Horatio Alger Jr.

Mark Mason's Victory

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Alger H.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I.
TWO STRANGERS FROM SYRACUSE

"That is the City Hall over there, Edgar."

The speaker was a man of middle age, with a thin face and a nose like a Hawk. He was well dressed, and across his vest was visible a showy gold chain with a cameo charm attached to it.

The boy, probably about fifteen, was the image of his father. They were crossing City Hall Park in New York and Mr. Talbot was pointing out to his son the public buildings which make this one of the noted localities in the metropolis.

"Shine?" asked a bootblack walking up to the pair.

"I'd like to take a shine, father," said Edgar. "What do you charge?"

"Five cents, but I don't object to a dime," replied the bootblack.

"Can I have a shine, father?"

"Why didn't you get one at the hotel?"

"Because they charged ten cents. I thought I could get it for less outside."

"Good boy!" said the father in a tone of approval. "Get things as low as you can. That's my motto, and that's the way I got rich. Here, boy, you can get to work."

Instantly the bootblack was on his knees, and signed for Edgar to put his foot on the box.

"What's your name, boy?" asked Edgar with a condescending tone.

"No, it ain't boy. It's Tom."

"Well, Tom, do you make much money?"

"Well, I don't often make more'n five dollars a day."

"Five dollars? You are trying to humbug me."

"It's true though. I never made more'n five dollars in a day in my life, 'cept when I shined shoes for swells like you who were liberal with their cash."

Edgar felt rather flattered to be called a swell, but a little alarmed at the suggestion that Tom might expect more than the usual sum.

"That's all right, but I shall only pay you five cents."

"I knew you wouldn't as soon as I saw you."

"Why?"

"'Cause you don't look like George W. Childs."

"Who's he?"

"The *Ledger* man from Philadelphia. I once blacked his shoes and he gave me a quarter. General Washington once paid me a dollar."

"What!" ejaculated Edgar. "Do you mean to say that you ever blacked General Washington's shoes?"

"No; he wore boots."

"Why, my good boy, General Washington died almost a hundred years ago."

"Did he? Well, it might have been some other general."

"I guess it was. You don't seem to know much about history."

"No, I don't. I spent all my time studyin' astronomy when I went to school."

"What's your whole name?"

"Tom Trotter. I guess you've heard of my father. He's Judge Trotter of the Supreme Court?"

"I am afraid you don't tell the truth very often."

"No, I don't. It ain't healthy. Do you?"

"Of course I do."

This conversation was not heard by Mr. Talbot, who had taken a seat on one of the park benches, and was busily engaged in reading the morning *World*.

By this time Tom began to think it was his time to ask questions.

"Where did you come from?" he inquired.

"How do you know but I live in the city?"

"'Cause you ain't got New York style."

"Oh!" said Edgar rather mortified. Then he added in a tone which he intended to be highly sarcastic: "I suppose you have."

"Well, I guess. You'd ought to see me walk down Fifth Avener Sunday mornin' with my best girl."

"Do you wear the same clothes you've got on now?"

"No, I guess not. I've got a little Lord Fauntleroy suit of black velvet, with kid gloves and all the fixin's. But you ain't told me where you live yet."

"I live in Syracuse. My father's one of the most prominent citizens of that city."

"Is it the man you was walkin' with?"

"Yes; there he is sitting on that bench."

"He ain't much to look at. You look just like him."

"Really, I think you are the most impudent boy I ever met!" said Edgar with asperity.

"Why, what have I said? I only told you you looked like him."

"Yes, but you said he wasn't much to look at!"

"I guess he's rich, and that's better than good looks."

"Yes, my father is quite wealthy," returned Edgar complacently.

"I wish I was rich instead of good lookin'."

"You good looking!"

"That's what everybody says. I ain't no judge myself."

Tom looked roguishly at Edgar, and his aristocratic patron was obliged to confess that he had a pleasant face, though it was marred by a black spot on each cheek, probably caused by the contact of his hands.

"You're a queer boy," said Edgar. "I don't know what to make of you."

"Make a rich man of me, and well go to Europe together. My doctor says I ought to travel for my health."

"Edgar, haven't you got your shoes blacked yet?" asked his father from the bench.

Tom struck the box sharply with his brush to show that the job was completed.

"Just got done, governor," he said familiarly.

"Here is your money," said Edgar, producing some pennies from his pockets.

"There's only four," observed Tom with a critical glance.

"Only four! Haven't you dropped one?"

"No. That's all you gave me."

"Father, have you got a cent?"

Mr. Talbot's hand dived into his pocket, and he brought out a penny, but it was a Canadian coin.

"I don't know as I can pass this," said Tom. "They're very particular at the Windsor Hotel, where I am boarding."

"You can save it till you go traveling in Canada," suggested Edgar, with unusual brightness for him.

"That's so," answered Tom, who appreciated a joke. "I'll stop in Syracuse on the way and pay you a visit."

"How does he know about our living in Syracuse?" asked Mr. Talbot.

"I told him I lived there."

"He said you was a big bug up there."

"I hope you didn't use that expression, Edgar," said his father.

"Oh well, that's what he meant. Won't you have a shine yourself, governor?"

"No; I don't think I shall need it."

"Where'd you get that shine you've got on?"

"In Syracuse."

"Tell 'em they don't understand shinin' boots up there."

"Hadn't you better go up there and give them some lessons?" suggested Edgar.

"Well, I don't mind, if I can get free board at your house."

"Do you think we would have a bootblack living in our house?"

"Don't waste any time on him, Edgar. He is a street boy, and his manners are fitted to his station."

"Thank you, governor. That's the biggest compliment I've had for a long time."

Mr. Talbot laughed.

"Really, boy, you are very grotesque."

"That's another compliment," said Tom, taking off his hat and bowing with mock politeness.

"Hallo, Tom!"

Tom turned to meet the smile of a District Telegraph messenger, who was crossing the park to Broadway.

"How's yourself, Mark?" he said. "I'd offer to shake hands, but I've been doin' a little business for these gentlemen, and my gloves ain't handy."

No. 79, following the direction of Tom's nod, glanced at Mr. Talbot and Edgar, and instantly a look of surprise came over his face.

"Why, Uncle Solon, is that you?" he exclaimed.

Solon Talbot looked embarrassed, and seemed in doubt whether to acknowledge his relationship to the humble telegraph boy.

"Are you Mark Mason?" he asked.

"Yes; don't you know me?"

"I haven't seen you for two years, you know."

"And this is Edgar!" continued the telegraph boy. "You've grown so I would hardly know you."

"I hope you are well," said Edgar coldly.

"Thank you. Uncle Solon, where are you staying?"

