

Otis James

The Princess and Joe Potter



James Otis
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CHAPTER I.

A RUINED MERCHANT

"Hello, Joe Potter! What you doin' up in this part of the town?"

The boy thus addressed halted suddenly, looked around with what was very like an expression of fear on his face, and then, recognising the speaker, replied, in a tone of relief:

"Oh, it's you, is it, Plums?"

"Of course it's me. Who else did you think it was? Say, what you doin' 'round here? Who's tendin' for you now?"

"Nobody."

"It don't seem as though this was the time of day when you could afford to shut up shop."

"But that's what I have done."

"Got some 'portant business up here at the *depot*, eh?"

Joe shook his head mournfully, stepped back a few paces that he might lean against the building, and looked about him with a languid air, much as if there was no longer anything pleasing for him in life.

Plums, or to give him his full name, George H. Plummer, gazed at his friend in mild surprise.

Any other boy of Joe Potter's acquaintance would have been astonished at the great change which had come over him; but Plums was not given to excesses of any kind, save in the way of eating. That which would have excited an ordinary lad only served to arouse Plums in a mild degree, and perhaps it was this natural apathy which served to give Master Plummer such an accumulation of flesh. He was what might be called a very fat boy, and was never known to move with sufficient energy to reduce his weight.

Sim Jepson stated that Plums sold newspapers in the vicinity of the Grand Central Station because he lived only a couple of blocks away, and therefore had sufficient time to walk to his place of business during the forenoon.

"How he ever earns enough to pay for fillin' hisself up is more'n I can make out," Master Jepson had said, with an air of perplexity. "By the time he's sold ten papers, he's ate the profits off of twenty, an' acts like he was hungrier than when he begun."

As Plums waited for, rather than solicited, customers, he gazed in an indolent fashion at the dejected-looking friend, who might have served, as he stood leaning against the building on this particular June day, as a statue of misery.

Joe Potter was as thin as his friend was stout, and, ordinarily, as active as Plums was indolent. His listless bearing now served to arouse Master Plummer's curiosity as nothing else could have

done.

"Business been good down your way?" he finally asked.

"It's mighty bad. I got stuck on a bunch of bananas, and lost thirty-two cents last week. Then oranges went down till you couldn't hardly see 'em, an' I bought a box when they was worth two dollars. It seems like as if every *Italian* in the city, what ain't blackin' boots, has started a fruit-stand, an' it's jest knocked the eye out of business."

"I shouldn't think you could afford to lay 'round up here if it is as bad as all that."

"It don't make any difference where I am now, 'cause I've busted; Plums, I've busted. Failed up yesterday, an' have got jest sixteen cents to my name."

"Busted!" Master Plummer exclaimed. "Why, you told me you had more'n seven dollars when you started that fruit-stand down on West Street."

"Seven dollars an' eighty-three cents was the figger, Plums, an' here's what's left of it."

Joe took from his pocket a handful of pennies, counting them slowly to assure himself he had made no mistake in the sum total.

Master Plummer was so overwhelmed by the sad tidings, that two intending purchasers passed him by after waiting several seconds to be served, and Joe reminded him of his inattention to business by saying, sharply:

"Look here, Plums, you mustn't shut down on business jest 'cause I've busted. Why don't you sell papers when you get the

chance?"

"I didn't see anybody what wanted one. I'm jest knocked silly, Joe, about your hard luck. How did it happen?"

"That's what I can't seem to make out. I kept on sellin' stuff, an' of course had to buy more; but every night the money was smaller an' smaller, till I didn't have much of any left."

"I felt kind of 'fraid you was swellin' too big, Joe. When a feller agrees to give five dollars a month rent, an' hires a clerk for a dollar a week, same's you did, he's takin' a pretty good contract on his shoulders. Did you pay Sim Jepson his wages all right?"

"Yes, I kept square with him, and I guess that's where most of my money went. Sim owns the stand now."

"He owns it? Why, he was your clerk."

"Don't you s'pose I know that? But he was gettin' a dollar a week clean money, an' it counted up in time. If things had been the other way, most likely I'd own the place to-day."

Master Plummer was silent for an instant, and then a smile as of satisfaction overspread his fat face.

"I'll tell you how to do it, Joe: hire out to Sim, an' after a spell you'll get the stand back ag'in."

"That won't work; I tried it. You see, when it come yesterday, I owed him a dollar for wages, an' thirty cents I'd borrowed. There wasn't more'n ninety cents' worth of stuff in the stand, an' Sim said he'd got to be paid right sharp. Of course I couldn't raise money when I'd jest the same's failed, an' told him so. He offered to square things if I'd give him the business; an' what else could

I do? I left there without a cent to my name; but earned a quarter last night, an' here's what's left of it."

The ruined merchant mournfully jingled the coins in his hand, while he gazed dreamily at the railway structure overhead, and Master Plummer regarded him sympathetically.

"What you goin' to do now?" the fat boy asked, after a long pause.

"That's jest what I don't know, Plums. If I had the money, I reckon I'd take up shinin' for a spell, even if the *Italians* are knockin' the life out of business."

"Why don't you sell papers, same's you used to?"

"Well, you see when I went into the fruit-stand I sold out my rights 'round the City Hall, to Dan Fernald, an' it wouldn't be the square thing for me to jump in down there ag'in."

"There's plenty of chances up-town."

"I don't know about that. S'posen I started right here, then I'd be rubbin' against you; an' it's pretty much the same everywhere. I tell you, Plums, there's too many folks in this city. I ain't so certain but I shall go for a sailor; they say there's money in that business."

"S'posen there was barrels in it, how could you get any out?" and in his astonishment that Joe should have considered such a plan even for a moment, Master Plummer very nearly grew excited. "You ain't big enough to shin up the masts, an' take in sails, an' all that sort of work, same's sailors have to do."

"I'd grow to it, of course. I don't expect I could go down to

the docks an' get a chance right off as a first-class hand on masts an' sails; but I shouldn't go on a vessel, you know, Plums. I'm contin' on a steamboat, where there ain't any shinnin' round to be done. Them fellers that run on the Sound steamers have snaps, that's what they have. You know my stand was on West Street, where I saw them all, and the money they spend! It don't seem like as if half a dollar was any account to 'em."

"But what could you do on a steamboat?"

"I don't know yet; but I'll snoop 'round before the summer's over, an' find out. Where you livin' now?"

"Well, say, Joe, you can talk 'bout steamboat snaps; but this house of mine lays over 'em all. I s'pose I've got about the swellest layout in this city, an' don't have to give up a cent for it, either. First off McDaniels counted on chargin' me rent, an' after I'd been there a couple of days he said it didn't seem right to take money, 'cause the place wasn't fit for a dog. I'll tell you what it is, if McDaniels keeps his dogs in any better shanty than that, they must be livin' on the fat of the land."

"Who's McDaniels?"

"He's the blacksmith what owns the shanty where I live. You see, it was like this: I allers sold him a paper every afternoon, an' when it rained, or business was dull, I loafed 'round there, an' that's how I found the place."

"Do you live in the blacksmith's shop?"

"Well I should say I didn't! Right behind it is a shed he built, to keep a wagon in, but I guess he ain't got any now, leastways

he don't flash one up. There was a lot of old iron an' the like of that thrown in at one end, an' when I saw it, I says to myself, says I, 'That's a mighty good shanty for some feller what don't want to give up all the money he makes for a place to sleep in,' and I began to figger how it could be fixed. It took me as much as two days before I could see into it, an' then I had it all in my mind; so I tackled McDaniels about hirin' it. He was willin', so long's I 'greed to be careful about fire, an' – well, if you're out of business now there's nothin' to keep you from comin' down to-night an' seein' it."

