

Horatio Alger Jr.

Luke Walton



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Alger Horatio Luke Walton

CHAPTER I A CHICAGO NEWSBOY

"*News and Mail*, one cent each!"

Half a dozen Chicago newsboys, varying in age from ten to sixteen years, with piles of papers in their hands, joined in the chorus.

They were standing in front and at the sides of the Sherman House, on the corner of Clark and Randolph Streets, one of the noted buildings in the Lake City. On the opposite side of Randolph Street stands a gloomy stone structure, the Court House and City Hall. In the shadow of these buildings, at the corner, Luke Walton, one of the largest newsboys, had posted himself. There was something about his bearing and appearance which distinguished him in a noticeable way from his companions.

To begin with, he looked out of place. He was well grown, with a frank, handsome face, and was better dressed than the average newsboy. That was one reason, perhaps, why he preferred to be by himself, rather than to engage in the scramble for customers which was the habit of the boys around him.

It was half-past five. The numerous cars that passed were full of business men, clerks, and boys, returning to their homes after a busy day.

Luke had but two papers left, but these two for some unaccountable reason remained on his hands an unusual length of time. But at length a comfortable-looking gentleman of middle age, coming from the direction of La Salle Street, paused and said, "You may give me a *News*, my boy."

"Here you are, sir," he said, briskly.

The gentleman took the paper, and thrusting his hand into his pocket, began to feel for a penny, but apparently without success.

"I declare," he said, smiling, "I believe I am penniless. I have nothing but a five-dollar bill."

"Never mind, sir! Take the paper and pay me to-morrow."

"But I may not see you."

"I am generally here about this time."

"And if I shouldn't see you, you will lose the penny."

"I will risk it, sir," said Luke, smiling.

"You appear to have confidence in me."

"Yes, sir."

"Then it is only fair that I should have confidence in you."

Luke looked puzzled, for he didn't quite understand what was in the gentleman's mind.

"I will take both of your papers. Here is a five-dollar bill. You may bring me the change to-morrow, at my office, No. 155 La Salle Street. My name is Benjamin Afton."

"But, sir," objected Luke, "there is no occasion for this. It is much better that I should trust you for two cents than that you should trust me with five dollars."

"Probably the two cents are as important to you as five dollars to me. At any rate, it is a matter of confidence, and I am quite willing to trust you."

"Thank you, sir, but –"

"I shall have to leave you, or I shall be home late to dinner."

Before Luke had a chance to protest further, he found himself alone, his stock of papers exhausted, and a five-dollar bill in his hand.

While he stood on the corner in some perplexity, a newsboy crossed Randolph Street, and accosted him.

"My eyes, if you ain't in luck, Luke Walton," he said. "Where did you get that bill? Is it a one?"

"No, it's a five."

"Where'd you get it?"

"A gentleman just bought two papers of me."

"And gave you five dollars! You don't expect me to swaller all that, do you?"

"I'm to bring him the change to-morrow," continued Luke.

The other boy nearly doubled up with merriment.

"Wasn't he jolly green, though?" he ejaculated.

"Why was he?" asked Luke, who by this time felt considerably annoyed.

"He'll have to whistle for his money."

"Why will he?"

"Cause he will."

"He won't do anything of the sort. I shall take him his change to-morrow morning."

"What?" ejaculated Tom Brooks.

"I shall carry him his change in the morning – four dollars and ninety-eight cents. Can't you understand that?"

"You ain't going to be such a fool, Luke Walton?"

"If it's being a fool to be honest, then I'm going to be that kind of a fool. Wouldn't you do the same?"

"No, I wouldn't. I'd just invite all the boys round the corner to go with me to the theayter. Come, Luke, be a good feller, and give us all a blow-out. We'll go to the theayter, and afterwards we'll have an oyster stew. I know a bully place on Clark Street, near Monroe."

"Do you take me for a thief, Tom Brooks?" exclaimed Luke, indignantly.

"The gentleman meant you to have the money. Of course he knew you wouldn't bring it back. Lemme see, there's a good play on to Hooley's. Six of us will cost a dollar and a half, and the oyster stews will be fifteen cents apiece. That'll only take half the money, and you'll have half left for yourself."

"I am ashamed of you, Tom Brooks. You want me to become a thief, and it is very evident what you would do if you were in my place. What would the gentleman think of me?"

"He don't know you. You can go on State Street to sell papers, so he won't see you."

"Suppose he should see me."

"You can tell him you lost the money. You ain't smart, Luke Walton, or you'd know how to manage."

"No, I am not smart in that way, I confess. I shan't waste any more time talking to you. I'm going home."

"I know what you're going to do. You're goin' to spend all the money on yourself."

"Don't you believe that I mean to return the change?"

"No, I don't."

"I ought not to complain of that. You merely credit me with acting as you would act yourself. How many papers have you got left?"

"Eight."

"Here, give me half, and I will sell them for you, that is, if I can do it in fifteen minutes."

"I'd rather you'd take me to the theayter," grumbled Tom.

"I've already told you I won't do it."

In ten minutes Luke had sold his extra supply of papers, and handed the money to Tom. Tom thanked him in an ungracious sort of way, and Luke started for home.

It was a long walk, for the poor cannot afford to pick and choose their localities. Luke took his way through Clark Street to the river, and then, turning in a north westerly direction, reached Milwaukee Avenue. This is not a fashionable locality, and the side streets are tenanted by those who are poor or of limited means.

Luke paused in front of a three-story frame house in Green Street. He ascended the steps and opened the door, for this was the newsboy's home.

CHAPTER II

A LETTER FROM THE DEAD

In the entry Luke met a girl of fourteen with fiery red hair, which apparently was a stranger to the comb and brush. She was the landlady's daughter, and, though of rather fitful and uncertain temper, always had a smile and pleasant word for Luke, who was a favorite of hers.

"Well, Nancy, how's mother?" asked the newsboy, as he began to ascend the front stairs.

"She seems rather upset like, Luke," answered Nancy.

"What has happened to upset her?" asked Luke, anxiously.

"I think it's a letter she got about noon. It was a queer letter, all marked up, as if it had been travelin' round. I took it in myself, and carried it up to your ma. I stayed to see her open it, for I was kind of curious to know who writ it."

"Well?"

"As soon as your ma opened it, she turned as pale as ashes, and I thought she'd faint away. She put her hand on her heart just so," and Nancy placed a rather dirty hand of her own, on which glittered a five-cent brass ring, over that portion of her anatomy where she supposed her heart lay.

"She didn't faint away, did she?" asked Luke.

"No, not quite."

"Did she say who the letter was from?"

"No; I asked her, but she said, 'From no one that you ever saw, Nancy.' I say, Luke, if you find out who's it from, let me know."

"I won't promise, Nancy. Perhaps mother would prefer to keep it a secret."

"Oh, well, keep your secrets, if you want to."

"Don't be angry, Nancy; I will tell you if I can," and Luke hurried upstairs to the third story, which contained the three rooms occupied by his mother, his little brother, and himself.

Opening the door, he saw his mother sitting in a rocking-chair, apparently in deep thought, for the work had fallen from her hands and lay in her lap. There was an expression of sadness in her face, as if she had been thinking of the happy past, when the little family was prosperous, and undisturbed by poverty or privation.

