

Otis James

# Aunt Hannah and Seth



James Otis

**Aunt Hannah and Seth**

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### CHAPTER I.

### AN ADVERTISEMENT

A small boy with a tiny white dog in his arms stood near the New York approach to the Brooklyn Bridge on a certain June morning not many years since, gazing doubtfully at the living tide which flowed past him, as if questioning whether it might be safe to venture across the street.

Seth Barrows, otherwise known by his acquaintances as Limpy Seth, because of what they were pleased to speak of as "a pair of legs that weren't mates," was by no means dismayed by the bustle and apparent confusion everywhere around him. Such scenes were familiar, he having lived in the city, so far as he knew, from the day of his birth; but, owing to his slight lameness, it was not always a simple matter for him to cross the crowded streets.

"Hi, Limpy!" a shrill voice cried from amid the pedestrians in the distance, and as Seth looked quickly toward the direction from which had come the hail, he noted that a boy with hair of such a vivid hue of red as would attract particular attention from any person within whose range of vision he might come, was frantically trying to force a passage.

Seth stepped back to a partially sheltered position beneath the stairway of the overhead bridge, and awaited the coming of his friend.

"Out swellin', are you?" the boy with the red hair asked, as he finally approached, panting so heavily that it was with difficulty he could speak. "Goin' to give up business?"

"I got rid of my stock quite a while ago, an' counted on givin' Snip a chance to run in the park. The poor little duffer don't have much fun down at Mother Hyde's while I'm workin'."

"You might sell him for a pile of money, Limpy, an' he's a heap of bother for you," the new-comer said reflectively, as he stroked the dog's long, silken hair. "Teddy Dixon says he's got good blood in him – "

"Look here, Tim, do you think I'd sell Snip, no matter how much money I might get for him? Why, he's the only relation I've got in all this world!" and the boy buried his face in the dog's white hair.

"It costs more to keep him than you put out for yourself."

"What of that? He thinks a heap of me, Snip does, an' he'd be as sorry as I would if anything happened to one of us."

"Yes, I reckon you are kind'er stuck on him! It's a pity, Limpy, 'cause you can't hustle same's the rest of us do, an' so don't earn as much money."

"Snip has what milk he needs – "

"An' half the time you feed him by goin' hungry yourself."

"What of that?" Seth cried sharply. "Don't I tell you we two are the only friends each other's got! I'd a good deal rather get along without things than let him go hungry, 'cause he wouldn't know why I couldn't feed him."

"A dog is only a dog, an' that's all you can make out of it. I ain't countin' but that Snip is better'n the general run, 'cause, as Teddy Dixon says, he's blooded; but just the same it don't stand to reason you should treat him like he was as good as you."

"He's a heap better'n I am, Tim Chandler! Snip never did a mean thing in his life, an' he's the same as a whole family to me."

As if understanding that he was the subject of the conversation, the dog pressed his cold nose against the boy's neck, and the latter cried triumphantly:

"There, look at that! If you didn't have any folks, Tim Chandler, an' couldn't get 'round same as other fellers do, don't you reckon his snuglin' up like this would make you love him?"

"He ain't really yours," Tim said after a brief pause, whereat the lame boy cried fiercely:

"What's the reason he ain't? Didn't I find him 'most froze to death more'n a year ago, an' haven't I kept him in good shape ever since? Of course he wasn't mine at first; but I'd like to see the chump who'd dare to say he belonged to anybody else! If you didn't own any more of a home than you could earn sellin' papers, an' if nobody cared the least little bit whether you was cold or hungry, you'd think it was mighty fine to have a chum like Snip. You ought'er see him when I come in after he's been shut up in the room all the forenoon! It seems like he'd jump out of his skin, he's so glad to see me! I tell you, Tim, Snip loves me just like I was his mother!"

Master Chandler shook his head doubtfully, and appeared to be on the point of indulging some disparaging remark, when his attention was diverted by a lad on the opposite side of the street, who was making the most frantic gestures, and, as might be guessed by the movement of his lips, shouting at the full strength of his lungs; but the words were drowned by the rattle of vehicles and other noises of the street.

