

Horatio Alger Jr.

**The Young Adventurer: or, Tom's
Trip Across the Plains**



Horatio Alger
**The Young Adventurer: or,
Tom's Trip Across the Plains**

*http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23171131
The Young Adventurer or Tom's Trip Across the Plains:*

Содержание

CHAPTER I.	4
CHAPTER II.	10
CHAPTER III.	16
CHAPTER IV.	23
CHAPTER V.	30
CHAPTER VI.	37
CHAPTER VII.	44
CHAPTER VIII.	50
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	53

Horatio Alger

The Young Adventurer or Tom's Trip Across the Plains

CHAPTER I.

MARK NELSON'S FAMILY

"I wish I could pay off the mortgage on my farm," said Mark Nelson soberly, taking his seat on the left of the fireplace, in the room where his wife and family were assembled.

"Have you paid the interest, Mark?" asked his wife.

"Yes; I paid it this afternoon, and it has stripped me of money completely. I have less than five dollars in my pocketbook toward buying you and the children clothes for the winter."

"Never mind me," said his wife cheerfully. "I am pretty well provided for."

"Why, mother," said Sarah, the oldest daughter, a girl of fourteen; "you haven't had a new dress for a year."

"I have enough to last me till spring, at any rate," said the mother.

"You never buy anything for yourself."

"I don't go in rags, do I?" asked Mrs. Nelson, with a smile.

Mrs. Nelson had a happy disposition, which led her to accept uncomplainingly, and even cheerfully, the sacrifices which, as the wife of a farmer in poor circumstances, she was compelled to make.

"You are right, Sarah," said Mark Nelson. "Your mother never seems to think of herself. She might have been much better off if she had not married me."

The children did not understand this allusion. They had never been told that their mother had received an offer from Squire Hudson, the wealthiest man in the village, but had chosen instead to marry Mark Nelson, whose only property was a small farm, mortgaged for half its value. Her rejected admirer took the refusal hard, for, as much as it was possible for him, he loved the prettiest girl in the village, as Mary Dale was generally regarded. But Mary knew him to be cold and selfish, and could not make up her mind to marry him. If she had done so, she would now be living in the finest house in the village, with the chance of spending the winter in New York or Boston, instead of drudging in an humble home, where there was indeed enough to eat, but little money for even necessary purposes. She had never regretted her decision. Her husband, though poor, was generally respected and liked, while the squire, though his money procured him a certain degree of consideration, had no near or attached friends.

To Squire Hudson many in the village paid tribute; for he held mortgages on twenty farms and buildings, and was strict in exacting prompt payment of the interest semi-annually. It

was he to whom Mark Nelson's farm was mortgaged for two thousand dollars. The mortgage had originally been for fifteen hundred dollars, but five years before it had been increased to two thousand, which represented more than half the sum which it would have fetched, if put up for sale. The interest on this sum amounted to a hundred and twenty dollars a year, which Mark Nelson always found it hard to raise. Could he have retained it in his hands, and devoted it to the use of his family, it would have helped them wonderfully, with Mrs. Nelson's good management.

Tom, the oldest boy, now approaching his sixteenth birthday, looked up from a book he was reading. He was a bright-looking boy, with brown hair, a ruddy complexion, and dark-blue eyes, who looked, and was, frank and manly.

"What is the amount of your interest?" he asked.

"Sixty dollars every half-year, Tom. That is what I paid to Squire Hudson this afternoon. It would have made us very comfortable, if I only could have kept it."

"It would have done you more good than the squire," said Sarah.

"He has more money than he knows what to do with," said her father, almost complainingly. "It seems hard that money should be so unevenly distributed."

"Money is not happiness," said Mrs. Nelson quietly.

"No; but it helps to buy happiness."

"I don't think Squire Hudson is as happy a man as you, Mark." Mark Nelson's face softened as he surveyed his wife and

children.

"I am happy at home," he said, "and I don't think the squire is."

"I am sure he isn't," said Tom. "Mrs. Hudson is sour and ill-tempered, and Sinclair – the only child – is a second edition of his mother. He is the most unpopular boy in the village."

"Still," said the farmer, not quite convinced, "money is an important element of happiness, and a farmer stands a very poor chance of acquiring it. Tom, I advise you not to be a farmer."

"I don't mean to be if I can help it," said Tom. "I am ready for any opening that offers. I hope some day to pay off the mortgage on the farm, and make you a free man, father."

"Thank you for your good intentions, Tom; but two thousand dollars is a large sum of money."

"I know it, father; but I was reading in a daily paper, not long since, of a boy, as poor as myself, who was worth twenty-five thousand dollars by the time he was thirty. Why shouldn't this happen to me?"

"Don't build castles in the air, Tom," said his mother sensibly.

"At least, mother, I may hope for good luck. I have been wanting to talk to you both about my future prospects. I shall be sixteen next week, and it is time I did something."

"You are doing something – working on the farm now, Tom."

"That don't count. Father advises me not to be a farmer, and I agree with him. I think I am capable of making my way in the world in some other way, where I can earn more money. There is Walter, who likes the country, to stay with you."

Walter, the third child, was now twelve years of age, with decided country tastes.

"I would like to be a farmer as well as anything," said Walter. "I like the fresh air. I shouldn't like to be cooped up in a store, or to live in the city. Let Tom go if he likes."

"I have no objection," said Mr. Nelson; "but I have neither money nor influence to help him. He will have to make his own way."

"I am not afraid to try," said Tom courageously. "From this day I will look out for a chance, if you and mother are willing."

"I shall not oppose your wishes, Tom," said Mrs. Nelson gravely, "though it will be a sad day for me when you leave your home."

"That isn't the way to look at it, mother," said Tom. "If gold pieces grew on currant bushes, it wouldn't be necessary for me to leave home to make a living."

"I wish they did," said Harry, a boy nine years of age.

"What would you do then, Harry?" asked his brother, smiling.

"I would buy a velocipede and a pair of skates."

"I heard of a boy once who found a penny in the field, right under a potato-vine," said Walter.

"I don't believe it," said Harry.

"It's true, for I was the boy."

"Where did it come from?"

"Tom put it there to fool me."

"Won't you put one there to fool me, Tom?" asked Harry.