"What's the matter, mother?" asked Luke, with solicitude.

Mrs. Walton looked up quickly.

"I have been longing to have you come back, Luke," she said. "Something strange has happened to-day."

"You received a letter, did you not?"

"Who told you, Luke?"

"Nancy. I met her as I came in. She said she brought up the letter, and that you appeared very much agitated when you opened it."

"It is true."

"From whom was the letter, then, mother?"

"From your father."

"What!" exclaimed Luke, with a start. "Is he not dead?"

"The letter was written a year ago."

"Why, then, has it arrived so late?"

"Your father on his deathbed intrusted it to someone who mislaid it, and has only just discovered and mailed it. On the envelope he explains this, and expresses his regret. It was at first mailed to our old home, and has been forwarded from there. But that is not all, Luke. I learn from the letter that we have been cruelly wronged. Your father, when he knew he could not live, intrusted to a man

in whom he had confidence, ten thousand dollars to be conveyed to us. This wicked man could not resist the temptation, but kept it, thinking we should never know anything about it. You will find it all explained in the letter."

"Let me read it, mother," said Luke, in excitement.

Mrs. Walton opened a drawer of the bureau, and placed in her son's hands an envelope, brown and soiled by contact with tobacco. It was directed to her in a shaky hand. Across one end were written these words:

This letter was mislaid. I have just discovered it, and mail it, hoping it will reach you without further delay. Many apologies and regrets. J. HANSHAW.

Luke did not spend much time upon the envelope, but opened the letter.

The sight of his father's familiar handwriting brought the tears to his eyes, This was the letter: GOLD GULCH, California.

MY DEAR WIFE: It is a solemn thought to me that when you receive this letter these trembling fingers will be cold in death. Yes, dear Mary, I know very well that I am on my deathbed, and shall never more be permitted to see your sweet face, or meet again the gaze of my dear children. Last week I contracted a severe cold while mining, partly through imprudent exposure; and have grown steadily worse, till the doctor, whom I summoned from Sacramento, informs me that there is no hope, and that my life is not likely to extend beyond two days. This is a sad end to my dreams of future happiness with my little family gathered around me. It is all the harder, because I have been successful in the errand that brought me out here. "I have struck it rich," as they say out here, and have been able to lay by ten thousand dollars. I intended to go home next month, carrying this with me. It would have enabled me to start in some business which would have yielded us a liberal living, and provided a comfortable home for you and the children. But all this is over – for me at least. For you I hope the money will bring what I anticipated. I wish I could live long enough to see it in your hands, but that cannot be.

I have intrusted it to a friend who has been connected with me here, Thomas Butler, of Chicago. He has solemnly promised to seek you out, and put the money into your hands. I think he will be true to his trust. Indeed I have no doubt on the subject, for I cannot conceive of any man being base enough to belie the confidence placed in him by a dying man, and despoil a widow and her fatherless children. No, I will not permit myself to doubt the integrity of my friend. If I should, it would make my last sickness exceedingly bitter.

Yet, as something might happen to Butler on his way home, though exceedingly improbable, I think it well to describe him to you. He is a man of nearly fifty, I should say, about five feet ten inches in height, with a dark complexion, and dark hair a little tinged with gray. He will weigh about one hundred and sixty pounds. But there is one striking mark about him which will serve to identify him. He has a wart on the upper part of his right cheek – a mark which disfigures him and mortifies him exceedingly. He has consulted a physician about its removal, but has been told that the operation would involve danger, and, moreover, would not be effectual, as the wart is believed to be of a cancerous nature, and would in all probability grow out again. For these reasons he has given up his intention of having it removed, and made up his mind, unwillingly enough, to carry it to the grave with him.

I have given you this long description, not because it seemed at all necessary, for I believe Thomas Butler to be a man of strict honesty, but because for some reason I am impelled to do so.

I am very tired, and I feel that I must close. God bless you, dear wife, and guard our children, soon to be fatherless!

Your loving husband,

FREDERICK WALTON.

P.S. – Butler has left for the East. This letter I have given to another friend to mail after my death.

CHAPTER III

LUKE FORMS A RESOLUTION

As Luke read this letter his pleasant face became stern in its expression. They had indeed been cruelly wronged. The large sum of which they had been defrauded would have insured them comfort and saved them from many an anxiety. His mother would not have been obliged to take in sewing, and he himself could have carried out his cherished design of obtaining a college education.

This man in whom his father had reposed the utmost confidence had been false to his trust. He had kept in his own hands the money which should have gone to the widow and children of his dying friend. Could anything be more base?

"Mother," said Luke, "this man Thomas Butler must be a villain."

Yes, Luke; he has done us a great wrong."

"He thought, no doubt, that we should never hear of this money."

"I almost wish I had not, Luke. It is very tantalizing to think how it would have improved our condition."

"Then you are sorry to receive the letter, mother?"

"No, Luke. It seems like a message from the dead, and shows me how good and thoughtful your poor father was to the last. He meant to leave us comfortable."

"But his plans were defeated by a rascal. Mother, I should like to meet and punish this Thomas Butler."

"Even if you should meet him, Luke, you must be prudent. He is probably a rich man."

"Made so at our expense," added Luke, bitterly.

"And he would deny having received anything from your father."

"Mother," said Luke, sternly and deliberately, "I feel sure that I shall some day meet this man face to face, and if I do it will go hard if I don't force him to give up this money which he has falsely converted to his own use."

The boy spoke with calm and resolute dignity hardly to be expected in one so young, and with a deep conviction that surprised his mother.

"Luke," she said, "I hardly know you to-night. You don't seem like a boy. You speak like a man."

"I feel so. It is the thought of this man triumphant in his crime, that makes me feel older than I am. Now, mother, I feel that I have a purpose in life. It is to find this man, and punish him for what he has done, unless he will make reparation."

Mrs. Walton shook her head. It was not from her that Luke had inherited his independent spirit. She was a fond mother, of great amiability, but of a timid shrinking disposition, which led her to deprecate any aggressive steps.

"Promise me not to get yourself into any trouble, Luke," she said, "even if you do meet this man."

"I can't promise that, mother, for I may not be able to help it. Besides, I haven't met him yet, and it isn't necessary to cross a bridge till you get to it. Now let us talk of something else."

"How much did you make to-day, Luke?" asked Bennie, his young brother, seven years old.

"I didn't make my fortune, Bennie. Including the morning papers, I only made sixty cents."

"That seems a good deal to me, Luke," said his mother. "I only made twenty-five. They pay such small prices for making shirts."

"I should think they did. And yet you worked harder and more steadily than I did."

"I have worked since morning, probably about eight hours."

"Then you have made only three cents an hour. What a shame!"

"If I had a sewing-machine, I could do more, but that is beyond our means."

"I hope soon to be able to get you one, mother. I can pay something down and the rest on installments."

"That would be quite a relief, Luke."

"If you had a sewing-machine, perhaps I could help you," suggested Bennie.

"I should hardly dare to let you try, Bennie. Suppose you spoiled a shirt. It would take off two days' earnings. But I'll tell you what you can do. You can set the table and wash the dishes, and relieve me in that way."