"Ahem! I am stopping up town."

"Shall you be in the city long?"

"I don't think so."

"Mother would like very much to see you. She would like to ask about grandfather's estate."

"Ah – um – yes! Where do you live?"

"No. 174 St. Mark's Place, near First Avenue."

"We'll call if we can. Edgar, we'll have to hurry away."

As they walked toward the other side of the park at a brisk pace, Tom asked: "You don't mean to say that's your uncle, Mark?"

"Yes; that is, he married my mother's sister."

"And that young swell is your cousin?"

"Yes."

"He is rich, isn't he?"

"I suppose so."

"Why don't he do something for you and your mother?"

"He was always a very selfish man. But we don't ask any favors – mother and I don't. All we ask is justice."

"What do you mean by that?"

"My grandfather, that is mother's father and Mrs. Talbot's, died two years ago, and Uncle Solon was the administrator. We supposed he had left a good deal of money, but all we have received from his estate is seventy-five dollars."

"Do you think the old feller's been playin' any game on you?"

"I don't know what to think."

"I tell you what, Mark, he deserves a good lickin' if he's cheated you, and I'd like to give it to him."

"Well, Tom, I must be going. I can't stop talking here, or I'll get into trouble at the office."

CHAPTER II.
WHERE MARK LIVED

There is a large tenement house on St. Mark's Place, between Third Avenue and Avenue A. The suites of rooms consist, as is the general New York custom in tenement houses, of one square apartment used as kitchen, sitting room and parlor combined, and two small bedrooms opening out of it.

It was in an apartment of this kind on the third floor back, that Mark Mason's mother and little sister Edith lived. It was a humble home, and plainly furnished, but a few books and pictures saved from the wreck of their former prosperity, gave the rooms an air of refinement not to be found in those of their neighbors.

Mrs. Mason was setting the table for supper and Edith was studying a lesson in geography when the door opened and Mark entered.

His mother greeted him with a pleasant smile.

"You are through early, Mark," she said.

"Yes, mother. I was let off earlier than usual, as there was an errand up this way that fortunately took very little time."

"I'm glad you've come home, Mark," said Edith, "I want you to help me in my map questions."

"All right, Edie, but you will have to wait till after supper. I've got something to tell mother."

"What is it, Mark?"

"I saw two old acquaintances of ours from Syracuse, this forenoon."

"Who were they?" asked Mrs. Mason eagerly.

"Uncle Solon and Edgar."

"Is it possible? Where did you see them?"

"In City Hall Park. Edgar had just been having his boots blacked by Tom Trotter."

"Did you speak to them?"

"Yes."

"How did they appear?"

"Well, they didn't fall on my neck and embrace me," answered Mark with a smile. "In fact they seemed very cool."

"And yet Solon Talbot is my brother-in-law, the husband of my only sister."

"And Edgar is my own cousin. He's an awful snob, mother, and he looks as like his father as one pea looks like another."

"Then he is not very handsome. I wish I could see them. Did you invite them to call?"

"Yes."

"And what did Solon – Mr. Talbot – say?"

"He said he *might* call; but he was in a great hurry."

"Did you remember to give him our address?"

"Yes, mother; I said you would like to see him about grandfather's estate."

"I certainly would. It seems strange, very strange – that father should have left so little money."

"We only got seventy-five dollars out of it."

"When I expected at least five thousand."

"I suspect there's been some dishonesty on the part of Uncle Solon. You know he is awfully fond of money."

"Yes, he always was."

"And Tom Trotter says that Edgar told him his father was very rich."

"It seems strange the change that has taken place. When I first knew Solon Talbot I was a young lady in society with a high position, and he was a clerk in my father's store. He was of humble parentage, though that, of course, is not to his discredit. His father used to go about sawing wood for those who chose to employ him."

"You don't mean it! You never told me that before."

"No, for I knew that Solon would be ashamed to have it known, and as I said before it is nothing to his discredit."

"But it might prevent Edgar from putting on such airs. He looked at me as if I was an inferior being, and he didn't care to have anything to say to me."

"I hope you don't feel sensitive on that account."

"Sensitive? No. I can get along without Edgar Talbot's notice. I mean some time to stand as high or higher than Uncle Solon, and to be quite as rich."

"I hope you will, Mark, but as we are at present situated it will be hard to rise."

"Plenty of poor boys have risen, and why not I?"

"It is natural for the young to be hopeful, but I have had a good deal to depress me. Did you remember that the rent comes due the day after to-morrow?"

"How much have you towards it, mother?"

"Only five dollars, and it's eight. I don't see where the other three dollars are coming from, unless," – and here her glance rested on the plain gold ring on her finger.

"Pledge your wedding-ring, mother!" exclaimed Mark. "Surely you don't mean that?"

"I would rather do it than lose our shelter, poor as it is."

"There must be some other way – there must be."

"You will not receive any wages till Saturday."

"No, but perhaps we can borrow something till then. There's Mrs. Mack up-stairs. She has plenty of money, though she lives in a poor way."

"There isn't much hope there, Mark. She feels poorer than I do, though I am told she has five thousand dollars out at interest."

"Never mind. I am going to try her."

"Eat your supper first."

"So I will. I shall need all the strength I can get from a good meal to confront her."

Half an hour later Mark went up-stairs and tapped at the door of the rooms above his mother's.

"Come in!" said a feeble quavering voice.

Mark opened the door and entered. In a rocking chair sat, or rather crouched, a little old woman, her face seamed and wrinkled. She had taken a comforter from the bed and wrapped it around her to keep her warm, for it was a chilly day, and there was no fire in her little stove.

"Good evening, Mrs. Mack," said Mark. "How do you feel?"

"It's a cold day," groaned the old lady. "I – I feel very uncomfortable."

"Why don't you have a fire then?"

"It's gone out, and it's so late it isn't worth while to light it again."

"But it is worth while to be comfortable," insisted Mark.

"I – I can keep warm with this comforter around me, and – fuel is high, very high."

"But you can afford to buy more when this is burned."

"No, Mark. I have to be economical – very economical. I don't want to spend all my money, and go to the poor-house."

"I don't think there's much danger of that. You've got money in the savings bank, haven't you?"

"Yes – a little, but I can't earn anything. I'm too old to work, for I am seventy-seven, and I might live years longer, you know."

"Don't you get interest on your money?"

"Yes, a little, but it costs a good deal to live."

"Well, if the interest isn't enough, you can use some of the principal. I can put you in the way of earning twenty-five cents."

"Can you?" asked the old woman eagerly. "How?"

"If you'll lend me three dollars till Saturday – I get my wages then – I'll pay you twenty-five cents for the accommodation."