"You are too smart, Harry," said Tom, laughing. "My pennies are too few to try such experiments. I hope, by the time you are as old as Walter, to give you something better."

The conversation drifted to other topics, with which we are not concerned. Tom, however, did not forget it. He felt that an important question had that evening been decided for him. He had only thought of making a start for himself hitherto. Now he had broached the subject, and received the permission of his father and mother. The world was all before him where to choose. His available capital was small, it is true, amounting only to thirty-seven cents and a jack-knife; but he had, besides, a stout heart, a pair of strong hands, an honest face, and plenty of perseverance – not a bad equipment for a young adventurer.

CHAPTER II.

TOM FINDS A WALLET

Since the time of which I am writing, over sixty years have passed, for it was in the year 1850 that Tom made up his mind to leave home and seek a fortune. The papers were full of the new gold discoveries in the new country which had recently been added to the great republic. Thousands were hurrying to the land of gold; men who had been unfortunate at home, or, though moderately well situated, were seized by the spirit of adventure. At considerable sacrifice many raised the means of reaching the new El Dorado, while others borrowed or appropriated the necessary sum. Some, able to do neither, set out on a venture, determined to get there in some way.

In the weekly paper, to which Mr. Nelson had for years been a subscriber, Tom had read a good deal about California. His youthful fancy had been wrought upon by the brilliant pictures of a land where a penniless man might, if favored by fortune, secure a competence in a twelvemonth, and he ardently wished that he, too, might have the chance of going there. It was a wish, but not an expectation. It would cost at least two hundred dollars to reach the Pacific coast, and there was no hope of getting a tithe of that sum.

"If I could only go to California," thought Tom, "I would make

my way somehow; I would cheerfully work twelve hours a day. I don't see why a boy can't dig gold, as well as a man. If somebody would lend me money enough to get there, I could afford to pay high interest."

There was one man in Wilton who might lend him the money if he would. That man was Squire Hudson. He always had money on hand in considerable quantities, and two hundred dollars would be nothing to him. Tom would not have dreamed of applying to him, however, but for a service which just at this time he was able to render the squire.

Tom had been in search of huckleberries – for this was the season – when, in a narrow country road, not much frequented, his attention was drawn to an object lying in the road. His heart hounded with excitement when he saw that it was a well-filled pocketbook. He was not long in securing it.

Opening the wallet, he found it was absolutely stuffed with bank-bills, some of large denomination. There were, besides, several papers, to which he paid but little attention. They assured him, however, as he had already surmised, that the wallet was the property of Squire Hudson.

"I wonder how much money there is here," thought Tom, with natural curiosity.

He stepped into the woods to avoid notice, and carefully counted the bills. There were two hundred-dollar bills, and three fifties, and so many of smaller denominations that Tom found the whole to amount to five hundred and sixty-seven dollars.

"Almost six hundred dollars!" ejaculated Tom, in excitement, for he had never seen so much money before. "How happy should I be if I had as much money! How rich the squire is! He ought to be a happy man."

Then the thought stole into our hero's mind, that the wallet contained nearly three times as much as he would need to take him to California.

"If it were only mine!" he thought to himself.

Perhaps Tom ought to have been above temptation, but he was not. For one little instant he was tempted to take out two hundred dollars, and then drop the wallet where he had picked it up. No one would probably find out where the missing money was. But Tom had been too well brought up to yield to this temptation. Not even the thought that he might, perhaps within a year, return the money with interest, prevailed upon him.

"It wouldn't be honest," he decided, "and if I began in that way I could not expect that God would prosper me. If that is the only way by which I can go to California I must make up my mind to stay at home."

So the question was settled in Tom's mind. The money must be returned to the owner. His pail was nearly full of huckleberries, but he postponed going home, for he felt that Squire Hudson would be feeling anxious about his loss, and he thought it his duty to go and return the money first of all. Accordingly he made his way directly to the imposing residence of the rich man.

Passing up the walk which led to the front door, Tom rang the

bell. This was answered by a cross-looking servant. She glanced at the pail of berries, and said quickly: "We don't want any berries, and if we did you ought to go round to the side door."

"I haven't asked you to buy any berries, have I?" said Tom, rather provoked by the rudeness of the girl, when he had come to do the squire a favor.

"No, but that's what you're after. We have bought all we want."

"I tell you I didn't come here to sell berries," said Tom independently; "I picked these for use at home."

"Then what do you come here for, anyway, takin' up my time wid comin' to the door, when I'm busy gettin' supper?"

"I want to see Squire Hudson."

"I don't know if he's at home."

"Then you'd better find out, and not keep me waiting."

"I never see such impudence," ejaculated the girl.

"I mean what I say," continued Tom stoutly. "I want to see the squire on important business."

"Much business you have wid him!" said the girl scornfully.

Tom by this time was out of patience.

"Go and tell your master that I wish to see him," he said firmly.

"I've a great mind to slam the door in your face," returned Bridget angrily.

"I wouldn't advise you to," said Tom calmly.

A stop was put to the contention by an irritable voice.

"What's all this, hey? Who's at the door, Bridget?"

"A boy wid berries, sir."

"Tell him I don't want any."

"I have told him, and he won't go."

"Won't go, hey?" and Squire Hudson came out into the hall.

"What's all this, I say? Won't go?"

"I wish to see you, sir," said Tom, undaunted. "I have told the girl that I didn't come here to sell berries; but she objects to my seeing you."

Squire Hudson was far from an amiable man, and this explanation made him angry with the servant. He turned upon her fiercely.

"What do you mean, you trollop," he demanded, "by refusing to let the boy see me? What do you mean by your insolence, I say?"

Bridget was overwhelmed, for the squire's temper was like a tornado.

"I thought he wanted to sell berries," she faltered.

"That isn't true," said Tom. "I told you expressly that I picked the berries for use at home, and had none to sell."

"Go back to the kitchen, you trollop!" thundered the squire. "You deserve to go to jail for your outrageous conduct."

Bridget did not venture to answer a word, for it would only have raised a more violent storm, but retreated crestfallen to her own realm, and left our hero in possession of the field. She contented herself with muttering under her breath what she did not dare to speak aloud.

"You are Tom Nelson, are you not?" asked the squire, adjusting his spectacles, and looking more carefully at the boy.

