolph met Luke about an hour later in the village street. He did not often stop to speak with our hero, but this time he had an object in doing so.

CHAPTER IX

LUKE LOSES HIS POSITION

"Luke Larkin!"

Luke turned, on hearing his name called, and was rather surprised to see Randolph hastening toward him.

"How are you, Randolph?" he said politely.

"Where are you going?" asked Randolph, not heeding the inquiry.

"To the schoolhouse, to sweep out."

"How long have you been janitor?" asked Randolph, abruptly.

"About a year," Luke answered, in surprise.

"That's a good while."

Luke was puzzled. Why should Randolph feel such an interest, all at once, in his humble office?

"I suppose you know that my father is now on the school committee?"

Randolph continued.

"Yes; I heard so."

"He thinks of appointing Tim Flanagan janitor in your place."

Luke's face showed his surprise and concern. The loss of his modest income would, as he knew, be severely felt by his mother and himself. The worst of it was, there seemed no chance in Groveton of making it up in any other way.

"Did your father tell you this?" he asked, after a pause.

"Yes; he just told me," answered Randolph, complacently.

"Why does he think of removing me? Are there any complaints of the way I perform my duties?"

"Really, my good fellow," said Randolph, languidly, "I can't enlighten you on that point. You've held the office a good while, you know."

"You are very kind to tell me—this bad news," said Luke, pointedly.

"Oh, don't mention it. Good morning. Were you fatigued after your violent exercise at Florence Grant's party?"

"No. Were you?"

"I didn't take any," said Randolph, haughtily. "I danced—I didn't jump round."

"Thank you for the compliment. Is there anything more you wish to say to me?"

"No."

"Then good morning."

When Luke was left alone he felt serious. How was he going to make up the dollar a week of which he was to be deprived? The more he considered the matter the further he was from thinking anything. He was not quite sure whether the news was reliable, or merely invented by Randolph to tease and annoy him. Upon this point, however, he was soon made certain. The next day, as he was attending to his duties in the schoolhouse, Tim Flanagan entered.

"Here's a note for you, Luke," he said.

Luke opened the note and found it brief but significant. It ran thus:

"LUKE LARKIN: I have appointed the bearer, Timothy Flanagan, janitor in your place. You will give him the key of the schoolhouse, and he will at once assume your duties.

"PRINCE DUNCAN."

"Well, Tim," said Luke, calmly, "it appears that you are going to take my place."

"Yes, Luke, but I don't care much about it. My mother went to the squire and got me the job. The pay's a dollar a week, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"That isn't enough."

"It isn't very much, but there are not many ways of earning money here in Groveton."

"What do you have to do?"

"Make the fire every morning and sweep out twice a week.

Then there's dusting, splitting up kindlings, and so on."

"I don't think I'll like it. I ain't good at makin' fires."

"Squire Duncan writes you are to begin at once."

"Shure, I'm afraid I won't succeed."

"I'll tell you what, Tim. I'll help you along till you've got used to the duties. After a while they'll get easy for you."

"Will you now? You're a good feller, Luke. I thought you would be mad at losin' the job."

"I am not mad, but I am sorry. I needed the money, but no doubt you do, also. I have no grudge against you."

Luke had just started in his work. He explained to Tim how to do it, and remained with him till it was done.

"I'll come again to-morrow, Tim," he said. "I will get you well started, for I want to make it easy for you."

Tim was by no means a model boy, but he was warm-hearted, and he was touched by Luke's generous treatment.

"I say, Luke," he exclaimed, "I don't want to take your job. Say the word, and I'll tell mother and the squire I don't want it."

"No, Tim, it's your duty to help your mother. Take it and do your best."

On his way home Luke chanced to meet the squire, walking in his usual dignified manner toward the bank, of which he was president.

"Squire Duncan," he said, walking up to him in a manly way, "I would like to speak a word to you."

"Say on, young man."

"Tim Flanagan handed me a note from you this morning ordering me to turn over my duties as janitor to him."

"Very well?"

"I have done so, but I wish to ask you if I have been removed on account of any complaints that my work was not well done?"

"I have heard no complaints," answered the squire. "I appointed Timothy in your place because I approved of rotation in office.

It won't do any good for you to make a fuss about it."

"I don't intend to make a fuss, Squire Duncan," said Luke, proudly. "I merely wished to know if there were any charges against me."

"There are none."

"Then I am satisfied. Good morning, sir."

"Stay, young man. Is Timothy at the schoolhouse?"