"Or you might take in washing," said Luke, with a laugh. "That pays better than sewing. Just imagine how nice it would look in an advertisement in the daily papers: A boy of seven is prepared to wash and iron for responsible parties. Address Bennie Walton, No. 161-1/2 Green Street."

"Now you are laughing at me, Luke," said Bennie, pouting. "Why don't you let me go out with you and sell papers?"

"I hope, Bennie," said Luke, gravely, "you will never have to go into the street with papers. I know what it is, and how poor boys fare. One night last week, at the corner of Monroe and Clark Streets, I saw a poor little chap, no older than you, selling papers at eleven o'clock. He had a dozen papers which he was likely to have left on his hands, for there are not many who will buy papers at that hour."

"Did you speak to him, Luke?" asked Benny, interested.

"Yes; I told him he ought to go home. But he said that if he went home with all those papers unsold, his stepfather would whip him. There were tears in the poor boy's eyes as he spoke."

"What did you do, Luke?"

"I'll tell you what I did, Bennie. I thought of you, and I paid him the cost price on his papers. It wasn't much, for they were all penny papers, but the poor little fellow seemed so relieved."

"Did you sell them yourself, Luke?"

"I sold four of them. I went over to Madison Street, and stood in front of McVicker's Theater just as the people were coming out. It so happened that four persons bought papers, so I was only two cents out, after all. You remember, mother, that was the evening I got home so late."

"Yes, Luke, I felt worried about you. But you did right. I am always glad to have you help those who are worse off than we are. How terribly I should feel if Bennie had to be out late in the streets like that!"

"There are many newsboys as young, or at any rate not much older. I have sometimes seen gentlemen, handsomely dressed, and evidently with plenty of money, speak roughly to these young boys. It always makes me indignant. Why should they have so easy a time, while there are so many who don't know where their next meal is coming from? Why, what such a man spends for his meals in a single day would support a poor newsboy in comfort for a week."

"My dear Luke, this is a problem that has puzzled older and wiser heads than yours. There must always be poor people, but those who are more fortunate ought at least to give them sympathy. It is the least acknowledgment they can make for their own more favored lot."

"I am going out a little while this evening, mother."

"Very well, Luke. Don't be late."

"No, mother, I won't. I want to call on a friend of mine, who is sick."

"Who it is, Luke?"

"It is Jim Norman. The poor boy took cold one day, his shoes were so far gone. He has a bad cough, and I am afraid it will go hard with him."

"Is he a newsboy, too, Luke?" asked Bennie Walton.

"No; he is a bootblack."

"I shouldn't like to black boots."

"Nor I, Bennie; but if a boy is lucky there is more money to be made in that business."

"Where does he live?" asked Mrs. Walton.

"On Ohio Street, not very far from here. There's another boy I know lives on that street Tom Brooks; but he isn't a friend of mine. He wanted me to keep five dollars, and treat him and some other boys to an evening at the theater, and a supper afterwards."

"I hope you won't associate with him, Luke."

"Not more than I can help."

Luke took his hat and went downstairs into the street.

In the hall he met Nancy. She waylaid him with an eager look on her face.

"Who was the letter from, Luke?" she asked.

"From a friend of the family, who is now dead," answered Luke, gravely.

"Good gracious! How could he write it after he was dead?" ejaculated Nancy.

"It was given to a person to mail who forgot all about it, and carried it in his pocket for a year."

"My sakes alive! If I got a letter from a dead man it would make me creep all over. No wonder your ma came near faintin'."

CHAPTER IV

AN ATTACK IN THE DARK

Luke turned into Milwaukee Avenue, and a few steps took him to West Ohio Street, where his friend lived. On his way he met Tom Brooks, who was lounging in front of a cigar store, smoking a cigarette.

"Good-evening, Tom," said Luke, politely.

"Evenin'!" responded Tom, briefly. "Where you goin'?"

"To see Jim Norman. He's sick."

"What's the matter of him?"

"He's got a bad cold and is confined to the house?"

Tom shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't go much on Jim Norman," he said, "He ought to be a girl. He never smoked a cigarette in his life."

"Didn't he? All the better for him. I don't smoke myself."

"You have smoked."

"Yes, I used to, but it troubled my mother, and I promised her I wouldn't do it again."

"So you broke off?"

"Yes."

"I wouldn't be tied to a woman's apron strings."

"Wouldn't you try to oblige your mother?"

"No, I wouldn't. What does a woman know about boys? If I was a gal it would be different."

"Then we don't agree, that is all."

"I say, Luke, won't you take me to the theayter?"

"I can't afford it."

"That's all bosh! Haven't you got five dollars? I'd feel rich on five dollars."

"Perhaps I might if it were mine, but it isn't."

"You can use it all the same," said Tom, in an insinuating voice.

"Yes, I can be dishonest if I choose, but I don't choose."

"What Sunday school do you go to?" asked Tom, with a sneer.

"None at present."

"I thought you did by your talk. It makes me sick!"

"Then," said Luke, good-naturedly, "there is no need to listen to it. I am afraid you are not likely to enjoy my company, so I will walk along."

Luke kept on his way, leaving Tom smoking sullenly.

"That feller's a fool!" he muttered, in a disgusted tone.

"What feller?"

Tom turned, and saw his friend and chum, Pat O'Connor, who had just come up.

"What feller? Why, Luke Walton, of course."

"What's the matter of him?"

"He's got five dollars, and he won't pay me into the theayter."

"Where did he get such a pile of money?" asked Pat, in surprise.

"A gentleman gave it to him for a paper, tellin' him to bring the change to-morrer."

"Is he goin' to do it?"

"Yes; that's why I call him a fool."

"I wish you and I had his chance," said Pat, enviously. "We'd paint the town red, I guess."

Tom nodded. He and Pat were quite agreed on that point.

"Where's Luke goin'?" asked Pat.

"To see Jim Norman. Jim's sick with a cold."

"What time's he comin' home?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"Do you think he's got the money with him – the five-dollar bill?"

"What are you up to?" asked Tom, with a quick glance at his companion.

"I was thinkin' we might borrow the money," answered Pat, with a grin.

To Tom this was a new suggestion, but it was favorably received. He conferred with Pat in a low tone, and then the two sauntered down the street in the direction of Jim Norman's home.

Meanwhile we will follow Luke.

He kept on till he reached a shabby brick house.

Jim and his mother, with two smaller children, occupied two small rooms on the top floor. Luke had been there before, and did not stop to inquire directions, but ascended the stairs till he came to Jim's room. The door was partly open, and he walked in.

"How's Jim, Mrs. Norman?" he asked.

Mrs. Norman was wearily washing dishes at the sink.

"He's right sick, Luke," she answered, turning round, and recognizing the visitor. "Do you hear him cough?"

From a small inner room came the sound of a hard and rasping cough.

"How are you feeling, Jim?" inquired Luke, entering, and taking a chair at the bedside.

"I don't feel any better, Luke," answered the sick boy, his face lighting up with pleasure as he recognized his friend. "I'm glad you come."

"You've got a hard cough."

"Yes; it hurts my throat when I cough, and I can't get a wink of sleep."

"I've brought you a little cough medicine. It was some we had in the house."

