

Horatio Alger Jr.

Tom, The Bootblack: or, The Road to Success



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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCING TOM, THE BOOTBLACK

"How do you feel this morning, Jacob?" asked a boy of fifteen, bending over an old man crouched in the corner of an upper room, in a poor tenement-house, distant less than a quarter of a mile from the New York City Hall.

"Weak, Tom," whined the old man, in reply. "I – I ain't got much strength."

"Would you like some breakfast?"

"I – I don't know. Breakfast costs money."

"Never you mind about that, Jacob. I can earn money enough for both of us. Come, now, you'd like some coffee and eggs, wouldn't you?"

There was a look of eager appetite in the old man's eyes as he heard the boy speak.

"Yes," he answered, "I should like them; but we can't afford it."

"Don't you be afraid of that. I'll go and ask Mrs. Flanagan to get some ready at once. I've earned thirty cents this morning already, Jacob, and that'll pay for breakfast for the two of us. I think I could eat some breakfast myself."

Jacob uttered a feeble remonstrance, but the boy did not stop to hear it. He went down the rough staircase, and knocked at the door of the room below. It was opened by a stout, wholesome-looking Irish woman, who saluted the boy heartily.

"Well, Tom, and how's your grandfather this mornin'?"

"He's weak, Mrs. Flanagan; but he'll be the better for some breakfast, and so shall I. I'll go and buy half a dozen eggs, if you'll be kind enough to cook them, and make some coffee for us. I'll pay you for your trouble."

"Of course I will, Tom. And for the eggs you needn't go out, for I've got the same in the closet; but I'm short of bread, and, if you'll buy a loaf, I'll have the coffee and eggs ready in no time."

While Tom is on his way to the baker's shop, a few words of explanation and description may be in place. First, for our hero. I have already said he was fifteen. Let me add that he was stout and strongly built, with an open, prepossessing face, and the air of one who is ready to fight his own battles without calling for assistance. His position in life is humble, for he is a street bootblack. He has served, by turns, at other vocations; but he has found none of them pay so well as this. He has energy and enterprise, and few of his comrades secure so many customers as he. For years he has lived with the old man introduced as Jacob, and is popularly regarded as his grandson; but Jacob has never made claim to that relationship, nor has he ever volunteered any information to the boy as to what originally brought them together. Occasionally Tom has tried to obtain some information, but on such occasions Jacob has been very reticent, and has appeared, for some reason, unwilling to speak. So, by degrees, Tom has given up asking questions, and has been much more concerned about the means of living than about his pedigree.

Jacob has done little or nothing for their common support, though at times, greatly to the annoyance of Tom, he has gone out on the street and asked alms. Tom, being high-spirited and independent, has resented this, and has always interfered, in a very decided manner, to prevent Jacob's figuring as a beggar. Though only a bootblack, he has an honest independence of feeling, in which any one is justified who works, however humbly, for his support.

Old Jacob is, moreover, a miser, so far as he can be. Whatever money he may have acquired by begging, he has kept. At all events, he has offered nothing of it for the common expenses. But Tom has not troubled himself about this. He suspects that Jacob may have a few dollars secreted somewhere, but is perfectly willing he should keep them for his own satisfaction. His earnings average over a dollar a day, and with this sum he is able to pay the small rent of their humble apartment, and buy their food.

In ten minutes Tom reappeared with a loaf under his arm. The door of Mrs. Flanagan's room was partly open, and he entered without ceremony. The good woman was bustling about preparing the eggs. The coffee-pot was already on the stove.

"It'll be ready in a minute, Tom," she said. "A cup of hot coffee'll do the poor craythur, yer grandfather, a power of good. So he's fable, is he?"

"Yes, Mrs. Flanagan."

"He won't last long, to my thinkin'."

"Do you think he's going to die?" asked Tom, thoughtfully.

"Yes, poor craythur. It's all he can do to drag himself up and down stairs."

"I shall be sorry to have him die," said Tom, "though I don't believe he's any relation to me."

"Isn't he your grandfather, then?" asked Mrs. Flanagan, in surprise.

"No; he never said he was."

"Then what makes the two of you live together? Maybe he's your uncle, though he looks too old for that."

"I don't think he's any relation. All I know is, I've lived with him ever since I was so high."

And Tom indicated with his hand the height of a boy of six.

"Then he's never told you anything?"

"No. I've asked him sometimes, but he didn't seem to want to speak."

When Tom re-entered the room he found the old man crouching in the corner, as at first.

"Come, Jacob," he said, cheerfully, "get up; I've got some breakfast for you."

The old man's features lighted up as he inhaled the grateful odor of the coffee, and he rose with some effort to his feet, and seated himself at the little table on which our hero placed it.

"Now, Jacob," said Tom, cheerfully, "I'll pour you out a cup of coffee. Mrs. Flanagan made it, and it's bully. It'll put new life into you. Then what do you say to a plate of eggs and some roll? I haven't got any butter, but you can dip it in your coffee. Now, isn't this a nice breakfast?"

"Yes, Tom," said the old man, surveying the coffee and eggs with eyes of eager desire. "It's nice; but we can't afford to live so all the time."

"Never you mind about that; we can afford it this morning; so don't spoil your appetite with thinkin' how much it costs."

"Now," said Tom, after he had helped the old man, "I don't mind takin' something myself. I ain't troubled with a delicate appetite, 'specially when I've been up and at work for two hours."

"Did you make much, Tom?"

"Well, I ain't made my fortune yet. I've earned thirty cents, but I'll make it up to a dollar before noon."

"You're a good boy, Tom," said the old man, approvingly. "Don't be afraid of work; I'd work, too, if I wasn't so old. It costs a sight to live, and I don't earn a cent."

"There ain't no need of it, Jacob; I can earn enough for the two of us. I'm young and strong. You are old and weak. When I'm an old man, like you, I won't want to work no more."

"I ain't so very old," said Jacob, jealously. "I'm only turned sixty-five. There's a good many years of life in me yet."

"Of course there is, Jacob," said Tom, though as he looked at his companion's thin, wasted face and shaking hand, he felt very doubtful on this point.

"My father lived to be seventy-five," said Jacob.

"So will you," said Tom, though, to the boy of fifteen, sixty-five appeared a very advanced age, and but little younger than eighty.

"I'll be stronger soon," said Jacob. "The weather ain't suited me."

"That's it, Jacob. Now let me give you another cup of coffee. It goes to the right spot, don't it? Don't you be afraid; there's plenty of it."

So he filled Jacob's cup once more, and the old man drank the contents with evident relish.

"Now don't you feel better?" asked Tom. "Why, you look ten years younger'n you did before you sat down. There's nothing like a bully breakfast to make a feller feel tip-top."

"Yes, I do feel better," said Jacob. "I – I think you're right, Tom. If I was rich, I'd always have a good breakfast."

"So you shall now, Jacob. It don't cost much. Now lie down again, and I'll take these dishes down to Mrs. Flanagan."

Tom speedily reappeared, and said, cheerfully:

"If there's nothing more you want, Jacob, I'll go out and look out for work. Mrs. Flanagan will bring you up some toast at noon, and I'll be back at six o'clock."

"All right, Tom. Go to work, there's a good boy. It costs a sight of money to live."

Tom seized his blacking-box and hurried down stairs. He had delayed longer than he intended, and was resolved to make up for lost time.

CHAPTER II. STRUCK DOWN

No sooner had Tom left the room than the old man rose slowly from his couch, and, walking feebly to the door, bolted it; then, going to a corner of the room, he lifted a plank from the flooring, and, thrusting his hand beneath, drew up a tin box. He opened this with a small key which he wore about his neck, suspended by a cord, and revealed a heap of silver and copper coins, filling the box two-thirds full. Upon this his eyes were fixed with eager and gloating satisfaction.

"It's all mine!" he muttered, joyfully. "Tom doesn't know about it. He mustn't know – he might want me to spend it. I will count it."

He took it out by handfuls, and began to count it for at least the hundredth time, putting together coins of similar value in little piles, till there was a circle of silver and copper about him.

It was a work of time for the old man, and probably half an hour was consumed before he had finished his task.