"There's Pip Smith, an' what do you s'pose he's got in his ear now?" Tim said speculatively; but with little apparent interest in the subject. "He's allers botherin' his head 'bout somethin' that ain't any of his business. He allows he'll be a detective when he gets big enough."

Seth gave more attention to the caresses Snip was bestowing upon him than to his acquaintance opposite, until Tim exclaimed, with a sudden show of excitement:

"He's yellin' for you, Seth! What's he swingin' that newspaper 'round his head for?"

Perhaps Tim might have become interested enough to venture across the street, had Master Smith remained on the opposite side very long; but just at that moment the tide of travel slackened sufficiently to admit of a passage, and the excited Pip came toward his acquaintances at full speed.

"What kind of a game have you been up to, Limpy?" he demanded, waving the newspaper meanwhile.

Seth looked at the speaker in astonishment, but without making any reply.

"Anything gone wrong?" Tim asked, gazing inquiringly from one to the other.

"I don't know what he means," Seth replied, and Pip shouted wildly:

"Listen to him! You'd think butter wouldn't melt in his mouth, an' yet he's been ridin' a mighty high hoss, 'cordin' to all I can find out!"

"Who?" Seth demanded, grown restive under Pip's accusing gaze.

"You, of course!"

"But I haven't been up to any game."

"You can't stuff me with that kind of talk, 'cause I've got it down here in black an' white."

"Got what down?" Tim asked impatiently. "If there's anything wrong, why don't you come out with it like a man, an' not stand there like a dummy?"

"Seth Barrows will find there's somethin' wrong when the whole perlice force of this city gets after him," Pip replied, in what was very like a threatening tone. "Listen to this, Tim Chandler, an' try to figger out the kind of a game Limpy's been playin'!"

Then, with a tragical air, Master Smith read slowly from the newspaper he had been brandishing, the following advertisement:

"INFORMATION WANTED of a boy calling himself Seth Barrows. Said boy is about eleven years old; his left leg an inch shorter than the right, and is known to have been living in Jersey City three years ago. He then sold newspapers for a

livelihood, and resided with one Richard Genet. A liberal reward will be paid for any information concerning him. Address Symonds & Symonds, Attorneys-at-law."

As he ceased reading, Master Smith looked at his companions with a certain gleam of triumph in his eyes; but this expression quickly changed to one of severe reproof as he met Seth's bewildered gaze.

"Sellin' papers is good enough for me, though it ain't a business that brings in any too much money," he said sharply. "But I don't keep a fancy dog, so the cost of livin' ain't so high."

"What does it mean?" Seth asked in a low tone, as he gazed alternately at Tim and Pip.

"Mean?" the latter replied scornfully. "I reckon you can answer that better'n we could. When the bank on Broadway was broke into there was the same kind of notice in the papers, for I saw it with my own eyes."

"But I haven't been breakin' into any bank!" Seth wailed, hugging Snip yet more tightly to his bosom.

"Then what's that advertisement there for?" and Master Smith looked upon his acquaintance with an air of judicial severity.

"How do I know?"

Now it was Tim's turn to gaze at Seth reproachfully; and as the three stood there one and another of their acquaintances, having heard the startling news, came up eagerly curious and positive that Snip's master had committed some terrible crime.

The lame boy gave ample token of mental distress, as well he might after hearing that two attorneys-at-law were desirous of finding him, and more than one of the throng set down the expression of trouble on his face as strong proof of guilt.

Although conscious that he had committed no crime, the boy was thoroughly alarmed at being thus advertised for. He knew that rewards were offered for information which would lead to the apprehension of criminals, and never so much as dreamed that similar methods might be employed in a search for those who were innocent.

There was no reason, so he might have said to himself, why any lawyer in the city of New York would care to see him, unless he had been accused of some crime, but as he revolved the matter in his mind terror took possession of him until all power of reflection had departed.