"Yes, sir."

"Have you any message from your father?"

"No, sir."

"Then why did you come here to take up my time?" demanded the squire, frowning.

"I came to do you a service, Squire Hudson."

"You came – to – do – me – a – service?" repeated the squire slowly.

"Yes, sir."

"You may as well come in," said the rich man, leading into the sitting-room.

Tom followed him into a handsomely furnished room, and the two sat down opposite each other.

CHAPTER III.

TOM ASKS A LOAN

"I don't know what service you can do me," said Squire Hudson incredulously.

His manner implied: "I am a rich man and you are a poor boy. How can you possibly serve me?"

"Have you lost anything lately?" inquired Tom, coming at once to business.

I suppose most men, when asked such a question, would first think of their pocket-books. It was so with Squire Hudson. He hastily thrust his hand into his pocket, and found – a large hole, through which, doubtless, the wallet had slipped.

"I have lost my wallet," he said anxiously. "Have you found it?"

In reply Tom produced the missing article. The squire took it hurriedly, and, at once opening it, counted the money. It was all there, and he heaved a sigh of relief, for he was a man who cared for money more than most people.

"Where did you find it?" he asked.

Tom answered the question.

"It is very fortunate you came along before anyone else saw it. I rode that way on horse-back this morning. I told Mrs. Hudson that my pocket needed repairing, but she put it off, according to

her usual custom. If it had not been found, I would have kept her on short allowance for a year to come."

Tom felt rather embarrassed, for, of course, it would not do to join in with the squire in his complaints of his wife. Suddenly Squire Hudson said, eying him keenly: "Do you know how much money there is in this wallet?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you counted it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why did you do it?"

"I wanted to know how much there was, so that no one might blame me if any were missing."

"Didn't you want to take any?" asked the squire bluntly.

"Yes," answered Tom promptly.

"Why didn't you? For fear you would be found out?"

"That may have had something to do with it, but it was principally because it would have been stealing and stealing is wrong."

"What would you have done with the money if you had taken it?"

"Started for California next week," answered Tom directly.

"Eh?" ejaculated the squire, rather astonished. "Why do you want to go to California – a boy like you?"

"To dig gold. I suppose a boy can dig gold, as well as a man. There doesn't seem to be much chance for me here. There's nothing to do but to work on the farm, and father and Walter can

do all there is to be done there."

"How is your father getting along?" asked the rich man, with an interest which rather surprised Tom.

"Poorly," said Tom. "He makes both ends meet; but we all have to do without a great many things that we need."

The squire looked thoughtful. He took half a dollar from his wallet and tendered it to Tom.

"You've done me a service," he said. "Take that."

Tom drew back.

"I would rather not take money for being honest," he said.

"That's all nonsense," said Squire Hudson sharply.

"That's the way I feel about it," said Tom stoutly.

"Then you're a fool."

"I hope not, sir."

"This would have been quite a large loss to me. I am perfectly willing to give you this money."

Then Tom gathered courage and said boldly, "You can do me a great favor, Squire Hudson, if you choose."

"What is it?"

"Lend me enough money to go to California," said Tom nervously.

"Good gracious! Is the boy crazy?" ejaculated the astonished squire.

"No, sir, I am not crazy. I'll tell you what my plans are. I shall go to work directly I get there, and shall devote the first money I make to paying you. Of course, I shall expect to pay high interest.

I am willing to pay you three hundred dollars for two; unless I am sick, I think I can do it inside of twelve months."

"How much money do you suppose you will need for this wild-goose expedition?"

"About two hundred dollars, sir; and, as I just said, I will give you my note for three."

"A boy's note is worth nothing."

"Perhaps it isn't in law; but I wouldn't rest till it was paid back."

"What security have you to offer?"

"None, sir, except my word."

"Do you know what I would be if I lent you this money?"

"You would be very kind."

"Pish! I should be a fool."

"I don't think you'd lose anything by it, sir; but, of course, I can't blame you for refusing," and Tom rose to go.

"Sit down again," said the squire; "I want to talk to you about this matter. How long have you been thinking of California?"

"Only two or three days, sir."

"What made you think of it?"

"I wanted to help father."

"Who has told you about California?"

"I have read about it in the papers."

"Have you spoken to your father about going there?"

"I have spoken to him about leaving home, and seeking my fortune; but I have not mentioned going to California, because I thought it impossible to raise the necessary money."

"Of course. That's sensible, at least."

Squire Hudson rose and walked thoughtfully about the room, occasionally casting a keen glance at Tom, who remained sitting, with his pail of huckleberries in his cap.

After a while the squire spoke again.

"Your father might let you have the money," he suggested.

"My father has no money to spare," said Tom quickly.

"Couldn't he raise some?"

"I don't know how."

"Then I'll tell you. I hold a mortgage for two thousand dollars on his farm. I suppose you know that?"

"Yes, sir."

"I might be willing to increase the mortgage to twenty-two hundred, and he could lend you the extra two hundred."

This was a new idea to Tom, and he took a little time to think it over.

"I don't like to ask father to do that," he said. "He finds it very hard now to pay the interest on the mortgage."

"I thought you intended to pay the money in a year," said the squire sharply.

"So I do," said Tom, and he began to think more favorably of the plan.

"In that case your father wouldn't suffer."

"You are right, sir. If father would only consent to do so, I would be happy. But I might die."

"Your father would have to take the risk of that. You can't

expect me to."

This seemed fair enough, and, in fact, the danger didn't seem very great to Tom. He was about sixteen; and to a boy of sixteen death seems very far off, provided he is strong and vigorous, as Tom was. He rapidly decided that the squire's offer was not to be refused without careful consideration. It opened to him a career which looked bright and promising. Once in California, what could he not do? Tom was hopeful and sanguine, and did not allow himself to think of failure.

"I understand that you are willing to advance the money, Squire Hudson?" he said, determined to know just what to depend upon.

"I will advance two hundred dollars, on condition that your father will secure me by an increased mortgage. It is no particular object to me, for I can readily invest the money in some other way."

"I will speak to father about it, Squire Hudson, and meanwhile I am thankful to you for making the offer."

"Very well. Let me know as soon as possible," said the squire carelessly.