"Ninety-nine dollars!" he exclaimed, in alarm, at the end of the calculation. "Somebody has robbed me; I ought to have twenty-five cents more. Could Tom have got at the box? Maybe I have made a mistake. I will count again."

With nervous fingers he recommenced the count, fearing that he had met with a loss. He was half through his task, when a knock was heard at the door. The old man started in agitation, and glanced apprehensively at the door.

"Who's there?" he asked, in quivering accents.

"It's I," answered a hearty voice, which Jacob readily recognized as that of Mrs. Flanagan.

"You can't come in," said the old man, peevishly. "What do you want?"

"I only came to ask how ye are, and if I can do anything for ye."

"No, you can't. I'm well – no, I'm sick, and I'd rather be left alone."

"All right," said the good woman, in no wise offended, for she pitied the old man. "If you want anything, jist *stomp* on the floor, and I'll hear ye, and come up."

"Yes," said Jacob, hastily. "Now go down – that's a good woman. I want to go to sleep."

"Poor craythur!" said Mrs. Flanagan, to herself. "It's little he enjoys the world, which is a blessin', as he will soon have to lave it."

"I hope she isn't looking through the keyhole," thought Jacob, in alarm. "She might see my money."

But the footsteps of the good woman descending the stairs came to his ears, and reassured him.

"It's well I locked the door," he said to himself. "I wouldn't want it known that I had all this money, or it wouldn't be safe. It's taken me a long time to get it, and it isn't quite a hundred dollars. If I had seventy-five cents more" – he had by this time found the missing quarter – "it would make just a hundred. If Tom wouldn't mind, I could get it easily by begging. I might have it by to-morrow. I wonder if he would care much," muttered the old man, as he put back the coins carefully into the tin box. "I – I think I'll go out a little while. He'll never know it."

By this time he had locked the box and replaced it beneath the flooring, restoring the plank to its original place.

"I'll lie down a little while till I feel strong," he muttered, "then I'll go out. If I go up on Broadway, Tom won't see me. He ought not to mind my begging. I am too weak to work, and it's the only way I can get money."

He lay down on the bed, and, after his exertion, small as it was, the rest was grateful to him. But the thought haunted him continually that he needed but seventy-five cents to make up his hoard to a hundred dollars, and the eager desire prompted him to forsake his rest and go out into the streets.

After awhile he rose from his bed.

"I am rested enough now," he said. "I think I can go out for a little while. I will get back before Tom comes home."

He took an old battered hat from a nail on which it hung, and with feeble step left the room, grasping the banister to steady his steps as he descended the stairs.

Mrs. Flanagan's door was open, and, though the old man made but little noise, she heard it.

She lifted both hands in amazement when she saw him.

"Shure ye are too wake to go out," said she. "Come, now, go up and lie on the bed till ye are better. Tom'll be mad if he knows ye have gone out."

"Ye needn't tell him," said Jacob, hastily. "I want to breathe the fresh air; it'll do me good."

"Shure you're not fit to go alone; I'll send my Mike wid you. He's only six, but he's a smart lad."

"I'd rather go alone," said Jacob, who was afraid the little boy would report his begging. "I – I am stronger than you think. I won't be gone long."

Mrs. Flanagan saw that he was obstinate, and she did not press the point. But after he had got down stairs she called Mike, and said:

"Mike, dear, go after the old man, and see where he goes; but don't you let him see you. I'll give you a penny to buy candy when you get back."

Mike was easily persuaded, for he had the weakness for candy common to boys of his age, of whatever grade, and he proceeded to follow his mother's directions.

When Jacob got to the foot of the lowest staircase he felt more fatigued than he expected, but his resolution remained firm. He must have the seventy-five cents before night. To-morrow he could rest. Let him but increase his hoard to a hundred dollars, and he would be content.

It was not without a painful effort that he dragged himself as far as Broadway, though the distance was scarcely quarter of a mile. Little Mike followed him, partly because his mother directed him to do it, partly because, young as he was, he was curious to learn where Jacob was going, and what he was going to do. His curiosity was soon gratified. He saw the old man remove his battered hat, and hold it out in mute appeal to the passers-by.

It was not long before Jacob received ten cents.

"What's the matter with you?" asked another passer-by, five minutes later.

"I'm sick and poor," whined Jacob.

"Well, there's something for you," and the old man, to his joy, found his hoard increased twenty-five cents. This he put into his pocket, thinking that he would be more likely to inspire compassion, and obtain fresh contributions, if only the ten cents were visible.

He did not get another contribution as large. Still, more than one passer-by, attracted by his wretched look, dropped something into his hat, till the sum he desired was made up. He had secured the seventy-five cents necessary to make up the hundred dollars; but his craving was not satisfied. He thought he would stay half an hour longer, and secure a little more. He was tired, but it would not take long, and he could rest long enough afterward. An unlucky impulse led him to cross the street to the opposite side, which he fancied would be more favorable to his purpose. I say unlucky, for he was struck down, when half way across, by some stage horses, and trampled under foot.

There was a rush to his rescue, and he was lifted up and carried into a neighboring shop.

"Does anybody know who he is, or where he lives?" asked a policeman.

"I know him," said little Mike, who had witnessed the accident, and followed the crowd in. "His name is old Jacob, and he lives in Carter's alley."

"Is there anybody to take care of him – any wife or daughter?" asked the physician.

Mike explained that he had only a grandson, and the physician thereupon directed that he be carried to Bellevue Hospital, while Mike ran home to bear the important news to his mother.

CHAPTER III. A STREET FIGHT

Tom, of course, knew nothing of Jacob's accident. He fancied him safe at home, and was only concerned to make enough money to pay the necessary expenses of both. He felt little anxiety on this score, as he was of an enterprising disposition, and usually got his fair share of business. He stationed himself near the Astor House, and kept an eye on the boots of all who passed, promptly offering his services where they appeared needed. Of course, there were long intervals between his customers, but in the course of two hours he had made fifty cents, which he regarded as doing fairly.

Finally a gentleman, rather tall and portly, descended the steps of the Astor House, and bent his steps in Tom's direction.

"Shine yer boots?" asked Tom.

The gentleman looked down upon the face of the boy, and a sudden expression swept over his own, as if he were surprised or startled. His boots were tolerably clean; but, after a moment's hesitation, he said:

"Yes."

Tom was instantly on his knees, first spreading a piece of carpet, about a foot square, to kneel upon, and set to work with energy.

"How long have you been in this line of business, boy?" asked his customer.

"Four or five years," answered Tom.

"Do you like it?"

"I have to like it," said Tom. "I've got to do somethin' for a livin'. Bread and meat don't grow on trees."

"What's your name?" asked the stranger, abruptly.

"Tom."

"Haven't you got but one name?"

"Tom Grey's my whole name; but everybody calls me Tom."

"Grey? Did you say your name was Grey?" asked the stranger, in a tone of some excitement.

"Yes," said Tom, surprised at the gentleman's tone.

In his surprise he looked up into his customer's face, and for the first time took notice of it. This was what he saw: a square face, with a heavy lower jaw, grizzled whiskers, and cold, gray eyes. But there was something besides that served to distinguish it from other faces – a scar, of an inch in length, on his right cheek, which, though years old, always looked red under excitement.

"Grey," repeated the stranger. "Is your father living?"

"I don't know," said Tom. "If he is, he's too busy to call round and see me."

"You mean that you don't know anything about your father?"

"That's about so," said Tom. "I'm ready to adopt a rich gentleman as a father, if it's agreeable."

And he looked up with a smile in the face of his customer.

But the latter did not respond to the joke, but looked more and more serious.

"That smile," he said to himself. "He is wonderfully like. Is it possible that this boy can be – "

But here he stopped, and left the sentence unfinished.

"Are you sure your name is Tom?" asked the stranger.

"Why shouldn't it be?" demanded the boy, in natural surprise.

"To be sure," returned the gentleman. "Only I have a theory that there is a connection between faces and names, and you don't look like my idea of Tom."

This was rather philosophical to be addressed to a New York bootblack; but Tom was smart enough to comprehend it.