"I'm not only out of business, but I'm out of a home, Plums. You see, when I sold the fruit-stand of course I hadn't any right to count on sleepin' there, an' – "

"Didn't Sim Jepson offer you the chance?"

"He seemed to think it wasn't big enough for two."

"He didn't have any sich swell notions when you first started there, an' he wanted a place to sleep."

"Yes, I remember all about that; but it's no use twittin' a feller. He was willin' enough to bunk in with me, but if he don't want to turn about an' give me the same show, it ain't any of my business."

"Of course you can come to my place, an' stay jest as long as you want to, Joe, an' I'll be glad to have you; but if you're countin' on workin' down-town it won't be very handy."

"I ain't certain but I'll try my luck hangin' 'round the *depot* here waitin' for a chance to carry baggage. I've done them kind of jobs before, an' they didn't turn out so terrible bad. You see,

with only sixteen cents, a feller can't spread hisself very much on goin' into business."

"You might buy papers, an' sell 'em here. It ain't a very great show for trade, but you won't have to work very hard, an' there's a good deal in that."

"Yes, Plums, there is, for a feller like you, what don't want to stir 'round much; but I'm ready to hustle, an' it wouldn't suit me nohow. You don't earn more'n fifteen or twenty cents a day."

"Not a great deal more," Master Plummer replied, in a tone of content, and a probable customer approaching just at that moment, he succeeded in making sufficient exertion to offer his wares for sale.

"That's jest about the way of it!" he exclaimed, as the gentleman passed into the building without giving heed to the paper held invitingly towards him. "There's no use to hustle 'round here, 'cause it don't pay. If they want to buy papers they buy 'em, an' if they don't, you can't give 'em away. There's one good thing about doin' business here, though, an' that is, the other fellers won't try to drive you out. It's mighty tough on you, droppin' all that money. If I'd had most eight dollars you can bet I wouldn't take the chances of losin' it. I'd sooner spend the whole pile buyin' swell dinners down on the Avenue."

"Yes, it's tough," Joe replied, musingly; "but I'd a good deal rather get rid of the money tryin' to make more, than spend it fillin' myself up with hash. When do you knock off work?"

"Oh, somewhere 'bout dark, 'less I've sold out before. Say, I

know of a place where you can get the biggest bowl of stew in this city, for five cents, – 'most all meat. Of course there'll be a bone now an' then, – you expect that; but it's rich! We'll go there to-night, eh?"

"I ain't so certain whether a feller with only sixteen cents ought'er spend five of it fer stuff to eat," Joe replied, reflectively; "but if I make a few nickels 'tween now an' night, perhaps we'll take a whirl at it."

"A feller's bound to eat, whether he makes anything or not. So long's you've got that much money you might as well enjoy yourself. Now I say it's best not to go hungry, else you can't do so much work, 'an then – "

"I'll see you later," Joe interrupted, not caring just at the moment to listen to his friend's ideas on the subject of food, for it was well known among Master Plummer's acquaintances that his highest idea of happiness consisted in ministering to his stomach.

The fat boy gazed after the ruined merchant until the latter was lost to view amid the throng of pedestrians, and then in a dreamy, indolent fashion he turned his attention once more to the business of selling newspapers to such of the passers-by as requested him to do so, murmuring mournfully from time to time:

"Seven dollars an' eighty-three cents, an' a feller can buy custard pies two inches thick for a dime apiece!"

Having assured himself of a lodging-place, and decided as to what business he should pursue, Joe Potter wasted no more time, but set about earning his livelihood in as cheery a fashion as if

the depression in the fruit market had brought him great gains instead of dire failure.

Before the night had come he was richer by forty cents, through having carried to their several destinations, a satchel for a gentleman, a basket containing a kitten for a lady, and a message for one of the employees at the station.

"Business is boomin' right along. At this rate I guess I can afford to stand one of Plums's bowls of stew," he said to himself, in a tone of satisfaction, and was about to seek other employment when his name was called from a shop on the opposite side of the street.

Turning quickly, he saw a boy with whom he had had slight acquaintance while in the fruit business, who stood in the door of the shop, and said, as Joe crossed the street:

"I'm workin' here now. It's a good deal more tony than down on West Street. You ought'er move your stand up this way somewhere."

"I haven't got any to move," Joe replied, and then explained why he was no longer connected with the business.

The young clerk did not appear particularly surprised by the information.

"I thought that's 'bout the way it would turn out, when I heard you hired Sim to help you. He's got the business, an' you've got the shake."

"Sim was square with me," Joe replied, stoutly.

"Well, I'm glad you think so, for you're the only one he ever

acted square with, an' it wouldn't astonish me a bit to know he'd done you up."

Joe was a boy who would not willingly listen to evil words against one he called a friend, and was about to begin a wordy war in Sim's behalf, when his friend's employer put an end to the conversation by demanding that the clerk "get in and attend to business."

"I won't believe Sim ever did a thing crooked to me," Joe said, recrossing the street and taking up his station where he could have a full view of those who came from the building. "He saved his money while I was losin' mine, an' that's all there is to it. It seems like as if everybody wanted to jump on him 'cause he had sense enough to do jest what he has done."

This was not the first time Master Potter had heard such an accusation against his late clerk, and, while he would not believe Sim had been dishonest, the suggestion so troubled him that he had some difficulty in banishing the matter from his mind.

As the passengers from the incoming train appeared, he had other affairs than Sim's possible dishonesty to think about, as he did his best to attract the attention of those whom he thought might prove to be patrons.

In this manner, but yet without earning any more money, the remainder of the afternoon was passed, and when one by one the electric lights began to appear, telling that the day had come to a close, he decided it was time to seek out Master Plummer.

Now the thought of that bowl of stew for five cents was

particularly pleasing, and he had made up his mind to indulge in such a hearty meal, when a little tot of a girl, who could not have been more than three years old, came out from among the throng of pedestrians and stood looking up into Joe's face.

"Well, say, but you are a dandy!" Master Potter exclaimed, in genuine admiration, as he surveyed the tiny figure, allowing his eyes to dwell almost lovingly upon the sweet, baby face. "You are a dandy, an' no mistake; but them as owns you must be crazy to let sich a mite of a thing snoop 'round here alone."

The child came nearer, and Joe stooped down to look at her more closely, for she was the most dainty little maid he had ever seen.

"I'd ask you to speak to me if I was any ways fit," he said, holding out a not over-cleanly hand.

The little maid must have judged the boy by his face rather than his apparel, for hardly had he spoken when she came boldly towards him and laid her tiny hand on his cheek with a caressing movement that captivated Joe immediately.

"Talk about daisies! Why, you're a corker! You look jest like a pink an' blue image I've seen in the shop windows. What's your name?"

"Essie," the little lady replied, and added what may have been words; but might equally well be Greek so far as Joe was concerned.

"What's that you say? I didn't jest catch on."

Miss Essie cooed at him once more, and Joe winked and

blinked, trying most earnestly to understand what she said; but all to no purpose.

Then he stood erect, fearing lest the little maid's parents should appear and reprove him for having dared to speak to her; but the moments passed and no one came to claim the child.

It was evident Essie had not been accustomed to neglect, for when Joe ceased speaking, she put a tiny little hand in his and told him in her childish dialect what may have been a very interesting story.

Joe looked at the pink hand, and then at his own soiled palm.