"Thank you, Luke. You're a good friend to me. Give me some, please."

"If your mother'll give me a spoon, I'll pour some out."

When the medicine was taken, the boys began to talk.

"I ought to be at work," said Jim, sighing. "I don't know how we'll get along if I don't get out soon. Mother has some washing to do, but it isn't enough to pay all our expenses. I used to bring in seventy-five cents a day, and that, with what mother could earn, kept us along."

"I wish I was rich enough to help you, Jim, but you know how it is. All I can earn I have to carry home. My mother sews for a house on State Street, but sewing doesn't pay as well as washing."

"I know you'd help me if you could, Luke. You have helped me by bringing in the medicine, and it does me good to have you call."

"But I would like to do more. I'll tell you what I will do. I know a rich gentleman, one of my customers. I'll call upon him to-morrow. I'll tell him about you, and perhaps he will help you."

"Any help would be acceptable, Luke, if you don't mind asking him."

"I wouldn't like to ask for myself, but I don't mind asking for you."

Luke stayed an hour, and left Jim much brighter and more cheerful for his visit.

When he went out into the street it was quite dark, although the moon now and then peeped out from behind the clouds that a brisk breeze sent scurrying across the sky.

Having a slight headache, he thought he would walk it off, so he sauntered slowly in the direction of the business portion of the city.

Walking farther than he intended, he found himself, almost before he was aware, crossing one of the numerous bridges that span the river. He was busy with thoughts of Jim, and how he could help him, and did not notice that two boys were following him stealthily. It was a complete surprise to him therefore when they rushed upon him, and, each seizing an arm, rendered him helpless.

"Hand over what money you've got, and be quick about it!" demanded one of the boys.

CHAPTER V

HOW LUKE ESCAPED

The attack was so sudden and unexpected that Luke was for the moment incapable of resistance, though in general quite ready to defend himself. It was not till he felt a hand in his pocket that he "pulled himself together," as the English express it, and began to make things lively for his assailants.

"What are you after?" he demanded. "Do you want to rob me?"

"Give us the money, and be quick about it."

"How do you know I have any money?" asked Luke, beginning to suspect in whose hands he was.

"Never mind how! Hand over that five-dollar bill," was the reply in the same hoarse whisper.

"I know you now. You're Tom Brooks," said Luke. "You're in bad business."

"No, I'm not Tom Brooks." It was Pat who spoke now. "Come, we have no time to lose. Stephen, give me your knife."

The name was a happy invention of Pat's to throw Luke off the scent. He was not himself acquainted with our hero, and did not fear identification.

"One of you two is Tom Brooks," said Luke, firmly. "You'd better give up this attempt at highway robbery. If I summon an officer you're liable to a long term of imprisonment. I'll save you trouble by telling you that I haven't any money with me, except a few pennies."

"Where's the five-dollar bill?"

It was Tom who spoke now.

"I left it at home with my mother. It's lucky I did, though you would have found it hard to get it from me."

"I don't believe it," said Tom, in a tone betraying disappointment.

"You may search me if you like; but if a policeman comes by you'd better take to your heels."

The boys appeared disconcerted.

"Is he lying?" asked Pat.

"No," responded Tom. "He'd own up if he had the money."

"Thank you for believing me. It is very evident that one of you knows me. Good-night. You'd better find some other way of getting money."

"Wait a minute! Are you going to tell on us? It wouldn't be fair to Tom Brooks. He ain't here, but you might get him into trouble."

"I shan't get you into trouble, Tom, but I'm afraid you bring trouble on yourself."

Apparently satisfied with this promise, the two boys slunk away in the darkness, and Luke was left to proceed on his way unmolested.

"I wouldn't have believed that of Tom," thought Luke. "I'm sorry it happened. If it had been anyone but me, and a cop had come by, it would have gone hard with him. It's lucky I left the money with mother, though I don't think they'd have got it at any rate."

Luke did not acquaint his mother with the attempt that had been made to rob him. He merely told of his visit and of the sad plight of the little bootblack.

"I would like to have helped him, mother," Luke concluded. "If we hadn't been robbed of that money father sent us –"

"We could afford the luxury of doing good," said his mother, finishing the sentence for him.

Luke's face darkened with justifiable anger.

"I know it is wrong to hate anyone, mother," he said; "but I am afraid I hate that man Thomas Butler, whom I have never seen."

"It is sometimes hard to feel like a Christian, Luke," said his mother.

"This man must be one of the meanest of men. Suppose you or I should fall sick! What would become of us?"

"We won't borrow trouble, Luke. Let us rather thank God for our present good health. If I should be sick it would not be as serious as if you were to become so, for you earn more than twice as much as I do."

"It ought not to be so, mother, for you work harder than I do."

"When I get a sewing machine I shall be able to contribute more to the common fund."

"I hope that will be soon. Has Bennie gone to bed?"

"Yes, he is fast asleep."

"I hope fortune will smile on us before he is much older than I. I can't bear the idea of sending him into the street among bad boys."

"I have been accustomed to judge of the newsboys by my son. Are there many bad boys among them?"

"Many of them are honest, hard-working boys, but there are some black sheep among them. I know one boy who tried to commit highway robbery, stopping a person whom he had seen with money."

"Did he get caught?"

"No, he failed of his purpose, and no complaint was made of him, though his intended victim knew who his assailant was."

"I am glad of that. It would have been hard for his poor mother if he had been convicted and sent to prison."

This Mrs. Walton said without a suspicion that it was Luke that the boy had tried to rob. When Luke heard his mother's comment he was glad that he had agreed to overlook Tom's fault.

The next morning Luke went as usual to the vicinity of the Sherman House, and began to sell papers. He looked in vain for Tom Brooks, who did not show up.

"Where is Tom Brooks?" he asked of one of Tom's friends.

"Tom's goin' to try another place," said the boy. "He says there's too many newsboys round this corner. He thinks he can do better somewheres else."

"Where is he? Do you know?"

"I seed him near the corner of Dearborn, in front of the 'Saratoga.'"

"Well, I hope he'll make out well," said Luke.

Luke had the five-dollar bill in his pocket, but he knew that it was too early for the offices on La Salle Street to be open.

Luke's stock of morning papers included the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Times*, *Herald*, and *Inter-Ocean*. He seldom disposed of his entire stock as early as ten o'clock, but this morning another newsboy in addition to Tom was absent, and Luke experienced the advantage of diminished competition. As he sold the last paper the clock struck ten.

"I think it will do for me to go to Mr. Afton's office now," thought Luke. "If I don't find him in I will wait."

La Salle Street runs parallel with Clark. It is a busy thoroughfare, and contains many buildings cut up into offices. This was the case with No. 155.

Luke entered the building and scanned the directory on either side of the door. He had no difficulty in finding the name of Benjamin Afton.

He had to go up two flights of stairs, for Mr. Afton's office was on the third floor.

CHAPTER VI

MR. AFTON'S OFFICE

Mr. Afton's office was of unusual size, and fronted on La Salle Street. As Luke entered he observed that it was furnished better than the ordinary business office. On the floor was a handsome Turkey carpet. The desks were of some rich dark wood, and the chairs were as costly as those in his library. In a closed bookcase at one end of the room, surmounted by bronze statuettes, was a full library of reference.