"If I don't look like Tom, what do I look like?" he asked.

"John, or Henry, or – or Gilbert," said the gentleman, bringing out the last name after a slight pause.

"I like Tom best," said the boy; "it's short and easy."

"Do you live alone, or have you any friends?" asked the stranger.

"I live with an old man, but he ain't any relation to me."

"What's his name?"

"Jacob."

"What other name?" asked the customer, quickly.

Tom had by this time completed his task, and was standing erect, facing the speaker.

"He's got an inquirin' mind," thought Tom; but, though rather surprised at the questions, he had no objection to answer them.

"I don't know," he said.

"Don't know?"

"He never told me. Maybe it's Grey, like mine. Some call him my grandfather, but he isn't."

"It is he," thought the stranger; "but things are well as they are. He knows nothing, and need know nothing. I am safe enough, since between us there is a great gulf of ignorance, and more than a thousand miles of space."

"Well, my boy," he said, aloud, "I suppose you want to be paid?"

"That's what's the matter," answered Tom.

The stranger put in his hand a half dollar, and Tom, plunging his hand in his pocket, prepared to give change.

"Never mind," said his late customer, with a wave of his hand.

"Thanks," said Tom, and he mentally wished he might be as well paid every day for answering questions.

Tom shouldered his box, and walked a few steps down Broadway. It was some time before another customer appeared, and meanwhile another bootblack came up. The name of the newcomer was Pat Walsh. He enjoyed a bad reputation among his comrades – as one who would take a mean advantage, if he dared, and was at all times ready to bully a smaller boy. He had long cherished an ill feeling toward Tom, because the latter had interfered, on one occasion, to protect a smaller boy whom Pat tried to cheat out of a job. As Tom's prowess was well known, Pat had contented himself hitherto with uttering threats which he hesitated to carry into execution. It was shrewdly suspected by his companions that he was afraid to contend with Tom, and they had taunted him with it. Finding his authority diminishing, Pat decided to force a quarrel upon Tom at the first opportunity. He had no great appetite for the fight, but felt it to be a disagreeable necessity.

Just as he came up a gentleman approached with a valise in his hand. His boots were decidedly dirty, and he was hailed as a prize by the bootblacks.

"Shine yer boots?" exclaimed Tom and Pat, simultaneously.

"I don't know but they need brushing," said the traveler.

Instantly both bootblacks were on their knees before him, ready to proceed to business.

"I don't need both of you," he said, smiling.

"Take me," said Pat; "I'll give you a bully shine."

"I'll give you the bulliest," said Tom, good humoredly. "I spoke first."

"Lave wid yer, or I'll mash yer!" said Pat.

"Better not try it," said Tom, not in the least intimidated. "The gentleman will choose between us."

"I'll choose you," said the traveler, decidedly more prepossessed by Tom's appearance than by that of his competitor.

There was no appeal from this decision, and Pat rose to his feet, his face wearing a very ugly scowl. He remained standing near, while Tom was engaged with his job, watching him with an aspect which betokened mischief.

"Thank you, sir," said Tom, as he received pay for his services.

The customer had no sooner left the spot than Pat strode up to Tom.

"I want that money," he said, menacingly.

"Do you?" returned Tom, coolly, as he thrust it into his vest pocket, for, unlike the majority of his companions, he indulged in the luxury of a vest.

"Yes, I do. It was my job."

"I don't see it."

"I spoke first."

"The gentleman chose me."

"You stuck yourself in where you wasn't wanted. Give me the money."

"Come and take it," said Tom, unconsciously making the same answer that was once returned by a heroic general to an insolent demand for surrender.

"I'll do it, then," said Pat, who had been nursing his rage till he was grown reckless of consequences.

He threw down his box and sprang at Tom. The latter also quickly rid himself of the incumbrance, and the two were soon wrestling at close quarters. Pat, by his impetuous onset, came near upsetting his adversary; but, by an effort, Tom saved himself.

Then commenced a determined contest. Both boys were unusually strong for their ages, and were, in fact, very evenly matched. But at length Tom, by an adroit movement of the foot, tripped his opponent, and came down on top of him. He did not hold him down, for he was fond of fair play, but rose immediately.

"You didn't do it; I slipped," said Pat, in anger and mortification, and he instantly threw himself upon Tom again. But our hero kept cool, while Pat was excited, and this placed him at an advantage. So the second contest terminated like the first.

Cheers from a crowd of boys greeted this second victory – cheers to which Pat listened with mortification and rage. He was half tempted to renew the battle, but a cry from the boys, "A cop! a cop!" warned him of the approach of his natural enemy, the policeman, and he walked sullenly away, breathing threats of future vengeance, to which Tom paid very little attention.

Five minutes later little Mike Flanagan came up, and pulled Tom by the arm.

"What's the matter, Mike?" asked Tom, seeing that the little boy looked excited.

"Your grandfather's been run over wid a horse," said the little boy, not very intelligibly.

"Run over!" exclaimed Tom. "How can that be, when he was at home on the bed?"

"He went out soon after you, and was beggin' on Broadway."

"Where is he now?" asked Tom, quickly.

"He was took to the hospital," said Mike.

CHAPTER IV. AT THE HOSPITAL

On a neat bed, at the Bellevue Hospital, old Jacob was stretched out. He had been in considerable pain, but opiates had been administered, and he was in an uneasy slumber.

Tom presented himself at the office below as soon as he could after hearing of the accident.

"Is he much hurt? Is he in danger?" he asked, anxiously, for Jacob was nearer to him than any one else.

"He is now sleeping, and must not be disturbed. Come tomorrow, and we can tell you more," was the reply.

"You can tell me if he was much hurt."

"One leg is broken, but we cannot yet tell whether he has received any internal injury. All depends upon that."

Tom presented himself the next day. This time the physician looked grave.

"We have reason to think that he is injured internally. His life is uncertain."

"Poor Jacob!" murmured Tom, moved by pity for the old man.

"Is he your grandfather?" asked the physician.

"No; but I have lived with him for some years. Can I see him?"

"Yes."

Tom followed the doctor into a long hall lined with beds. About midway, on the left hand side, he recognized the form of his old companion.

"I am sorry to see you here, Jacob," said Tom, gently.

"I'm almost dead," said the old man, peevishly. "The man drove over me on purpose."

"I hope not."

"I tell you he did!" said Jacob, irritably.

"Well, Jacob, it can't be helped. You must try to get well."

"I'm an old man. I'm afraid I shall never get well again," and he looked eagerly into Tom's face.

Having heard what he did from the doctor, Tom was placed in an awkward position. He was too honest to give false hopes, and he remained silent.

"What did the doctor tell you?" demanded Jacob, suspiciously.

"He said he could not tell whether you would get well or not."

"He thought I was going to die?" said the old man, nervously.

"He didn't say that."

"I don't want to die," moaned the old man, terrified. "I'm only sixty-five. My father lived to be seventy-five."

"You may live, Jacob."

"I – I'm not ready to die. Ask the doctor to do all he can."

"He will be sure to do that."

There was a pause. The old man's features were convulsed. He had not till now thought that he was in danger of dying. He was trying to realize the terrible fact. Tom stood by in silence, for he had some idea of Jacob's feelings, and he pitied him.

At length the old man turned his face again toward him, and said:

"Tom?"

"What is it, Jacob?"

"I want you to ask the doctor every day if he thinks I am going to die; and, when he says there is no hope, tell me."

"Yes, Jacob."

"Do you promise?"

"Yes, I promise."

"There is something I must tell you before I die – something important. Do you hear?"

"Yes, I hear."

"It's something you ought to know. Now you can go. I want to sleep."

"Perhaps it is something about my father," thought Tom, with vague curiosity.

It was a matter that he had never troubled himself much about, but now it did occur to him that he should like to know a little more about himself. He determined to keep faithfully the promise he had made the old man.

He was destined to have one more adventure before the day closed.

On leaving the hospital Tom directed his course to Broadway. It was the busiest part of the day, and the street was crowded with stages, drays, and other vehicles, making it difficult to cross.

A hump-backed seamstress stood on the sidewalk, looking helplessly across, but not daring to venture on the perilous passage. There was no policeman in sight.