"I'd give a nickel if I was a little bit cleaner! It seems like it was wicked to hold her hand while mine is so dirty. She takes the shine off of anything I ever saw before. Say, Essie, where's your mamma?"

"Mamma dorn," and the little lady clutched Joe's finger yet more tightly.

"Well, say, do you s'pose this kid's lost?" and now Joe began to look alarmed. "Anybody what would lose their grip of a dandy little thing like her ought to be horsewhipped, an' I'd like to do it."

Again he tried to get some information from the little maid, and again she replied readily; but Joe was no wiser than before.

The night had come; those who passed this way or that on the sidewalk moved rapidly as if in haste to get home; but no one gave any heed to the ruined fruit merchant or the charming little child by his side.

"Look here, baby," Joe said, after what seemed to him like a

long time of waiting, and no one came to claim the child, "will you let me take you up in my arms, if I try not to muss your clothes? I'm 'fraid folks can't see sich a bit of a thing down there, an' I'll hold you high, so's your mother can find you easier."

Miss Essie certainly understood something of what the fruit merchant said, for she held out her hands towards him as if to be taken, and he lifted her carefully, saying, as he did so:

"It's pretty rough for a feller like me to handle a kid like her! It seems like I was holdin' some of that swell candy you see in the shop windows. It'll be a wonder if I don't daub her all up with my great, dirty hands. I never knew how big they was till she took hold of 'em."

The little maid must have thought he was speaking for her especial benefit, for she made reply in language which apparently gave her the most intense satisfaction, but failed to enlighten Master Potter, and during perhaps five minutes the two stood on the sidewalk near the curbstone, jostled rudely now and then by the homeward-bound throng, but seeing no one who laid claim to the baby.

"This won't do at all," Joe said. "It ain't right for you to stay out in the night, and I don't know what's to be done, unless you could stand it for a spell in Plums's shanty. Say, I wonder if that wouldn't go down? Will you be willin' to hang 'round with us till mornin', if I buy a slat of good things? When it comes daylight I can find your folks without much trouble, 'cause of course they'll be right here huntin', don't you see? Is it a go?"

From what the little maid said, Joe concluded it was a "go," and, since she made no protest when he walked swiftly down towards where he knew his fat and hungry friend would be waiting for him, believed he had chosen such a course as met with her approval.

CHAPTER II.

THE PRINCESS

It was no easy task for Joe Potter to carry his burden, light though it was, amid the throng of pedestrians, without being pushed rudely here or there by those who were so intent upon their own business or pleasure as to give but little heed to the boy and the child.

Had he been alone, he could readily have forced a passage, but fearing lest the little maid might be injured by rough contact with one or the other, he proceeded so cautiously as to make but slight headway, until, forsaking the sidewalk, he betook himself to the street.

There was a fear in his mind lest Master Plummer, grown weary with long waiting, had gone home, and this would have been a serious matter, because Joe had no idea as to the whereabouts of his friend's lodgings.

Once out of the throng, he pressed on at a swift pace until he was nearly overturned by a boy coming from the opposite direction, whom he had failed to see in the shadows.

"What's the matter with you, chump? Can't you see where you're goin'?" he cried, angrily, and the tightening of the little maid's arm around his neck told that she was frightened.

"How much of this street do you own? Why don't you mind

your – Hello, Joe Potter, is that you?" and the ruined merchant recognised the voice as that of his friend with whom he had spoken a short time before in front of the fruit store.

"Course it's me. You ought'er look out how you run 'round here, when folks has got babies in their arms."

"I didn't see you, Joe, an' that's a fact. Where'd you get the kid?"

"She's lost, I reckon, an' I'm takin' her home for to-night," Joe replied, and, without waiting to make further explanation, hastened on, leaving his friend, the clerk, staring after him in open-mouthed astonishment.

"Don't you be afraid, little one," Joe said, as Essie clung yet more tightly to him. "They sha'n't hurt you, an' if there's any more funny business of runnin' into us tried, I'll break the feller's jaw what does it."

The child seemed reassured by the sound of his voice, and at once began to tell him something which was evidently interesting to herself.

"If I could understand what you say, things would be all right," Joe said, with a laugh, and then, as he emerged from the shadows cast by the overhead railway structure, he came face to face with Master Plummer.

"Well, I'd begun to think you never was comin'," that young gentleman began, but ceased speaking very suddenly, as he observed the burden in Joe's arms. "What you got there?"

"Can't you see for yourself?" and Joe lowered the little maid

gently to the sidewalk, that Master Plummer might have a full view of his treasure.

"Well, I'll be blowed! Where'd you get it?"

"She's lost, 'cordin' to my way of thinkin', an' I've been tryin' to find her folks, but it's no use huntin' 'round in the night, an' I'll tell you what it is, Plums, we've got to take care of her till mornin'."

"Take care of her! What's creepin' on you, Joe Potter? How do you think we're goin' to look after a kid like that?"

"I don't know why we can't," Joe replied, sharply. "It'll be pretty tough if a couple of fellers ain't able to tend out on a mite of a thing such as her. Say, Plums, don't she look like somethin' you see in the store windows?"

"She's fine as silk, there's no gettin' over that," and Master Plummer would have touched one pink-and-white cheek but that his friend prevented him.

"Now don't go to hurtin' her! She's in hard luck enough as it is, without your mussin' her all up."

"Who's a-hurtin' of her? I was jest goin' to put one finger on her cheek."

"There's no need of doin' so much as that. It might frighten the little thing, and besides, she's too fine to be handled by you and me, Plums. She's a reg'lar little princess, that's what she is," and Joe raised the child quickly, as if to remove the temptation from Master Plummer's path.

"What's her name?" the fat boy asked, as he gazed admiringly

at the child.

"I can't seem to make out, she talks so queer," and as if to illustrate his meaning, Joe's princess began to chatter, while she clasped both tiny arms around her self-elected guardian's neck.

"Well, say, I'd give up what I made this afternoon jest for the sake of havin' her hug me like that! Ain't she a daisy?"

"It would be mighty hard to find anything finer in this town."

"That's a fact; but say, Joe, it's no kind of use, your talkin' 'bout our takin' care of her, 'cause it can't be done."

"I'd like to know why?"

"Jest run your eye over her, an' then look at us! Why, she's been kept rolled up in silk all the time, an' you talk 'bout takin' her down to the blacksmith's shop!"

There was little need for Master Plummer to make further explanation. Joe had so thoroughly lost himself in admiration of the treasure he had found that, until this moment, he had not realised how poor was the home to which he proposed to carry her.

Now he looked about him in perplexity, and the princess, impatient because of the delay and her guardian's silence, began to protest most vehemently.

"See here, Plums, we've *got* to take her down to your place, an' that's all there is to it! There ain't any chance of findin' her folks to-night, so what else can we do?"

"It's goin' to be mighty tough on her," Master Plummer replied, with a shake of the head, and Joe put an end to further

discussion by starting off at a rapid pace down the street, regardless of the fact that he was in ignorance of the whereabouts of his friend's lodging-place.

The princess, satisfied now that they were moving, cooed and chattered in Joe's ear, much to his delight, and Master Plummer was forced to follow or allow himself to be left behind.

"There's no use in rushin' as if we hadn't another minute to live," he cried, when, by dint of rapid running, he overtook his friend. "I don't like to race 'round when we can jest as well go slow."

"It would be a good deal better if you walked fast once in awhile, 'cause then you wouldn't be so fat."

"S'pose I'd rather be fat than as lean as some fellers I know?"

"Then it would be all right to creep along the street same's we're doin' now. Say, how far off is your shanty?"