"But you might not pay me," said the old woman cautiously, "and it would kill me to lose three dollars."

Mark wanted to laugh, but felt that it would not do.

"There isn't any danger," he said. "I get two weeks' pay on Saturday. It will be as much as nine dollars, so you see you are sure of getting back your money."

"I – I don't know. I am afraid."

"What are you afraid of?"

"You might get run over by the horse cars, or a truck, and then you couldn't get your money."

"I will be careful for your sake, Mrs. Mack," said Mark good-humoredly. "You'll get your money back, and twenty-five cents more."

The old woman's face was a study – between avarice on the one hand and timidity on the other.

"I – I'm afraid," she said.

She rocked to and fro in her chair in her mental perturbation, and Mark saw that his errand was a failure.

"If you change your mind, let me know," he said.

As he reached the foot of the stairs he was treated to a surprise. There just in front of his mother's door stood Solon Talbot and Edgar.

CHAPTER III.
AN UNEXPECTED CALL

"In what room does your mother live?" asked Solon Talbot.

"This is our home," said Mark, proceeding to open the door.

Edgar Talbot sniffed contemptuously.

"I don't see how you can live in such a mean place," he remarked.

"It is not a matter of choice," returned Mark gravely. "We have to live in a cheap tenement."

By this time the door was opened.

"Mother," said Mark, preceding the two visitors, "here are Uncle Solon and Edgar come to call on you."

Mrs. Mason's pale cheek flushed, partly with mortification at her humble surroundings, for when she first knew Solon Talbot he was only a clerk, as she had said, and she was a society belle.

There was another feeling also. She had a strong suspicion that her brother-in-law had defrauded her of her share in her father's estate.

"I am glad to see you, Mr. Talbot," she said, extending her hand. "And this is Edgar! How you have grown, Edgar."

"Yes, ma'am," responded Edgar stiffly.

Both Mrs. Mason and Mark noticed that he did not call her "aunt." Her nephew's coldness chilled her.

"I am sorry to see you in such a poor place," she said, smiling faintly.

"I suppose rents are high in New York," said Solon Talbot awkwardly.

"Yes, and our means are small. How is my sister Mary?"

"Quite well, thank you."

"Did she send me any message?"

"She did not know I was going to call."

"How long it seems since I saw her!" sighed Mrs. Mason.

"I suppose you heard that I was in town."

"Yes; Mark told me."

"I was not sure whether I could call, as I am here on a hurried business errand."

"I am glad you have called. I wished to ask you about father's estate."

"Just so! It is very surprising – I assure you that it amazed me very much – to find that he left so little."

"I can't understand it at all, Solon. Only a year before he died he told me that he considered himself worth fifteen thousand dollars."

"People are often deluded as to the amount of their possessions. I have known many such cases."

"But I have only received seventy-five dollars, and there were two heirs – Mary and myself. According to that father must have left only one hundred and fifty dollars."

"Of course he left more, but there were debts – and funeral expenses and doctor's bills."

"I understand that, but it seems so little."

"It *was* very little, and I felt sorry, not only on your account, but on Mary's. Of course, as my wife, she will be provided for, but it would have been comfortable for her to inherit a fair sum."

"You can imagine what it is to me who am not amply provided for. I thought there might be five thousand dollars coming to me."

Solon Talbot shook his head.

"That anticipation was very extravagant!" he said.

"It was founded on what father told me."

"True: but I think your father's mind was weakened towards the end of his life. He was not really responsible for what he said."

"I disagree with you there, Solon. Father seemed to me in full possession of his faculties to the last."

"You viewed him through the eyes of filial affection, but I was less likely to be influenced in my judgments."

"Five thousand dollars would have made me so happy. We are miserably poor, and Mark has to work so hard to support us in this poor way."

"I thought telegraph boys earned quite a snug income," said Solon Talbot, who looked uncomfortable.

He was dreading every moment that his sister-in-law would ask him for pecuniary assistance. He did not understand her independent nature. Her brother-in-law was about the last man to whom she would have stooped to beg a favor.

"Mark sometimes makes as high as five dollars a week," said Mrs. Mason in a tone of mild sarcasm.

"I am sure that is very good pay for a boy of his age."

"It is a small sum for a family of three persons to live upon, Solon."

"Um, ah! I thought perhaps you might earn something else."

"Sometimes I earn as high as a dollar and a half a week making shirts."

Mr. Talbot thought it best to drop the subject.

"I am deeply sorry for you," he said. "It is a pity your husband didn't insure his life. He might have left you in comfort."

"He did make application for insurance, but his lungs were already diseased, and the application was refused."

"I may be able to help you – in a small way, of course," proceeded Solon Talbot.

Mark looked up in surprise. Was it possible that his close-fisted uncle was offering to assist them.

Mrs. Mason did not answer, but waited for developments.

"I have already paid you seventy-five dollars from your father's estate," resumed Mr. Talbot. "Strictly speaking, it is all you are entitled to. But I feel for your position, and – and your natural disappointment, and I feel prompted to make it a hundred dollars by paying you twenty-five dollars more. I have drafted a simple receipt here, which I will get you to sign, and then I will hand you the money."

He drew from his wallet a narrow slip of paper, on which was written this form:

"Received from Solon Talbot the sum of One Hundred Dollars, being the full amount due me from the estate of my late father, Elisha Doane, of which he is the administrator."

Mr. Talbot placed the paper on the table, and pointing to a black line below the writing, said, "Sign here."

"Let me see the paper, mother," said Mark.

He read it carefully.

"I advise you not to sign it," he added, looking up.

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Solon Talbot angrily.

"I mean," returned Mark firmly, "that mother has no means of knowing that a hundred dollars is all that she is entitled to from grandfather's estate."

"Didn't I tell you it was?" demanded Talbot frowning.

"Uncle Solon," said Mark calmly, "I am only a boy, but I know that one can't be too careful in business matters."

"Do you dare to doubt my father's word?" blustered Edgar.

"Our business is with your father, not with you," said Mark.

"What is it you want?" asked Solon Talbot irritably.

"I want, or rather mother does, to see a detailed statement of grandfather's property, and the items of his debts and expenses."

Solon Talbot was quite taken aback, by Mark's demand. He had supposed the boy knew nothing of business.

"Really," he said, "this impertinence from my own nephew is something I was by no means prepared for. It is a poor return for my liberal offer."

"Your liberal offer?"

"Yes, the twenty-five dollars I offered your mother is out of my own pocket – offered solely out of consideration for her poverty. Do I understand," he asked, addressing his sister-in-law, "that you decline my offer?"

