

Brereton Frederick Sadleir

Indian and Scout: A Tale of the Gold Rush to California



Frederick Brereton

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the Gold Rush to California**

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Brereton F. S. Frederick Sadleir

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CHAPTER I

Tusker Joe

"Ef there was a man here as was a man, guess it'd be some use waitin' and talkin'. But as thar ain't sich a thing handy, why, I'll git. Once and fer all, aer thar a one here as don't think I did it fair? Eh?"

The man who spoke swept his eyes round the narrow, ugly room, and pulled the brim of his wideawake hat down over his eyes just a trifle lower; whether to hide the scowl in them, or the fear which lurked in his dilated pupils, it would be difficult to say. Tusker Joe was not anxious that his companions in the room, which went by the name of saloon, should guess that he was anything but self-composed and full of courage. But to give the bare truth, Tusker Joe was by no means easy in his mind. Even the smoking revolver in his hand, in which four unused cartridges yet remained, failed to reassure him. It was not only fear for his own wretched life that haunted him. Tusker Joe had a conscience at this day, and it smote him just then harder than all else. Even as he swept his eyes round the room he was struggling hard to drown that ready conscience, to still the voice which whispered persistently in his ear: "Murderer, murderer!"

"Yer don't speak," he went on, after a minute's awkward silence, raising his voice till he almost shouted the words, as if the sounds helped to encourage him and drown that still, small whisper. "Then I takes it that ye're all in agreement. It was fair done. Me alone against them two, and they quarrelsome. I'd stop and face the sheriff hisself with that. But what's the use? A man has ter work nowadays, and a sheriff wastes time. Yer can jest give him the facts for yerselves; but, at the same time, yer can jest mind. Tusker Joe ain't a playsome girl. He ain't a weaklin', likely ter take sauce from no one. And lies he don't have at no price, not at all. Ef there's a man here as feels at this second as he don't agree that it war all fair and square, jest let him speak up. That's what I say. Let him open his mouth, here and now, before what's left of us."

The man's voice was truculent now. His words deafened those within the saloon, and there was no excuse for not hearing them. But no answer came. Not one of the three men seated at a table at one end ventured to open his lips. Instead, all, as if by common arrangement, kept their eyes fixed on the wall opposite them, as if intent on counting the planks which helped to make it, while their open palms lay exposed on the table.

Right opposite Tusker Joe a solitary individual sat awkwardly on a rough bench. He was a man of some thirty years of age, with red hair and beard, and a weak expression. The long, pointed chin, the narrow eyes switching restlessly from side to side, even the diminutive proportions of this fellow, spoke of indecision, of one accustomed to follow and not to lead, of one inclined at all times to shirk difficulties. Red Sam, for that was the name he went by in this mining camp, was not even his own master. He was a hired labourer, who had come to the mining camps not to test his own luck, and to risk all he had in the hope that hard work and a strenuous fight with Dame Fortune would bring him the riches which many a man had won. Sam had not the courage for such a venture. He preferred good wages, and a certainty, to any risk. He was not quarrelsome, nor over-talkative, and he did not frequent the drinking saloon at Salem Falls more often than others. He was just an average miner, content with his lot so far, and indistinguishable from the others who worked at the camp save in respect to his beard. He wore the same gaudy shirt and neckerchief, high boots, a wide-brimmed

hat, and a belt big enough to circle a horse, in the holster of which was a revolver. Tusker's eyes, which during the last few moments had been searching the cracked mirror opposite him, at the back of the bar on which he leaned, suddenly lit upon Sam – Red Sam, the weakling – whom all in that camp knew to be harmless and the reverse of dangerous. And as they did so, that still, small voice whispered with even greater persistence in Tusker's ear: "Murderer, murderer!" till the man became savage. He swung round again, his eyes flashing, his pistol pointed.

"What's that?" he demanded menacingly. "Yer didn't speak, I know, but yer looked what yer thought. Draw!"

Sam was utterly disconcerted. Had he been able, he would have straightway sunk beneath the rough boards which formed the floor of the saloon. To retreat, to get away from such a terrible man and such an ugly encounter, was all that he desired. But that pointed pistol held him rooted to the spot.

"Me?" he stuttered, gripping the bench with both hands. "Me think anything! Why – "

He stared at Tusker with wide-open mouth, and eyes which were dilated with terror.

"Yer looked it," retorted Tusker, his face scowling horribly. "Ef I thought for one moment as yer'd forget, I'd put daylight clean through yer now. Clean through yer, Sam."

The very idea of such a terrible happening almost caused Red Sam to faint. He positively shivered, and when his shifting eyes happened to pass to the far end of the saloon, where were the men whom Tusker had already fired upon, the shiver became a tremble. His fingers twitched as he endeavoured to clutch the bench, his hair stood erect beneath the wide-brimmed hat, which gave this modest fellow such a desperate appearance at ordinary times, while the end of his beard shook.

"Clean through yer," repeated Tusker grimly: the sight of this harmless and trembling individual seeming to appease the bully for the moment. "Through yer and any others as dares ter think – think, mind yer – that all warn't fair and square. For the last time, aer thar a man here as has got a word ter say agin it."