The number of alleged friends or acquaintances had increased, until Seth and Snip were literally surrounded, and every member of the throng knew full well that the gathering would be rudely dispersed by the first policeman who chanced to come that way. Therefore it was that each fellow hastened to give his opinion as to the reason why the advertisement had been inserted in the columns of the paper, and, with five or six boys speaking at the same moment, it can well be understood that no one of them succeeded in making any very great impression upon the minds of his neighbors.

Seth understood, however, that every boy present was agreed upon the supposed fact that a great crime had been committed, although these young merchants might, upon due reflection, come to realize how improbable was such a supposition.

When little Snip, seeming to understand that his master was in sore distress, licked the boy's cheek, it was to Seth almost as if the dog shared in the belief of those who were so ready to accuse him, and he could restrain his feelings no longer.

Leaning against the iron column which supported the staircase, with his face buried in Snip's silky hair, the crippled lad gave way to tears, while his companions gazed at him severely, for to their minds this show of grief was much the same as a confession of guilt.

A blue-coated guardian of the peace dispersed the throng before those composing it had had time to make audible comment upon this last evidence of an accusing conscience; but Seth was so bowed down by bewilderment, sorrow, and fear as not to know that he stood alone with Snip, while a throng of acquaintances gazed at him from the opposite side of the street.

Once the officer had passed on, and was at a respectful distance, Seth's friends returned, and it could be understood from their manner that some definite plan of action had been decided upon during the enforced absence.

"See here, Seth, we ain't such chumps as to jump on a feller when he's down. If you don't want to tell us what you've been doin' – "

"I haven't done a thing, an' you know it, Tim Chandler," the lad moaned, speaking with difficulty because of his sobs.

"Then what's the notice about?" Tim asked in a severe, yet friendly tone.

"I don't know any more'n you do."

"Where's the lead nickel Mickey Dowd says somebody shoved on you the other day?" Teddy Dixon asked sharply.

Seth raised his head, looked about him for a moment as a shadow of fear passed over his face, and, dropping Snip for an instant, plunged both hands deep in his trousers pockets.

Withdrawing them he displayed a small collection of silver and copper coins, which he turned over eagerly, his companions crowding yet more closely to assure themselves that the examination was thorough.

"It's gone!" Seth cried shrilly. "It's gone; but I'll cross my throat if I knew I was passin' it!"

Snip, hearing his young master's cry of fear, stood on his hind feet, scratching and clawing to attract attention, and, hardly conscious of what he did, Seth took the little fellow in his arms once more.

"That settles the whole business," Teddy Dixon cried, in the tone of one who has made an important discovery. "You shoved it on somebody who'd been lookin' for counterfeit money, an' now the detectives are after you!"

Seth glanced quickly and apprehensively around, as if fearing the officers of the law were already close upon him, and the seeming mystery was unravelled.

From that moment there was not even the shadow of a doubt in the minds of Seth's acquaintances, and, believing that he had not intended to commit such a grave crime, the sympathies of all were aroused.

"You've got to skip mighty quick," Tim said, after a brief pause, during which each lad had looked at his neighbor as if asking what could be done to rescue the threatened boy.

"Where'll I go?" Seth cried tearfully. "They know what my name is, an' there ain't much use for me to hide."

"You can bet I wouldn't hang 'round here many seconds," one of the group said, in a low tone, glancing around to make certain his words were not overheard by the minions of the law. "If we fellers keep our mouths shut, an' you sneak off into the country somewhere, I don't see how anybody could find you!"

"But where'd I go?" Seth asked, his tears checked by the great fear which came with the supposed knowledge of what he had done.

"Anywhere. Here's Snip all ready to take a journey for his health, an' in ten minutes you'll be out of the city; but it ain't safe to hang 'round thinkin' of it very long, for the detectives will be runnin' their legs off tryin' to earn the money that's promised by the advertisement."

Seth made no reply, and his most intimate friends understood that if he was to be saved from prison the time had arrived when they must act without waiting for his decision.

They held a hurried consultation, while Seth stood caressing Snip, without being really conscious of what he did, and then Teddy and Tim ranged themselves either side of the culprit who had unwittingly brought himself under the ban of the law.