As Tom went out, the rich man soliloquized: "I have no faith in the boy's scheme, and I don't believe half the stories they tell about the California mines; but it will give me an extra hold on Nelson, and hasten the day when the farm will come into my hands. When Mary Nelson refused my hand I resolved some day to have my revenge. I have waited long, but it will come at last.

When she and her children are paupers, she may regret the slight she put upon me."

CHAPTER IV.

TOM ASKS LEAVE OF ABSENCE

Tom walked home slowly, but the distance seemed short, for he was absorbed in thought. In a way very unexpected he seemed to be likely to realize what he had regarded as a very pleasant, but impossible, dream. Would his father consent to the squire's proposal, and, if so, ought Tom to consent to expose him to the risk of losing so considerable a sum of money? If he had been older and more cautious he would probably have decided in the negative; but Tom was hopeful and sanguine, and the stories he had heard of California had dazzled him. There was, of course, an element of uncertainty in his calculations, but the fact that there seemed to be no prospect before him in his native village had an important influence in shaping his decision.

To ask his father the momentous question, however, was not easy, and he delayed it, hoping for a favorable opportunity of introducing the subject. His thoughtful manner excited attention, and secured him the opportunity he sought.

"You seem deep in thought, Tom," said his mother.

"Yes, mother, I have a good deal to think about."

"Anybody would think Tom overwhelmed with business," said Walter, next to Tom in age, with good-humored banter.

"I am," said Tom gravely.

"Won't you take me in partnership, then?" asked Walter.

Tom smiled.

"I don't think I could do that," he answered. "Not to keep you waiting, Squire Hudson has made me a business proposal this afternoon."

All were surprised and looked to Tom for an explanation.

"He offers to advance me two hundred dollars for a year, to help me out to California."

"Squire Hudson makes this offer to a boy of your age?" said his father slowly.

"Yes, or rather he makes the offer to you."

"To me?"

"Perhaps you will think me selfish for even mentioning it," said Tom rapidly, in a hurry to explain fully now that the ice was broken. "He will advance the money, on condition that you increase the mortgage on the farm to twenty-two hundred dollars."

Mr. Nelson looked blank.

"Do you know, Tom," he said, "how hard I find it now to pay the interest on the mortgage, and how hopeless I am of ever paying it off?"

"I know all that, father; but I want to help you. If I keep my health, and have a chance, I think I can help you. There's no chance for me here, and there is a chance in California. You remember what we have read in the *Weekly Messenger* about the gold-fields, and what large sums have been realized by miners."

"They are men, and you are a boy."

"That's true," said Tom, "but," he added, with natural pride, "I am pretty strong for a boy. I am willing to work, and I don't see why I can't dig gold as well as a man. I may not make as much, but if I only do half as well as some that we have read about, I can do a good deal for you."

"How far off is California?" asked Mrs. Nelson.

"Over three thousand miles, across the continent," answered her husband. "By sea it is a good deal more."

"Why, it is as far off as Europe," said Walter, who was fresh from his lesson in geography.

"It is farther than some parts of Europe – England, for example," said his father.

"And a wild, unsettled region," said Mrs. Nelson soberly.

"I don't think so much of that," said Mark Nelson. "Tom is no baby. He is a boy of good sense, not heedless, like some of his age, and I should feel considerable confidence in his getting along well."

"What, Mark, are you in favor of his going so far – a boy who has never been away from home in his life?"

"I don't know what to say. I have not had time to consider the matter, as it has come upon me suddenly. I have a good deal of confidence in Tom, but there is one difficulty in my mind."

"What is that, father?" asked Tom anxiously.

"The expense of getting to California, and the method of raising the money; I don't like to increase the mortgage."

"I suppose you are right, father," said Tom slowly. "I know it is more than I have any right to ask. I wouldn't even have mentioned it if I hadn't hoped to help you to pay it back."

"That is understood, Tom," said his father kindly. "I know you mean what you say, and that you would redeem your promise if fortune, or rather Providence, permitted. It is a serious matter, however, and not to be decided in a hurry. We will speak of it again."

Nothing more was said about Tom's plan till after the children had gone to bed. Then, as Mark Nelson and his wife sat before the fire in the open fireplace, the subject was taken up anew.

"Mary," said Mark, "I am beginning to think favorably of Tom's proposal."

"How can you say so, Mark?" interrupted his wife. "It seems like madness to send a young boy so far away."

"Tom can't be called a young boy; he is now sixteen."

"But he has never been away from home."

"He must go some time."

"If it were only to Boston or New York; but to go more than three thousand miles away!" and the mother shuddered.

"There are dangers as great in Boston or New York as in California, Mary, to a boy of Tom's age. He can't always be surrounded by home influences."

"I wish we could find employment for him in town," said Mrs. Nelson uneasily.

"That is a mother's thought, and it would be pleasant for all of

us; but I doubt if it would be better for Tom."

"Why not?"

"A boy who is thrown upon his own guardianship and his own resources develops manliness and self-reliance sooner than at home. But we need not take that into consideration; there is nothing to do here, nor is there likely to be. He must go away from home to find employment. To obtain a place in Boston or New York requires influence and friends in those places; and we can hope for neither. In California he will become his own employer. The gold-mines are open to all, and he may earn in a year as much as he could in five years in the East."

"Do you favor his going, then, Mark?"

"Not against your will, Mary. Indeed, I should not feel justified in increasing the mortgage upon our little property against your wish. That concerns us all."

"I don't think so much of that. I am so afraid Tom would get sick in California. What would become of the poor boy in that case?"

"That is a mother's thought. I think Tom would find friends, who would not let him suffer. He is a manly, attractive boy, though he is ours, and I think he is well calculated to make his way."

"That he is," said his mother proudly. "No one can help liking Tom."

"Then you see he is likely to find friends. Were he such a boy as Sinclair Hudson, I should feel afraid that he would fare badly,

if he stood in need of help from others. Sinclair is certainly a very disagreeable boy."

"Yes, he is; and he isn't half as smart as Tom."

"A mother's vanity," said Mark Nelson, smiling. "However, you are right there. I should consider it a misfortune to have such a cross-grained, selfish son as Sinclair. Squire Hudson, with all his wealth, is not fortunate in his only child. There is considerable resemblance between father and son. I often wish that some one else than the squire held the mortgage on our farm."