"Yes, sir. I gave him some instruction about the work, and promised to go over to-morrow to help him."

"Very well."

Squire Duncan was rather relieved to find that Luke did not propose to make any fuss. His motive, as has already been stated, was a political one. He wished to ingratiate himself with Irish voters and obtain an election as representative; not that he cared so much for this office, except as a stepping-stone to something higher.

Luke turned his steps homeward. He dreaded communicating the news to his mother, for he knew that it would depress her, as it had him. However, it must be known sooner or later, and he must not shrink from telling her.

"Mother," he said, as he entered the room where she was sewing, "I have lost my job as janitor."

"I expected you would, Luke," said his mother, soberly.

"Who told you?" asked Luke, in surprise.

"Melinda Sprague was here yesterday and told me Tim Flanagan was to have it."

"Miss Sprague seems to know everything that is going on."

"Yes, she usually hears everything. Have you lost the place already?"

"Tim brought me a note this morning from Squire Duncan informing me that I was removed and he was put in my place."

"It is going to be a serious loss to us, Luke," said Mrs. Larkin, gravely.

"Yes, mother, but I am sure something will turn up in its place."

Luke spoke confidently, but it was a confidence he by no means felt.

"It is a sad thing to be so poor as we are," said Mrs. Larkin, with a sigh.

"It is very inconvenient, mother, but we ought to be glad that we have perfect health. I am young and strong, and I am sure I can find some other way of earning a dollar a week."

"At any rate, we will hope so, Luke."

Luke went to bed early that night. The next morning, as they were sitting at breakfast, Melinda Sprague rushed into the house and sank into a chair, out of breath.

"Have you heard the news?"

"No. What is it?"

"The bank has been robbed! A box of United States bonds has been taken, amounting to thirty or forty thousand dollars!"

Luke and his mother listened in amazement.

CHAPTER X

MELINDA MAKES MISCHIEF

"Where did you hear this, Melinda?" asked Mrs. Larkin.

"I called on Mrs. Duncan just now—I was doing some work for her—and she told me. Isn't it awful?"

"Was the bank broken open last night, Miss Sprague?" asked Luke.

"I don't know when it was entered."

"I don't understand it at all," said Luke, looking puzzled.

"All I know is that, on examining the safe, the box of bonds was missing."

"Then it might have been taken some time since?"

"Yes, it might."

The same thought came to Luke and his mother at once. Was the mysterious stranger the thief, and had he robbed the bank and transferred the tin box to Luke? It might be so, but, as this happened more than a fortnight since, it would have been strange in that case that the box had not been missed sooner at the bank. Luke longed to have Miss Sprague go, that he might confer with his mother on this subject. He had been told to keep the possession of the box secret, and therefore he didn't wish to reveal the fact that he had it unless it should prove to be necessary.

"Were any traces of the robber discovered?" he added.

"Not that I heard of; but I pity the thief, whoever he is," remarked Melinda. "When he's found out he will go to jail, without any doubt."

"I can't understand, for my part, how an outside party could open the safe," said Mrs. Larkin. "It seems very mysterious."

"There's many things we can't understand," said Melinda, shaking her head sagely. "All crimes are mysterious."

"I hope they'll find out who took the bonds," said the widow.

"Did they belong to the bank?"

"No, they belonged to a gentleman in Cavendish, who kept them in the bank, thinking they would be safer than in his own house. Little did he know what iniquity there was even in quiet country places like Groveton."

"Surely, Melinda, you don't think any one in Groveton robbed the bank?" said Mrs. Larkin.

"There's no knowing!" said Miss Sprague, solemnly. "There's those that we know well, or think we do, but we cannot read their hearts and their secret ways."

"Have you any suspicions, Miss Sprague?" asked Luke, considerably amused at the portentous solemnity of the visitor.

"I may and I may not, Luke," answered Melinda, with the air of one who knew a great deal more than she chose to tell; "but it isn't proper for me to speak at present."

Just then Miss Sprague saw some one passing who, she thought, had not heard of the robbery, and, hastily excusing herself, she left the house.

"What do you think, Luke?" asked his mother, after the spinster had gone. "Do you think the box we have was taken from the bank?"

"No, I don't, mother. I did think it possible at first, but it seems very foolish for the thief, if he was one, to leave the box in the same village, in the charge of a boy. It would have been more natural and sensible for him to open it, take out the bonds, and throw it away or leave it in the woods."

"There is something in that," said Mrs. Larkin, thoughtfully. "There is certainly a mystery about our box, but I can't think it was stolen from the bank."