Seizing him by the arms they forced the lad forward in the direction of Broadway, Tim saying hoarsely to those who gave token of their intention to follow:

"You fellers must keep away, else the cops will know we're up to somethin' crooked. Wait here, an' me an' Teddy'll come back as soon as we've taken care of Seth."

This injunction was not obeyed without considerable grumbling on the part of the more curious, and but for the efforts of two or three of the wiser heads, the fugitive and his accomplices would have aroused the suspicions of the dullest policeman in the city.

"You'll get yourselves into a heap of trouble if anybody knows you helped me to run away," Seth said, in a tone of faint remonstrance.

"It can't be helped," Teddy replied firmly, urging the hunted boy to a faster pace. "We ain't goin' to stand by an' see you lugged off to jail while there's a show of our doin' anything. Keep your eye on Snip so's he won't bark, an' we'll look after the rest of the business."

Even if Seth had been averse to running away from the possible danger which threatened, he would have been forced to continue the flight so lately begun, because of the energy displayed by his friends.

Tim and Teddy literally dragged him along, crossing the street at one point to avoid a policeman, and again dodging into a friendly doorway when the guardians of the peace came upon them suddenly.

Had any one observed particularly the movements of these three lads, the gravest suspicions must have been awakened, for they displayed a consciousness of guilt in every movement, and showed plainly that their great desire was to escape scrutiny.

Seth was so enveloped in sorrow and fear as to be ignorant of the direction in which he and Snip were being forced. He understood dimly that those who had the business of escape in hand were bent on gaining the river; but to more than that he gave no heed.

Finally, when they were arrived at a ferry-slip, Teddy paid the passage money, and Seth was led to the forward end of the boat, in order, as Tim explained, that he might be ready to jump ashore instantly the pier on the opposite side was gained, in case the officers of justice had tracked them thus far.

Now, forced to remain inactive for a certain time, Seth's friends took advantage of the opportunity to give him what seemed to be much-needed advice.

"The minute the boat strikes the dock you must take a sneak," Teddy said impressively, clutching Seth vigorously by the shoulder to insure attention. "We'll hang 'round here to make sure the detectives haven't got on to your trail, an' then we'll go back."

"But what am I to do afterward?" Seth asked helplessly.

"There ain't any need of very much guessin' about that. You're bound to get where there'll be a chance of hidin', an' you want to be mighty lively."

"Snip an' I will have to earn money enough to keep us goin', an' how can it be done while I'm hidin'?"

"How much have you got now?"

"'Bout fifty cents."

Tim drew from his pocket a handful of coins, mostly pennies, and, retaining only three cents with which to pay his return passage on the ferry-boat, forced them upon the fugitive, saying when the boy remonstrated:

"You'll need it all, an' I can hustle a little livelier to-night, or borrow from some of the other fellers if trade don't show up as it ought'er."

Teddy followed his comrade's example, paying no heed to Seth's expostulations, save as he said:

"We're bound to give you a lift, old man, so don't say anything more about it. If you was the only feller in this city what had passed a lead nickel, perhaps this thing would look different to me; but the way I reckon it is, that the man what put the advertisement in the paper jest 'cause he'd been done out'er five cents is a mighty poor citizen, an' I stand ready to do all I can towards keepin' you away from him."

"Look here, fellers," Seth cried in what was very like despair as the steamer neared the dock, "I don't know what to do, even after you've put up all your money. Where can Snip an' I go? We've got to earn our livin', an' I don't see how it's to be done if we're bound to hide all the time."

"That's easy enough," and Tim spoke hopefully. "The city is a fool alongside the country, an' I'm countin' on your havin' a reg'lar snap after you get settled down. When we land, you're to strike right out, an' keep on goin' till you're where there's nothin' but farms with milk, an' pie, an' stuff to eat layin' 'round loose for the first feller what comes to pick 'em up. Pip Smith says farmers don't do much of anything but fill theirselves with good things, an' I've allers wanted to try my hand with 'em for one summer."

Seth shook his head doubtfully. Although he had never been in the country, it did not seem reasonable that the picture drawn by Pip Smith was truthful, otherwise every city boy would turn farmer's assistant, rather than remain where it cost considerable labor to provide themselves with food and a shelter.

