

FRANCIS FINN

CUPID OF
CAMPION

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CHAPTER I

In which Clarence Esmond places himself in the hands of the Bright-eyed Goddess of Adventure, and is entrusted by that Deity to the care of a Butcher's Boy

On a morning early in September, the sun was shining brightly upon the village of McGregor. Nestled in a coulée between two hills, one rising squarely and rock-ribbed, lacking only the illusion of windows to give it the appearance of a ruined castle, the other to the northwest, sloping gently upwards, and crowned at the summit with a number of villas, McGregor, running down to the Mississippi River, was as pretty a town as Iowa could boast.

On this bright particular morning, an overgrown youth was sitting on the boat-landing, his feet dangling above the water, his face glooming darkly. Master Abe Thompson, age sixteen, was troubled in spirit.

He was homeless. He had lost his position, that of a butcher's boy, just a little after sunrise. It arose out of a difference of seventy-five cents in the butcher's accounts. Abe had been told under penalty of having "his face shoved in" never to darken the doors of the butcher-shop again. At the tender age of twelve Abe had left his home unostentatiously and without serving notice, and ever since had spent his time in losing jobs up and down the river. The trouble with Abe was that he never could resist "obeying that impulse," no matter what that impulse might be. He had been blessed, if one may say so, with an obedient mother and an indifferent father. The discipline of the public school which Abe was supposed to attend might have done something for the boy had he been present for so much as six days hand-running. But Abe had early made a successful course in the art of dodging duty. He was by way of joining that vast army of the unemployed who are the ornament of our country roads in summer and of our back alleys in winter. Abe was entitled to graduate with honors in the ranks of those who have learned the gentle art entitled "How not to do it." At the present moment Abe Thompson was in darkest mood. His soul just now was fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils. His gloomy eyes moved vacantly over the waters shimmering in the sun. Suddenly his air of listlessness disappeared, his eyes grew tense. Among the boats around the landing was one small skiff riding high on the water, in which (for some people will be careless) lay a pair of oars and a paddle.

Abe was still gazing at this boat and its contents with greedy eyes when there came upon his ears the sound of a sweet, piercing soprano voice, giving, to whoso should wish to hear, the ineffable chorus of an almost forgotten music-hall melody:

"Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay,
Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay,
Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay,
Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay!"

Abe turned to discover coming blithely down street – the one street running through McGregor – a gay lad of about fourteen years of age, dressed in an immaculate white sailor-suit. The approaching youth was walking, skipping, and jumping in such wise that it was hard to define what he was doing at any particular moment. He was rather small for his years, but apparently of muscle all compact.

Gracefulness characterized his wildest and most impetuous motions. He was a perfect blonde, and his hair, bobbed after the fashion of little girls of ten or eleven, gave him a somewhat feminine aspect, further emphasized by his cream-and-rose complexion. A close observer, studying his pretty features, might indeed have inferred from his tip-tilted nose and his square chin that the youngster was not safely to be treated as a mollycoddle. Abe was not a close observer.

“I say,” he broke out, as the pretty boy drew near, “what sort of a lingo is that you’re giving us? You don’t call that American, do you?”

“Good morning, fair sir,” replied the boy, raising his sailor hat and bowing elaborately, “may I have the pleasure of your acquaintance?”

“What lingo was that you was a-singing?”

“The language, fair sir, of adventure.”

Abe frowned, and spat into the river.

“Permit me,” continued the newcomer, “to introduce myself. I have the honor of informing you that my name is Clarence Esmond. What is yours?”

“I’m Abe Thompson. What are you looking for this morning?” continued Abe, as he noticed that Clarence was gazing longingly at the craft moored at the river’s edge.

“Who? – me?” queried the debonair youth. He drew himself erect, threw back his head, raised his eyes, and with a dramatic gesture continued: “I am looking for the bright-eyed goddess of adventure!”

“Oh, talk American!”

“I will, gentle youth. I am looking for fun; and if something happens, so much the better.”

“Do you want to go anywheres?”

“I want to go everywhere. I’d like to be on the ocean, running a liner; I’d like to be a cowboy, dodging Indians; I’d like to be a soldier in the trenches, and a sailor in a submarine. In fact, I’d like to be everywhere at the same time.”

“You can’t do that, you boob,” said Abe with strong disfavor on his rugged face.

“I am one of those fellows,” continued Clarence, “who wants to eat his cake and have it.”

“Oh, jiminy!” roared Abe, breaking into a loud laugh, “you want to eat your cake and you want to have it at the same time?”

“That’s it exactly. I want to eat my cake, and at the same time have it.”

“Oh, jiminy! Why, do you know what you are?” asked Abe laughing with conscious superiority.

“Won’t you please tell me?”

“Why, you are an idiot, a plumb-born idiot.”

“Oh, am I?” and as Clarence asked the question his face beamed with joy.

“You sure are.”

“I suppose,” continued Clarence, “that you think I am one of those chaps who hasn’t got enough sense to come in out of the rain when it is raining.”

“You’re the dumbdest idiot I ever met,” said the frank butcher’s boy.

“I guess you are right,” assented the lad beamingly. “Lots of people have told me I am an idiot. And I never do come in out of the rain when it is raining. I use a cravenette.”

“Oh, Lord!” cried Abe, all his crude humor stirred to scornful laughter, “what an awful ass you are!”

“Thank you so much,” answered Clarence glowing with delight. “It’s a pleasure to meet a fellow who says just what he thinks.”

“Any more like you at home?”

“I happen to be the only child,” answered Clarence. “I am the light of my mother’s eyes. There are no others like me.”

“I should say not! Say, who let you loose?”

“That reminds me,” said Clarence, his smile leaving him. “I’ve got to be back at noon, and it’s nearly eight-thirty now. Say, do you know this river?”

“I should say I do. Do you want me to row you?”

“Is there any place around here worth seeing?”

“Sure! Pictured Rocks! Everybody goes there. It’s a mile down the river.”

“Suppose I hire a boat, would you mind acting as my guide – salary, fifty cents?”