Mrs. Mason looked doubtfully at Mark. Twenty-five dollars in their present circumstances would be a boon, and, in addition to Mark's earnings, would tide them over at least three months. Was it right, or wise, to decline it?

Mark's face showed no signs of wavering. He was calm and resolute.

"What do you think, Mark?" asked his mother.

"You know what I think, mother. We have no knowledge that the estate has been fairly administered, and you would be bartering away our rights."

"I think I won't sign the receipt, Solon," said Mrs. Mason.

Solon Talbot looked very angry.

"Then," he replied, "I cannot give you the twenty-five dollars. Edgar, we will go."

"Give my love to Mary," faltered Mrs. Mason.

Solon Talbot deigned no answer, but strode from the room with angry look.

"Mother, I am convinced that Uncle Solon was trying to swindle us," said Mark.

"I hope we have done right, Mark," rejoined his mother doubtfully.

"What is this, mother?" asked Mark, as he picked up from the floor a letter partially torn.

"It must have been dropped by Solon Talbot."

CHAPTER IV.
A NIGHT AT DALY'S

"I will read this letter to see if it is of any importance," said Mark. "In that case I will forward it to Syracuse."

He read as follows:

> "Wall Street Exchange.
>
> "Dear Sir: In reference to the mining stock about which you inquire, our information is that the mine is a valuable one, and very productive. The stock is held in few hands, and it is difficult to obtain it. You tell me that it belongs to an estate of which you are the administrator. I advise you to hold it awhile longer before you seek to dispose of it. We are about to send an agent to Nevada to look after some mining interests of our own, and will authorize him also to look up the Golden Hope mine.
>
> "Yours truly,
>
> "Crane & Lawton,
>
> "Stock and Mining Brokers."

Mother and son looked at each other significantly.

Finally Mark said, "This mining stock must have belonged to grandfather."

"Yes; I remember now his alluding to having purchased a hundred shares of some mine."

"The brokers say they are valuable. Yet Uncle Solon has never said anything about them. Mother, he means to defraud us of our share in this property, supposing that we will hear nothing about it."

"How shameful!" exclaimed Mrs. Mason indignantly. "I will sit right down and write him a letter taxing him with his treachery."

"No, mother; I don't want you to do anything of the kind."

"You don't want us to submit to imposition? That don't sound like you, Mark."

"I mean that he shall give us whatever is our due, but I don't want him to suspect that we know anything of his underhand schemes. He hasn't sold the mining stock yet."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Leave the matter in my hands, mother. I will keep the letter, and it will always be evidence against him. He is shrewd, and will get full value for the stock. Then we can make him hand you your share."

"If you think that is best, Mark," said Mrs. Mason doubtfully. "I haven't much of a head for business."

"I think I have, mother. There is nothing I like better."

"Did you see Mrs. Mack about a loan? I didn't think to ask you, as your uncle came in with you when you returned from up-stairs."

"Yes, I saw her, but it was of no use."

"Then she won't lend us the money?"

"No, she is afraid to, though I offered her twenty-five cents interest. I told her that I should have nine dollars coming in on Saturday, but she thought something might prevent my getting it."

"Then I had better pawn my ring. The landlord won't wait even a day for his money."

"Don't be in a hurry, mother. The rent is not due till day after to-morrow, and something may happen between now and then to put me in funds."

"Perhaps you are right, Mark."

Five minutes later there was a knock at the door. Opening it, Mark saw another telegraph boy in the entrance. He had a paper in his hand.

"You're to go there," he said, handing Mark a card. "Put on your best clothes. It's a lady to take to the theater."

"All right, Jimmy. I'll be ready in a jiffy. Do you know what theater?"

"No, I don't. The lady will tell you."

"Mother, I'll be home late," said Mark. "I must put on some clean clothes. Is my collar dirty?"

"Yes, you had better put on a clean one. I don't like your being out so late. I thought you were through for the day."

"I'll get extra pay, mother, and every little helps."

"I say, Mark," said Jimmy, "you'd better wear your dress suit and diamond scarf-pin."

"I would, Jimmy, only I lent 'em both to a bootblack of my acquaintance who's going to attend a ball on Fifth Avenue to-night."

Jimmy laughed.

"You've always got an answer ready, Mark," he said. "Well, so long! Hope you'll have a good time."

"Where does the lady live, Mark?" asked Mrs. Mason.

"At No. 90 West Forty-Fifth Street. I haven't much time to spare. I must go as soon as I can get ready."

It was half-past seven o'clock before Mark rang the bell at a fine brown stone house on West Forty-Fifth Street. The door was opened by a colored servant, who, without speaking to Mark, turned his head, and called out: "The messenger's come, Miss Maud."

"I'm *so* glad," said a silvery voice, as a young lady of twenty, already dressed for the street, came out of a room on the left of the hall. Mark took off his hat politely.

"So you are the messenger boy?" she said. "You are to take me to Daly's Theater."

"Yes, miss. So I heard."

"Let us go at once. We will take the horse cars at Sixth Avenue, and get out at Thirtieth Street."

Before she had finished they were already in the street.

"I must explain," she said, "that my uncle bought two tickets this morning and expected to accompany me, but an important engagement has prevented. I was resolved to go, and so I sent for a messenger. Perhaps you had better take the tickets."

"All right, Miss – ."

"Gilbert. As you are to be my escort I will ask your name."

"Mark Mason."

"Shall I call you Mark, or Mr. Mason?" she asked with a roguish smile.

"I would rather you would call me Mark."

"Perhaps, as you are taking the place of my uncle, it would be proper to call you Uncle Mark," she laughed.

"All right, if you prefer it," said Mark.

"On the whole I won't. I am afraid you don't look the character. Are you quite sure you can protect me?"

"I'll try to, Miss Gilbert."

"Then I won't borrow any trouble."

Maud Gilbert had carefully observed Mark, and as he was an attractive-looking boy she felt satisfied with the selection made for her.

"I am glad you didn't wear your uniform," she said. "I forgot to speak about that."

"When I heard what I was wanted for I thought it would be better to leave off the uniform," said Mark.

"That was right. Now I can pass you off as a young friend. If I meet any young lady friend, don't call me Miss Gilbert, but call me Maud. Perhaps you had better call me that at any rate."

"I will – Maud."

"That's right, and I will call you – let me see, Cousin Mark. I don't want my friends to think I had to send for an escort to a telegraph office."

When they entered Daly's Miss Gilbert met an old school friend – Louisa Morton.

"Why, Maud, are you here?" said her friend. "How delightful! And who is this young gentleman?"

"My cousin, Mark Mason."

"Indeed! Well, I congratulate you on having such a nice escort. If he were a few years older I might try to make you jealous."