"You don't think he would take advantage of you?"

"I don't think he would be very lenient to me if I failed to pay interest promptly. He has a grudge against me, you know."

"That is nonsense," said Mrs. Nelson, blushing, for she understood the allusion.

"I am glad he doesn't ask me to give him a mortgage on you, Mary."

"He has forgotten all that," said Mrs. Nelson. "I am no longer young and pretty."

"I think you more attractive than ever," said the husband.

"Because you are foolish," said his wife; but she was well pleased, nevertheless. Poor as her husband was, she had never dreamed of regretting her choice.

"Be it so; but about this affair of Tom – what shall I say to him in the morning?"

Mrs. Nelson recovered her gravity instantly.

"Decide as you think right, Mark," she said. "If you judge that

Tom had better go I will do my best to become reconciled to his absence, and set about getting him ready."

"It is a great responsibility, Mary," said Mark slowly; "but I accept it. Let the boy go, if he wishes. He will leave our care, but we can trust him to the care of his heavenly Father, who will be as near to him in California as at home."

Thus Tom's future was decided. His father and mother retired to bed, but not to sleep. They were parting already in imagination with their first-born, and the thought of that parting was sad indeed.

CHAPTER V.

TOM RAISES THE MONEY

Tom got up early the next morning – in fact, he was up first in the house – and attended to his usual "chores." He was splitting wood when his father passed him on the way to the barn with the milk-pail in his hand.

"You are up early, Tom," he said.

"Yes," answered our hero.

Tom could not help wondering whether his father had come to any decision about letting him go to California; but he did not like to ask. In due time he would learn, of course. He felt that he should like to have it decided one way or the other. While his plans were in doubt he felt unsettled and nervous.

At an early hour the family gathered about the breakfast table. Tom noticed that his father and mother looked grave, and spoke in a subdued tone, as if they had something on their minds; but he did not know what to infer from this, except that they had his prospects still in consideration.

When breakfast was over, Mark Nelson pushed back his chair, and said: "How soon can you get Tom ready to start, Mary?"

"Am I going, father?" asked Tom, his heart giving an eager bound.

"Is Tom really going?" asked the younger children, with

scarcely less eagerness.

"If Squire Hudson doesn't go back on his promise. Tom, you can go with me to the squire's."

"How soon?"

"In about an hour. He doesn't breakfast as early as we do. I think he will be ready to receive us in about an hour."

"Thank you, father," said Tom. "You are doing a great deal for me."

"I can't do much for you, my boy. I can probably get you to California, and then you will be thrown upon your own exertions."

"I mean to work very hard. I think I shall succeed."

"I hope so, at least, Tom. When the time comes to start the other boys, I shall be glad to have your help in doing it."

Tom was pleased to hear this, though it placed upon his shoulders a new and heavy responsibility. He was assuming the responsibility not only for his own future, but for that of his brothers. But it made him feel more manly, as if the period of his dependent boyhood were over, and he had become a young man all at once.

"I hope I sha'n't disappoint you, father," he said.

"If you do, I don't think it will be your fault, Tom," said his father kindly. "Fortune may be against you, but we must take the risk of that."

"I don't know what to think about it, Tom," said his mother, in a tone of doubt and mental disturbance. "I feel as if you were

too young to go out in the wide world to seek your fortune."

"I am not so very young, mother. I am old enough to make my way."

"So your father says, and I have yielded to his judgment; but, Tom, I don't know how to let you go."

There were tears in Mrs. Nelson's eyes as she spoke. Tom was moved, and if he needed anything to strengthen him in the good resolutions he had formed, his mother's emotion supplied it.

"You sha'n't regret giving your consent, mother," he said manfully, and, rising from his seat, he went to his mother and kissed her.

"Mary," said Mr. Nelson, "you haven't answered my question. How long will it take to get Tom ready? If he is to go, he may as well start as soon as possible."

"Let me see," said Mrs. Nelson, "how many shirts have you got, Tom?"

"Five."

"Are they all in good order?"

"I believe one needs mending."

"I don't know whether that will be enough," said Mrs. Nelson doubtfully.

"Mary," said her husband, "don't provide too large a supply of clothing. Tom may find it a burden. Remember, in California, he will have to travel on foot and carry his own baggage."

"Then I think he is already pretty well provided. But some of his clothes may need mending. That won't take long, and I will

attend to it at once."

"Perhaps Squire Hudson will go back on you, after all," said Walter.

Tom's face was overcast. That would be a disappointment he could not easily bear.

"I shall soon know," he said.

An hour later Tom and his father set out for Squire Hudson's residence. Tom felt nervous; he could not well help it.

"Tom," said his father, "this is an important visit for you."

"Yes, sir," said Tom.

"You are feeling nervous, I see. Try to take it coolly, and don't feel too low-spirited if things don't turn out as you hope."

"I will try to follow your advice, father, but I am not sure as I can."

"If you are disappointed, try to think it is for the best. A boy of your age had made all arrangements to visit Europe with a party of friends. The day before starting something happened which made it impossible for him to go. For weeks he had been looking forward with eager anticipation to his journey, and now it was indefinitely postponed."

"What a terrible disappointment!" said Tom.

"Yes, it seemed so, but mark the issue. The steamer was lost, and all on board were drowned. The disappointment saved his life."

"It might not always turn out so," objected Tom.

"No, that is true. Still, if we are willing to think that our

disappointments are not always misfortunes, we shall go through life with more cheerfulness and content."

"Still, I hope I shall not be disappointed in this," said Tom.

"You are perhaps too young to be philosophical," said his father.

Mark Nelson had enjoyed only the usual advantages of education afforded by a common school; but he was a man of good natural capacity, and more thoughtful than many in his vocation. From him Tom inherited good natural abilities and industrious habits. It would not be fair, however, to give all the credit to his father. Mrs. Nelson was a superior woman, and all her children were well endowed by nature.

As they turned into Squire Hudson's gravel-path, the squire himself opened the front door.

"Were you coming to see me?" he asked.

"We would like to speak with you a few minutes, squire, if you can spare the time."

"Oh, yes, I have nothing pressing on hand," said the squire, with unusual affability. "Walk in, Mr. Nelson."

He led the way into the room where Tom had had his interview with him the day before.