“I can do better than that,” said Abe, becoming all of a sudden obsequious. “That’s my boat down there – that little boat with the oars – and I’ll take you to Pictured Rocks and bring you back for one dollar. That’s fair enough, ain’t it?”

Abe was young and his imagination undeveloped. Had he been older, he would have tried to sell the boat and a few houses nearest the river bank, all together, for a slightly larger sum.

“That’s a go!” cried Clarence, running for the boat, jumping in and seating himself to row. “Come on quick. Cast off, old boy.”

The boat was locked to a post. Abe was accustomed to facing such difficulties. He broke the lock under Clarence’s unobservant eyes, and, shoving the skiff off and jumping in, seated himself in the stern.

“You row and I’ll steer,” he said, as he picked up the paddle.

Clarence dipped the oars into the water, and with a few strokes the two started down the river with the swift current. It was a beautiful morning, clear and crisp. The river, a vast lake in width with islands and inlets and lagoons and streams between the Iowa and the Wisconsin shores, was dancing in the sunlight. Birds, late though the season was, made the air gay. On the Wisconsin shore the solemn hills, noble and varied, stood sentinel over the smiling valleys of golden grain which ran almost to the river’s banks; on the Iowa side, a twin range came down almost to the water. The river was clear and, despite the current, had all the appearance of a vast lake.

The air and the sunshine and the scenery entered into Clarence’s soul.

“Hurrah!” he cried, brandishing an oar. “All aboard to meet the bright-eyed goddess of adventure!”

And the bright-eyed goddess was not deaf to the summons of the thoughtless lad. The goddess was awaiting him. The meeting was to be very soon, and the interview a long one. And it is because of the meeting that this veracious story is written.

CHAPTER II

In which the Steamer St. Paul and a tramp lend their aid to the Bright-eyed Goddess

“I say,” observed Abe presently, “you can row some!”

“What do you think I’ve been going to school for?” retorted the dainty youngster, as with even and strong stroke he sent the boat flying down the current.

“What are you giving us? There ain’t no rowing-schools.”

“It may be, fair sir,” answered Clarence, “that there be no schools with that precise name; at the same time, I don’t mind telling you that for the past three years I’ve been attending Clermont Academy in New York State, a young gentleman’s boarding school, as the prospectus says, where for the trifling sum of nine hundred dollars a year, cash in advance semi-annually, I have learned to play handball, baseball, football, lawn tennis, basket-ball, hurdling, shot-throwing, swimming, skating, and a few other little things like that.”

“You call that a school?” exclaimed Abe, his large nose curling in disdain.

“Everybody calls it a school,” answered Clarence, blithely, “even the babes in their mothers’ arms.”

“What about readin’, ’ritin’ and ’rithmetic?” continued the incredulous steersman.

“Oh, we’ve got all that, too; if we want that sort of thing. We can’t be running and jumping all day, you know.”

“That’s a measly school,” continued Abe.

“Awful sorry you don’t like it. Of course, you don’t have to come.”

“No school for me,” said Abe emphatically. “Say, why ain’t you at school now?”

“Because my ma and my pa are over here visiting. They’re going West as far as the coast, and my pa’s taking me along so’s he’ll know me next time he sees me. And my ma says she’s real anxious to make my acquaintance.”

“You don’t mean to say you don’t know your own pa and your own ma?” cried the scandalized Abe.

“Well, I haven’t seen ’em ever since I was eleven. A boy changes a good deal in three years. My ma didn’t change so much. But she says she’d hardly know me. I say, this river looks fine! How is it for swimming?”

“Mighty bad,” answered Abe, his power of invention beginning to stir. “If you don’t know this river, you’re just as like as not to get drowned. It looks all right,” continued the young vagabond, warming up to his theme; “but it’s full of sink-holes and places that suck you down. Don’t you ever go in this river unless you know some one who can show you a safe spot. You see that little house there, with the red roof?”

“It appears to me I do.”

“Well, the other day, three guys who didn’t know nothing about this river went in swimming just in front of it. All three went down, and they never come up no more.”

“What!” cried Clarence, resting on his oars and losing something of his color.

“Yes, sir,” Abe affirmed, regretting now that he hadn’t made it six or seven boys. “And their fathers all came here to see what could be done, and one of them went in and he was drowned too. It’s a mighty dangerous river in these parts.”

“That settles it,” said Clarence, resuming his rowing with a sigh. “I’ll not take the swim today that I promised myself.”

“Oh, I can fix that,” said Abe, “I know a place right down by Pictured Rocks where a hen wouldn’t mind swimming; it’s so safe. Oh, look!” he continued, “here comes the St. Paul.”

“What? Where?” cried Clarence, once more relinquishing the oars and craning his neck. “By George! That’s worth seeing. Where is it from?”

“From St. Louis. It’s a passenging boat and is going to St. Paul.”

The approaching steamboat, just turned a bend, was quite near them.

“Aha!” cried Clarence, picking up the oars and becoming melodramatic. “There she is! I can see her. Somewhere, Master Abe, in that boat is the bright-eyed goddess of adventure, and I’m going to meet her.” As he spoke he set vigorously to rowing out towards mid-stream.

“Say, you boob,” roared Abe, dropping his paddle in dismay: “You’re going to get run down. Do you want to get drowned?”

“Not at all. Now just sit tight, don’t rock the boat, and let me do it all by myself. We’re going to shoot right across her bow. You just leave it to me. We can do it easily.”

They were now quite near the steamer and it looked to Abe, as it looked to the captain of the boat, as though the little craft were almost certain of being run down. Abe fell back, his cheeks grew white, his teeth chattered; he turned his face from the approaching vessel. Meantime, there was a whistle, a clanging of bells, and hurried movements on the St. Paul. As the forward deck filled with excited passengers, the steamboat came almost to a full stop; observing which Mister Clarence, who had been rowing with all his might and main, lessened his efforts most perceptibly, and gazed enquiringly at the big boat.

“Say, do you know, Abe, I believe that boat’s in trouble? Maybe they want our help.”

Abe sat up and once more took notice.

“You young jackass!” roared the captain leaning as far as it was safe over the deck.