"I wish I could get across," she said, loud enough to be heard. "Mother won't know what has become of me."

Tom saw her anxious face, and stepped up at once.

"I will take you across, miss," he said, politely.

"Will you?" she asked, her face brightening. "I shall be very much obliged to you. My poor mother is sick at home, waiting for some medicine I went out to get for her, and I have been standing here ten minutes, not daring to cross. I don't know when Broadway has been so full."

"Take my arm," said Tom, "and don't be afraid."

She had scarcely taken Tom's arm, when a rude street-boy called out, in derision:

"Is that your girl, Tom? Ask her what she will take for her hump."

"I'll lick you when I come back," retorted Tom. "Don't mind what he says, miss."

"I don't," said the seamstress; "I'm used to it," she added with a patient sigh.

"Don't think about it," said Tom.

"You are not ashamed to be seen with a hunchback?"

"There ain't no cause."

By this time Tom had skillfully threaded his way with his companion across the street, and landed her in safety on the other side.

"I am very much obliged to you," she said, gratefully. "You're a gentleman."

With these words she nodded, and walked hastily away.

"A gentleman!" repeated Tom, thoughtfully. "Nobody ever called me that before. My clothes don't look much like it. Maybe it ain't all in the clothes. I'd like to be a gentleman, and," he added, impulsively, "I mean to be one, some time. I'll have to change my business suit, though. Gentlemen don't generally black boots for a living."

It was a passing thought that came to him by chance, his desire to grow up a gentleman, but he was more than half in earnest. He had not thought much about the future hitherto, but now his ambition was kindled, and he thought he should like to fill a respectable place in society.

What road should he take to the success which he coveted?

CHAPTER V. THE LAST INTERVIEW

Two weeks passed away. Tom went about his business, as usual; but every day he made it a point to call at the hospital to inquire how Jacob was getting on. At first the answers were moderately encouraging, but a turn came, and the doctor spoke less hopefully. Finally Tom was told that the old man could not live.

"How soon will he die?" he asked.

"He may live forty-eight hours, but it is possible that the end may come sooner."

"Then I must see him and tell him. I promised him I would."

"It may be well to do so. If he has anything to tell you before he dies, no time should be lost."

When Tom approached Jacob's bedside he saw, from his changed appearance, that the doctors had told him truly. He was not used to the sight of those who were very sick, but soon, to an inexperienced observer, the signs of approaching death were plain. Tom, in the full vigor of perfect health, regarded his old companion with awe and pity.

"How do you feel this morning, Jacob?" he asked.

"I am very weak," said the old man, faintly.

"Are you in much pain?"

"No; the pain has gone away. If I can get stronger I shall soon be out again."

He did not realize that this relief from pain was only a sign that Nature had succumbed at last, and that Death had gained the victory. Tom hated to dispel the illusion, but it must be done.

"Jacob," he said, slowly and sadly, "I have got something to tell you."

"What is it?" said the old man, in alarm.

"It is something that the doctor told me just now."

"He – he didn't say I was going to die?" asked Jacob, agitated.

"Yes; he said you could not live."

A low and feeble wail burst from the old man's lips.

"I can't die," he said. "I'm not ready. I'm only sixty-five. He – he may be mistaken. Don't you think I look better this morning?"

"You look very sick."

"I don't want to die," wailed the old man. "It's only a little while since I was a boy. Did – did he say how long I could live?"

"He said you might live forty-eight hours."

"Forty-eight hours – only two days – are you sure he said that?"

"Yes, Jacob. I wish I could do anything to make you live longer."

"You're a good boy, Tom. I – I'm afraid I haven't been a good friend to you."

"Yes, you have, Jacob. We have always been good friends."

"But I helped do you a great wrong. I hope you will forgive me."

"I don't know what it is, but I will forgive you, Jacob."

"Then, perhaps, Heaven will forgive me, too. I'll do all I can. I'll leave you all my money."

Tom did not pay much regard to this promise, for he did not know that Jacob had any money beyond a few shillings, or possibly a few dollars.

"Thank you, Jacob," he said, "but I can earn enough to pay my expenses very well. Don't trouble yourself about me."

"There's no one else to leave it to," said the old man. "It isn't much, but you shall have it."

Here he drew out, with trembling fingers, the key suspended to a piece of twine which, through all his sickness, he had carried around his neck. He held it in his hand a moment, and a spasm

convulsed his pale features. To give it up seemed like parting with life itself. It was a final parting with his treasure, to which, small though it was, his heart clung even in this solemn moment. He held it, reluctant to give it up, though he knew now that he must.

"Take this key, Tom," he said. "It is the key to my box of gold."

"I didn't know you had a box of gold," said Tom, rather surprised.

"It is not much – a hundred dollars. If I had lived longer, I might have got more."

"A hundred dollars, Jacob? I did not think you were so rich."

"It will never do me any good," said the old man, bitterly. "I was a fool to go out in the street that day. I might have lived to be as old as my father. He was seventy-five when he died."

Tom would like to have comforted him, but he would give him no hope of life, and that was what the old man longed for.

"Where is the box of money?" he asked, seeking to divert Jacob's mind, as well as to gain a necessary piece of information.

"It is under the floor of the room. You lift up a board just before you get to the pantry, and you will see a tin box underneath. You will find something else in it, Tom. It is a paper in which I wrote down all I know about you. You said you would forgive me for wronging you."

"Yes, Jacob."

"Perhaps you can get back your rights; but I am afraid not."

"My rights!" repeated Tom, bewildered.

"Yes; I can't tell you about it; I am too weak; the paper will tell you."

The old man began to show signs of exhaustion. The excitement of learning his hopeless condition, and the conversation which he had already held with Tom, had overtasked his feeble strength, and he showed it by his appearance.

"I am afraid I have staid too long, Jacob," said Tom, considerately. "I will go, now, but I will come back to-morrow morning."

"You won't look for the box till I am gone, Tom?" said the old man, anxiously. "I – the doctors might be wrong; and, if I get well, I would want it back again."

"No, Jacob, I will not look for it while you are alive."

"Promise me," said Jacob, suspicious to the last, where money was concerned.

"I promise, Jacob. Don't be troubled. I would rather have you live than take all the money."

"Good boy!" said Jacob, faintly, as his head sank back on the pillow.

Tom left the hospital ward with one last glance of compassion at the miserable old man, who clung to life, which had so little that is ordinarily counted agreeable, with despairing hope. It was the last time he was to see Jacob alive. The next day, when he called to inquire after the old man, he was told that he was dead. He sank steadily after his last interview with our hero, and, having parted with the key to his treasure, it seemed as if there was nothing left to live for.

CHAPTER VI. THE REVELATION

Tom had already made up his mind upon one point. He would accept the bequest of his old companion, since, in so doing, he was robbing no one better entitled to it. So far as he knew, the old man had no relatives or friends, except himself. But he was determined that, since Jacob had money, he should not be buried at the public expense. He would take so much of the hundred dollars as might be necessary, and place it in the hands of the doctor at Bellevue Hospital to defray the expenses of Jacob's funeral. He would say nothing about it, however, till he had actually found the money. It might be a hallucination of Jacob's, and have no real existence.

"When will he be buried?" he inquired at the hospital.

"Day after to-morrow."

"How much will it cost?"

"Do not trouble yourself about that," said the physician, who judged that Tom was poor. "That will be done at the expense of the city."

"But," said Tom, conscientiously, "he left a little money. At least he told me so. If I find it, I will pay out of it whatever it costs."

"It is not necessary."

"I would rather do it; that is, if I find the money. It didn't do him any good while he was alive, and he lost his life in getting a part of it."

"Then, if you find this money, you may pay the expense of the coffin."

"How much will that be?"

"From ten to fifteen dollars."

"I will bring you fifteen dollars to-morrow," said Tom.

Of course Tom might easily have saved this money, and applied it to his own use; but his feeling was one that did him credit. As he had for years supported Jacob, he had of course spent for him much more than the hundred dollars, and so might have considered himself justly entitled to all the money, but this thought never occurred to him.