"Down here a bit; but you don't count on goin' right there, do you?"

"Why not? Where else should we go?"

"Seems to me it would be better to get that stew first, an' then we sha'n't have to come out again to-night."

"Look here, Plums," and Joe spoke sharply, "do you think I'm goin' to take the princess into a place where they sell five-cent stews?"

"She's got to go somewhere, if she wants anything to eat."

"We'll bring her supper to your shanty. I won't carry this little thing into a saloon for a crowd of toughs to look at."

Master Plummer sighed. He had been anticipating a feast of stew from the moment Joe left him to engage in his new vocation, and it was a grievous disappointment that the pleasure should be so long delayed.

"We'll go down to your place an' try an' fix things up; then you can leave us there – "

"But you want somethin' to eat as well as I do."

"I guess I can get along without anything, for a spell. It's the princess I'm thinkin' about; she's got to have somethin' fine, you know. Stew'd never do for her."

"How's custard pie? I know where they've got some that's great, – two inches thick, with the crust standin' up 'round the edge so the inside won't fall out while you're eatin' it."

"Perhaps the princess might like the custard; but I ain't so sure about the crust. It seems to me she's been fed mostly on candy, an' sich stuff as that. Anyhow, you take my money an' buy whatever you think she'd like. Got any candles down to your place?"

"I did have one last week; but the rats ate most of it, an' I don't s'pose it would burn very well now."

"Take this nickel, an' buy some in that grocery store."

"Why don't you come, too?"

"I don't believe the princess would like to go into sich a place, an' besides, folks might want to take hold of her. I ain't goin' to have any Dutch groceryman slobberin' over her."

Master Plummer took the nickel and crossed the street in his ordinarily slow fashion, while Joe and the princess held a long

and animated conversation, to the evident satisfaction of the little maid and the mystification of the boy.

Owing to his being thus engaged, Joe did not grow impatient because of Master Plummer's long absence, as he might have done under other circumstances, and said to his princess when the newsdealer rejoined them:

"Now, little one, we're goin' to Plums's home, an' you must try not to feel bad 'cause it ain't very swell. It's bound to be better'n stayin' out in the street all night, for I've tried that game a good many times, an' there's nothin' funny 'bout it."

The little maid, perched on Joe's arm something after the fashion of a bird, chirped and twittered a reply, and Plums, who had fallen in the rear that he might secretly touch the arm which was around Joe's neck, said, reflectively:

"I s'pose we'll have a high old time between now and mornin', 'cause that kid, sweet as she's lookin' jest now, ain't goin' to be quiet in a place like mine. It's fellers like you an' me, Joe, who've knocked 'round the city a good many times when we didn't have the price of a lodgin' in our pockets, what can 'preciate a home where the wind an' rain can't get in."

"You're talkin' straight enough, Plums, an' I 'gree to all you say; but this 'ere princess ain't like the general run of kids, – that you could see if you was blind. She's a reg'lar swell, an' you can bet there won't be any kick 'cause we ain't stoppin' at the Walledoff. Couldn't you get a little more of a move on? At this rate we sha'n't have supper much before mornin'."

Master Plummer was willing to comply with this request, and did indeed appear to be making strenuous efforts to walk at a more rapid pace; but having patterned after a snail so many years, it seemed impossible for him to overcome what had become a habit.

Not once during the short journey did the princess make any protest against the plan her temporary guardian had suggested.

She was very comfortable, and although Joe's arms ached from long holding the light burden, she knew it not, – perhaps it would have made no difference had she been aware of the fact.

Finally, and after what had seemed a very long journey to the princess's guardian, the little party arrived in front of the blacksmith's shop, and Master Plummer conducted his guests through a narrow alley to the rear of the building, where was a small, shed-like structure, the end of which was open, save for a pile of boxes and boards directly in front of it.

"This is the place," Master Plummer said, with an air of proprietorship; "an' seein's you've got the kid in your arms, I'd better light a candle so's you can see the way, 'cause there's a lot of stuff out here at this end. I've been countin' on clearin' it up some day, but can't seem to find the time. Besides, it wouldn't make any difference to us, – it's only 'cause we've got the princess to lodge with us that I'd like to see it a little cleaner. Say, Joe, what *is* a princess, anyhow?"

"Why, it's a – you see, it's – it's a – well, look at her, can't you see? That's what it is. *She's* a princess. Now don't be all night

lightin' one candle."

It did really appear as if Plums was even slower than usual, and so awkward that two matches were consumed before the wick was ignited.

"You see I don't often swell out in so much style as to have candles, an' it takes me quite a spell to get one goin'," he said, in an apologetic tone. "She's all right now, though. Jest come 'round the end of that box, an' look out for this pile of iron, 'cause you might trip. There *would* be a mess if your princess was dumped down on this stuff."

"You get on with the candle, an' I'll see to the rest of the business," Joe said, impatiently, for by this time his arms ached severely.

Master Plummer obeyed, and a moment later Joe and the princess were surveying the home, which occupied six square feet or more in one corner of the shed, was walled in by barrels and boxes, and furnished with a pile of straw and a disreputable-looking gray blanket.

"I've slept here some mighty cold nights, an' I know jest how good the place is," the proprietor said, proudly. "She's tight as a brick, an' there can't so much as a sniff of wind get in. Then look here!"

He raised the lid of a small box, thereby displaying two tin tomato cans in which were fragments of biscuits, a broken cup half full of sugar, two wooden plates, a knife, a fork, and a spoon.

"When trade is dull, I buy stuff at the grocery store, an' bring

it in here. Why, Joe, things will keep jest as well in that box as they would in one of your tony 'frigerators, an' I ain't sure but it's better. I have had ice in there two or three days, though I don't know as it 'mounted to anything 'cept to wet everything."

Joe gave little heed to his friend's cupboard. He was looking around for some spot where the princess could sit down without danger of soiling her garments, but failed to find that for which he sought.

"See here, Plums, you'll have to spread some papers over that blanket; it'll never do to put this little thing down where everything is so dirty."

"I don't see what there is 'round here that's dirty. It seems like she couldn't come to much harm on the straw. It's only been here two weeks."

"Put the papers down, an' we'll talk 'bout it afterwards. It seems as though my arms would break."

Master Plummer obeyed, but with an ill grace, for this fault-finding without reason was not agreeable.

There was no lack of newspapers in the house, and in as short a time as Plums could compass it the straw was covered.

It was with a long breath of relief that Joe sat his charming burden down, and then were the boys treated to an exhibition of the princess's temper.

Cleanly though the couch was, she had no idea of sitting bolt upright when there were two subjects at hand to obey her wishes. She positively refused to be seated, but held out her hands as

if for Joe to take her in his arms once more, and when the boy attempted to explain that it was necessary she remain there a few moments, the little maiden made protest at the full strength of her lungs.

"I guess I'll have to take her up again," Joe said, with a long-drawn sigh, "an' I don't know as she's to be blamed for not wantin' to stay there."

"Well, I'd never believed anything so pretty could screech so loud!" Master Plummer exclaimed, in a tone of wonderment. "She yells jest 'bout the same's old Mis' Carter's kids do, an' there's nothin' swell about them."

Joe made no reply. He was too deeply engaged in trying to hush the princess to give any heed to his friend's remark, and fully five minutes passed before the imperious little maid was reduced to silence.

Then she nestled down in his arms with such apparent content, and looked so charming, that he was her willing slave, without one disagreeable thought concerning her temper.

"If my face was washed, I'd kiss her this minute," he said, half to himself, and immediately Master Plummer looked jealous.