“Which one of us do you mean, sir?” asked Clarence.

“*You*, gosh blame you! *You*, drat your hide! If there were more idiots on this river like you, I’d give it up and take to farming. I’ve stopped my boat on your account.”

“Go right ahead, sir. I didn’t want you to stop.”

Clarence beamed kindly on the captain, smiled upon the passengers, and doffed his cap. There came a cheer from the deck, Clarence hummed “Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay,” and presently the two adventurers had the river to themselves.

“He said you were a young jackass,” said Abe presently.

“Yes, I noticed.”

“Well, you are.”

“Why, I could have made that easily. There was no danger at all. He had no business to stop that old boat of his. I didn’t ask him to. And then he goes and calls me names.”

“He said you were an idiot,” pursued Abe.

“That’s nothing. I’ve heard that before. Nearly all my friends say things like that to me.”

“I’ll not go rowing with you again, you big boob.”

“You’ll not get the chance. I’m off for the Coast at noon-time.”

“Here we are,” cried Abe presently, steering towards the shore. “This is the place that leads up to Pictured Rocks.”

“Hurrah for Pictured Rocks!” shouted Clarence, bringing with a few swift strokes the boat well up on the beach. “And what are Pictured Rocks anyhow?”

“The folks round here,” answered Abe, as he took the oars from the boat and carefully hid them in the undergrowth near the shore, “calls ’em Pictured Rocks, because the rocks up this here hill instead of being white like other rocks is in layers of red and orange and blue and all sorts of colors between, and they says that the Injuns used to come here and use the stuff of the rocks for war-paint.”

“Well,” said Clarence, blithely turning a few cartwheels on reaching the bank, “I’m ready for your Pictured Rocks. Do you think I’ll find the bright-eyed goddess of adventure amongst them?”

“I dunno. Come right along; we can get up there in about fifteen minutes.”

But the bright-eyed goddess of adventure was nearer than Clarence fancied. She took, on this occasion, the guise of a tramp, who, making his way along the railroad ties of the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul towards McGregor and chancing to see a youth in a white sailor-suit, thought it worth his while to pause upon his weary journey.

Abe led the way. He passed the tracks unnoticed by the road adventurer. Clarence, pausing at every other step to take in the view, presently followed.

“Say, young feller, could I say a word to you?”

“Make it a dozen, while you’re about it,” answered Clarence, gazing at the long-haired, unshorn, shabby, middle-aged man before him.

“I ain’t had nothing to eat since last night. Could you spare me a dime?”

“With pleasure,” responded the youth, taking out as he spoke a handful of coin, selecting a quarter and handing it over to the hungry one.

The sight of money brings a strange light into certain eyes. The tramp’s were of that kind.

“You’re carrying too much money for a kid. Give me some more,” he said.

“Skiddoo! Hump yourself!” yelled Abe from a safe distance.

Clarence was looking hard at his new acquaintance. There was no mistaking the glint in the fellow’s eye. The beggar had developed into the highwayman.

“Excuse me!” said Clarence, and turning tail he dashed down the track.

The tramp had a good pair of legs in excellent condition from much travel. He was quick to the pursuit.

“Run faster!” roared Abe, content to give advice. “He’s catching up.”

Clarence had a start of nearly ten yards; but before he had gone far, it grew clear to him that his pursuer was no mean runner. Nearer and nearer drew the tramp. The race could not last much longer.

Suddenly Clarence stopped, whirled around, and before his pursuer could realize the turn of events, plunged through the air, landing with both arms about the astounded man’s knees. The tramp went down with a suddenness to which few men are accustomed, and, assisted by a quick shove from the boy’s agile arm, started rolling from the tracks down an incline of some fifteen feet. By the time he had arisen to a sitting posture below and passed his hand over the several bruises on his head, the boy was back with Abe and lustily making his way up the hillside.

The tramp saw him, no more; but as he rose to resume his wearied journey, he heard a blithe voice far up the hillside carolling forth:

“Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay,
Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay,
Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay,
Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay!”

CHAPTER III

In which Clarence and his companion, the Butcher's Boy, discourse, according to their respective lights, on poetry and other subjects, ending with a swim that was never taken and the singing of Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay for the last time

“That was great,” said Abe, enthusiastically, as he led the way up a steep and winding path. “You dished that feller easy. How did you do it?”

“I just tackled him.”

“What’s that?”

“Don’t you know anything about football?”

“Naw!”

“Well, when a chap on the other side has the ball and is running up the field with it and you want to stop him, you make a dive at his knees and clasp your arms right above ’em; and the faster he’s going, the harder he’ll fall.”

“I’d like to learn that game,” remarked Abe with some show of enthusiasm.

“What a nice little stream that is,” continued Clarence, waving his hand towards a tiny streamlet beside their upward path. “I like the sound of running water, don’t you? There ought to be a waterfall somewhere about here.”

“There is; it’s funder up.”

“Are you fond of Tennyson, Abe?”

“Eh? What’s that? Another game?”

“He’s a poet.”

“A what?”

“A poet: he writes verses, you know.”

“I don’t read nothin’.”

“Well, listen to this:

“I come from haunts of coot and hern,
I make a sudden sally
And sparkle out among the fern
To bicker down a valley!”

“Sally is a girl’s name,” said Abe, whose brows had grown wrinkled from concentrated attention.

“I don’t think you quite got the idea of those lines,” said Clarence suavely. “But just listen to this:

“I chatter, chatter as I flow
To join the brimming river;
For men may come and men may go,
But I go on forever.”

“Say that again, will you?”

Clarence obligingly and with some attention to elocution repeated the famous stanza.

“Who said that?” asked Abe.

“Tennyson.”

“What was he chattering for?”

“He wasn’t chattering; it was the brook that chattered.”

“Well, why didn’t he say so, then? He said, ‘*I chatter.*’”

“Oh, hang it! He put those words into the mouth of the brook.”

“But a brook ain’t got no mouth.”

“Yes; but he put himself in place of the brook. He just imagined what the brook would say, if it could talk. Listen once more.” And for the third time and still more melodramatically Clarence gave voice to the quatrain.