After leaving the hospital, Tom went home at once. It was his duty now to ascertain whether Jacob had labored under a delusion, or whether he really possessed the money he had spoken of.

Entering the room, he locked the door from motives of prudence. Then, following the directions of the old man, he went to the part of the room indicated, and, getting down on his knees, soon found the board beneath which the treasure lay. Carefully removing it, he lifted from beneath the box already described. By means of the key he opened it, and there lay before him, bright and glittering, the scanty treasure which had been so dear to the old man's heart. But to Tom it did not seem scanty. Brought up as he had been in the hard school of poverty, it seemed like quite a fortune, and he was filled with surprise at Jacob's having accumulated so much. But the old man had taken advantage of Tom's absence during the day to go out on frequent begging expeditions. Whenever he had obtained enough to amount to a gold piece, he was in the habit of carrying it to a broker's and effecting an exchange. So, little by little, he had obtained a hundred dollars, ninety of which were in gold, the remainder in silver.

Tom deliberated what he should do with his treasure. He determined, until his plans were formed, to leave it in the box, taking out only fifteen dollars, to be carried to the hospital to defray the burial expenses. But there was something else besides the money to seek. Jacob had mentioned a paper, in which he had written out something of Tom's previous history, including an account of the manner in which he had wronged him. This paper was also easily found. It was folded once, and lay flat on the bottom of the box. It was somewhat discolored; but, on opening it, Tom found the writing

quite legible. It may be a matter of surprise that Tom was able to read the manuscript, as many in his position would have been unable to do. But he had, of his own accord, for several winters, attended the city evening schools, and so was not only able to read and write, but also had some knowledge of arithmetic and geography. I do not claim that Tom was a good scholar, but he was not wholly ignorant. He took the paper from the box, and then, locking it, replaced it in its former place of concealment. He then sat down on a chair, and began to read the manuscript:

"Ten years since," it began, "I was a clerk in the employ of John and James Grey, in Cincinnati. They were merchants, in prosperous business; but John was much the richer of the two. James was, in fact, a poor relation who had been taken in, first as a clerk, afterward as a partner with a small interest, but his profits and share of the business were small, compared with those of the senior partner. John was a thorough gentleman, and a liberal and excellent man. I always got on well with him, and I shall never forgive myself for wickedly consenting to do harm to him and his. I would not have done it, if it had not been in a manner forced upon me; but I know that this is not a full excuse.

"James Grey I never liked. He was a more pompous man than his cousin, and he was often mistaken for the senior partner, because of the airs he put on. But John Grey only smiled at this, and often said, jokingly:

"'You ought to have been in my place, James. I am afraid I don't keep up the dignity of the establishment. I am too quiet.'

"To me, who was only a clerk, though an old and trusted one, James was always supercilious and overbearing. He seemed to look down upon me, though, having only a small interest in the concern, I didn't look upon him as very much my superior.

"John Grey was far different. He always treated me with kindness and politeness, and I felt it a pleasure to serve such a man. It was a great grief to me when he died. I knew well enough that I should feel the change, but I did not dream of what actually followed.

"John Grey's death took everybody by surprise. He was a stout, robust man, and seemed the picture of health; but it was in this habit of body that his danger lay. He was found one day on the floor of his chamber dead, his death resulting, as the doctors said, from apoplexy. He left considerable property, besides his share in the business. All this was left to his son, then a boy of five years of age. The boy's name was Gilbert. You, Tom, are that boy! Let me tell you how it happened that you, the son of a wealthy father, and the heir to great wealth, are now a poor bootblack in the streets of New York, with no prospects before you but a life of labor.

"According to your father's will, the whole property was left to his cousin, James Grey, in trust for you. But, in case of your death, your guardian was to inherit the whole of the property. If John Grey had known more of the selfish and worthless character of his cousin, he would never have made such a will. But he had perfect confidence in him, and judged him by himself. He did not see that he had exposed him to a very strong temptation, a temptation which, as it proved, he was unable to resist.

"Mr. James Grey, who was boarding with his wife and son, a boy of about your own age, immediately moved to your father's beautiful house, and installed himself there, taking you under his charge. For several months matters went on quietly, and I began to think that I had misjudged my new employer. But I did not know the trouble that was in store for me. First, my whole property, a few thousand dollars which I had saved, had been intrusted to a gentleman in whom I had confidence, and by him invested for me. He failed, dishonestly, as I suspect, and so all my savings were lost. Troubles never come singly, so they say, and so I found out. While I was almost crushed under this blow, another fell upon me. One morning some valuable securities, belonging to the firm, were missing. Of course they were sought for, and, as a matter of form – so Mr. Grey said – the desks of all in the establishment were searched. What was my horror when the missing securities were found in my desk! Of course, this was ruin. My reputation, my future, were in the hands of James Grey. I could not account for the discovery, knowing my innocence; but I now feel sure that my employer put the papers in my desk himself.

"Instead of arresting me, he told me to come up to his house that evening. I came. I protested my innocence.

"He asked me pointedly if I could prove it. I told him no. Then he said that he had a plan in view. If I could aid him, he would forgive my offense, and would not have me arrested. Cautiously he unfolded the plan, and it was this: In consideration of five thousand dollars in gold, I was to carry you off by night, and sail with you to Australia, changing your name to Tom, and must agree nevermore to bring you back to America, or let you know who you were. Of course, I knew that this was only a plot to get possession of the property, and I told him so. He freely admitted it to me, but coolly threatened me with the severest punishment of the law for my supposed crime if I disclosed it, or refused to aid him.

"Well, the result of it all was that I agreed to his terms. It was arranged as had been agreed on, and I left Cincinnati, secretly, with you under my charge. Arriving in New York, I sailed for Australia, under an assumed name. But when I arrived, I didn't like the country. After a year, I took passage in a vessel bound for New York. We were wrecked, and all my money was lost. We were saved by a vessel bound for the same port, and, at length, reached it, penniless. How we have lived since, you know as well as I do. It has been a wretched life; but I never dared to write to Mr. Grey, lest he should have me arrested for embezzling the securities. But I have often hoped that retribution would come upon him, and that you might be restored to your rights. I have heard that he closed up the business, and removed farther West, having proved, by a witness whom he bribed, that you had been drowned in the Ohio River. The body of a poor boy was exhibited as yours.

"If you ever meet James Grey, you will recognize him by this description. He is a large man, with a square face, gray eyes, and a scar on his right cheek, an inch long. I don't know where he got the scar, but it is always red, especially when he is excited."

Tom dropped the paper in his amazement.

"Why," he soliloquized, "it must be the man whose boots I blacked one morning before the Astor House. He must have knowed me, or he wouldn't have asked so many questions."

CHAPTER VII. TOM TURNS OVER A NEW LEAF

The communication which he had just read gave Tom much to think of. Up to this time he knew nothing of his past history. Now a clear light was thrown upon it, and it remained for him to decide what he would do. He knew as much as this, that the man who had wronged him was still living. Where he lived was unknown. That was the first thing to discover. The next was, to make him disgorge the property of which he was in unlawful possession. It seemed wonderful to Tom to reflect that, if he had his rights, he would be heir to a large fortune.

"There's a lot of money lyin' around loose somewheres that belongs to me," said Tom to himself. "Blest if it don't seem like a dream. I'd like to set eyes on that old feller with a scar again."

Tom leaned his head on his hand, and devoted five minutes to reflection. During that brief interval, he made up his mind what to do. He would leave New York, giving up his business into other hands, and set his face westward, in search of his fraudulent guardian and his fortune. He might have been embarrassed about this, but for the opportune legacy of old Jacob. It wasn't very large, but it would, at all events, start him on his journey. Then he must trust to luck and his own exertions for the rest.

He was not in the least afraid but that he could get along. He had supported himself for years, and he knew he could again.

I may as well warn my young readers here that there is no occasion for them to forsake comfortable homes to follow Tom's example. Circumstances alter cases, and, what was right for Tom, would not be right for them. I have in mind the case of two boys who left comfortable homes in quest of adventure, without any good reason, and were very glad to get back again in a few days, without a penny in their pockets, utterly unsuccessful. If fortune drives you out, do your best, but never leave a good home when you are well off, or you will repent it.