"If you can do that, I reckon I can."

"Well, there won't either of us try it yet awhile, so s'posin' you go after your supper, an' bring something for the princess when you come back. Don't be gone any longer'n you can help, will you, Plums, 'cause she must be gettin' hungry by this time."

"I'll take the cans an' get the stew in them, else I'd be gone

quite a spell if I waited to eat my share. Will I buy custard pie for her?"

"Yes, an' anything else you think she'd like. Don't get cheap stuff, 'cause she ain't used to it."

Then Joe emptied the contents of his pocket in Master Plummer's hands, and the latter asked, in surprise:

"Are you goin' to spend the whole of this?"

"It don't seem as though you'd have to, an' besides, we ought to leave a little something for breakfast. Do the best you can, Plums."

With an air of responsibility, the proprietor of the establishment walked slowly out, and Joe was left alone with his baby.

Swaying his body to and fro to delude her with the idea of being rocked, Master Potter did his best to please the princess, and evidently succeeded, for in a very short time after Plums had departed, the sleep-elves soothed her eyelids with their poppy wands until she crossed over into dreamland.

Now Joe would have laid the tiny maid on the straw to give relief to his arms, but each time he attempted anything of the kind she moved uneasily, as if on the point of awakening, and he was forced to abandon the effort.

"I must be a chump if I can't hold a bit of a thing like her till she's through sleepin'," he said to himself, "an' I ought'er be mighty glad to have such a chance."

It was monotonous work, this playing the nurse while seated

on the ground with no support to his back; but never for a moment, not even when his arms ached the hardest, did Joe Potter regret having taken upon himself such a charge.

He had given little heed as to how the princess's parents might be found, because he believed that would prove an exceedingly simple task. He had only to go to the railroad station in the morning, and there deliver the child to her mother, who, as a matter of course, would be in waiting.

There was never a thought in his mind that, by bringing her to this home of Master Plummer's, he had in fact secreted her from those who must at that moment be making eager search.

He had done what seemed to him fitting under all the circumstances, and felt well satisfied that no one could have cared for the child in a better fashion, save in the matter of lodgings, which last left much to be desired.

After a time, Joe succeeded in so far changing his position that it was possible to gain the use of one hand, and immediately this had been done, he set about carefully covering the princess's garments with a newspaper, lest he himself should soil the fabrics.

Then there was nothing to do save wait the leisurely movements of Plums, and it seemed as if fully an hour passed before that young gentleman finally made his appearance.

"If I haven't got all you fellers can eat, then I'm mistaken," Master Plummer announced, in an exceedingly loud tone as he entered the building; and Joe whispered, hoarsely:

"What are you makin' sich a row for? If you ain't careful, you'll wake the princess."

"Well, I'll be blowed, if she ain't gone to sleep jest like any of Mis' Carter's kids would do!" Plums said, in a tone of surprise, when he was where a view could be had of the sleeping child.

"Of course she has. You don't s'pose swells sleep different from other folks, do you?"

"I don't know, 'cause I never had a chance to see one close to, before. Say, here's the stuff."

Plums was literally laden with small packages, and, in addition, had the two tomato cans nearly filled with what he declared was "great stew."

"I tell you there's no flies on that stuff, an' here's the pie," he added, as he took a parcel wrapped in brown paper from under his arm. "I'm 'fraid it's got mashed a little, but I couldn't carry it any other way. Takin' the stew an' that, with what other things I've got, it'll be funny if your princess can't fill herself up in great shape."

Then, from one pocket and another, Master Plummer drew out two small cakes frosted with white and sprinkled with red sugar, three inches or more of Bologna sausage, a cruller, a small bag of peanuts, an apple, and two sticks of candy which looked much the worse for wear, because of having been placed in his pocket without a covering.

"Now if that ain't rich enough for any feller's blood, I'd like to know what you'd call it? Three or four princesses like your'n

ought'er get through with a layout same's this, an' thank their lucky stars for havin' the chance."

CHAPTER III.

AN ADVERTISEMENT

Having placed the packages on the straw near about his friend, in what he believed to be a most tempting display, Master Plummer seemed to consider that his duties as host had been performed properly, and gave himself wholly up to the pleasures of eating.

With one of the tomato cans between his knees, he gave undivided attention to the savoury stew, until, the first pangs of hunger having been appeased, he noted, as if in surprise, that Joe was not joining in the feast.

"Why ain't you eatin' somethin'?" he asked, speaking indistinctly because of the fullness of his mouth.

"I don't see how it can be done while the princess is asleep."

"Put her down on the blanket, where she belongs. You don't count on holdin' her all night, I hope?"

"It looks like I'd have to. Jest the minute I stir she begins to fuss 'round, an' –"

"Well, let her fuss. Old Mis' Carter says kids wouldn't be healthy if they didn't kick up a row every once in awhile."

"I guess she won't be sick any to speak of, if we keep her quiet till mornin'. The trouble is, Plums, there's bound to be an awful row jest as soon as she wakes up an' finds out where she is. I

s'pose she's been tended like she was a piece of glass, an' the shanty must look pretty hard to her. You can tell by the way she acts that the princess has always had a reg'lar snap, an' I wouldn't be s'prised if this was the meanest place she was ever in."

"She'll be lucky never to get in a worse one," Master Plummer replied, emphatically; and added, after having filled his mouth once more, "There's no reason why you can't eat your share of the stew an' hold her at the same time."

"I'm 'fraid I might spill some of it on her dress."

"Look here, Joe Potter," and now Plums spoke sharply, "you'll be all wore up before mornin', carryin' on at this rate. It wouldn't hurt that kid a bit if she had every drop of stew we've got, on her clothes, an' she's playin' in big luck to be with us instead of walkin' 'round the streets. Take your share of the stuff while it's goin', for of course you haven't had anything to eat since noon."

"I had a pretty fair breakfast."

"An' nothin' since then?" Master Plummer cried, in astonishment.

"Well, I wasn't hungry, – that is, not very. You see, when a feller closes up business, the same's I've done, he don't think much 'bout eatin'."

"Well, think about it now, an' *do* it, too!"

Having thus spoken, and in his sternest tones, Plums placed the second can of stew where his friend could reach it conveniently, and waited until Joe had so changed his position that it was possible for him to partake of the food.

No better proof of Master Plummer's interest in his friend could have been given than when he thus voluntarily ceased eating to serve him.

The boys had not attempted to remove either the princess's hat or cloak, and she appeared anything rather than comfortable as she lay wrapped in newspapers, with her head pillowed on Joe's arm; but yet her slumbers were not disturbed when Master Potter, his appetite aroused by the odour of the stew, proceeded to make a hearty meal.

"I s'pose we ought'er wake her up, so's she'll get somethin' to eat," Joe said, thoughtfully, and Plums replied, very decidedly:

"Don't you do anything of the kind. So long's a kid's quiet you'd better leave 'em alone, 'cause it ain't safe to stir 'em up 'less you want a reg'lar row."

"Of course that wouldn't do; but say, Plums, if she keeps on sleepin' like this, it won't have been a terrible hard job to take care of her."

"Not 'less you count on holdin' her all night."

Joe was already cramped from sitting so long in one position, and as if his friend's remark had reminded him of the fact, he made another effort to relieve himself of the burden, this time being successful.

The princess moved uneasily when she was first laid upon the bed of straw, and the boys literally held their breath in suspense, fearing she would awaken; but, after a few moments, the child lay quietly, and Plums said, in a tone of satisfaction:

"I know a good bit about kids, I do, 'cause old Mis' Carter had sich a raft of 'em, an' I lived with her 'most a year. The right way is to chuck 'em 'round jest as you want to, an' they'll stand it; but once you begin to fuss with 'em, there's no end of a row."