"Your son did me a good turn yesterday," he said graciously. "He behaved in a very creditable manner."

"He told me that he found your pocketbook, Squire Hudson."

"Yes; it contained a large sum of money. Some boys would have kept it."

"None of my boys would," said Mark Nelson proudly.

"Of course not. They're too well brought up."

"Tom told me that you offered to advance money enough to get him to California," said Mr. Nelson, coming to business.

"On satisfactory security," added the squire cautiously.

"You proposed to increase the mortgage on my place?"

"Yes," said the squire. "I wouldn't have done it, though, Neighbor Nelson, but for the good turn the boy did me. I am not at all particular about increasing the amount of the mortgage, but, if by so doing it I can promote Tom's views, I won't object."

"Thank you, sir," said Tom gratefully.

"It is a serious step for me to take," continued Mr. Nelson, "for I feel the incumbrance to be a heavy one already. In fact, it is with difficulty that I pay the interest. But the time has come when Tom should start in life, and in this village there seems to be no opening."

"None whatever," said the squire, in a tone of decision.

"What do you think of the prospects in California?" asked Mark Nelson. "You are a man of business, and can judge better than I. Are the stories we hear of fortunes made in a short time to be relied upon?"

"As to that," said the squire deliberately, "I suppose we can't believe all we hear; we must make some allowances. But, after all, there's no doubt of the existence of gold in large quantities; I am satisfied of that."

"Then about the wisdom of sending out a boy like Tom, alone;

do you think it best?"

"It depends altogether on the boy," responded the squire. "If he is honest, industrious, and energetic, he will make his way. You know your own boy better than I do."

"He is all you say, Squire Hudson. I have a great deal of confidence in Tom."

Tom looked at his father gratefully. Sometimes it does a boy good to learn that the older people have confidence in him.

"Then let him go," said the squire. "I stand ready to furnish the money. I think you said you needed two hundred dollars."

This question was put to Tom, and the boy answered in the affirmative.

"Very well," said the squire. "As soon as the necessary writings are made out, the money shall be ready."

"It's all settled!" thought Tom triumphantly.

At that moment Sinclair Hudson, the squire's only son, opened the door and looked into the room.

"Hello, Tom Nelson," said he, rather rudely. "What brings you here?"

CHAPTER VI.

TOM ARRIVES IN PITTSBURG

"I came on business, Sinclair," answered Tom, smiling.

"Thomas is going to California, Sinclair," explained Squire Hudson.

Sinclair opened wide his eyes in amazement. "What for?" he asked.

"To dig gold and make my fortune," answered Tom complacently.

"Come out and tell me all about it."

"You can go, Thomas," said Squire Hudson graciously. "Your father and I will settle the business."

"Is it true that you are going to California?" asked Sinclair, when they were out in the front yard.

"Yes."

"How soon do you go?"

"I want to get away in a week."

"What has my father to do with it?" inquired Sinclair.

"He is going to lend me the money to get there."

"How much?"

"Two hundred dollars."

"Then he is a greater fool than I thought," said Sinclair, with characteristic politeness.

"Why do you say that?" demanded our hero, justly nettled.

"Because he'll never see the money again."

"Yes, he will. My father is responsible for it."

"Your father is a poor man."

"He is able to pay that, if I don't; but I hope he won't have to."

"Do you really expect to find gold?" asked Sinclair curiously.

"Certainly I do. Others have, and why shouldn't I? I am willing to work hard."

"Do you think you'll come home rich?"

"I hope so."

"I have a great mind to ask father to let me go with you," said Sinclair unexpectedly.

"You wouldn't like it. You haven't been brought up to work," said Tom, rather startled, and not much pleased with the proposal, for Sinclair Hudson was about the last boy he wished as a companion.

"Oh, I wouldn't go to work. I would go as a gentleman, to see the country. Wait a minute; I will run in and ask him."

So Sinclair ran into the house, and preferred his request.

"That's a wild idea, Sinclair," said his father quickly.

"Why is it? I'm as old as Tom Nelson."

"He is going because it is necessary for him to earn his living."

"He will have a splendid time," grumbled the spoiled son.

"You shall travel all you want to when you are older," said his father. "Now you must get an education."

"I want to travel now."

"I will take you to New York the next time I go."

"Give me five dollars besides."

The money was handed him.

He went out and reported to Tom that he was going to travel all over the world when he was a little older, and had decided not to go to California now.

"If you have money enough you can go with me," he added graciously.

"Thank you," said Tom politely, though the prospect of having Sinclair for a traveling companion did not exhilarate him much.

For a few days Mrs. Nelson was very busy getting Tom ready to go. It was well, perhaps, that so much needed to be done, for it kept her mind from the thought of the separation.

The question of which route to take, whether by steamer or across the plains, demanded consideration. It was finally decided that Tom should go overland. It was thought he might join some company at St. Joseph – or St. Joe, as it was then, and is now, popularly called – and pay his passage in services, thus saving a good share of the two hundred dollars. That was, of course, an important consideration.

"How shall I carry my money?" asked Tom.

"It will be best to take gold, and carry it for safety in a belt around your waist," said his father. "You must be very prudent and careful, or you may be robbed. That would be a serious thing for you, as I could not forward you any more money."

"I will be very prudent, father," said Tom. "I know the value

of money too well to risk losing it."

Well, the days of preparation were over at length, and Tom stood on the threshold, bidding good-by to his parents and his brothers and sisters. He had not realized till now what it was to leave home on a long journey of indefinite duration. He wanted to be heroic, but in spite of himself his eyes moistened, and he came near breaking down.

"I don't know how to part with you, my dear child," said his mother.

"Think that it is all for the best, mother," said Tom, choking. "Think of the time when I will come back with plenty of money."

"God bless you, Tom!" said his father. "Don't forget your good habits and principles when you are far away from us."

"I won't, father."

So Tom's long journey commenced.

Tom's plan was to go to St. Louis first. His father made some inquiries about the route, and recommended going to Pittsburg by cars, then to take the boat on the Ohio River for Cincinnati. This seemed to Tom to afford a pleasant variety, and he gladly accepted the suggestion.

As they were approaching Pittsburg, Tom occupied a whole seat on the left-hand side of the car. A brisk, plausible young man, of twenty-five, passing through the aisle, observed the vacant seat, and, pausing, inquired, "Is this seat engaged?"