At one desk stood a tall man, perhaps thirty-five, with red hair and prominent features. At another desk was a young fellow of eighteen, bearing a marked resemblance to the head bookkeeper. There was besides a young man of perhaps twenty-two, sitting at a table, apparently filing bills.

"Mr. Afton must be a rich man to have such an elegant office," thought Luke.

The red-haired bookkeeper did not take the trouble to look up to see who had entered the office.

"Is Mr. Afton in?" Luke asked, in a respectful tone.

The bookkeeper raised his eyes for a moment, glanced at Luke with a supercilious air, and said curtly, "No!"

"Do you know when he will be in?" continued the newsboy.

"Quite indefinite. What is your business, boy?"

"My business is with Mr. Afton," Luke answered.

"Humph! is it of an important nature?"

"It is not very important," he answered, "but I wish to see Mr. Afton personally."

"Whose office are you in?"

"He isn't in any office, Uncle Nathaniel," put in the red-haired boy. "He is a newsboy. I see him every morning round the Sherman House."

"Ha! is that so? Boy, we don't want to buy any papers, nor does Mr. Afton. You can go."

As the bookkeeper spoke he pointed to the door.

"I have no papers to sell," said Luke, "but I come here on business with Mr. Afton, and will take the liberty to wait till he comes."

"Oh, my eyes! Ain't he got cheek?" ejaculated the red-haired boy. "I say, boy, do you black boots as well as sell papers?"

"No, I don't."

"Some of the newsboys do. I thought, perhaps, you had got a job to black Mr. Afton's boots every morning."

Luke who was a spirited boy, was fast getting angry.

"I don't want to interfere with you in any way," he said.

"What do you mean?" demanded the red-haired boy, his cheeks rivaling his hair in color.

"I thought that might be one of your duties."

"Why, you impudent young vagabond! Uncle Nathaniel, did you hear that?"

"Boy, you had better go," said the bookkeeper.

"You can leave your card," added Eustis Clark, the nephew.

A friend of Luke's had printed and given him a dozen cards a few days previous, and he had them in his pocket at that moment.

"Thank you for the suggestion," he said, and walking up to the boy's desk he deposited on it a card bearing this name in neat script:

LUKE WALTON.

"Be kind enough to hand that to Mr. Afton."

Eustis held up the card, and burst into a guffaw.

"Well, I never!" he ejaculated. "Mr. Walton," he concluded, with a ceremonious bow.

"The same to you!" said Luke, with a smile.

"I never saw a newsboy put on such airs before," he said, as Luke left the office. "Did you, Uncle Nathaniel? Do you think he really had any business with the boss?"

"Probably he wanted to supply the office with papers. Now stop fooling, and go to work."

"They didn't seem very glad to see me," thought Luke. "I want to see Mr. Afton this morning, or he may think that I have not kept my word about the money."

Luke stationed himself in the doorway at the entrance to the building, meaning to intercept Mr. Afton as he entered from the street. He had to wait less than ten minutes. Mr. Afton smiled in instant recognition as he saw Luke, and seemed glad to see him.

"I am glad the boy justified my idea of him," he said to himself. "I would have staked a thousand dollars on his honesty. Such a face as that doesn't belong to a rogue."

"I am rather late," he said. "Have you been here long?"

"Not very long, sir; I have been up in your office."

"Why didn't you sit down and wait for me?"

"I don't think the red-haired gentleman cared to have me. The boy asked me to leave my card." Mr. Afton looked amused.

"And did you?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Do you generally carry visiting cards?"

"Well, I happened to have some with me this morning."

"Please show me one. So your name is Luke Walton?" he added, glancing at the card.

"Yes, sir; office corner Clark and Randolph Streets."

"I will keep the card and bear it in mind."

"I have brought your change, sir," said Luke.

"You can come upstairs and pay it to me in the office. It will be more business-like."

Luke was glad to accept the invitation, for it would prove to the skeptical office clerks that he really had business with their employer.

Eustis Clark and his uncle could not conceal their surprise when they saw Luke follow Mr. Afton into the office.

There was a smaller room inclosed at one corner, which was especially reserved for Mr. Afton.

"Come here, Luke," said he, pleasantly.

Luke followed him inside.

He drew from his pocket four dollars and ninety-eight cents, and laid it on the table behind which his patron had taken a seat.

"Won't you please count it and see if it is right?" he asked.

"I can see that it is, Luke. I am afraid I have put you to more trouble than the profit on the two papers I bought would pay for."

"Not at all, sir. Besides, it's all in the way of business. I thank you for putting confidence in me."

"I thought I was not mistaken in you, and the result shows that I was right. My boy, I saw that you had an honest face. I am sure that the thought of keeping back the money never entered your head."

"No, sir, it did not, though one of the newsboys advised me to keep it."

"It would have been very shortsighted as a matter of policy. I will take this money, but I want to encourage you in the way of well-doing."

He drew from his vest pocket a bill, and extended it to Luke.

"It isn't meant as a reward for honesty, but only as a mark of the interest I have begun to feel in you."

"Thank you, sir," said Luke; and as he took the bill, he started in surprise, for it was ten dollars.

"Did you mean to give as much as this?"

"How much is it?"

"Ten dollars."

"I thought it was five, but I am glad it is more. Yes, Luke, you are welcome to it. Have you anyone dependent upon you?"

"My mother. She will be very much pleased."

"That's right, my lad. Always look out for your mother. You owe her a debt which you can never repay."

"That is true, sir. But I would like to use a part of this money for some one else."

"For yourself?"

"No; for a friend."

Then he told in simple language of Jim Norman, and how seriously his family was affected by his sickness and enforced idleness.

"Jim has no money to buy medicine," he concluded. "If you don't object, Mr. Afton, I will give Jim's mother half this money, after buying some cough medicine out of it."

The merchant listened with approval.

"I am glad, Luke, you feel for others," he said, "but I can better afford to help your friend than you. Here is a five-dollar bill. Tell the boy it is from a friend, and if he should need more let me know."

"Thank you, sir," said Luke, fairly radiant as he thought of Jim's delight. "I won't take up any more of your time, but will bid you good-morning."

Probably Mr. Afton wished to give his clerks a lesson, for he followed Luke to the door of the outer office, and shook hands cordially with him, saying: "I shall be glad to have you call, when you wish to see me, Luke;" adding, "I may possibly have some occasional work for you to do. If so, I know where to find you."

"Thank you, sir."

"What's got into the old man?" thought Eustis Clark.

As Mr. Afton returned to his sanctum, Eustis said with a grin, holding up the card:

"Mr. Walton left his card for you, thinking you might not be in time to see him."

"Give it to me, if you please," and the rich man took the card without a smile, and put it into his vest pocket, not seeming in the least surprised.

"Mr. Walton called to pay me some money," he said, gravely. "Whenever he calls invite him to wait till my return."

CHAPTER VII

A STRANGE ENCOUNTER

Luke went home that evening in high spirits. The gift he had received from Mr. Afton enabled him to carry out a plan he had long desired to realize. It was to secure a sewing machine for his mother, and thus increase her earnings while diminishing her labors. He stopped at an establishment not far from Clark Street, and entering the showroom, asked: "What is the price of your sewing machines?"