"The princess ain't anything like Mis' Carter's youngsters."

"No, I don't know as she is; but I guess the same kind of handlin' will fetch her 'round all right in the long run. Can't you eat some peanuts?"

"I've had enough, an', besides, we must leave somethin' to give the princess, 'cause she'll be hungry in the mornin'."

"Yes, I s'pose we must. It always makes me feel bad to stop when there's good things in the house," and Master Plummer told his friend of the "great time" he had had on a certain rainy day, when it would have been useless to attend to business, and the larder was well filled.

"I kept right on eatin', from mornin' till it was time to go to bed; didn't rush, you know, but stuck at it."

"Didn't it make you sick?"

"Well, I did have a pretty bad ache before mornin'; but jest as likely as not that would have come whether I'd eat anything or not. Mis' Carter says if I don't stop bein' so hungry all the time I'll fill up a glutton's grave, but how can a feller keep from wantin' something to eat?"

"I don't s'pose it's anybody's business, Plums, what you do, so long as you pay the bills; but it does seem to me that it would be better if you'd get on more of a hustle when you're at work,

an' stop thinkin' so much about vittles. I can't see how you earn money enough to keep this thing up."

"Seems like I've got some push to me if I do it, don't it?" Master Plummer replied, complacently, and there the conversation came to an end.

Plums, having ministered to his appetite, stretched himself at full length on the ground, and it seemed to Joe as if he had but just assumed that position when his heavy breathing told that he had fallen asleep.

Now and then from the street beyond could be heard the rumbling of a carriage, sounding unusually loud owing to the stillness of the night. At intervals the hum of voices told that belated seekers after pleasure were returning home, and, in fact, everything reminded the ruined fruit merchant that the time for rest was at hand.

Joe's eyelids were heavy with sleep, yet he resisted the impulse to close them, because it seemed necessary he should watch over the princess.

The candle, having burned down to the neck of the bottle in which it had been placed, spluttered and fretted because its life was so nearly at an end, and Joe replaced it with a fresh one.

With his back against the box which served as cupboard, he sat watching the little maid with a strong determination not to indulge in sleep, and even as he repeated for the twentieth time that it was necessary he remain awake, his eyes closed in slumber.

It was yet dark, and the second candle nearly consumed, when

the princess suddenly opened her big, brown eyes, and during a single instant looked about her in silent astonishment.

Then, as the only way by which she could express her displeasure with her surroundings, the child opened her tiny mouth to its fullest extent, and from the little pink throat came as shrill a scream as was ever uttered by one of "old Mis' Carter's kids."

Joe Potter was on his feet instantly, and during the first few seconds after being thus rudely awakened was at a loss to understand exactly where he was, or what had aroused him.

The princess introduced herself to his attention very quickly, however, for she was a maid who had ever received, and was ever ready to demand, attention.

Joe had her in his arms as soon as might be, but just at this moment it was her mother she wanted, and the friendship previously displayed for her new guardian was forgotten.

In other words, the princess screamed passionately; Joe walked to and fro with her in his arms, whispering soothing words which did not soothe; and through all the uproar Master Plummer slumbered as sweetly as an infant.

"I know what you want, you poor little thing; but how am I goin' to get it for you to-night? Why won't you try to make the best of it till mornin', an' then we'll be sure to find your folks? Here, eat some of these peanuts; they must be awful good, 'cordin' to the way Plums pitched into 'em last night."

The princess had no appetite for peanuts just then, and, as the

readiest way of giving her guardian such information, she struck the outstretched hand with her tiny fist, sending the nuts flying in every direction.

Joe was considerably surprised that such a dainty-looking little maiden could display so much temper, but did not relax his efforts to please.

One of the sugared cakes had escaped Master Plummer's cyclonic appetite, and with this the amateur nurse tried to tempt the screaming child into silence.

The cake shared the fate of the peanuts, and the princess gave every evidence in her power of a positive refusal to be soothed.

Joe had tossed her in the air, fondled her in his arms, paced to and fro as if walking for a wager, but all without avail, and now it seemed necessary he should have assistance.

Master Plummer's rest had not been disturbed by the noise, but he rose to a sitting posture very suddenly when Joe kicked him almost roughly.

"Wha – wha – what's the matter?" he asked, blinking in the light of the candle, which was directly in front of his eyes.

"I should think you might know by this time! Can't you hear the princess?"

"I thought there'd be a row if she waked up," Master Plummer replied, in a matter-of-fact tone, and then he laid himself down again, evidently intending to continue the interrupted nap.

"See here, Plums, you can't do that!" Joe cried, sharply. "I mustn't be left alone with this poor little thing. It ain't certain but

she'll die, she's so frightened."

"Don't fret yourself. She'll come out of it after a spell; all Mis Carter's kids used to."

"But she isn't like them, I tell you! They could stand 'most anything, an' she's been raised different."

"She cries jest the same's they did."

"Look here, George Plummer, get up on your feet an' help me! This thing is growin' dangerous!"

Plums had no fear the princess would injure herself by crying; but his friend spoke so sternly that he decided it was wisest to obey the command, and a very sleepy-looking boy he was, as he stood yawning and rubbing his eyes, with an expression of discontent amounting almost to peevishness upon his face.

"There ain't anything either you or I can do. Youngsters have to yell jest about so much, – it makes 'em healthy, – an' she'll quiet down after a spell. Why don't you give her somethin' to eat?"

"I tried that, but she wouldn't take a single crumb. The trouble is, we haven't got what she wants. Now, if there was some milk in the house – "

"But there ain't, so what's the use thinkin' of that?"

"It must be near mornin', an' if there is a bakeshop anywhere 'round, you could get some."

"Do you want a feller to turn out in the night an' travel 'round the streets lookin' for milk?" Plums asked, indignantly.

"It is better to do that than have a dear little baby like this die."

"But there's no danger anything of that kind will happen. I've seen lots of worse scrapes than this, but they always ended up all right."

"Look here, Plums, will you go out an' get some milk?"

"What's the use – "

"*Will* you go an' get the milk?"

Just for an instant Master Plummer stood irresolute, as if questioning the necessity for such severe exertion, and then a single glance at his friend's face decided the matter.

In silence, but with a decided show of temper, the fat boy picked up one of the tomato-cans, jammed his battered hat down over his head, and stalked out of the shanty.

During this brief conversation the princess's outcries had neither ceased nor diminished in volume, and when Plums had thus unwillingly departed, it was as if she redoubled her efforts.

Unfortunately, Joe had had no experience with "old Mis' Carter's kids," and when the child's face took on a purplish hue, he was thoroughly alarmed, believing her to be dying.

"Don't, baby dear, don't! You'll kill yourself if you act this way! I'm doin' the best I know how; but the trouble is, I can't tell what you want!"

Entreaties were as useless as any of his other efforts to soothe, yet he alternately begged her to be silent, and paced to and fro with her in his arms, until, when it seemed to him that at least one whole night must have passed since she awakened, the princess tired of her exertions.

Then it was a tear-stained, grief-swollen face that he looked into, and the childish sobs which escaped her lips gave him deeper pain than had her most energetic outcries.

Believing her to be suffering severely, the big tears of sympathy rolled down Joe's face as he told her again and again of all he would do towards finding her mother when the day had come.

The princess was lying quietly in Joe's arms when Master Plummer finally returned, bringing the can of milk, and yawning as if he had been asleep during the entire journey and had but just awakened.