“Tennysee was a fool. The idea of a feller taking himself to be a brook. Why, if he *was* a brook, he couldn’t talk anyhow.”

“Abe, you’re hopeless.”

“See here, don’t you call me no names.”

“You’re a literalist!”

“You’re another, and you’re a liar!”

“Oh!” cried Clarence, gurgling with delight, “here are the Pictured Rocks, sure enough. And a cave!”

Beside the stream, a vast bed of rocks in veritable war-paint, hollowed at the centre into a rather large cavern, greeted the eyes of the astonished youth. The colors in horizontal layers were gay and well-defined, red being predominant.

“This is where the Injuns used to come for their paint,” explained Abe, forgetting his grievance in the pleasure of being a cicerone. “They used to come down this path and daub themselves up, and then cross the river to Wisconsin, and shoot the Injuns on the other side with their bows and arrers.”

Clarence was examining the surface of the rock. It was easy to rub away the outer part of the soft layers.

“Say, Abe, let me paint you. I think you’d make a fine Indian.” And Clarence with a handful of red sand sprang smilingly at his guide.

“You go on and paint yourself,” growled Abe, backing quickly. As a result, he missed his footing, slipped and fell into the tiny stream, where he sat for several seconds before it occurred to him to rise.

“Ha, ha, ha!” screamed Clarence. His silvery laughter, clear and sweet, was caught up by the echoes and came back translated into the merriment of elfland.

Much as the echoes seemed to appreciate his burst of glee, it did not appeal at all to the wrathful guide. His face had grown red as a turkey-cock’s; his fists doubled, and he was on the point of assaulting the unsuspecting Clarence.

“Oh, hark, oh, hear!” cried Clarence with a gesture and in a voice so high and ringing that Abe was startled, and paused in the execution of his revenge.

“Did you hear ‘em?”

“Hear what?”

“The echoes. They’re the horns of elfland, you know.”

“The what!” exclaimed Abe. He had a dread of the unknown word.

“The horns of elfland faintly blowing.”

“You’re blowing yourself. Here you” – Abe stooped, picked up a small twig and placed it on one shoulderband of his blue overalls – “Knock that chip off’n my shoulder!”

Clarence surveyed his offended companion severely.

“Abe, come on; let’s go up. You know, I owe you a dollar. If you were to put one of my beautiful blue eyes into mourning, I think I’d claim that dollar for damages and then where would you be?”

“Well, then, you stop using them big words.”

“All right, Abe.”

With an occasional shout to set the wild echoes flying, the two pursued their steep upward way. For the most part, there was no conversation.

When they reached the waterfall, nothing would do Clarence but at the risk of life and limb to get under the hollow rock, over which fell the water in a wide but thin stream, and, extending his head and opening his mouth, catch what drops he could as they fell.

“Abe!” he suddenly said, “I think I know now where the goddess of adventure lives.”

“Eh? What?”

“If ever I wish to communicate with that bright-eyed lady, I’ll address my letters thus:

“To the Goddess of Adventure,
The Bright-eyed Waterfall,
Pictured Rocks,
Iowa, U. S. A.”

“You drop that goddess of adventure. I don’t believe in no such foolishness as that.”

“All right, Abe, if you don’t believe in her, she doesn’t exist. Now for the top.”

Up they went, with quick steps and, as regards Clarence, steady breathing. Abe was puffing. Loose living had reached out into the future and gained for him the “far off interest of years.” Abe belonged to that steadily increasing class of Americans who, growing up without recognition of any law of God or man are destined to be short-lived in the land.

Presently, they were at the summit.

“Look,” cried Abe, his sulkiness yielding momentarily to a spark of enthusiasm. He led the way forward a few feet and paused.

“Oh-h-h-h-!” cried Clarence.

Far, far below, the river rolled its flashing length, the broad river, silvery in the sun, the broad river with its green wooded islands, its lagoons, its lesser streams, its lakes. To the southeast another body of water, yet more silvery, emptied itself into the Mississippi. Beside both and around both and all the way that eye could see up and down the Mississippi River rose the full-bosomed hills, older than the Pyramids, holding their secrets of the past in a calm not to be broken till the day of judgment. Between the hills and the river, on the Wisconsin side, lay the valley, rich in golden grain, dotted here and there with granary and farm-house. It was in very deed a panorama beautiful in each detail, doubly so in its variety.

“What river is that?” asked Clarence.

“What! Don’t you know that? I thought from the way you were talking that you knew everything. That’s the Wisconsin River.”

“You don’t say! Why, that’s where Marquette came down. Think of that, Abe. Marquette came down that river and discovered the upper Mississippi. He must have passed right near to where we’re standing.”

“I’ve been round this river all my life, and I never heard of no Marquette. Who was he?”

“He was a priest.”

“A Catlic?”

“Yes, and a Jesuit.”

“I hate those dirty Catlics,” growled Abe, spitting savagely.

Behold, gentle reader, Abe’s religion. He hated Catholics, and in doing so felt consciously pious. He belongs, it must be sadly confessed, to the largest church in the backwoods of America; the Great Unlettered Church. So worldly a thing as a railroad has been known to put their religion to flight.

“I’m not a Catholic myself,” said Clarence, losing for the moment his light manner, “and I believe they’re superstitious and away behind the times; but I don’t hate them. Anybody who reads books knows that there have been splendid men and women who were good Catholics. A Church that has lived and kept fully alive for nineteen hundred years is not to be sneezed at.”

“Sneezed at! What do you want to sneeze at it for? What good would that do? We ought to blow it up.”

“My son,” said Clarence, raising his head, tilting his chin and assuming a paternal air, “I’m beginning to despair of you. A moment ago, you remember, I said you were a literalist. Well, it’s worse than that. You’re a pessimist.”

At this Abe broke into a torrent of profanity. In this particular sort of diction he showed a surprising facility.

“Excuse me, friend,” said Clarence, “for breaking in upon your exquisite soliloquy; but would you mind telling me what that big building over there in the distance is? It seems to be across the river from McGregor.”

“That,” said Abe with some unction in his tones, “is Champeen College.”