"One in a plain case will cost you twenty-five dollars."

"Please show me one."

"Do you want it for your wife?"

"She may use it some time. My mother will use it first."

The salesman pointed out an instrument with which Luke was well pleased.

"Would you like to see how it works?"

"Yes, please."

"Miss Morris, please show this young man how to operate the machine."

In the course of ten minutes Luke got a fair idea of the method of operating.

"Do you require the whole amount down?" asked Luke.

"No; we sell on installments, if preferred."

"What are your terms?"

"Five dollars first payment, and then a dollar a week, with interest on the balance till paid."

"Then I think I will engage one," Luke decided.

"Very well! Come up to the desk, and give me your name and address. On payment of five dollars, we will give you a receipt on account, specifying the terms of paying the balance, etc."

Luke transacted his business, and made arrangements to have the machine delivered any time after six o'clock, when he knew he would be at home.

As Luke was coming out of the sewing-machine office he saw Tom Brooks just passing. Tom looked a little uneasy, not feeling certain whether Luke had recognized him as one of his assailants or not the evening previous.

Luke felt that he had a right to be angry. Indeed, he had it in his power to have Tom arrested, and charged with a very serious crime – that of highway robbery. But his good luck made him good-natured.

"Good-evening, Tom," he said. "I didn't see you selling papers to-day."

"No; I was on Dearborn Street."

"He doesn't know it was me," thought Tom, congratulating himself, and added: "Have you been buying a sewing machine?"

This was said in a joke.

"Yes," answered Luke, considerably to Tom's surprise. "I have bought one."

"How much?"

"Twenty-five dollars."

"Where did you raise twenty-five dollars? You're foolin'."

"I bought it on the installment plan – five dollars down."

"Oho!" said Tom, nodding significantly. "I know where you got that money?"

"Where did I?"

"From the gentleman that bought a couple of papers yesterday."

"You hit it right the first time."

"I thought you weren't no better than the rest of us – you that pretended to be so extra honest."

"What do you mean by that, Tom Brooks?"

"You pretended that you were going to give back the man's change, and spent it, after all. I thought you weren't such a saint as you pretended to be."

"I see you keep on judging me by yourself, Tom Brooks. I took round the money this morning, and he gave it to me."

"Is that true?"

"Yes; I generally tell the truth."

"Then you're lucky. If I'd returned it, he wouldn't have given me a cent."

"It's best to be honest on all occasions," said Luke, looking significantly at Tom, who colored up, for he now saw that he had been recognized the night before.

Tom sneaked off on some pretext, and Luke kept on his way home.

"Did you do well to-day, Luke?" asked Bennie.

"Yes, Bennie; very well."

"How much did you make?"

"I'll tell you by and by. Mother, can I help you about the supper?"

"You may toast the bread, Luke. I am going to have your favorite dish – milk toast."

"All right, mother. Have you been sewing to-day?"

"Yes, Luke. I sat so long in one position that I got cramped."

"I wish you had a sewing machine."

"So do I, Luke; but I must be patient. A sewing machine costs more money than we can afford."

"One can be got for twenty-five dollars, I have heard."

"That is a good deal of money for people in our position."

"We may as well hope for one. I shouldn't be surprised if we were able to buy a sewing machine very soon."

Meanwhile Luke finished toasting the bread and his mother was dipping it in milk when a step was heard on the stairway, the door was opened, and Nancy's red head was thrust into the room.

"Please, Mrs. Walton," said Nancy, breathlessly, "there's a man downstairs with a sewing machine which he says is for you."

"There must be some mistake, Nancy. I haven't ordered any sewing machine."

"Shall I send him off, ma'am?"

"No, Nancy," said Luke; "it's all right. I'll go down stairs and help him bring it up."

"How is this, Luke?" asked Mrs. Walton, bewildered.

"I'll explain afterwards, mother."

Up the stairs and into the room came the sewing machine, and was set down near the window. Bennie surveyed it with wonder and admiration.

When the man who brought it was gone, Luke explained to his mother how it had all come about.

"You see, mother, you didn't have to wait long," he concluded.

"I feel deeply thankful, Luke," said Mrs. Walton. "I can do three times the work I have been accustomed to do, and in much less time. This Mr. Afton must be a kind and charitable man."

"I like him better than his clerks," said Luke. "There is a red-headed bookkeeper and a boy there who tried to snub me, and keep me out of the office. I try to think well of red-headed people on account of Nancy, but I can't say I admire them."

After supper Luke gave his mother a lesson in operating the machine. Both found that it required a little practice.

The next morning as Luke was standing at his usual corner, he had a surprise.

A gentleman came out of the Sherman House and walked slowly up Clark Street. As he passed Luke, he stopped and asked, "Boy, have you the *Inter-Ocean*?"

Luke looked up in his customer's face. He paused in the greatest excitement.

The man was on the shady side of fifty, nearly six feet in height, with a dark complexion, hair tinged with gray, and a wart on the upper part of his right cheek!

CHAPTER VIII

A MARKED MAN

At last, so Luke verily believed, he stood face to face with the man who had deceived his dying father, and defrauded his mother and himself of a sum which would wholly change their positions and prospects. But he wanted to know positively, and he could not think of a way to acquire this knowledge.

Meanwhile the gentleman noticed the boy's scrutiny, and it did not please him.

"Well, boy!" he said gruffly, "you seem determined to know me again. You stare hard enough. Let me tell you this is not good manners."

"Excuse me," said Luke, "but your face looked familiar to me. I thought I had seen you before."

"Very likely you have. I come to Chicago frequently, and generally stop at the Sherman House."

"Probably that explains it," said Luke. "Are you not Mr. Thomas, of St. Louis?"

The gentleman laughed.

"You will have to try again," he said. "I am Mr. Browning, of Milwaukee. Thomas is my first name."

"Browning!" thought Luke, disappointed. "Evidently I am on the wrong track. And yet he answers father's description exactly."

"I don't know anyone in Milwaukee," he said aloud.

"Then it appears we can't claim acquaintance."

The gentleman took his paper and turned down Randolph Street toward State.

"Strange!" he soliloquized, "that boy's interest in my personal appearance. I wonder if there can be a St. Louis man who resembles me. If so, he can't be a very good-looking man. This miserable wart ought to be enough to distinguish me from anyone else."

He paused a minute, and then a new thought came into his mind.

"There is something familiar in that boy's face. I wonder who he can be. I will buy my evening papers of him, and take that opportunity to inquire."

Meanwhile Luke, to satisfy a doubt in his mind, entered the hotel, and, going up to the office, looked over the list of arrivals. He had to turn back a couple of pages and found this entry:

"THOMAS BROWNING, Milwaukee."

"His name is Browning, and he does come from Milwaukee," he said to himself. "I thought, perhaps, he might have given me a false name, though he could have no reason for doing so."

Luke felt that he must look farther for the man who had betrayed his father's confidence.

"I didn't think there could be two men of such a peculiar appearance," he reflected. "Surely there can't be three. If I meet another who answers the description I shall be convinced that he is the man I am after."