"You'll strike it rich somewhere," Teddy said, with an air of conviction, "an' then you can sneak back long enough to tell us where you're hangin' out. I'll work down 'round the markets for a spell, an' p'rhaps I'll see some of the hayseeders you've run across."

The conversation was brought to a close abruptly as the ferry-boat entered the dock with many a bump and reel against the heavy timbers; and Seth, with Snip hugged tightly to his bosom, pressed forward to the gates that he might be ready to leap ashore instantly they were opened.

"Keep your upper lip stiff, an' don't stop, once you've started, till you're so far from New York that the detectives can't find you," Tim whispered encouragingly, and ten seconds later the fugitive was running at full speed up the gangway, Snip barking shrilly at the throng on either side.

Tim and Teddy followed their friend to the street beyond the ticket office, and there stood watching until he had disappeared from view. Then the latter said, with a long-drawn sigh:

"I wish it had been almost any other feller what passed the lead nickel, for Seth hasn't got sand enough to do what's needed, if he counts on keepin' out'er jail." And Tim replied sadly:

"If a feller stuck me with a counterfeit I'd think I had a right to shove it along; but after all this scrape I'll keep my eyes open mighty wide, else it may be a case of the country for me, an' I ain't hankerin' after livin' on a farm, even if Pip Smith does think it's sich a soft snap."

Then the friends of the fugitives returned to the ferry-boat, in order that they might without delay make a report to those acquaintances whom they knew would be eagerly waiting, as to how Seth had fared at the outset of his flight.

## CHAPTER II

### THE COUNTRY

Seth had little idea as to the direction he had taken, save that the street led straight away from the water, and surely he must come into the country finally by pursuing such a course.

Neither time nor distance gave him relief of mind; it was much as if flight served to increase the fear in his mind, and even after having come to the suburbs of the city he looked over his shoulder apprehensively from time to time, almost expecting to see the officers of the law in hot pursuit.

If it had been possible for Snip to understand the situation fully, he could not have behaved with more discretion, according to his master's views.

Instead of begging to be let down that he might enjoy a frolic on the green grass, he remained passive in Seth's arms, pressing his nose up to the lad's neck now and then as if expressing sympathy. The little fellow did not so much as whine when they passed rapidly by a cool-looking, bubbling stream, even though his tongue was lolling out, red and dripping with perspiration; but Seth understood that his pet would have been much refreshed with a drink of the running water, and said, in a soothing, affectionate tone:

"I don't dare to stop yet a while, Snippey dear, for nobody knows how near the officers may be, and you had better go thirsty a little longer, than be kicked out into the street when I'm locked up in jail."

A big lump came into the fugitive's throat at the picture he had drawn, and the brook was left far behind before he could force it down sufficiently to speak.

Then the two were come to a small shop, in the windows of which were displayed a variety of wares, from slate pencils to mint drops, and here Seth halted irresolutely.

He had continued at a rapid pace, and fully an hour was passed since he parted from his friends. He was both hungry and weary; there were but few buildings to be seen ahead, and, so he argued with himself, this might be his last opportunity to purchase anything which would serve as food until he was launched into that wilderness known to him as "the country."

No person could be seen in either direction, and Seth persuaded himself that it might be safe to halt here for so long a time as would be necessary to select something from the varied stock to appease hunger, and at the same time be within his limited means.

For the first moment since leaving the ferry-slip he allowed Snip to slip out of his arms; but caught him up again very quickly as the dog gave strong evidence of a desire to spend precious time in a frolic.

"You must wait a spell longer, Snippey dear," he muttered. "We may have to run for it, an' I mightn't have a chance to get you in my arms again. It would be terrible if the officers got hold of you, an' I'm afraid they'd try it for the sake of catchin' me, 'cause everybody knows I wouldn't leave you, no matter what happened."

Then Seth stole softly into the shop, as if fearing to awaken the suspicion of the proprietor by a bold approach, and once inside, gazed quickly around.