Maud laughed gaily.

"Oh, you can't get him away. He is devoted to me. Aren't you, Cousin Mark?"

Mark was about to say "You bet," but it occurred to him that this would not be *comme il faut*, so he only said, "You are right, Maud."

"Where are your seats? I hope they are near ours."

They proved to be in the same row, but on the other side of the center aisle.

As Mark and the young lady took seats two pairs of astonished eyes noted their entrance. These belonged to Edgar and his father, who sat two rows behind. Edgar was the first to catch sight of them.

"Look, father!" he said, clutching his father's arm. "There is Mark Mason and a beautiful girl just taking their seats. What does it mean?"

"I don't know," returned Mr. Talbot. "She seems to be a fashionable young lady."

"How in the world did he get acquainted with such people? She treats him as familiarly as if he were a brother or cousin."

"It is very strange."

"Please take the opera-glass, Mark," Edgar heard Miss Gilbert say. "You know I must make you useful."

For the rest of the evening the attention of Edgar and his father was divided between the play and Miss Gilbert and Mark. For the benefit chiefly of her friend, Maud treated her young escort with the utmost familiarity, and quite misled Solon Talbot and Edgar.

When the play was over Mark carefully adjusted Miss Gilbert's wraps. As he passed through the aisle he saw for the first time Edgar and his father looking at him with astonished eyes.

"Good evening," he said with a smile. "I hope you enjoyed the play."

"Come, Mark, it is growing late," said Maud.

Mark bowed and passed on.

"Well, if that doesn't beat all!" ejaculated Edgar. "They seemed very intimate."

When Mark bade Miss Gilbert good night after ringing the bell at her home, she pressed a bank note into his hand.

"Thank you so much," she said. "Keep the change, and when I want another escort I will send for you."

By the light of the street lamp Mark inspected the bill and found it was a five.

"That will give me over three dollars for myself," he said joyfully. "So the rent is secure."

The next day about two o'clock he was in the office of a prominent banker to whom he had carried a message, when a wild-looking man with light brown hair and wearing glasses, rushed in, and exclaimed dramatically to the astonished banker, "I want a hundred thousand dollars! Give it to me at once, or I will blow your office to atoms."

He pointed significantly to a small carpet bag which he carried in his left hand.

The broker turned pale, and half rose from his chair. He was too frightened to speak, while two clerks writing in another part of the office seemed ready to faint.

CHAPTER V.
MARK AS A HERO

The situation was critical. That the wild-eyed visitor was demented, there was hardly a doubt, but his madness was of a most dangerous character.

The eyes of all were fixed with terror upon the innocent-looking valise which he held in his left hand, and in the mind of all was the terrible thought, Dynamite!

"Well, will you give me the money?" demanded the crank fiercely.

"I – I don't think I have as much money in the office," stammered the pallid banker.

"That won't work," exclaimed the visitor angrily. "If you can't find it I will send you where you won't need money," and he moved his arm as if to throw the valise on the floor.

"I – I'll give you a check," faltered Luther Rockwell, the banker.

"And stop payment on it," said the crank with a cunning look. "No, that won't do."

"Give me half an hour to get the money," pleaded Rockwell desperately. "Perhaps twenty minutes will do."

"You would send for a policeman," said the intruder. "That won't do, I must have the money now. Or, if you haven't got it, bonds will answer."

Luther Rockwell looked helplessly toward the two clerks, but they were even more terrified than he. There was one to whom he did not look for help, and that was the telegraph boy, who stood but three feet from the crank, watching him sharply. For a plan of relief had come into the mind of Mark Mason, who, though he appreciated the danger, was cooler and more self-possessed than any one else in the office.

Standing just behind the crank, so that he did not attract his attention, he swiftly signaled to the clerks, who saw the signal but did not know what it meant. Mark had observed that the dangerous satchel was held loosely in the hands of the visitor whose blazing eyes were fixed upon the banker. The telegraph boy had made up his mind to take a desperate step, which depended for its success on rapid execution and unfaltering nerves.

Luther Rockwell was hesitating what reply to make to his visitor's demand when Mark, with one step forward, snatched the valise from the unsuspecting visitor and rapidly retreated in the direction of the two clerks.

"Now do your part!" he exclaimed in keen excitement.

The crank uttered a howl of rage, and turning his fierce, bloodshot eyes upon Mark dashed towards him.

The two clerks were now nerved up to action. They were not cowards, but the nature of the peril had dazed them. One was a member of an athletic club, and unusually strong.

They dashed forward and together seized the madman. Mr. Rockwell, too, sprang from his seat, and, though an old man, joined the attacking party.

"Quick!" he shouted to Mark. "Take that valise out of the office, and carry it where it will do no harm. Then come back!"

Mark needed no second bidding. He ran out of the office and down-stairs, never stopping till he reached the nearest police station. Quickly he told his story, and two policemen were despatched on a run to Mr. Rockwell's office.

They arrived none too soon. The crank appeared to have the strength of three men, and it seemed doubtful how the contest between him and the three who assailed him would terminate.

The two policemen turned the scale. They dexterously slipped handcuffs over his wrists, and at last he sank to the floor conquered. He was panting and frothing at the mouth.

Luther Rockwell fell back into his seat exhausted.

"You've had a trying time, sir!" said one of the policemen respectfully.

"Yes," ejaculated the banker with dry lips. "I wouldn't pass-through it again for fifty thousand dollars. I've been as near a terrible death as any man can be – and live! But for the heroism of that boy – where is he?"

The question was answered by the appearance of Mark Mason himself, just returned from the police station.

"But for you," said the banker gratefully, "we should all be in eternity."

"I too!" answered Mark.

"Let me get at him!" shrieked the crank, eying Mark with a demoniac hatred. "But for him I should have succeeded."

"Was there really dynamite in the bag?" asked one of the policemen.

"Yes," answered Mark. "The sergeant opened it in my presence. He said there was enough dynamite to blow up the biggest building in the city."

"What is going to be done with it?" asked the banker anxiously.

"The policemen were starting with it for the North River."

"That's the only safe place for it."

"If you have no further use for this man we'll carry him to the station-house," said one of the officers.

"Yes, yes, take him away!" ejaculated the banker with a shudder.

Struggling fiercely, the crank was hurried down the stairs by the two official guardians, and then Mr. Rockwell who was an old man, quietly fainted away.

When he came to, he said feebly, "I am very much upset. I think I will go home. Call a cab, my boy."

Mark soon had one at the door.

"Now, I want you to go with me and see me home. I don't dare to go by myself."