“Champeen College?”

“Yes, the Catlics are trying to run it, but them guys doesn’t even know how to spell it. They leave out the H. I saw their boat – a fellow told me about it – and sure enough they didn’t have no H.”

Clarence pondered for a few moments.

“Look here,” he said presently. “Perhaps you mean Champion College.”

“That’s just what I said; Champeen College.”

“You say Champeen; you mean Champion.”

“That’s what I’ve said all along – Champeen College.”

Again Clarence reflected.

“Oh!” he said, breaking into a smile, “I think I’ve got it. Leaving out that H you have Campion College. That’s it, I’ll bet; and Campion was a wonderful Jesuit priest, famous in history and novel. He died a martyr.”

Hereupon the butcher’s boy proceeded to express his sentiments on the Jesuits. He declared them at some length and with no little profanity.

“I think,” observed Clarence calmly, when Abe had stopped more for want of breath than of language, “that it’s about time to start down, if we want to have that swim. Be good enough, gentle youth, to lead the way.”

Their descent was along another roadway, south of the one by which they had come up. In parts, the path was so steep that it was difficult to keep one’s foothold.

Abe led sullenly. He was deep in thought. The problem of beginning life again was facing him, beginning life with one pair of ancient overalls, a shirt, a jack-knife, shoes that had seen better days, and, in prospect, the handsome sum of one dollar. There was no question of his beginning life at McGregor. There confronted him, indeed, a difficulty, apparently insurmountable, in showing his face there at all. Abe figured to himself an irate boat-owner waiting at the landing for the person who had had the boldness to take away his skiff. How, then, he reflected, could he collect his dollar, get Clarence back, and escape unobserved. One plan would be to land below McGregor and let Clarence go the rest of the way alone. But even that plan had its risks. Doubtless, there were boatmen on the river even now in quest of the missing craft. Much thinking was alien to Abe’s manner of life; continuous thinking, impossible. He left the solution in the lap of the gods, therefore, and started conversation with his companion. With Abe, language was not the expression of, but rather an escape from, thought. So he gabbled away, going from one subject to another with an inconsequence which bridged tremendous gulfs of subject.

In an unhappy moment, he became foul in his expression. He did not, by reason of being in the advance, see the blush that mantled his companion’s face.

“Suppose you change the subject,” said Clarence, giving, as he spoke, Master Abe a hearty shove with both arms.

If dropping the subject entirely is equivalent to changing it, Abe was perfectly obedient. At any rate, he certainly changed his base; and before the words were well out of Clarence’s mouth, Abe was sliding down the steep incline at a rate which would have outdistanced the average runner. He went full thirty feet before a friendly stump brought him to a pause.

“Look here,” cried Abe, remaining seated where he had come to a stop, and rubbing himself; “What did you mean?”

“You aren’t hurt, are you?” enquired the sailor-clad youth, drawing near and really looking sympathetic.

“Hurt!” echoed Abe, rising as he spoke “I’m sore; and,” he continued as he craned his neck to see what had happened to his clothes, “my overalls is torn.”

“So they is,” assented Clarence, his love of mischief once more in the ascendant. “How much are those overalls worth?”

“I paid eighty-five cents for them.”

“Very good. I’ll give you two dollars instead of one. Is that all right?”

“Suppose you pay me now,” suggested Abe, holding out his hand.

“No you don’t,” answered Clarence. Our young lover of adventure was not of a suspicious disposition; nevertheless it was plain to him that Abe, once he had the money, would, as like as not, either attempt to take revenge for the indignities shown him, or desert at once and leave his charge to shift, as best he might, for himself. In fact, it would be just like Abe to refuse the further services of the boat. “We’ll take our swim first, and then when we’re on the boat and in sight of McGregor I’ll pay you the two dollars.”

Still rubbing himself, and muttering savagely under his breath, Abe led the way down. The descent was soon accomplished, and presently the two boys were disrobing.

“My ma told me that I might take a swim this morning,” remarked Clarence, “provided I went in with some person who knew the river well, and who could show me a good place. Do you know the river and how to swim well?”

“I guess I do. Why, I know this river by heart.” Here Abe paused, gazed carefully at the boat, and suddenly brightened up as though some happy thought had found lodgment in his primitive brain. “And look here,” he continued impressively, “I want to show you something. You see that place where my boat is?”

“Seems to me I do.”

“Well, going *down* the river from where that boat lays is the most dangerous spot you can find. It is a risk for the best swimmer – big men swimmers – to go in there.”

“See here, I don’t want to go and get drowned,” protested Clarence. The young gentleman, having doffed his sailor costume, revealed to the admiring eyes of his companion a beautiful brand new bathing suit of heavenly blue, evidently put on for this occasion. Clarence had left home that morning prepared to go swimming.

“Oh, you won’t get drowned; there’s a place up stream just a little ways that I told you about where a hen could swim. We can row up there in no time. Get in the boat, in the stern, and I’ll row you.”

“As you say, so shall it be, fair sir,” and with this Clarence tumbled into the boat.

“That’s it,” said Abe, encouragingly, as he proceeded to shove the boat into the water.

“Hey! You’ve forgotten the oars,” said Clarence.

For answer Abe continued to push the boat.

“The oars! The oars!” cried Clarence.

“You don’t need no oars,” shouted Abe as with a tremendous effort he sent the boat spinning out into the current. “Now, smartie, I’ve fixed you! You stay right in there where you are, or you’ll be drowned sure.”

The boat with its solitary occupant was now fully thirty feet from the shore. Clarence, possessed of one single-piece swimming suit and nothing else in the world, turned pale with alarm.

“What’s the meaning of this?” he cried.

“There ain’t no meaning,” returned Abe, thoughtfully going through the pockets of Clarence’s sailor suit. “You just sit tight and maybe you’ll land in St. Louis by the end of the month.”

“Look here, I’ve got to be back at McGregor by twelve o’clock,” remonstrated Clarence, “You’re carrying this joke too far.”

“You’ll not see McGregor today, nor yet tomorrow,” answered Abe, grimly, as he wrapped up in Clarence’s handkerchief the paper money and the silver which he had found.