Two or three early, unwholesome-looking apples and a jar of ginger cakes made up the list of eatables, and his decision was quickly made.

"How many of them cakes will you sell for five cents?" he asked timidly of the slovenly woman who was embroidering an odd green flower on a small square of soiled and faded red silk.

She looked at him listlessly, and then gazed at the cakes meditatively.

"I don't know the price of them. This shop isn't mine; I'm tendin' it for a friend."

"Then you can't sell things?" and Seth turned to go, fearing lest he had already loitered too long.

"Oh, dear, yes, that's what I'm here for; but I never had a customer for cakes, an' to tell the truth I don't believe one of 'em has been sold for a month. Do you know what they are worth?"

"The bakers sell a doughnut as big as three of them for a cent, an' throw in an extra one if they're stale."

The lady deposited her embroidery on a sheet of brown paper which covered one end of the counter, and surveyed the cakes.

"It seems to me that a cent for three of them would be a fair price," she said at length, after having broken one in order to gain some idea of its age.

"Have you got anything else to eat?"

"That candy is real good, especially the checkerberry sticks, but perhaps you rather have somethin' more fillin'."

"I'll take five cents' worth of cakes," Seth said hurriedly, for it seemed as if he had been inside the shop a very long while.

The amateur clerk set about counting the stale dainties in a businesslike way; but at that instant Snip came into view from behind his master, and she ceased the task at once to cry in delight:

"What a dear little dog! Did he come with you?"

"Yes, ma'am," Seth replied hesitatingly; and he added as the woman stooped to caress Snip: "We're in a big hurry, an' if you'll give me the cakes I'll thank you."

"Dear me, why didn't you say so at first?" and she resumed her task of counting the cakes, stopping now and then to speak to Snip, who was sitting up on his hind legs begging for a bit of the stale pastry. "How far are you going?"

"I don't know; you see we can't walk very fast."

"Got friends out this way, I take it?"

"Well, – yes – no – that is, I don't know. Won't you please hurry?"

The woman seemed to think it necessary she should feed Snip with a portion of one cake that had already been counted out for Seth, and to still further tempt the dog's appetite by giving him an inch or more broken from one of the checkerberry sticks, before attending to her duties as clerk, after which she concluded her portion of the transaction by holding out a not over-cleanly hand for the money.

Seth hurriedly gave her five pennies, and then, seizing Snip in his arms, ran out of the shop regardless of the questions she literally hurled after him.

His first care was to gaze down the road in the direction from which he had just come, and the relief of mind was great when he failed to see any signs of life.

"They haven't caught up with us yet, Snippey," he said, as if certain the officers were somewhere in the rear bent on taking him prisoner. "If they stop at the store, that woman will be sure to say we were here."

Having thus spurred himself on, he continued the journey half an hour longer, when they had arrived at a grove of small trees and bushes through which ran a tiny brook.

"We can hide in here, an' you'll have a chanceto run around on the grass till you're tired," he said, as, after making certain there was no one in sight to observe his movements, he darted amid the shrubbery.

It was not difficult for a boy tired as was Seth, to find a rest-inviting spot by the side of the stream where the bushes hid him from view of any who might chance to pass along the road, and without loss of time Snip set himself the task of chasing every butterfly that dared come within his range of vision, ceasing only for a few seconds at a time to lick his master's hand, or take his share of the stale pastry.

It was most refreshing to Seth, this halt beneath the shade of the bushes where the brook sang such a song as he had never heard before, and despite the age of the cake his hunger was appeased. Save for the haunting fear that the officers of the law might be close upon his heels, he would have

been very happy, and even under the painful circumstances attending his departure, he enjoyed in a certain degree the unusual scene before him.

Then Snip, wearied with his fruitless pursuit of the butterflies, crept close by his master's side for a nap, and Seth yielded to the temptation to stretch himself out at full length on the soft, cool moss.

There was in his mind the thought that he must resume the flight within a short time, lest he fail to find a shelter before the night had come; but the dancing waters sang a most entrancing and rest-inviting melody until his eyes closed despite his efforts to hold them open, and master and dog were wrapped in slumber.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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