In the afternoon the same man approached Luke, as he stood on his accustomed corner.

"You may give me the *Mail* and *Journal*," he said.

"Yes, sir; here they are. Three cents."

"I believe you are the boy who recognized me, or thought you did, this morning."

"Yes, sir."

"If you ever run across this Mr. Thomas, of St. Louis, present him my compliments, will you?"

"Yes, sir," answered Luke, with a smile.

"By the way, what is your name?"

"Luke Walton."

The gentleman started.

"Luke Walton!" he repeated, slowly, eying the newsboy with a still closer scrutiny.

"Yes, sir."

"It's a new name to me. Can't your father find a better business for you than selling papers?"

"My father is dead, sir."

"Dead!" repeated Browning, slowly. "That is un fortunate for you. How long has he been dead?"

"About two years."

"What did he die of?"

"I don't know, sir, exactly. He died away from home – in California."

There was a strange look, difficult to read, on the gentleman's face.

"That is a long way off," he said. "I have always thought I should like to visit California. When my business will permit I will take a trip out that way."

Here was another difference between Mr. Browning and the man of whom Luke's father had written. The stranger had never been in California.

Browning handed Luke a silver quarter in payment for the papers.

"Never mind about the change," he said, with a wave of his hand.

"Thank you, sir. You are very kind."

"This must be the son of my old California friend," Browning said to himself. "Can he have heard of the money intrusted to me? I don't think it possible, for I left Walton on the verge of death. That money has made my fortune. I invested it in land which has more than quadrupled in value. Old women say that honesty pays," he added, with a sneer; "but it is nonsense. In this case dishonesty has paid me richly. If the boy has heard anything, it is lucky that I changed my name to Browning out of deference to my wife's aunt, in return for a beggarly three thousand dollars. I have made it up to ten thousand dollars by judicious investment. My young newsboy acquaintance will find it hard to identify me with the Thomas Butler who took charge of his father's money."

If Browning had been possessed of a conscience it might have troubled him when he was brought face to face with one of the sufferers from his crime; but he was a hard, selfish man, to whom his own interests were of supreme importance.

But something happened within an hour which gave him a feeling of anxiety.

He was just coming out of the Chicago post-office, at the corner of Adams and Clark Streets, when a hand was laid upon his shoulder.

"How are you, Butler?" said a tall man, wearing a Mexican sombrero. "I haven't set eyes upon you since we were together at Gold Gulch, in California."

Browning looked about him apprehensively. Fortunately he was some distance from the corner where Luke Walton was selling papers.

"I am well, thank you," he said.

"Are you living in Chicago?"

"No; I live in Wisconsin."

"Have you seen anything of the man you used to be with so much – Walton?"

"No; he died."

"Did he, indeed? Well, I am sorry to hear that. He was a good fellow. Did he leave anything?"

"I am afraid not."

"I thought he struck it rich."

"So he did; but he lost all he made."

"How was that?"

"Poor investments, I fancy."

"I remember he told me one day that he had scraped together seven or eight thousand dollars."

Browning shrugged his shoulders. "I think that was a mistake," he said. "Walton liked to put his best foot foremost."

"You think, then, he misrepresented?"

"I think he would have found it hard to find the sum you mention."

"You surprise me, Butler. I always looked upon Walton as a singularly reliable man."

"So he was – in most things. But let me correct you on one point. You call me Butler?"

"Isn't that your name?"

"It was, but I had a reason – a good, substantial, pecuniary reason – for changing it. I am now Thomas Browning."

"Say you so? Are you engaged this evening?"

"Yes, unfortunately."

"I was about to invite you to some theater."

"Another time – thanks."

"I must steer clear of that man," thought Browning. "I won't meet him again, if I can help it."

CHAPTER IX

STEPHEN WEBB

The more Browning thought of the newsboy in whom he had so strangely recognized the son of the man whom he had so cruelly wronged, the more uneasy he felt.

"He has evidently heard of me," he soliloquized. "His father could not have been so near death as I supposed. He must have sent the boy or his mother a message about that money. If it should come to his knowledge that I am the Thomas Butler to whom his father confided ten thousand dollars which I have failed to hand over to the family, he may make it very disagreeable for me."

The fact that so many persons were able to identify him as Thomas Butler made the danger more imminent.

"I must take some steps – but what?" Browning asked himself.

He kept on walking till he found himself passing the entrance of a low poolroom. He never played pool, nor would it have suited a man of his social position to enter such a place, but that he caught sight of a young man, whose face and figure were familiar to him, in the act of going into it. He quickened his pace, and laid a hand on the young man's shoulder.

The latter turned quickly, revealing a face bearing the unmistakable marks of dissipation.

"Uncle Thomas!" he exclaimed, apparently ill at ease.

"Yes, Stephen, it is I. Where are you going?" The young man hesitated.

"You need not answer. I see you are wedded to your old amusements. Are you still in the place I got for you?"

Stephen Webb looked uneasy and shamefaced.

"I have lost my place," he answered, after a pause.

"How does it happen that you lost it?"

"I don't know. Some one must have prejudiced my employer against me."

"It is your own habits that have prejudiced him, I make no doubt."

This was true. One morning Stephen, whose besetting sin was intemperance, appeared at the office where he was employed in such a state of intoxication that he was summarily discharged. It may be explained that he was a son of Mr. Browning's only sister.

"When were you discharged?" asked his uncle.

"Last week."

"And have you tried to get another situation?"

"Yes."

"What are your prospects of success?"

"There seem to be very few openings just now, Uncle Thomas."

"The greater reason why you should have kept the place I obtained for you. Were you going to play pool in this low place?"

"I was going to look on. A man must have some amusement," said Stephen, sullenly.

"Amusement is all you think of. However, it so happens that I have something that I wish you to do."

Stephen regarded his uncle in surprise.

"Are you going to open an office in Chicago?" he asked.

"No; the service is of a different nature. It is – secret and confidential. It is, I may say, something in the detective line."

"Then I'm your man," said his nephew, brightening up.

"The service is simple, so that you will probably be qualified to do what I require."

"I've read lots of detective stories," said Stephen, eagerly. "It's just the work I should like."

"Humph! I don't think much is to be learned from detective stories. You will understand, of course, that you are not to let anyone know you are acting for me."

"Certainly. You will find that I can keep a secret."

"I leave Chicago to-morrow morning, and will give you directions before I go. Where can we have a private conference?"

"Here is an oyster house. We shall be quiet here."

"Very well! We will go in."

They entered a small room, with a sanded floor, provided with a few unpainted tables.

Stephen and his uncle went to the back of the room, and seated themselves at the rear table.

"We must order something," suggested Stephen.

"Get what you please," said Browning, indifferently.

"Two stews!" ordered Stephen. "We can talk while they are getting them ready."

"Very well! Now, for my instructions. At the corner of Clark and Randolph Streets every morning and evening you will find a newsboy selling papers."

"A dozen, you mean."

"True, but I am going to describe this boy so that you may know him. He is about fifteen, I should judge, neatly dressed, and would be considered good-looking."

"Do you know his name?"

"Yes, it is Luke Walton."

"Is he the one I am to watch?"

"You are to make his acquaintance, and find out all you can about his circumstances."