Mark helped the old gentleman into his cab, and up the stairs of his dwelling. Mr. Rockwell paid the cab driver adding. "Take this boy back to my office. What is your name, my boy?"

"Mark Mason, No. 79."

Luther Rockwell scribbled a few lines on a leaf torn from his memorandum book, and gave it to Mark.

"Present that at the office," he said. "Come round next week and see me."

"Yes, sir," answered Mark respectfully, and sprang into the cab.

As he was riding through Madison Avenue he noticed from the window his uncle Solon and Edgar walking slowly along on the left hand side. At the same moment they espied him.

"Look, father!" cried Edgar in excitement "Mark Mason is riding in that cab."

"So he is!" echoed Mr. Talbot in surprise.

Catching their glance, Mark smiled and bowed. He could understand their amazement, and he enjoyed it.

Mechanically Mr. Talbot returned the salutation, but Edgar closed his lips very firmly and refused to take any notice of his cousin.

"I don't understand it," he said to his father, when the cab had passed. "Doesn't it cost a good deal to ride in a cab in New York?"

"Yes. I never rode in one but once, and then I had to pay two dollars."

"And yet Mark Mason, who is little more than a beggar, can afford to ride! And last evening he was at the theater in company with a fashionable young lady. Telegraph boys must get higher pay than he said."

"Perhaps, Edgar," suggested his father with an attempt at humor, "you would like to become a telegraph boy yourself."

"I'd scorn to go into such a low business."

"Well, I won't urge you to do so."

Meanwhile Mark continued on his way in the cab. As he passed City Hall Park Tom Trotter, who had just finished shining a gentleman's boots, chanced to look towards Broadway. As he saw his friend Mark leaning back in the cab, his eyes opened wide.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" he exclaimed. "How's that for puttin' on style? Fust thing you know Mark Mason will have his name down wid de Four Hundred!"

It did not occur to Mark to look at the paper given him by Mr. Rockwell till he got out of the cab. This was what he read:

> Mr. Nichols: Give this boy ten dollars.
> Luther Rockwell.

His eyes flashed with delight.

"This is a lucky day!" he exclaimed. "It's worth while running the risk of being blown up when you're so well paid for it."

Nichols, the chief clerk, at once complied with his employer's directions.

"You're a brave boy, 79," he said. "If it hadn't been for you, we'd all have been blown higher than a kite. How did you leave Mr. Rockwell?"

"He seems pretty well upset," answered Mark.

"No wonder; he's an old man. I don't mind saying I was upset myself, and I am less than half his age. You were the only one of us that kept his wits about him."

"Somehow I didn't think of danger," said Mark. "I was considering how I could get the better of the crank."

"You took a great risk. If the valise had fallen, we'd have all gone up," and he pointed significantly overhead. "I am glad Mr. Rockwell has given you something. If he had given you a hundred dollars, or a thousand, it wouldn't have been too much."

"He told me to call at the office next week."

"Don't forget to do it. It will be to your interest."

CHAPTER VI.
"THE EVENING GLOBE."

While Mark was passing through these exciting scenes Mrs. Mason went about her daily duties at home, anxiously considering how the rent was to be paid on the following day. Mark had not told her of his gift from Maud Gilbert, intending it as a surprise.

As she was washing the breakfast dishes, there was a little tap at the door. To her surprise, the visitor turned out to be Mrs. Mack, of the floor above, to whom Mark had applied for a loan without success. As Mrs. Mack seldom left her room Mrs. Mason regarded her with surprise.

"Come in and sit down, Mrs. Mack," she said kindly.

She had no regard for the old woman, but felt that she deserved some consideration on account of her great age.

Mrs. Mack hobbled in and seated herself in a rocking-chair.

"I hope you are well," said Mrs. Mason.

"Tollable, tollable," answered the old woman, glancing curiously about the room, as if making an inventory of what it contained.

"Can't I give you a cup of tea? At your age it will be strengthening."

"I'm not so very old," said the old woman querulously. "I'm only seventy-seven, and my mother lived to be eighty-seven."

"I hope you will live as long as you wish to. But, Mrs. Mack, you must make yourself comfortable. Old people live longer if they live in comfort. Will you have the tea?"

"I don't mind," answered Mrs. Mack, brightening up at the prospect of this unwonted luxury.

She did not allow herself tea every day, on account of its cost. There are many foolish people in the world, but among the most foolish are those who deny themselves ordinary comforts in order to save money for their heirs.

The tea was prepared, and the old woman drank it with evident enjoyment.

"Your boy came up yesterday to borrow three dollars," she began then, coming to business.

"Yes, he told me so."

"He said he'd pay me Saturday night."

"Yes, he gets two weeks' pay then."

"I – I was afraid he might not pay me back and I can't afford to lose so much money, I'm a poor old woman."

"Mark would have paid you back. He always pays his debts."

"Yes; I think he is a good boy. If I thought he would pay me back. I – I think I would lend him the money. He offered to pay me interest."

"Yes; he would pay you for the favor."

"If – if he will pay me four dollars on Saturday night I will lend him what he wants."

"What!" ejaculated Mrs. Mason, "Do you propose to ask him a dollar for the use of three dollars for two or three days?"

"It's – it's a great risk!" mumbled Mrs. Mack.

"There is no risk at all. To ask such interest as that would be sheer robbery. We are poor and we can't afford to pay it."

"I am a poor old woman."

"You are not poor at all. You are worth thousands of dollars."

"Who said so?" demanded Mrs. Mack in alarm.

"Everybody knows it."

"It's – it's a-mistake, a great mistake. I – I can't earn anything, I'm too old to work. I don't want to die in a poor-house."

"You would live a great deal better in a poor-house than you live by yourself. I decline your offer, Mrs. Mack. I would rather pawn my wedding ring, as I proposed to Mark. That would only cost me nine cents in place of the dollar that you demand."

The old woman looked disappointed. She had thought of the matter all night with an avaricious longing for the interest that she expected to get out of Mark, and she had no thought that her offer would be declined.

"Never mind about business, Mrs. Mack!" said Mrs. Mason more kindly, as she reflected that the old woman could not change her nature. "Won't you have another cup of tea, and I can give you some toast, too, if you think you would like it."

An expression of pleasure appeared on the old woman's face.

"If – it's handy," she said. "I don't always make tea, for it is too much trouble."

It is safe to say that Mrs. Mack thoroughly enjoyed her call, though she did not effect the loan she desired to make. When she rose to go, Mrs. Mason invited her to call again.

"I always have tea, or I can make it in five minutes," she said.

"Thank you kindly, ma'am; I will come," she said, "if it isn't putting you to too much trouble."

"Mother," said Edith, after the visitor had hobbled up-stairs, "I wouldn't give tea to that stingy old woman."