"Now you can see that it was jest as I said!" he exclaimed. "When youngsters start in yellin', they've got to do about so much of it, an' there's no use tryin' to stop 'em. Here I've walked all over this city huntin' for milk when I might jest as well have been sleepin'."

"It won't do you any harm, Plums, an' I honestly think the princess is hungry."

"She can't be very bad off, with Bologna, an' cakes, an' peanuts 'round. I'll bet she won't touch this."

Joe broke into the milk such fragments of cracker as remained in the cupboard-box, after which, and first wiping the spoon carefully on his coat sleeve, he began to feed the little maid.

To Master Plummer's disappointment, she ate almost greedily, and Joe said, in a tone of triumph:

"You may know a good deal 'bout Mis' Carter's babies, but

you're way off when it comes to one of this kind."

"I don't know whether I am or not," and Plums laid himself down once more, falling asleep, or pretending to, almost immediately thereafter.

Having eaten with evident relish the food which had cost Plums so much labour, the princess's ill-temper vanished entirely, and she twittered and chirped to Joe until he forgot his former fears and anxieties in the love which sprang up in his heart for the tiny maid who was dependent upon him for a shelter.

The day was close at hand when the amateur nurse and his charge journeyed into dreamland for the second time, and although Joe had gained but little rest during the night, his slumbers were not so profound but that a hum of shrill voices near the building awakened him very shortly afterward.

The one fear in his mind was that the princess would be disturbed, and he stepped quickly outside the shanty to learn the cause of the noise.

"Here he is! Here he is now! We was in big luck to come 'round this way!" one of a party of boys said, excitedly, and Joe recognised in these early visitors three friends and business acquaintances, all of whom were looking very serious, and evidently labouring under great excitement.

"What's brought you fellers up to this part of the town so early?" Joe asked, in surprise, and Dan Fernald, who had under his arm a bundle of morning papers, said, in a mournful tone:

"We've come after you."

"What for? I'm goin' to hang 'round here a spell till I can get enough money ahead to go into business ag'in. Did you fellers think I'd be so mean as to sell papers 'round City Hall after I'd sold out to Dan?"

"It ain't anything like that, Joe Potter," Master Fernald replied, so gravely that the princess's guardian could not fail of being alarmed.

"What's floatin' over you fellers?" he asked, sharply. "Ain't been gettin' into trouble, have you?"

"We're all right; but there's somethin' mighty wrong 'bout you, Joe. Say, did you do anything crooked when you sold that stand to Sim Jepson?"

"Crooked? Why, how could I? He'd been workin' for me at a dollar a week, an' when I hadn't any more money, he took the stand for what I owed him. If you call it crooked to sell out a business for a dollar an' twenty cents, when it cost pretty nigh eight times as much, you're off your base."

"Then what *have* you been doin'?" Tim Morgan asked.

By this time Joe began to understand that something serious had caused this early visit, and he began to grow alarmed, without knowing why it should disturb him.

"I don't want you to make any noise 'round here, 'cause Plums an' me have got a kid what we picked up in the street last night, an' she's asleep. It won't do to wake her 'less you want to hear the tallest kind of screechin'. But I've got to know what's givin' you fellers the chills; so out with it, but be as quiet as you can."

Dan Fernald looked at his comrades as if hoping one of them would act as spokesman; but since both remained silent, he began by saying:

"See here, Joe, you know we're your friends, an' are willin' to do all we can to help you out of a scrape?"

"Yes," Master Potter replied, growing yet more alarmed because of Dan's solemn manner.

"If you'd come right to us in the first place, we'd helped you, no matter how much money was wanted."

"Look here, Dan, don't give me a stiff like this!" Joe cried, imploringly. "If anything's wrong, out with it, 'stead of mumblin' 'bout helpin' me. I've allers managed to help myself, and you fellers, too, a good many times, so I don't know why you should stand 'round lookin' like as if somethin' was chewin' you."

"If we wasn't your friends, Joe, you might give us a bluff like that, an' even if we didn't take it, we'd make out as though we did. See here," and unfolding a newspaper, Dan pointed to an advertisement, as he added, "I saw this almost 'fore I got out of the *Herald* office, an' didn't stop for anything but jest to pick up Tim an' Jerry before I come to find you."

Joe looked at each of his friends in turn before taking the proffered paper, and then, after considerable difficulty because of the necessity of spelling out each word in turn, he read the following:

JOSEPH POTTER. Information wanted of a newsboy or fruit vendor answering to the name of Joseph Potter. He was

last seen in front of the Grand Central Station at about seven o'clock on the evening of yesterday (Tuesday), holding in his arms a child three years old. A liberal reward will be paid for information as to the present whereabouts of the boy. Address Cushman & Morton, Attorneys at Law, 47-1/2 Pine Street, New York.

Immediately below this was an advertisement signed with the same names, requesting information concerning a little girl who had strayed from the Grand Central Station and was last seen in the company of a newsboy; but this Joe did not read.

The fact that he was advertised for, as if he had been a fugitive from justice, terrified him.

He could not so much as speak; but looked alternately at the printed sheet and his companions, until Dan said, sternly:

"Now, Joe, you can tell us 'bout this thing or not, jest as you have a mind. What we've come for is to help you get clear, an' we're bound to do it."

"Get clear of what?" Joe repeated, in bewilderment.

"You know better'n we do, an' I ain't askin' questions if you think it ought'er be kept secret from us."

"But I haven't been doin' anything that wasn't square," Joe replied, with a trembling voice.

"Then what's a couple of lawyers advertisin' you for?" Tim Morgan asked, shrilly. "Do you s'pose sich folks want'er catch a feller what sells papers, jest to look at him?"

"See here, Tim, you know me, an' you know I never did a

mean thing to anybody in my life."

"Then what they advertisin' yer for?"

"Say, fellers, I wouldn't try to make out – "

"Now, Joe, this ain't any time for you to stuff us," Dan Fernald said, impatiently. "If you hadn't done anything crooked, your name wouldn't be right there in them big letters. You've allers been willin' to do us a good turn, an' we're goin' to pay you back. You've *got* to skip! An' you've got to skip bloomin' quick!"

CHAPTER IV.

JOE'S FLIGHT

It was literally impossible for Joe Potter to make any reply to Dan Fernald's positive statement that he must run away in order to escape punishment.

As a matter of course he knew he had done nothing of a criminal nature, and yet the advertisement, which seemed to stand out more conspicuously than any other item in the paper, could not be construed either by himself or his companions to mean anything else.

The fact that it was signed by attorneys seemed to Joe and his friends positive proof that a crime had been committed; otherwise why would representatives of the law have appeared in the matter?

Dan Fernald, as Joe's oldest and nearest friend, took it upon himself to act as master of ceremonies in the affair, and, understanding that his comrade was so overwhelmed by the impending danger as to be absolutely incapable of intelligent movement, led him towards the shanty, as he said, gravely:

"Never mind what it is you've done, Joe, us fellers are goin' to see you through, an' it won't do to hang 'round here very long, if you plan on givin' the perlice the slip. I reckon they'll be hot after you before nine o'clock, an' by that time I'm countin' on havin'

you hid. Got anything here you want to take with you?"

Joe shook his head; but Master Fernald seemed to consider it necessary they should enter the building, and his two comrades followed close in the rear.

Once inside the shanty, the visitors, as a matter of course, saw the princess sleeping on the straw, and, despite the fact that her garments were not as cleanly as on the day previous, making a most charming picture.

"Well, I'll be blowed! Where'd you get that?"