"Do you know where he lives?"

"No; that is one of the things you are to find out for me."

"What else do you want me to find out?"

"Find out how many there are in family, also how they live; whether they have anything to live on except what this newsboy earns."

"All right, Uncle Thomas. You seem to have a great deal of interest in this boy."

"That is my business," said Browning, curtly. "If you wish to work for me, you must not show too much curiosity. Never mind what my motives are. Do you understand?"

"Certainly, Uncle Thomas. It shall be as you say. I suppose I am to be paid?"

"Yes. How much salary did you receive where you were last employed?"

"Ten dollars a week."

"You shall receive this sum for the present. It is very good pay for the small service required of you."

"All right, uncle."

The stews were ready by this time. They were brought and set before Stephen and his uncle. The latter toyed with his spoon, only taking a taste or two, but Stephen showed much more appreciation of the dish, not being accustomed, like his uncle, to dining at first-class hotels.

"How am I to let you know what I find out?" asked Stephen.

"Write me at Milwaukee. I will send you further instructions from there."

"Very well, sir."

"Oh, by the way, you are never to mention me to this Luke Walton. I have my reasons."

"I will do just as you say."

"How is your mother, Stephen?"

"About the same. She isn't a very cheerful party, you know. She is always fretting."

"Has she any lodgers?"

"Yes, three, but one is a little irregular with his rent."

"Of course, I expect that you will hand your mother half the weekly sum I pay you. She has a right to expect that much help from her son."

Stephen assented, but not with alacrity, and as he had now disposed of the stew, the two rose from their seats and went outside. A few words of final instructions, and they parted.

"I wonder why Uncle Thomas takes such an interest in that newsboy," thought Stephen. "I will make it my business to find out."

CHAPTER X

STEPHEN WEBB OBTAINS SOME INFORMATION

Luke was at his post the following morning, and had disposed of half his papers when Stephen Webb strolled by. He walked past Luke, and then, as if it was an after thought, turned back, and addressed him.

"Have you a morning *Tribune*?" he asked.

Luke produced it.

"How's business to-day?" asked Stephen in an offhand manner.

"Pretty fair," answered Luke, for the first time taking notice of the inquirer, who did not impress him very favorably.

"I have often wondered how you newsboys make it pay," said Stephen, in a sociable tone.

"We don't make our fortunes, as a rule," answered Luke, smiling, "so I can't recommend you to go into it."

"I don't think it would suit me. I don't mind owning up that I am lazy. But, then, I am not obliged to work for the present, at least."

"I should like to be able to live without work," said the newsboy. "But even then I would find something to do. I should not be happy if I were idle."

"I am not wholly without work," said Stephen. "My uncle, who lives at a distance, occasionally sends to me to do something for him. I have to hold myself subject to his orders. In the meantime I get an income from him. How long have you been a newsboy?"

"Nearly two years."

"Do you like it? Why don't you get a place in a store or an office?"

"I should like to, if I could make enough; but boys get very small salaries."

"I was about to offer to look for a place for you. I know some men in business."

"Thank you! You are very kind, considering that we are strangers."

"Oh, well, I can judge of you by your looks. I shouldn't be afraid to recommend you."

"Thank you!" he replied; "but unless you can offer me as much as five dollars a week, I should feel obliged to keep on selling papers. I not only have myself to look out for, but a mother and little brother."

Stephen nodded to himself complacently. It was the very information of which he was in search.

"Then your father isn't living?" he said.

"No. He died in California."

"Uncle Thomas made his money in California," Stephen said to himself. "I wonder if he knew this newsboy's father."

"Five dollars is little enough for three persons to live upon," he went on, in a sympathetic manner.

"Mother earns something by sewing," Luke answered, unsuspectingly; "but it takes all we can make to support us."

"Then they can't have any other resources," thought Stephen. "I am getting on famously."

"Well, good-morning, Luke!" he said. "I'll see you later."

"How do you know my name?" asked Luke, in surprise.

"I'm an idiot!" thought Stephen. "I ought to have appeared ignorant of his name. I have seen you before to-day," he replied, taking a little time to think. "I heard one of the other newsboys calling you by name. I don't pretend to be a magician."

This explanation satisfied Luke. It appeared very natural.

"I have a great memory for names," proceeded Stephen. "That reminds me that I have not told you mine – I am Stephen Webb, at your service."

"I will remember it."

"Have a cigarette, Luke?" added Stephen, producing a packet from his pocket."

"Thank you; I don't smoke."

"Don't smoke, and you a newsboy! I thought all of you smoked."

"Most of us do, but I promised my mother I wouldn't smoke till I was twenty-one."

"Then I'm old enough to smoke. I've smoked ever since I was twelve years old – well, good morning!"

"That'll do for one day," thought Stephen Webb.

It was three days before Stephen Webb called again on his new acquaintance. He did not wish Luke to suspect anything, he said to himself. Really, however, he found other things to take up his attention. At the rate his money was going it seemed very doubtful whether he would be able to give his mother any part of his salary, as suggested by his uncle.

"Hang it all!" he said to himself, as he noted his rapidly diminishing hoard. "Why can't my uncle open his heart and give me more than ten dollars a week? Fifteen dollars wouldn't be any too much, and to him it would be nothing – positively nothing."

On the second evening Luke went home late. It had been a poor day for him, and his receipts were less than usual, though he had been out more hours.

When he entered the house, however, he assumed a cheerful look, for he never wished to depress his mother's spirits.

"You are late, Luke," said Mrs. Walton; "but I have kept your supper warm."

"What makes you so late, Luke?" asked Bennie.

"The papers went slow, Bennie. They will, sometimes. There's no very important news just now. I suppose that explains it."

After a while Luke thought he noticed that his mother looked more serious than usual.

"What's the matter, mother?" he asked. "Have you a headache?"

"No, Luke. I am perfectly well, but I am feeling a little anxious."

"About what, mother?"

"I went around this afternoon to take half a dozen shirts that I had completed, and asked for more. They told me they had no more for me at present, and they didn't know when I could have any more."

This was bad news, for Luke knew that he alone did not earn enough to support the family. However, he answered cheerfully: "Don't be anxious, mother! There are plenty of other establishments in Chicago besides the one you have been working for."

"That is true, Luke; but I don't know whether that will help me. I stopped at two places after leaving Gusset & Co.'s, and was told that their list was full."

"Well, mother, don't let us think of it to-night! To-morrow we can try again."

Luke's cheerfulness had its effect on his mother, and the evening was passed socially.

The next morning Luke went out to work at the usual time. He had all his papers sold out by half-past ten o'clock, and walked over to State Street, partly to fill up the time, and partly in search of some stray job. He was standing in front of the Bee Hive, a well-known drygoods store on State Street, when his attention was called to an old lady, who, in attempting to cross the street, had imprudently placed herself just in the track of a rapidly advancing cable car. Becoming sensible of her danger, the old lady uttered a terrified cry, but was too panic-stricken to move.

On came the car, with gong sounding out its alarm, and a cry of horror went up from the bystanders.

Luke alone seemed to have his wits about him.

He saw that there was not a moment to lose, and, gathering up his strength, dashed to the old lady's assistance.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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