"My dear child, she is old, and though she is not poor, she thinks she is, which is almost as bad. If I can brighten her cheerless life in any way, I am glad to do so."

About one o'clock a knock was heard at the door. Mrs. Mason answered it in person, and to her surprise found in the caller a brisk-looking young man, with an intelligent face. He had a note-book in his hand.

"Is this Mrs. Mason?" he inquired.

"Yes, sir."

"Your son is a telegraph boy?"

"Yes."

"No. 79?"

"Yes, sir. Has anything happened to him?" she asked in quick alarm.

"I bring no bad news," answered the young man with a smile. "Have you a photograph or even a tintype of your son, recently taken?"

"I have a tintype taken last summer at Coney Island."

"That will do. Will you lend it to me till to-morrow?"

"But what can you possibly want with Mark's picture?" asked the mother, feeling quite bewildered.

"I represent the *Daily Globe*, Mrs. Mason. His picture is to appear in the evening edition."

"But why should you publish Mark's picture?"

"Because he has distinguished himself by a heroic action. I can't stop to give you particulars, for I ought to be at the office now, but I will refer you to the paper."

With the tintype in his hand the reporter hurried to the office of the journal he represented, leaving Mrs. Mason in a state of wondering perplexity.

Within an incredibly short time hundreds of newsboys were running through the streets crying "Extry! Extra! A dynamite crank at the office of Luther Rockwell, the great banker!"

Mark Mason was returning from a trip to Brooklyn, when a newsboy thrust the paper in his face.

"Here, Johnny, give me that paper!" he said.

The boy peered curiously at him.

"Ain't you Mark Mason?" he asked.

"Yes; how did you know me?"

"Your picture is in the paper."

Mark opened the paper in natural excitement, and being a modest boy, blushed as he saw his picture staring at him from the front page, labeled underneath "The Heroic Telegraph Boy." He read the account, which was quite correctly written with a mixture of emotions, among which gratification predominated.

"But where did they get my picture?" he asked himself.

There was also a picture of the dynamite crank, which was also tolerably accurate.

"I must take this home to mother," said Mark, folding up the paper, "Won't she be surprised!"

About the same time Solon Talbot and Edgar were in the Grand Central Depot on Forty-Second Street. Their visit was over, and Mr. Talbot had purchased the return tickets.

"You may buy a couple of evening papers, Edgar," said his father.

One of them selected was the *Evening Globe*.

Edgar uttered an exclamation as he opened it.

"What's the matter, Edgar?" asked his father.

"Just look at this! Here's Mark Mason's picture in the paper!"

"What nonsense you talk!" said Solon Talbot.

"No, I don't. Here is the picture, and here is his name!" said Edgar triumphantly.

Solon Talbot read the account in silence.

"I see," said another Syracuse man coming up, "you are reading the account of the daring attempt to blow up banker Rockwell's office!"

"Yes," answered Solon.

"That was a brave telegraph boy who seized the bag of dynamite."

"Very true!" said Solon, unable to resist the temptation to shine by the help of the nephew whom he had hitherto despised. "That boy is my own nephew!"

"You don't say so!"

"Yes; his mother is the sister of my wife."

"But how does he happen to be a telegraph boy?"

"A whim of his. He is a very independent boy, and he insisted on entering the messenger service."

"Be that as it may, you have reason to be proud of him."

Edgar said nothing, but he wished that just for this once he could change places with his poor cousin.

"I'd have done the same if I'd had the chance," he said to himself.

CHAPTER VII.
THE GREAT MR. BUNSBY

"So you have become quite a hero, Mark," said his mother smiling, as Mark entered the house at half-past six.

"Have you heard of it then, mother?" asked the messenger boy.

"Yes, a little bird came and told me."

"I suppose you saw the *Evening Globe*."

"Yes, I sent Edith out to buy a copy."

"But how did you know it contained anything about me?"

"Because a reporter came to me for your picture."

"That explains it. I couldn't understand how they got that."

"It makes me shudder, Mark, when I think of the risk you ran. How did you dare to go near that terrible man?"

"I knew something must be done or we should all lose our lives. No one seemed to think what to do except myself."

"You ought to have been handsomely paid. The least Mr. Rockwell could do was to give you five dollars."

"He gave me ten, and told me to call at the office next week."

"Then," said his mother relieved, "we shall be able to pay the rent."

"That was provided for already. The young lady I escorted to the theater last evening gave me three dollars over the regular charges for my services."

"Why didn't you tell me before, Mark?"

"I ought to have done so, but I wanted it to be an agreeable surprise. So you see I have thirteen dollars on hand."

"It is a blessed relief. Oh, I mustn't forget to tell you that Mrs. Mack came in this morning to offer to lend me three dollars."

"What! has the old woman become kind-hearted all at once?"

"As to that, I think there is very little kindness in offering three dollars at thirty-three per cent. interest for three days. She was willing to lend three dollars, but demanded four dollars in return."

"It is lucky we shall not have to pay such enormous interest. Now, mother, what have you got for supper?"

"Some tea and toast, Mark."

"We must have something better. I will go out and buy a sirloin steak, and some potatoes. We will have a good supper for once."

At the entrance to the street Mark found Tom Trotter.

Tom's honest face lighted up with pleasure.

"I see you've got into de papers, Mark," he said.

"Yes, Tom."

"I wouldn't believe it when Jim Sheehan told me, but I went and bought de *Evening Globe*, and there you was!"

"I hope you'll get into the papers some time, Tom."

"There ain't no chance for me, 'cept I rob a bank. Where you goin', Mark?"

"To buy some steak for supper. Have you eaten supper yet?"

"No."

"Then come along with me, and I'll invite you to join us."

"I don't look fit, Mark."

"Never mind about your clothes, Tom. We don't generally put on dress suits. A little soap and water will make you all right."

"What'll your mudder say?"

"That any friend of mine is welcome."

So Tom allowed himself to be persuaded, and had no reason to complain of his reception. The steak emitted appetizing odors as it was being broiled, and when at length supper was ready no one enjoyed it more than Tom.

"How do you think my mother can cook, Tom?" asked Mark.

"She beats Beefsteak John all hollow. I just wish she'd open a eaten' house."

"I'll think about it, Tom," said Mrs. Mason smiling. "Would you be one of my regular customers?"

"I would if I had money enough."

It is hard to say which enjoyed the supper most. The day before Mrs. Mason had been anxious and apprehensive, but to-day, with a surplus fund of thirteen dollars, she felt in high spirits.

This may seem a small sum to many of our readers, but to the frugal little household it meant nearly two weeks' comfort.