"I'll take some of this money," said Tom to himself, "and buy some clo'es. I ain't goin' to travel in these rags. Considerin' I'm heir to a fortune, I'll dress respectable."

Tom withdrew fifty dollars from the miser's hoard, then went to the hospital and left fifteen dollars to defray the expenses of Jacob's burial.

"It's the last I can do for him," thought Tom. "I hope, if I live to be as old as he was, somebody'll do as much for me."

The thought of his old companion made him sad for the moment, but his mind was full of his future plans, and he quickly became cheerful again.

Before going to buy new clothes, it struck Tom that it would be a good plan to take a bath. I should not like to say how long it was since he had washed himself all over, but it is well known that excessive neatness is not a characteristic of street-boys. It had never troubled Tom much to have a spot of blacking on his face, or to see his hands bearing the traces of the business by which he made his living. Now, however, he determined to turn over a new leaf.

"I'm going to set up for a gentleman," he said, "and I must look respectable."

There was a hotel near by, where warm and cold baths were provided to the general public, at twenty-five cents apiece. He made his way thither, and entered the barber shop adjoining. Just before him was a gentleman who inquired for a bath, and was led into the adjoining apartment. When the attendant came back, Tom went up to him.

"Well, boy; what's wanted?" he asked.

"I want a warm bath," answered Tom, boldly.

"You!" exclaimed the attendant, surveying the boy in alarm.

"Yes," said Tom. "Don't you think I need it?"

"I should say you did," returned the other. "How long since you took one?"

"I can't exactly remember," said Tom.

"Did you ever take a bath in your life?"

"That's a leadin' question," said Tom. "I never took any except at the Fifth Avenoo Hotel. They've got bully baths there."

"Have they? Then I think you'd better go there now."

"It's too far off, and I'm in a hurry. I'm invited to dine with the mayor, and I wouldn't like to go dirty."

"If you bathe here, we shall charge you double price."

"How much is that?"

"Fifty cents."

"Well, I am rich. I can afford it."

"Money payable in advance."

"All right," said Tom. "Here's fifty cents. I'm a young man of fortun', though I don't look like it. I've been boot-blackin' for a joke. When I come in to my money, I'll get shaved here regular."

"You're a case," said the attendant, laughing.

"That's so," said Tom. "Now, just show me the bath-tub, and give me a bar of soap, and I'll get my money's worth."

The attendant led the way to the bath-room, first collecting the fifty cents which he had decided to charge. The water was turned on, and Tom went to work energetically to wash off the stains and dirt which, in the course of his street-life, he had contrived to accumulate. Tom never did anything by halves, and he set himself to work with a will, sparing neither strength nor soap. The result was that he effected a very great change for the better.

"I wish I'd got some better clo'es to put on," he thought, as with reluctance he drew on the ragged attire which had served him for some months, getting more ragged and dirty every day. "I'll buy some as soon as I get out."

He surveyed himself in the mirror and his long, unkempt locks attracted his attention.

"I must have my hair cut," he decided.

On his way out he saw a vacant chair, and seated himself in it.

"Do you want to be shaved?" asked one of the barbers.

"Not to-day," said Tom. "You may cut off some of my wool. Mind you give me a fashionable cut."

"Oh, I'll take care of that," said the journeyman.

"If you do what's right," said Tom, "I'll recommend all my friends on Fifth avenoo to come here."

"Is that the Fifth avenue style of coat?" asked the barber, pointing to several large holes in Tom's most prominent article of dress.

"It's a dress I wore to a masquerade ball last evenin'," said Tom. "I went in the character of a bootblack."

"You made a pretty good imitation," said the knight of the scissors, who had already commenced operations on Tom's head.

"That's what all the ladies told me," said Tom. "They said they wouldn't have knowed me from the genooine article."

In about twenty minutes the task was completed.

"How's that?" said the barber.

Tom looked in the mirror, and hardly recognized his image, so much was it altered by the careful arrangement of his hair.

"If it wasn't for the clo'es," he said, "I would think it was another boy."

He paid his bill and left the hotel.

"The next thing must be some new clo'es," he said to himself; "then I'll begin to feel respectable."

CHAPTER VIII. THE EFFECT OF A NEW SUIT

Tom bent his steps in the direction of a large and popular clothing establishment, and, entering, looked about for an unoccupied salesman.

"Well, boy, what's wanted?" asked a young man behind the counter.

"I want some clo'es."

"Then you've come to the right place. Did you buy them you have on here?" asked the salesman, with a grin.

"Young feller," said Tom, "these clo'es were bought before you were born."

"So I should think, from the looks."

"I'd make 'em do for a few years longer, only I'm goin' to be married next week. Have you got any bridal suits?"

"Step this way. I suppose you have got money to pay for them?" remarked the clerk, doubtfully.

"You suppose right. Just lead the way, and I'll see what you've got."

"How high are you willing to go?"

"Anywhere from twenty-five cents to twenty-five dollars."

"Our twenty-five cent suits are all out; but we can give you some for fifteen dollars, and as much more as you like."

"Show me some at fifteen."

Tom looked at some suits at this price. They were well made, but coarse, and did not quite come up to his ideas of what was appropriate for a young man of fortune.

"Show me some for twenty-five dollars," he said. "These ain't good enough to be married in."

Finally, Tom picked out a dark mixed suit, which appeared to be an exact fit. The price was twenty dollars, which he considered reasonable, and at once paid.

"Shall I send them home for you?" asked the clerk, regarding our hero with more respect, now that he had shown himself a purchaser for cash.

"Never mind; I'll take 'em myself," said Tom. "My carriage is waitin' outside, so it's no trouble."

He left the store with the clothes under his arm. But he was not yet wholly provided. He had no shirts, stockings, or under-clothes, which he cared to wear in the new life upon which he was entering. All must be procured. He stopped at a cheap store in Nassau street, and provided himself with half a dozen of each, at a cost of twenty dollars more. By this time he found himself so encumbered with bundles that he thought it best to go home.

He entered the room without attracting attention, and proceeded at once to throw off his old rags, and array himself in the new clothes, including a blue silk neck-tie which he had purchased. When his toilet was complete, he surveyed himself with no little complacency. For the first time in all the years that he could remember, he was attired, from top to toe, as a young gentleman.

"Blest if I couldn't pass myself off for a young Fifth avenoodle," he said to himself. "I'll go down and see Mrs. Flanagan. I wonder if she'll know me?"

He descended the stairs, and knocked at the door of the good-hearted Irishwoman.

She did not recognize him, having no idea that it was Tom the bootblack.

"Does Mrs. Flanagan live here?" asked Tom, slightly disguising his voice.

"Yes, sir. Is it washing ye want me to do?"

"Is there a boy named Tom lives here?" asked our hero.

"He lives up stairs, just over this."

"Do you know him?"

"Shure I do. I know him as if he was my own bye."

"I don't know about that," said Tom, in his natural voice, raising his hat, which he had worn slouched down over his eyes. "You didn't seem to know him when you saw him."

"Shure it's Tom himself!" exclaimed Mrs. Flanagan. "Why, Tom, dear, what's come to you? You're lookin' quite the gintleman."

"Of course I am," said Tom. "That's the new business I've gone into."

"Where did you get them new clo'es, Tom?"

"I bought them with the money old Jacob left me. And now, Mrs. Flanagan, I'm goin' to leave you."

"Where are you goin', Tom?"

"I'm goin' out West, to seek my fortune."

"Shure I hope you'll find it."

"So do I, Mrs. Flanagan. I know it's there, and mean to get it, if I can."

"Are you goin' now?"

"Not till to-morrow. I've got some more things to buy first."

"I'm sorry to lose you, Tom. I'll miss you and old Jacob. I hope the poor man's better off."

"So do I, Mrs. Flanagan. I won't hide it from you – but he left me a paper, tellin' me that there is a man out West that's cheated me out of my fortune."

"What's his name?"

"Grey. He's my father's cousin."

"Where does he live?"

"I don't know."

"Then how will you find him?"