Meanwhile, Miss Sprague had formed an important resolve. The more she thought of it, the more she believed the missing box was the one of which she had caught a glimpse of in Mrs. Larkin's trunk. True, Luke and the widow had not betrayed that confusion and embarrassment which might have been anticipated when the theft was announced, but she had noticed the look exchanged between them, and she was sure it meant something. Above all, her curiosity was aroused to learn how it happened that a woman as poor as the Widow Larkin should have a tin box in her trunk, the contents of which might be presumed to be valuable.

"I don't like to get Luke and his mother into trouble," Melinda said to herself, "but I think it my duty to tell all I know. At any rate, they will have to tell how the box came into their possession, and what it contains. I'll go to the bank and speak to Squire Duncan."

Prince Duncan had called an extra meeting of the directors to consider the loss which had been discovered, and they were now seated in the bank parlor. There were three of them present, all of whom resided in Groveton—Mr. Manning, the hotelkeeper; Mr. Bailey, a storekeeper, and Mr. Beane, the Groveton lawyer.

Miss Sprague entered the bank and went up to the little window presided over by the paying-teller.

"Is Squire Duncan in the bank?" she asked.

"Yes, Miss Sprague."

"I would like to speak with him."

"That is impossible. He is presiding at a directors' meeting."

"Still, I would like to see him," persisted Melinda.

"You will have to wait," said the paying-teller, coldly. He had no particular respect or regard for Miss Sprague, being quite familiar with her general reputation as a gossip and busybody.

"I think he would like to see me," said Melinda, nodding her head with mysterious significance. "There has been a robbery at the bank, hasn't there?"

"Do you know anything about it, Miss Sprague?" demanded the teller, in surprise.

"Maybe I do, and maybe I don't; but I've got a secret to tell to Squire Duncan."

"I don't believe it amounts to anything," thought the teller. "Well, I will speak to Squire Duncan," he said aloud.

He went to the door of the directors' room, and after a brief conference with Prince Duncan he returned with the message, "You may go in, Miss Sprague."

She nodded triumphantly, and with an air of conscious importance walked to the bank parlor. Prince Duncan and his associates were sitting round a mahogany table.

Melinda made a formal curtsy and stood facing them.

"I understand, Miss Sprague, that you have something to communicate to us in reference to the loss the bank has just sustained," said the squire, clearing his throat.

"I thought it my duty to come and tell you all I knew, Squire Duncan and gentlemen," said Melinda.

"Quite right, Miss Sprague. Now, what can you tell us?"

"The article lost was a tin box, was it not?"

"Yes."

"About so long?" continued Miss Sprague, indicating a length of about fifteen inches.

"Yes."

"What was there in it?"

"Government bonds."

"I know where there is such a box," said Miss Sprague, slowly.

"Where? Please be expeditious, Miss Sprague."

"A few days since I was calling on Mrs. Larkin—Luke's mother—just happened in, as I may say, and, not finding her downstairs, went up into her chamber. I don't think she heard me, for when

I entered the chamber and spoke to her she seemed quite flustered. She was on her knees before an open trunk, and in that trunk I saw the tin box."

The directors looked at each other in surprise, and Squire Duncan looked undeniably puzzled.

"I knew the box was one such as is used to hold valuable papers and bonds," proceeded Melinda, "and, as I had always looked on the widow as very poor, I didn't know what to make of it."

"Did you question Mrs. Larkin about the tin box?" asked Mr. Beane.

"No; she shut the trunk at once, and I concluded she didn't want me to see it."

"Then you did not say anything about it?"

"No; but I went in just now to tell her about the bank being robbed."

"How did it seem to affect her?" asked Mr. Bailey.

"She and Luke—Luke was there, too—looked at each other in dismay.

It was evident that they were thinking of the box in the trunk."

Melinda continued her story, and the directors were somewhat impressed.

"I propose," said Mr. Manning, "that we get out a search-warrant and search Mrs. Larkin's cottage. That box may be the one missing from the bank."

CHAPTER XI

LUKE IS ARRESTED

Just after twelve o'clock, when Luke was at home eating dinner, a knock was heard at the front door.

"I'll go, mother," said Luke, and he rose from the table, and, going into the entry, opened the outer door.

His surprise may be imagined when he confronted Squire Duncan and the gentlemen already mentioned as directors of the Groveton bank.

"Did you wish to see mother?" he asked.

"Yes; we have come on important business," said Squire Duncan, pompously.

"Walk in, if you please."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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