"No, sir," answered Tom.

"Then, if you have no objection, I will occupy it."

"Certainly, sir."

The young man was nicely dressed. In his bosom sparkled a diamond pin, and he wore three or four rings on his fingers.

"He must be rich," thought Tom, who was of an observant turn.

"A pleasant day to travel," remarked the young man affably.

"Yes, it is," said Tom.

"Do you go farther than Pittsburg?"

"Yes, I am going to California," answered Tom proudly.

"Is it possible? Are you alone?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are young to travel so far."

"I am sixteen; that is, I shall be in two or three weeks."

"Still, you are young to take such a journey alone. Are you going to join friends there?"

"No; I am going to seek my fortune."

Once more the young man looked surprised, and scanned Tom curiously.

"I presume you are from the city," he observed, with a smile which Tom would not have understood if he had noticed it. The truth is, that Tom bore evident marks of being a country boy. I don't like to say that he looked "green," but he certainly lacked the air that distinguishes a town-bred boy. His companion evidently understood boy nature, for Tom was much flattered by the supposition that he was a city boy.

"No," he answered, almost as if apologizing for a discreditable

fact; "I am from the country."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed the other, in apparent surprise. "I thought, from your appearance, that you were from the city. How do you go from Pittsburg?"

"By river to Cincinnati."

"Do you really? I am glad to hear it; I am going there myself. We shall be fellow passengers. That will be pleasant."

Tom thought it would. His companion seemed very pleasant and social, and he had been feeling lonely, as was only natural.

"Yes, it will," he said.

"By the way, as we may be thrown together, more or less, we ought to know each other. My name is Milton Graham. My father is a rich merchant in New York. I am traveling partly on business for my father's firm, and partly for pleasure."

"My name is Thomas Nelson; most people call me Tom," said our hero.

"Then I will call you Tom," said Graham. "I like the name. I have a favorite cousin named Tom. Poor boy! – he is an orphan. His father died two years ago, leaving him two hundred thousand dollars. My father is his guardian. He is about your age; only not quite so good-looking."

Tom blushed. He had not thought much of his own looks, but he was human, and no one is displeased at being considered good-looking. Mr. Graham spoke meditatively, as if he was not intending to pay a compliment, only mentioning a fact, and Tom did not feel called upon to thank him for this flattering remark.

"That is a great deal of money," he said.

"Yes, it is. All my relations are rich; that is, except one uncle, who probably is not worth over twenty thousand dollars."

Tom was impressed. A man who could talk of such a sum in such terms must certainly be very rich.

"Do you know, Mr. Graham," he inquired, "how soon the steamer will start after we reach Pittsburg?"

"No; but I can find out after we reach there."

On arriving at Pittsburg, inquiry was made, and it was ascertained that the steamer *River Belle* would leave at nine o'clock the following morning.

"We shall have to go to a hotel," said Graham.

"Is there any cheap hotel here?" asked Tom prudently.

"Yes; there is the Pittsburg House. Suppose we both go there."

"All right."

Mr. Graham had only a small carpetbag, smaller than Tom's. They took them in their hands, and walked for a short distance, till they reached a plain building, which, from the sign, Tom discovered to be the hotel which had been mentioned.

"Shall we room together? It will cost less," said Milton Graham carelessly.

"If you please," said Tom.

He was lonely and thought he would like company. Besides, it would be cheaper, and that was a weighty consideration.

CHAPTER VII.

THE PITTSBURG HOUSE

Tom and his companion entered the hotel. At the left was the clerk's desk. Milton Graham naturally took the lead. He took a pen from the clerk, and entered his name with a flourish. Then he handed the pen to Tom, who followed his example, omitting the flourish, however.

"This young gentleman will room with me," said Graham.

"All right, sir," said the clerk. "Will you go up to your room now?"

"Yes."

The porter was summoned, and handed the key of No. 16. He took the two carpetbags, and led the way up-stairs, for the Pittsburg House had no elevator. Even in the best hotels at that time this modern convenience was not to be found.

The door of No. 16 was opened, revealing a plain room, about twelve feet square, provided, as Tom was glad to see, with two narrow beds.

"Have you got a quarter, Tom?" asked Graham.

Tom drew one from his pocket.

Graham took it and handed it to the porter, who expressed his thanks.

"It's always customary to fee the porter," he said carelessly, in

answer to Tom's look of surprise.

"What for?"

"For bringing up the baggage."

"Twenty-five cents for bringing up two small carpetbags! That's pretty high. I'd have brought them up myself, if I had known," said Tom, dissatisfied, for he felt that this fee was hardly in accordance with his resolutions of economy.

"Oh, he expects it. It's his regular perquisite. When you've traveled more you'll understand."

"How much are we to pay for our accommodations?" asked Tom anxiously.

"About two dollars apiece, I reckon."

"That's more than I can afford," said Tom, alarmed.

"Perhaps it is less, as we room together."

"I hope so, for I can't afford to be extravagant."

"Do you call two dollars a day extravagant?" asked Graham, smiling.

"It is for me. My father is poor."

"Oh, it'll be all right. I'll fix it with the clerk. If you are ready, suppose we go down and have some supper."

To this Tom had no objection. He washed his hands and face, and brushed his hair; then he declared himself ready.

Tom was hungry, and did justice to the supper, which he found very good. As they left the table, and reentered the office of the hotel, Milton Graham said, "I am going to make a call on some friends. Sorry to leave you, but we shall meet later in the

evening."

"All right," said Tom.

On the whole he did not regret being alone. He began to doubt whether Graham would make a desirable traveling companion. Tom felt the need of economy, and he saw that his companion would make it difficult. If a fee must be paid, it was fair to divide it; but the porter's fee had come out of Tom's pocket.

"Didn't he have a quarter, I wonder?" thought our hero.

It was a small matter, but economy must begin in small matters, or it is not likely to be practised at all.

He took the opportunity to go to the desk and ascertain the sum likely to be charged for his accommodations.

"How long do you stay?" asked the clerk pleasantly.

"Till to-morrow morning. I am going to sail in the *River Belle*."

"Then we shall charge you a dollar and a half."