"I know how he looks. He was in New York a little while ago, and I blacked his boots. When I come into my fortune, I'll make you a handsome present, Mrs. Flanagan."

"Shure I hope you'll get it widout the present."

"Now I must be goin'. I've got to buy a carpet-bag and umbrella."

"Come in and bid me good-by before you go, Tom."

"Yes, I will."

Tom went out into the street, when it occurred to him that there was one article he had not yet renewed – his hat. He lost no time in visiting a hat store, where he supplied himself with one of fashionable shape. He could not resist the temptation, also, of purchasing a small, jaunty cane. Being naturally a good-looking boy, I am justified in saying that, in his new outfit, he would have easily passed muster as the son of a man of wealth. In fact, so effectually was he disguised, that he passed some of his old street companions without their recognizing him. Tom was rather amused and pleased at this. As he passed his old rival and enemy, Pat Walsh, it struck him that it would be a good joke to employ him to black his shoes, of which I neglected to say that he had purchased a new pair. Pat was just finishing off a customer, when Tom stepped up.

"Shine yer boots?" asked Pat.

"Yes, boy, and be quick about it," answered Tom, assuming a tone of haughty command.

Pat was at once on his knees, blacking the shoes of his old rival without the slightest suspicion of his identity.

"Humph! do you call that a good shine?" demanded Tom, when the first shoe was finished. "I could black it better myself."

"What do you know about blackin' boots?" said Pat, angrily. "There ain't a boy round here can give you a better shine than that."

"I got my boots blacked yesterday by a boy named Tom. He gave me a better shine."

Just then Pat looked up in his face, and started in surprise.

"You're Tom yourself," he said. "Where'd you get them clo'es?"

"Do you dare to compare me to a bootblack?" said Tom. "My name is Gilbert."

"You look like Tom's twin-brother, then," said Pat, bewildered.

Tom didn't reply, but walked off in a dignified manner, after paying Pat, swinging his cane in the most approved style.

"Don't he look like Tom, though?" soliloquized Pat, bewildered.

Tom enjoyed the joke, but didn't venture to laugh till he was out of sight.

"No wonder Pat didn't know," he thought. "I ain't sure I'd know myself, if I'd gone to sleep a bootblack and waked up as I am now."

Tom made his purchases, took supper at a restaurant, and went to bed early. It was his last night in the city. On the next day he was to start for the West, in quest of fortune.

CHAPTER IX.

BESSIE BENTON

Tom called the next day at the hospital, and left ten dollars, finding this to be the right amount for Jacob's coffin. He took a last look at the old man, so long his companion, and then, feeling that he could do no more, went on his way. He next went to a railroad office, on Broadway, and bought a through-ticket to Cincinnati. This was the city where, according to Jacob's story, his father had been in business, and he himself had been born. His inquiries for the uncle who had defrauded him must commence here.

Having taken his seat in the cars, he was led to make an examination of his pocket-book. He found it, by no means, well filled. A hundred dollars had seemed to him a good deal of money, but he had expended half of it for clothes. His railway ticket, and the money he left at the hospital, consumed thirty dollars more, and he had, therefore, but twenty dollars left.

"That ain't much to set up as a gentleman on," said Tom to himself. "I didn't know it cost so much to get along; I'll have to go to work afore long."

Tom was not in the least daunted, however; he had always been accustomed to earn his living, and didn't doubt that he could do it now.

He had little money, but he had his wits and two strong arms, and he thought he could keep out of the poor-house. No anxious fears for the future marred the pleasure which the journey afforded him. With an eye of interest he regarded the rich and productive country through which the train was speeding at the rate of twenty-five miles an hour.

There is more than one route from New York to Cincinnati, a fact of which Tom knew nothing, and it was only by accident that he had selected that which led through Buffalo. He stopped over a night at this enterprising city, and at an early hour entered the cars to go on to the chief city in Ohio. The passengers were nearly all seated. In fact, every seat was occupied, except that beside Tom, when a stout, elderly gentleman entered the car, followed by an attractive young girl of fourteen.

"There don't seem to be any seats, Bessie," he said.

"Here's one, uncle," said the young lady, indicating the seat of which our hero occupied half.

"Is this seat engaged, young man?" asked the old gentleman.

Tom looked up, and, seeing that a pretty girl was to sit beside him, answered, with alacrity:

"No, sir."

"Then, Bessie, you may as well sit down here. I am very sorry you must take this long journey alone. I thought, till the last moment, that Mr. Armstrong was going."

"Oh! never mind, uncle; I can get along well enough."

"But it don't seem right; I am afraid your father will blame me."

"Perhaps," said Bessie, with a little coquettish glance at Tom, whom she privately thought a very good-looking boy; "perhaps this young gentleman will look after me."

The old gentleman looked dubious, and would have preferred a person of more maturity. Still, there was no choice, and he said:

"Young man, are you going to Cincinnati?"

"Yes, sir," said Tom.

"Then, if it won't be too much trouble, I will ask you to look after my niece a little. I am unable to go with her myself."

"All right, sir; I'll do it," said Tom, in a confident tone.

"There goes the bell, uncle," said Bessie. "You'd better go, or you will be carried along with us."

The old gentleman bent over and kissed his niece. Our hero thought he should have been willing to relieve him of the duty. The young girl beside him looked so fresh and pretty that, though he was

too young to fall in love, he certainly did feel considerable pleasure in the thought that she was to be his companion in a journey of several hundred miles. It gave him a feeling of importance, being placed in charge of her, and he couldn't help wondering whether he would have got the chance if he had been dressed in his old street suit.

"There's a good deal in clo's," thought Tom, philosophically. "It makes all the difference between a young gentleman and a bootblack."

"Would you like to sit by the window?" he asked, by way of being sociable and polite.

"Oh, no! I can see very well from here," said the young lady. "Do you come from Buffalo?"

"No; I am from New York."

"I never was there; I should like to go very much. I have heard that Central Park is a beautiful place."

"Yes, it's a bully place," said Tom.

Bessie laughed.

"That's a regular boy's word," she said. "Miss Wiggins, our teacher, was always horrified when she heard any of us girls use it. I remember one day I let it out without thinking, and she heard it. 'Miss Benton,' said she, 'never again let me hear you employ that *inelegant* expression. That a young lady *under my charge* should, *even once*, have been guilty of such a breach of propriety, mortifies me extremely.'"

Bessie pursed up her pretty lips, and imitated the manner of the prim schoolmistress, to the great amusement of our hero.

"Is that the way she talked?" he asked.

"Yes; and she glared at me through her spectacles. She looked like a beauty, with her tall bony figure, and thin face. Did you ever go to boarding-school?"

"No," said Tom; "nor to any other," he might almost have added.

"You wouldn't like it, though boys' boarding-schools may be better than girls'. I have been two years at Miss Wiggins' boarding-school, in Buffalo. Now I'm going home, on a vacation, and I really hope papa won't send me there again."

"Do you live in Cincinnati?"

"Yes – that is, papa does. Are you going to stay there long?"

"I think I shall live there," said Tom, who fancied it would be agreeable to live in the same city with Bessie Benton.

"Oh, I hope you will! Then you could come and see us."

"That would be bully," Tom was about to say, but it occurred to him that it would be in better taste to say: "I should like to very much."

"Have you finished your education?" asked Bessie.

"There wasn't much to finish," thought Tom, but he said, aloud:

"Maybe I'll study a little more."

"Where did you study?" asked the persevering Bessie.

"I've been to Columbia College," said Tom, after a little pause.

So he had been up to the college grounds, but I am afraid he intended Bessie to believe something else.

"Then you must know a great deal," said Bessie. "Do you like Latin and Greek very much?"

"Not *very* much," said Tom.

"I never went farther than the Latin verbs. They're tiresome, ain't they?"

"I'll bet they are," said Tom, who wouldn't have known a Latin verb from a Greek noun.

"I suppose they come easier to boys. Were you long in college?"

"Not long."

"I suppose you were a Freshman?"

"Yes," said Tom, hazarding a guess.

"Don't the Sophomores play all sorts of tricks on the Freshmen?"

"Awful," said Tom, who found it safest to chime in with the remarks of the young lady.