Clarence noticed with dismay that his boat, now at least twenty-five yards from the shore, was going down the stream at what seemed to him a very rapid rate.

In the meantime, Abe, having securely hid the money, stood on the shore and grinned triumphantly at the boy in the boat.

“You will use big words, will you? You will try to be funny, will you? You will shove me down the hill; you will come round here showing off in your dandy clothes! Next time you get a chanst, you won’t be so smart – Now, what have you got to say for yourself?”

The youth in the current saw that, so far as the butcher’s boy was concerned, his case was hopeless. In reply, then, to this question, he opened his pretty mouth, lifted his head proudly, and carolled forth:

“Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay,
Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay,
Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay,
Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay!”

As Clarence was singing, Master Abe, throwing out both hands in a gesture of defiance, suddenly bolted into the bushes. He was gone, leaving on the shore his own and Clarence’s clothes.

The deserted youth in the boat came to an end of his singing. He had sung bravely to the last note. He never sang “Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay” again. Abe was gone: he was alone. Clarence at last gave in. He burst into tears and wept for some time in sore bitterness of heart.

CHAPTER IV

In which Clarence Esmond, alone and deserted, tries to pray; and his parents defer their trip to the Coast

After all, Clarence was but fourteen years of age. He was brave beyond his years. He had a craving for adventure. But, picture to yourself a lad in a thin blue bathing suit, in an oarless boat, alone on a great river. Clarence was really a good swimmer. He was at home in any lake; he had disported many a time in the salt water; but a river with its unknown dangers was new to him. The fear of the unknown, therefore, coupled with the warning of the butcher's boy, kept him in the boat, when in fact he could easily have made the shore. Adventure is all very well in its way, but one likes to meet that fair goddess with reassuring companions. No wonder, then, that the boy broke down.

For some minutes he continued to sob. His grief was poignant. Chancing to glance over the side of the boat, he saw his features, tear-stained and swollen, reflected in the clear water. It was the first time that he had ever seen his reflection when he was in heavy grief. He looked again, and then suddenly broke into a laugh.

"Never say die," he muttered to himself, and forthwith, putting his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands, he began to meditate.

What would his parents think about it? They would search, they would find his clothes upon the river bank and conclude naturally that he was drowned. Perhaps, however, Master Abe would reassure them on that point. Clarence did not know that Abe, having taken to the bushes and making his way into the interior of Iowa, had already dickered with a farmer's boy for an old pair of overalls and was now doing his best to put as wide a distance between himself and McGregor as possible.

Once more Clarence raised his head and looked about him. The sun was now in mid-heaven and, shining down upon the boy's unprotected calves and shoulders, promised to leave the memory of that adventurous day in scarlet characters upon his tender skin. On one side flowed the Wisconsin into the Mississippi; on the other the Iowa hills frowned down on him. The river itself was clear of craft. Water, water, everywhere; and standing sentinel over the mighty stream the hills of two sovereign states. Hotter and hotter fell the rays of the sun.

"Lord, have mercy on me," exclaimed Clarence. He really prayed as he uttered these words.

Clarence, it must be confessed, knew very little of prayer. They did not specialize on that form of devotion – nor, in fact, on any form of devotion – at the academy of which for two years he had been a shining ornament. Vainly did he try to cudgel his brain for some other prayer. Even the Our Father, recited in tender years at his mother's knee, he had forgotten.

The sun grew hotter; it was getting almost unbearable. Clarence was driven to action. After some effort, in which he skinned his knuckles, he succeeded in dislodging one of the two boards serving as seats. Placing this next to the others he threw himself below, doubled up so as to get himself as much as possible under the welcome shade, and – happy memory – murmured:

"Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray to God my soul to keep:
And if I die before I wake,
I pray to God my soul to take."

In saying these homely but beautiful lines, our adventurer had no intention of courting slumber. Nevertheless, he was sound asleep in ten minutes. The incidents of the morning, the climb up the hill, the rowing, the brush with the tramp – all these things, combined with the fact that he had stayed up

late the night before and had risen that morning at five o'clock, sent him into a slumber the sounder for the quiet and the freshness of the great river.

About the same hour in which Clarence had snuggled low down in the boat and presently fallen into deep slumber, a gentleman came hurrying down to the McGregor boat-landing. He was a rather handsome man in the prime of life, dressed in a manner that showed he belonged to the many-tailored East. He was pulling at his mustache, gazing anxiously all about him, and betraying in many ways nervousness and anxiety.

"Beg pardon," he began, addressing a group of men and women who were waiting for the ferry-boat that plied between McGregor and Prairie du Chien, "but have any of you chanced to see a boy of fourteen in a white sailor suit about here? He's my son."

"Did you say a white sailor suit?" asked a man of middle age.

"Yes."

"Why, I think I saw a boy dressed that way this morning. As I was coming down the street, towards nine o'clock, I saw a boat going down stream with two people in it. First, I thought the one rowing was a girl; I took another look, and I could almost swear it was a boy dressed in white. They were gone down some distance, and so I couldn't say for sure."

Just then a young man of about twenty-one dressed in flannels joined the group.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he said. "I'm a stranger here, and am rowing down the river from LaCrosse to Dubuque. This morning I locked my boat here, leaving the oars in it, and went for breakfast and a little stroll into the country back of McGregor. My boat has disappeared."

"Was it painted green?" inquired the first informant, "and did it ride rather high?"

"Yes, that's the boat."

"Well, the boat I saw, with, I thought, two boys in it, one in a white sailor suit, must have been your boat."

"Strange!" exclaimed Clarence's father. "My boy, I am sure, would not do such a thing."

"What about the other boy?" said an old inhabitant. "There's a no-account fellow here-about named Abe Thompson. He was the butcher's boy and got fired early today. He's disappeared this morning, too, and I'll bet my boots that he's the one who went off in that boat."

"That reminds me," put in another member of the group. "When the St. Paul came in here this morning, the passengers were all talking about a small boy rowing a boat up near Pictured Rocks, who tried to cross their bow. The Captain had to stop the steamboat and he said that the two boys in that boat seemed anxious to commit suicide. When the Captain roared at the oarsman and called him a jackass, the kid smiled and asked which one of the two he was speaking to."