The table was cleared, and Mark and Tom sat down to a game of checkers. They had just finished the first game when steps were heard on the stairs and directly there was a knock at the door.

"Go to the door, Mark," said his mother.

Mark opened the door and found himself in the presence of a stout man, rather showily dressed, and wearing a white hat.

"Is this Mark Mason?" asked the visitor.

"Yes, sir."

The visitor took out a copy of the *Evening Globe*, and compared Mark with the picture.

"Yes, I see you are," he proceeded. "You are the telegraph boy that disarmed the dynamite crank in Mr. Rockwell's office."

"Yes, sir."

"Allow me to say, young man, I wouldn't have been in your shoes at that moment for ten thousand dollars."

"I wouldn't want to go through it again myself," smiled Mark.

All the while he was wondering why the stout man should have taken the trouble to come and see him.

"Perhaps you'll know me when I tell you that I'm Bunsby," said the stout visitor drawing himself up and inflating his chest with an air of importance.

"Of Bunsby's Dime Museum?" asked Mark.

"Exactly! You've hit it the first time. Most people have heard of me," he added complacently.

"Oh yes, sir, I've heard of you often. So have you, Tom?"

"Yes," answered Tom, fixing his eyes on Mr. Bunsby with awe-struck deference, "I've been to de museum often."

"Mr. Bunsby," said Mark gravely, "this is my particular friend, Tom Trotter."

"Glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Trotter," said Mr. Bunsby, offering his hand.

Tom took it shyly, and felt that it was indeed a proud moment for him. To be called Mr. Trotter by the great Bunsby, and to have his hand shaken into the bargain, put him on a pinnacle of greatness which he had never hoped to reach.

"Won't you walk in, Mr. Bunsby? This is my mother, Mrs. Mason, and this is my sister Edith."

"Glad to meet you, ladies both! I congratulate you, Mrs. Mason, on having so distinguished a son."

"He is a good boy, Mr. Bunsby, whether he is distinguished or not."

"I have no doubt of it. In fact I am sure of it. You already know that I keep a dime museum, where, if I do say it myself, may be found an unrivaled collection of curiosities gathered from the four quarters of the globe, and where may be witnessed the most refined and recherché entertainments, which delight daily the élite of New York and the surrounding cities."

"Yes, sir," assented Mrs. Mason, rather puzzled to guess what all this had to do with her.

"I have come here to offer your son an engagement of four weeks at twenty-five dollars a week, and the privilege of selling his photographs, with all the profits it may bring."

"But what am I to do?" asked Mark.

"Merely to sit on the platform with the other curiosities."

"But I am not a curiosity."

"I beg your pardon, my dear boy, but everybody will want to see the heroic boy who foiled a dynamite fiend and saved the life of a banker."

Somehow this proposal was very repugnant to Mark.

"Thank you, Mr. Bunsby," he said, "but I should not like to earn money in that way."

"I might say thirty dollars a week," continued Mr. Bunsby. "Come, let us strike up a bargain."

"It isn't the money. Twenty-five dollars a week is more than I could earn in any other way, but I shouldn't like to have people staring at me."

"My dear boy, you are not practical."

"I quite agree with Mark," said Mrs. Mason. "I would not wish him to become a public spectacle."

CHAPTER VIII.
A SCENE IN MRS. MACK'S ROOM

Fifteen minutes before a stout, ill-dressed man of perhaps forty years of age knocked at the door of Mrs. Mack's room.

"Come in!" called the old lady in quavering accents.

The visitor opened the door and entered.

"Who are you?" asked the old lady in alarm.

"Don't you know me, Aunt Jane?" replied the intruder. "I'm Jack Minton, your nephew."

"I don't want to see you – go away!" cried Mrs. Mack.

"That's a pretty way to receive your own sister's son, whom you haven't seen for five years."

"I haven't seen you because you've been in jail," retorted his aunt in a shrill voice.

"Yes, I was took for another man," said Jack. "He stole and laid it off on to me."

"I don't care how it was, but I don't want to see you. Go away."

"Look here, Aunt Jane, you're treating me awful mean. I'm your own orphan nephew, and you ought to make much of me."

"An orphan – yes. You hurried your poor mother to the grave by your bad conduct," said Mrs. Mack with some emotion. "You won't find me so soft as she was."

"Soft? No, you're as hard as flint, but all the same you're my aunt, and you're rich, while I haven't a dollar to bless myself with."

"Rich! Me rich!" repeated the old lady shrilly. "You see how I live. Does it look as if I was rich?"

"Oh, you can't humbug me that way. You could live better if you wanted to."

"I'm poor – miserably poor!" returned the old woman.

"I'd like to be as poor as you are!" said Jack Minton grimly. "You're a miser, that's all there is about it. You half starve yourself and live without fire, when you might be comfortable, and all to save money. You're a fool! Do you know where all your money will go when you're dead?"

"There won't be any left."

"Won't there? I'll take the risk of that, for I shall be your heir. It'll all go to me!" said Jack, chuckling.

"Go away! Go away!" cried the terrified old woman wildly.

"I want to have a little talk with you first, aunt," said Jack, drawing the only other chair in the room in front of Mrs. Mack and sitting down on it. "You're my only relation, and we ought to have an understanding. Why, you can't live more than a year or two – at your age."

"What do you mean?" said Mrs. Mack angrily. "I'm good for ten years. I'm only seventy-seven."

"You're living on borrowed time, Aunt Jane, you know that yourself. You've lived seven years beyond the regular term, and you can't live much longer."

"Go away! Go away!" said the terrified old woman, really alarmed at her nephew's prediction. "I don't want to have anything to do with you."

"Don't forget that I'm your heir."

"I can leave my money as I please – not that I've got much to leave."

"You mean you'll make a will? Well, go ahead and do it. There was a man I know made a will and he died the next day."

This shot struck home, for the old woman really had a superstitious dread of making a will.

"You're a terrible man!" she moaned. "You scare me."

"Come, aunt, be reasonable. You can leave part of your money away from me if you like, but I want you to help me now. I'm hard up. Do you see this nickel?" and he drew one from his vest pocket.

"Yes."

"Well, it's all the money I've got. Why, I haven't eaten anything to-day, and I have no money to pay for a bed."

"I – I haven't any supper for you."

"I don't want any *here*. I wouldn't care to board with you, Aunt Jane. Why, I should soon become a bag of bones like yourself. I don't believe you've got five cents' worth of provisions in the room."

"There's half a loaf of bread in the closet."

"Let me take a look at it."

He strode to the closet and opened the door. On a shelf he saw half a loaf of bread, dry and stale. He took it in his hand, laughing.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.