Joe had been so bewildered by the terrible knowledge that the officers of the law were probably on his trail, as to have forgotten for the moment that the princess was in his charge, and he stood for an instant staring at her vacantly before making any reply, which odd behaviour served to strengthen the belief in the minds of his friends that he was guilty of some serious crime.

"Oh, that's the princess. She lost her folks somewhere near the *depot* last night, an' I was countin' on findin' 'em for her this mornin'. Plums an' me had to take her in, else she'd been layin' 'round the streets."

Dan looked at him sharply, while Tim and Jerry raised themselves on tiptoe to gaze at the sleeping child.

"Well, what you goin' to do with her now?" Dan asked, after waiting in vain for his friend to speak.

"I don't know," Joe replied, sadly, and added, in a more hopeful tone, "If you fellers would look after the little thing, she might – "

"We'll have all we can do keepin' you out of jail, without bein' bothered by a kid taggin' everywhere we go. You don't seem to understand, Joe, that it's goin' to take mighty sharp work, an' most likely every feller that ever knew you will be watched by the perlice from this time out."

"But I can't leave her here alone," Master Potter wailed.

"Why not take her down where Plums used to live? Mis' Carter's got a reg'lar raft of kids, an' ought'er know how to take care of another."

"It would jest 'bout break the little thing's heart to put her in with that Carter gang, an' I can't do it. I'd sooner the perlice nabbed me."

"Now you're talkin' through your hat. Of course you don't want to go up to Sing Sing for two or three years, an' that's what's bound to happen if them lawyers get hold of you. What's Plums snorin' away for, when things are all mixed up so bad?" Dan asked, impatiently, and without further delay he proceeded to arouse Master Plummer to a knowledge of the terrible danger that threatened Joe, by shaking him furiously.

"What do you want now, – more milk?" the fat boy asked, without opening his eyes, and Dan pulled him suddenly to his feet.

"Wake up, an' see what we want! Here's the perlice after Joe, red-hot, an' we've got to get him out'er town."

"After Joe?" Master Plummer repeated, stupidly. "What's he been doin'?"

"We don't know, an' he won't tell us."

"I haven't been doin' a thing, Plums, as true as I live; but there it all is in the paper," Master Potter replied, in a tearful voice. "Of course there's no gettin' away from that."

Not until Plums had spelled out for himself the ominous advertisement was it possible for those who would rescue Joe Potter from the impending doom to do anything towards his escape, and, once having mastered the printed lines, the fat boy gazed at his grief-stricken friend in mingled astonishment and reproach.

"Of course the perlice are goin' to know you slept here last night, an' jest as likely as not I'll be pulled for takin' you in."

"Course you will!" Jerry Hayes cried, shrilly. "You're in a pretty tight box, Plums."

Joe protested vehemently that he was innocent of any intentional wrong-doing; but with that unexplainable advertisement before him, Plums received the statement with much the same incredulity as had the others.

"Where you goin' to take him?" he asked of Dan; and the latter replied:

"I don't know; but we've got to get him out of town by the shortest cut, an' I reckon that'll be Thirty-fourth Street Ferry. How much money you fellers got?"

Master Plummer took from his pocket that which remained of the amount given him by Joe the night previous, and, after counting it twice, replied:

"Here's sixteen cents what belongs to Joe, an' I've got twenty of my own."

"Us fellers have anteed up a dollar an' a quarter towards seein' you through, an' here it is," Master Fernald said, as he gave Plums a handful of small coins.

Joe did not so much as glance at the money, and Dan said, impatiently:

"Now, don't hang 'round here any longer, you two, 'cause it's mighty near sunrise."

"But what about the kid?" Plums asked, as if until that moment he had entirely forgotten the sleeping child.

"I reckon she'll have to take her chances," Dan replied, carelessly. "Some one will look out for her, of course, – turn her over to McDaniels, the blacksmith."

This suggestion aroused Joe very suddenly, and he glanced at each of his companions in turn, as if to read the thoughts of all, after which he said, sharply:

"You fellers can believe me or not, but I haven't done anything to set the perlice after me. I can't say as I blame you for thinkin' it ain't so, 'cause there's that advertisement; but it's a fact all the same, an' I'm goin' to let the cops take me."

"What?" Tim Morgan screamed. "You're goin' to jail?"

"What else can I do?"

"Run away, of course, the same's we're fixin' it."

"In the first place, we haven't got money enough to go very far, an' then, ag'in, I won't leave the princess knockin' 'round the

streets."

"You'd have to if you went to jail."

"I could take her with me for a spell, anyhow."

Joe appeared so thoroughly determined to give himself up to the officers of the law that his comrades were seriously alarmed.

Although there was but little question in their minds that he was guilty of some crime, not one of them was willing he should yield to the order of arrest which they believed had already been issued.

Plums looked at Dan imploringly, and the latter said, as he laid hold of Joe's arm:

"Now see here, old man, we ain't goin' to stand by with our hands in our pockets while you go to jail, 'cause there's no need of it. The perlice won't be 'round for two or three hours, an' it's pretty hard lines if we can't get you out of town before they come."

"I won't leave the princess," Joe replied, doggedly.

"Then take her with you. Of course there's a good deal of risk in it, seein's how the advertisement said you had her; but it's a blamed sight better'n givin' right up same's any chump would do."

"I counted on findin' her folks this mornin'."

"The way things have turned out, you can't; an' what's the odds if you wait two or three days? I'll see that you have money enough to keep you goin' for a spell, anyhow, 'cause all the fellers what know you an' Plums will chip in to help."

"Am I goin', too?" Master Plummer asked, in surprise.

"I can't see any other way out of it. When the perlice find where Joe slept last night, they're bound to pull you in. It don't look to me as if it was goin' to be sich a terrible hard thing to go off in the country for a spell, now the weather's warm, an' if it wasn't for the kid here, I'd say you'd have a great time."

At this moment the princess awakened, and, fortunately, in an amiable mood.

She raised her hands towards Joe as if asking to be taken in his arms, and, instantly the mute request was complied with, the ruined merchant's courage failed him.

Burying his face in her dress, regardless of the possible injury to be done the delicate fabric, the poor boy gave way to tears, and the little maid must have understood that he was suffering, for she patted him on the ear, or ruffled his hair gently with her hands, all of which served but to make his grief more intense.

"Now's the time to get him right away," Dan said, in a low tone to Master Plummer. "We've fooled 'round here too long already, and if he kicks ag'in goin', why, we've got to lug him, that's all. I won't see Joe Potter put in jail if it can be helped."

"What do you s'pose he's been doin'?" Plums asked, in a terrified whisper.

"Blamed if I know; but it must be somethin' pretty tough, else they wouldn't spend money advertisin' for him."

"I don't b'lieve he'd kill anybody."

"Neither do I; but it must be somethin' 'bout as bad as that.

While he's takin' on so we can get him off without much trouble. We'd better walk to the ferry, 'cause there might be somebody on the horse-car what would know him."

"If I've got to leave the town, I don't want to hang 'round Long Island, 'cause there ain't so much chance of gettin' further away," Plums objected, and Dan began to show signs of ill temper at being thus thwarted in his efforts to do a favour.

"You'll be blamed lucky if you get anywhere, except to jail."

"But what's the difference if we go over to Jersey? It ain't much further to the Weehawken Ferry than it is Thirty-fourth Street way."

"All right, go there, then, – anywhere, so's you get a move on."

Master Plummer took the precaution to gather up such provisions as remained in the cupboard, and, after one long look around at the home he might be leaving for ever, shook Joe gently.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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