"That was my son Clarence beyond a doubt," said Mr. Esmond with the suspicion of a smile. "It would be just like him to cut across the bow of a steamboat, and that question of his makes it a dead certainty. The boy sat up until one o'clock last night reading *Treasure Island*. He's very impressionable, and he left the house this morning with his heart set upon meeting with an adventure of some sort or other. It's near twelve o'clock now, and we were to start for the coast at one-forty. Can't I get a motorboat around here somewhere?"

The man who had been the first to give information then spoke up.

"Sir," he said, "I have a fairly good motorboat at the McGregor landing. It will be a pleasure for me to do anything I can to help you."

"Thank you a thousand times. Let's get off at once. My name is Charles Esmond."

"And mine," returned the other, "is John Dolan." The two, as they made their way to the motorboat, shook hands.

"This is awfully kind of you," continued Mr. Esmond, as he seated himself in the prow.

"It's a pleasure, I assure you. I've really nothing to do at this season, and so I pass most of my time on the river."

As he spoke these words, the boat shot out into the water.

“Now,” continued Mr. Dolan, “as a working hypothesis, we may take it for granted that those boys went to Pictured Rocks; everybody goes there. So we’ll make for that place and reach it, I dare say, in six or seven minutes.”

“I hope nothing has happened,” said the father. “This morning my wife had a bad sick headache, and Clarence was overflowing with animal spirits. We had promised him, the night before, a ride on the river and a swim. He had never been on the Mississippi, and he was all eagerness. To make matters worse, I got a telegram this morning to send on a report on a Mexican mine – it’s my business, by the way, to study mines here, in Mexico, and, in fact, almost anywhere. That report meant two or three hours of hard work. So I told Clarence to run out and get some good boatman, if he could, and go rowing. I cautioned him to be careful about where he went swimming and not to go in alone. He promised me faithfully to be back at twelve. Now I have no reason to think the boy would break his word. In fact, I had an idea that he was truthful.”

“You talk of your boy,” observed Mr. Dolan, “as though you didn’t know him very well.”

Mr. Esmond relaxed into a smile.

“It does sound funny, doesn’t it,” he said. “The fact of the matter is that I really have very little first-hand knowledge of him. At the age of five, Clarence learned how to read, and developed a most extraordinary passion for books at once. If allowed, he read from the time he got up till he went to bed. I never saw such a case of precocity. It was next to impossible to get him to take exercise. His mother did her best to restrain him, and I did my share too, though it was very little, as I was away looking up mines nine months out of the twelve. When the boy was eleven, it became clear that some radical action had to be taken. I looked around for some school that would suit or rather offset his idiosyncrasy. After no end of inquiries I discovered Clermont Academy in New York State, where athletics were everything and such studies as reading, grammar and arithmetic were a sort of by-product. Clarence has been there for three years, and, up to a week ago, his mother and I never saw him from the time of his entrance. Well, he’s a changed boy. He is fairly stout, and muscular beyond my most sanguine hopes. He is up in all sorts of games. In fact, in his class – boys of twelve to fourteen – he’s the leader. All the same, I blush to say that I really know very little about my boy.”

“Perhaps the lad is a genius,” suggested Mr. Dolan.

“Some of my friends have made that claim and accused me of trying to clip his wings. All the same, I want my boy, genius or no genius, to grow up to be a hale, hearty man.”

“Halloa!” exclaimed Dolan. He had turned the boat shoreward. Before the eyes of both lay in full view on the bank two suits of clothes. The boat had scarce touched the shore, when Mr. Esmond jumped from it and ran to the spot where the clothes lay spread upon the ground.

“My God! These are my son’s,” he cried, gazing with dismay upon the white sailor suit which he had caught up in his hands. His face quivering with emotion, he stood stock still for a moment, then sank upon the ground and buried his head in his hands.

“And this,” said John Dolan, looking closely at the abandoned overalls, “belongs to that ne’er-do-well butcher’s boy. It looks bad. They must have gone swimming here.”

Mr. Esmond arose and looked about.

“Where’s that boat they had?” he inquired.

“It may have drifted away,” answered John. “Or, more probably, that butcher’s boy, who is a known thief, has hidden it somewhere. He knew very well that there would be a search for it.”

“Say, Dolan, you’ll stand by me, won’t you? I am almost in despair; the thing is so sudden.”

“I’ll do anything you want.”

“Well, you leave me here and run back to McGregor. Send word to my wife that I am detained – don’t let her think or even suspect that our boy is drowned – and to put off our trip to the Coast, as I cannot make the train. Tell her to expect me and Clarence before supper. Then get the proper officials of McGregor to come here at once and drag the river. Hire any extra men you judge fit. Don’t bother about expense. Now go and don’t lose a moment.”

Left alone, Mr. Esmond made a careful search, tracing the boy's steps in their ascent to Pictured Rocks. He went part of the way himself, crying out at intervals, "Clarence! Clarence! Clarence!" There was no answer save the echoes which to his anxious ears sounded far differently from the "horns of elfland."

Again and again he called. And yet Clarence was not so far away – hardly half a mile down the river, locked in slumber, and, as it proved, in the hands of that bright-eyed goddess of adventure whom the reckless lad had not in vain wooed.

Returning to the shore, Mr. Esmond on further investigation traced his boy's footprints to the river's banks. At this juncture, several motorboats arrived, each carrying a number of men, and soon all were busy dragging the river.

At six o'clock John Dolan insisted on bringing the despairing father back to McGregor.

"Dolan," he said, as they started upstream, "have you any religion?"

"I hope so. I'm a Catholic."

"I don't know what I am; – but my poor boy! His mother ought to be a Catholic, but she was brought up from her tender years by Baptist relations with the result that she's got no more religion than I have. When my boy was born, I started him out on the theory that he was not to be taught any religion, but was to grow up without prejudices, and when he was old enough, he was to choose for himself. All the religion he ever got amounted to his saying the 'Our Father' and 'Now I lay me down to sleep.' At that school he's been going to there's no religion taught at all. I wish I had done differently. Think of his appearing before a God he never thought of. Some of our theories look mighty nice in ordinary circumstances. But now! My son is dead, and without any sort of preparation."