"I had a cousin at Yale College," continued Bessie. "When he was a Freshman, the Sophomores broke into his room one night, blindfolded him, and carried him off somewhere. Then they made him smoke a pipe, which made him awful sick, and poured a pail of water over his head. Did they ever do such things to you?"

"No, they wouldn't dare to," said our hero.

"You couldn't help yourself."

"Yes, I could; I'd put a head on them."

"I don't know what Miss Wiggins would say if she should hear you talk. She'd have a fit."

"What did I say?" he asked, innocently.

"You said you'd *put a head* on them."

"So I would."

"Only it is a very inelegant expression, as Miss Wiggins says."

"If you don't like it, I won't say it any more."

"Oh! I don't care," said Bessie, laughing. "You needn't be afraid I'll have a fit. I ain't such a model of propriety as that. Perhaps I shall be some time, when I get to be a stiff old maid like Priscilla Wiggins."

"You won't be that."

"How do you know?" said Bessie, saucily.

"You don't look like it."

"Don't I? Perhaps nobody will marry me," she said, demurely.

"If nobody else will, send for me!" said Tom, blushing immediately at his unexpected boldness.

"Am I to regard that as a proposal?" asked Bessie, her eyes sparkling with fun.

"Yes, if you want to," said Tom, manfully.

"I'm sure I'm very much obliged," said the young lady. "I won't forget it, and, if *nobody else* will have me, I'll send for you."

"She's a trump," he thought, but fortunately didn't make use of a word which would have been highly objectionable to Miss Wiggins.

CHAPTER X.

TOM ARRIVES IN CINCINNATI

"You haven't told me your name yet," said Bessie, after a while.

"Gilbert Grey," said Tom.

The name sounded strange to himself, for he had always been called Tom; but his street-life was over. He had entered upon a new career, and it was fitting that he should resume the name to which he had a rightful claim.

"That's a good name," said Bessie, approvingly. "Would you like to know mine?"

"I know it already – it's Bessie Benton."

"Oh, you heard me use it. Do you like it?"

"Tip-top."

"That's another of your boy-words."

"Isn't it good?"

"I like it well enough. I'm not Miss Wiggins."

I am not going to inflict on the reader a full account of all that was said on the journey by Bessie and her young protector. They chatted upon a variety of topics, Tom taking care not to be too communicative touching his street experiences. He wanted to stand well with Bessie, and was afraid that she would not be quite so pleased and social with him if she should learn that he had been a knight of the blacking-brush.

It was early evening when the train reached Cincinnati.

"I think papa will be here to meet me," said Bessie, looking out of the car window, as they entered the depot. "Uncle telegraphed him from Buffalo that I would arrive by this train."

Our hero was sorry they were already at their journey's end. He had enjoyed Bessie's company, and he knew that he might never meet her again. Though he knew nothing of etiquette, he did what was proper on the occasion, and assisted Bessie to ascend the steps upon the platform.

Bessie looked around to find a familiar face.

"Oh, there's Cousin Maurice!" she said. "Here, Maurice, here I am."

A boy, somewhat taller than our hero, who no doubt considered himself a young man, came forward, and was about to kiss Bessie, but the latter drew back slightly and frustrated his design by giving him her hand instead.

Maurice colored a little, and looked vexed.

"Where is papa? Didn't he come?" she asked, quickly.

"He was busy, and sent me. Won't I do as well?"

"Of course I am glad to see you, but I hoped papa would be here."

"The carriage is outside; let us hurry," said Maurice, taking her arm.

"Wait a minute," said Bessie, releasing her arm. She walked up to Tom, and, taking his hand cordially, said: "Good-by, Gilbert. I'm ever so much obliged to you for taking care of me. We live at 116 B – street. I hope you will call in a day or two. Papa will be glad to see you, and he will thank you, too."

Tom's face flushed with pleasure.

"Thank you, Miss Bessie," he said. "I'd like to do it all over again."

"You'll be sure to come?"

"Yes, I'll come."

Maurice listened to this conversation with impatient annoyance. He liked his pretty cousin enough to be jealous of any one to whom she seemed attentive, and he thought her altogether too cordial with this strange boy.

"Who's that fellow?" he asked, as they were passing out of the depot.

"I don't know whom you mean."

"The boy you spoke to."

"The *young gentleman* I spoke to," remarked Bessie, with emphasis, "was Gilbert Grey."

"And who is Gilbert Grey, and how did you become acquainted with him?"

"Uncle Henry put me in his charge," said Bessie. "I've traveled with him all the way from Buffalo."

"A great protector he is!" sneered Maurice. "He isn't old enough to take charge of a kitten."

"A kitten would be more trouble than I was," said Bessie. "She might scratch. I never do that, you know, Cousin Maurice."

"I should think Uncle Henry might have found some older person to put you in charge of."

"I am glad he didn't. Gilbert was real nice."

"You shouldn't call him by his first name; it isn't proper."

"Pray don't talk about what's proper. I heard enough of that from Miss Wiggins. Besides, he's only a boy, you know, though, to be sure, he looks almost as old as you."

"Don't be so provoking, Bessie. I am much larger than he."

"Are you? I didn't see it."

"I am sorry you invited him to the house, Bessie. He only traveled with you a few hours. There is no need of becoming intimate with him on that account."

"I want to become intimate with him," said Bessie, with provoking frankness. "He's very nice."

"He seemed to me rather a low, common fellow," said Maurice, irritated.

"You needn't like him, if you don't want to," said Bessie. "Let us talk about something else," and she began to make inquiries about home affairs.

We return to Tom, whom we left standing on the platform in the depot.

"Have a carriage, sir?" asked a hackman.

"Where to?"

"Anywhere you like – Burnett House."

"If you know of any nice hotel where they'll board me for the pleasure of my company, you can take me right along."

"They don't do business that way, here."

"Never mind, then. I guess my private carriage is outside."

Tom, of course, knew nothing of Cincinnati; but, picking out a man with a carpet-bag, whose dress indicated limited means, he followed him.

"He won't stop at any of the tip-top hotels," thought our hero. "I can't afford to go first-class any more; my pocket-book ain't so full as it was."

He followed his unconscious guide nearly a mile. The latter finally stopped before a small, third-class hotel, which bore the name Ohio House. After a slight pause he entered, and Tom followed him. After the man had registered his name, Tom went up to the desk.

"What do you charge?" he asked.

"Two dollars a day."

"Is that the lowest price?"

"Where a party stays a week, it's ten dollars," was the reply.

"All right," said our hero.

"Will you register your name?"

Tom took the pen, and would have put down "Gilbert Grey," but, as we know, his education had been neglected, and he was not at all sure as to the proper way of spelling Gilbert. After a little reflection, he put down:

G. Grey, New York

The clerk wrote the number of a room opposite, and asked our hero if he would go to his room before supper.

Tom decided that he would, and was shown into a stuffy little bedroom, which would never have been mistaken, even by the most inexperienced, for a room in a first-class hotel. However, our hero was not very particular – he had never been accustomed to luxurious accommodations, and he was perfectly satisfied with No. 12.

"You can go," said he to the servant, "I'll be down in a jiffy."

He washed his face and hands – for even in the days of his street-life he had paid more regard to neatness than most of his class – opened his carpet-bag and took out a clean paper collar, which he substituted for the one he wore, and, after brushing his hair, went down stairs. He did not have long to wait for his supper, nor was he wanting in appetite. Though the establishment could boast of no French cook, the table was spread with substantial dishes, which Tom attacked vigorously.

"There's nothing like a good square meal, when a fellow's hungry," he said to himself. "It's more than old Jacob and I often got. I wonder what the old man would say if he knew I was payin' two dollars a day out of his money? I can't foller it up long, that's one sure thing. But it's no use worrying before it's time. I guess I'll find something to do in a big place like this."

Our hero knew little or nothing about geography, or the comparative size of places. He fancied that Cincinnati was nearly as large as New York. At any rate, it was large enough to afford a living for a young man of pluck and industry. He was no doubt correct in this. Pluck and industry are pretty sure to make their way in any place, whatever its size, and these qualities Tom certainly possessed.

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