This seemed large to Tom, but he made no objection.

"How much would it have been if I had roomed alone?" he asked.

"The same. We make no change in our terms on that account."

"Mr. Graham told me it would be cheaper to room together."

"He is your roommate, isn't he?"

"Yes, sir."

"He is mistaken, so far as our house is concerned. I suppose you have known him for some time."

"No, sir. I met him on the cars yesterday afternoon for the first time."

"Then you don't know anything about him?"

"Oh, yes," answered Tom. "He is the son of a rich merchant in New York."

"Who told you that?"

"He did."

The clerk was a man of middle age. At home he had a son of Tom's age, and this led him to feel a friendly interest in our hero.

"I suppose you have never traveled much," he said.

"No, sir. This is my first journey."

"Are you going far?"

"To California."

"That is a long journey for a boy of your age," said the clerk, looking surprised.

"Yes, sir; but I can't get anything to do at home, and I am going to California to seek my fortune."

"I hope you will be successful," said the clerk, with hearty sympathy. "Will you let me give you a piece of advice?"

"I shall be very glad of it, sir," responded Tom. "I find I am quite inexperienced."

"Then don't trust strangers too readily. It is dangerous."

"Do you refer to Mr. Graham?" asked Tom, startled.

"Yes, I refer to him, or any other chance acquaintance."

"Don't you think he is all right?" asked our hero anxiously.

"I don't think he is the son of a rich merchant in New York."

"Then why should he tell me so?"

Tom was green, and I have no intention of concealing it.

"I can't tell what his designs may be. Did you tell him that you were going to California?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then he will, of course, conclude that you have money. Did you tell him where you keep it?"

"No, sir. I keep it in a belt around my waist."

"You are too ready to tell that, though with me the information is safe. You are to room together. What will be easier, then, for your companion to rob you during the night?"

"I'd better take a room alone," said Tom, now thoroughly alarmed.

"I should advise you to, in most cases, but at present it may be as well to let things remain as they are, as it will save an awkward explanation."

"But I don't want to be robbed."

"We have a safe in the office – there it is – in which we deposit articles of value intrusted to us by our guests. Then we become responsible for them. I advise you to leave your money with us overnight."

"I will," said Tom, relieved. "I shall have to go to my room to remove it."

"Very well. If you have a watch, or any other valuable, it will be well to put those in our charge also."

"No, sir, I have nothing of consequence but the money."

The belt of money was deposited in the safe, and Tom felt relieved. He began to realize for the first time the need of

prudence and caution. It had never occurred to him that a nice, gentlemanly-looking man, like Milton Graham, was likely to rob him of his scanty means. Even now he thought there must be some mistake. Still he felt that he had done the right thing in depositing the money with the clerk. The mere thought of losing it, and finding himself high and dry – stranded, so to speak – hundreds of miles from home, made him shudder. On the whole, Tom had learned a valuable, though an unpleasant, lesson. The young are by nature trustful. They are disposed to put confidence in those whom they meet, even for the first time. Unhappily, in a world where there is so much evil as there is in ours, such confidence is not justified. There are too many who make it a business to prey on their fellows, and select in preference the young and inexperienced.

It was only seven o'clock. Tom had a curiosity to see the city of Pittsburg, with whose name he had been familiar. So, after parting with his treasure, he went out for a walk. He did not much care where he went, since all was alike new to him. He ascertained, on inquiry, that Smithfield Street was the principal business thoroughfare. He inquired his way thither, and walked slowly through it, his attention fully occupied by what he saw.

CHAPTER VIII.

GRAHAM IN HIS TRUE COLORS

Tom strayed into a street leading from the main thoroughfare. Presently he came to a brilliantly-lighted liquor saloon. As he paused in front of the door, a heavy hand was laid upon his shoulder, and, looking up, he met the glance of a well-dressed gentleman, rather portly, whose flushed face and uncertain gait indicated his condition. He leaned rather heavily upon Tom, apparently for support, for he seemed to have been drinking more than was good for him.

"My young friend," he said, "come in and take a drink."

"Thank you, sir, but I would rather not," said Tom, startled.

"It won't hurt you. It don't hurt me."

As he uttered these last words he came near falling. In his effort to save himself he clutched Tom by the arm, and nearly pulled him over. Our hero was anxious to get away.

"Are you sure it don't hurt you?" he could not help saying.

"Do you think I'm drunk?" demanded the other.

"I think you've taken more than is good for you, sir," Tom answered bravely.

"I guess you're right," muttered the gentleman, trying to stand upright. "The drink's gone to my legs. That's strange. Does it ever go to your legs?"

"I never drink, sir."

"You're a most extraor'nary young man," hiccoughed Tom's new acquaintance.

"I must bid you good-night, sir," said our hero, anxious to get away.

"Don't go. I can't get home alone."

"Where do you live, sir?"

"I live in the country."

"Are you staying at a hotel?"

"Yes – Pittsburg House. Know Pittsburg House?"

"Yes, sir. I am staying there myself. Shall I lead you there? You'd better not drink any more."

"Jus' you say, my young frien'. You know best."

It was not a pleasant, or, indeed, an easy task to lead home the inebriate, for he leaned heavily on Tom, and, being a large man, it was as much as our hero could do to get him along. As they were walking along Tom caught sight of his roommate, Milton Graham, just turning into a saloon, in company with two other young men. They were laughing loudly, and seemed in high spirits. Graham did not recognize Tom.

"I hope he won't come home drunk," thought our hero. "It seems to me it is fashionable to drink here."

Tom's experience of city life was very limited. It was not long before he learned that Pittsburg was by no means exceptional in this respect.

He ushered his companion safely into the hotel, and then a

servant took charge of him, and led him to his room. Tom sat up a little while longer, reading a paper he found in the office, and then went to bed.

"I suppose Mr. Graham will come home late," he said to himself. "I must leave the door unlocked."

He soon went to sleep. How long he slept he did not know, but suddenly awoke after an interval. Opening his eyes he became conscious that Graham had returned. He discovered something more. His roommate, partially undressed, and with his back turned to Tom, was engaged in searching our hero's pockets. This discovery set Tom broad awake at once. He was not frightened, but rather amused when he thought of Graham's disappointment. He did not think it best to speak, but counterfeited sleep.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.