"We can pray for him; we can hope."

"Well, if his soul is saved," said Esmond gravely, "it's not because of me, it's in spite of me."

When the bereaved father reached the hotel, the despair in his eyes told the tale to his wife. Let us drop a veil over that scene of sorrow – the sudden loss of an only child.

CHAPTER V

In which Ben, the gypsy, associates himself with the Bright-eyed Goddess in carrying out her will upon Master Clarence Esmond, and that young gentleman finds himself a captive

It was the time when the night-hawk, soaring high in air and circling wantonly, suddenly drops like a thunderbolt down, down till nearing the ground it calls a sudden halt in its fall, and cutting a tremendous angle and letting out a short sound deep as the lowest string of a bass violin shoots up into the failing light of the evening; it was the time when the whippoorwill essays to wake the darkening sky with his insistent demands for the beating of that unfortunate youth, poor Will; it was the time when the sun, having left his kingdom in the western sky, stretches forth his wand of sovereignty from behind his curtains and touching the fleecy clouds changes them into precious jewels, ruby, pearl, and amethyst; it was, in fine, the time when the day is done and the twilight brings quiet and peace and slumber to the restless world.

However – and the exception proves the rule – it did not bring quiet and peace and slumber to Master Clarence Esmond. In fact, it so chanced that the twilight hour was the time when he was deprived of these very desirable gifts; for his sleep was just then rudely broken.

First, a feeling of uneasiness came upon his placid slumbers. It seemed to him, in those moments between sleeping and waking, that a very beautiful fairy, vested in flowing white, and with lustrous and shining eyes, appeared before him. She gazed at him sternly. “Oh, it’s you, is it?” murmured Clarence. “I’ve been looking for you, star-eyed goddess. Be good enough, now you’re here, to supply me with one or two first-class adventures in good condition and warranted to last.” In answer to which, she of the starry eyes extended her wand and struck her suppliant a smart blow on the forehead. As she did this, the light in her eyes went out, her form lost its outline, fading away after the manner of a moving picture effect into total darkness.

Clarence’s eyes then opened; it was not all a dream – the loose board above him had fallen and struck him on his noble brow. Also, although his eyes were open, he could see very little. Almost at once he realized where he was. Almost at once he recalled, with the swiftness thought is often capable of, the varied events of the day. Almost at once, he perceived that the boat, no longer drifting, was moving swiftly as though in tow.

Clarence sat up. There was a splashing of the water quite near the boat. He rubbed his eyes and peered into the gathering darkness. A brown hand, near the prow, was clasped to the gunwale. Then Clarence standing up looked again. From the hand to the arm moved his eyes; from the arm to the head. Beside the boat and swimming vigorously was a man, whom, despite the shadows of the evening, Clarence recognized as young and swarthy. They were rapidly nearing shore.

“Say!” cried Clarence. “Look here, will you? Who are you?”

The swimmer on hearing the sound of the boy’s voice suspended his swimming, turned his head, and seeing standing in what he had supposed to be an empty boat, a young cherub arrayed in a scanty suit of blue, released his hold and disappeared under the water as though he had been seized with cramp.

The boat freed of his hand tilted very suddenly in the other direction, with the result that the erect cherub lost his balance so suddenly that he was thrown headlong into the waters on the other side.

Simultaneously with Clarence’s artless and unpremeditated dive, the strange swimmer came to the surface. He had thought, as our young adventurer subsequently learned, that the figure in the boat was a ghost. But ghosts do not tumble off boats into the water; neither do ghosts, when they come to the surface, blow and sputter and cough and strike out vigorously with an overhand stroke, which

things the supposed ghost was now plainly doing. The stranger, therefore, taking heart of grace, laid the hand of proprietorship upon the boat once more. Clarence from the other side went through the same operation.

“What did you spill me for?” he gasped.

“I didn’t know anyone was in the boat,” returned the stranger with a slightly foreign accent. “When you stood up and spoke, I was plumb scared.”

“I really think I’m rather harmless,” remarked the boy, blithely. “Never yet, save in the way of kindness, did I lay hand on anybody – well hardly anybody. Where are we anyhow?”

“We’re on the Mississippi River,” returned the other guardedly.

“Oh, thank you ever so much. I really thought we were breasting the billows of the Atlantic.”

Meanwhile, they had drawn within a few feet of the shore, on which Clarence now cast his eyes. On a sloping beach in a grove surrounded by cottonwoods blazed a ruddy fire. Standing about it but with their eyes and attention fixed upon the two swimmers was a group consisting of a man a little beyond middle age, a woman, apparently his wife, a younger woman, a boy a trifle older and larger than Clarence, a girl of twelve, and five or six little children. In the camp-fire’s light Clarence perceived that they were, taking them all in all, swarthy, black-haired, clad like civilized people, and yet in that indescribable wild way of which gypsies possess the secret.

“Come on,” said the man, as the boat touched the shore.

“Excuse me,” said Clarence politely, “but I’m not dressed to meet visitors. The water is fine anyway; and it’s not near so dangerous as it’s cracked up to be. Can’t you get a fellow at least a pair of trousers?”

“You’ll stay here, will you?”

“I certainly will,” answered the youth, turning on his back and floating. “I’ve had enough of being out on the Mississippi to last me for several weeks at the very least. Go on, there’s a good fellow, – and get me something to put on.”

With a not ill-natured grunt of assent, the man walked up the sloping bank. As he passed the watchful group he uttered a few words; whereupon the larger gypsy boy came down to the shore and fixed a watchful eye upon the bather, while the others broke up and gave themselves to various occupations. Clarence’s rescuer went on beyond the fire, where two tents lay pitched beside a closed wagon – a prairie schooner on a small scale. After some search in which the young woman assisted him, he issued from the larger tent with a pair of frayed khaki trousers and an old calico shirt.

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