Tall and broad, his face and neck and arms burned to a brick red by exposure to the sun, Tusker Joe would have at ordinary times been pronounced a handsome fellow. His long, curling, black moustache set off features which, though never pleasant, were regular and distinctly prepossessing. His red mining shirt, corduroy breeches, and high boots made up, with the brilliant handkerchief round his throat and the draggled and untidy hat upon his head, an appearance which was picturesque, if nothing more; while the breadth of his shoulders, and the size of his limbs, told of a man used to labour, of a strong fellow, able to look well to himself. Unfortunately, however, there was something about the face which detracted from the general air of picturesqueness. Tusker Joe's features were marked by heavy lines, some across a somewhat narrow forehead, and others about the corners of the eyes and the mouth. Even at rest the features wore an air the reverse of frank and straightforward. The eyes were shifty, even more so than those of the weak Red Sam. And now, when his passions were stirred, the face which looked out from beneath the pulled-down brim of his hat was seamed with other lines – lines which told of hate, of avarice, of fear, of a thousand passions flitting through the man's mind. Bluff and brag at his best, Tusker Joe was in those days too young a man to carry off such a situation with absolute tranquillity. True, he had been in saloon brawls before, and had shot men; but he had never murdered. In those rough days, down at the diggings, when men spent a goodly part of their gains in the saloons, quarrels were of frequent occurrence, and revolvers came readily to the hand. Bullies arose, too, and for a while terrorized even these lawless, gambling men. But sheer murder was hardly attempted, for then even the miners arose in anger, and when that was the case lynch law was the order – a short shrift was given to the guilty party, and either he was riddled with bullets or, if a rope happened to be handy, he was strung to the nearest tree. Often enough there was no suitable tree, and then the bullets of the miners finished the matter.

Tusker Joe had turned from Red Sam by now, and for one brief moment cast his eyes to that far end where lay the men at whom he had fired. Even he shuddered ever so little, and from contemplating them turned to the rough bar again and leaned one arm upon it. Then his eyes sought the cracked

mirror which was nailed to the boarded wall behind the bar, reflecting from its golden-circled frame the whole of the saloon. In the glass he could see the three men seated at the table, their palms still prominently exposed. Not one had moved so much as a finger. They sat riveted to their chairs, their eyes fixed on the plank wall as before, knowing that Tusker Joe's eyes were upon them, and that to carry a hand to a pocket meant a shot from his revolver in an instant.

"Cowed! Jest don't dare ter move a finger, the skunks," growled the murderer beneath his breath. "And thar ain't one of 'em as don't know Tusker well enough ter guess what'll follow if they get ter blabbin'. Blabbin'! What's that I said? Thar ain't no need ter fear that. It was fair and square. Lord Tom had no need fer ter call me a liar and a thief. He knew that a man don't take sich words hereabouts, and that bullets git flyin' when names are called. He asked fer trouble, and, by thunder, he's had it! As fer Jim, he'd a hand at his shooter, and ef he's gone under, reckon it's his own fault. Yer don't catch me waitin' fer a man ter shoot."

For some two minutes he stood at the bar, his unseeing eyes fixed upon the reflecting mirror, while his busy brain invented excuse after excuse for the act of which he had just been guilty. But, strive as he might to gloss over this shooting affray, and to paint his own side of the squabble in rosy colours, that still, small voice returned with persistence. "Murderer! murderer!" It echoed even louder in his ears, till the man was distracted and desperate.

"Here! fill it up, will yer?" he shouted, thrusting forward an empty glass, and menacing the frightened negro behind the bar with his revolver. "To the brim, and slippy with it! Hur! Now, again! Hur! Thar's the price fer it. Keep the change."

Gulping down two glasses of spirit within a few seconds, he threw the glass to the floor, where it smashed into a hundred pieces, and then tossed a dollar on to the bar. By now a haunted look had come into the man's face. The fingers which pulled the expended cartridges from his weapon and replenished the chambers trembled obviously. The man was become desperate. His conscience was driving him hard. But with it all he was cunning. He kept his eyes on the men at the table, and then swung round to confront Red Sam, causing that miserable individual to shiver more than ever. Then, with never a glance to the far end of the room, he backed to the door of the saloon, pulled it open with his foot, and backed out. The door slammed to, and Tusker was gone. Those who crossed to the window to watch him saw the miner running down the street for his life, and, conscious now that they were safe themselves, they shook their fists at his retreating figure, and swore beneath their breath.

"I knew as it would come from him," exclaimed one of them, proceeding to fill a pipe. "Tusker Joe is bound ter break out somewhares, and become camp bully and murderer. Up to date he ain't dared attempt anything over much, but ter-day he's done it. He won't never look back. Mark my words, mate, he'll get wusser and wusser. He's the sort that goes on from one thing ter another, and don't stop till the sheriff's got him, or his mates has took the law up themselves, and has strung him six foot up. It war all a plant."

"It war," agreed a second. "Tusker had made up his mind fer a ruction, and Lord Tom war a fool to help him. Ef he hadn't been green, as green as grass, he'd have known what'd happen when he got ter callin' names. He war too free with 'em, and had got no use fer his own shooter. But I'm surprised at Jim. He's been out this way nigh most of his life, and he must have known. Seems he was took by surprise; fer he could shoot, he could."

They nodded their heads at one another, and slowly filled and lit their pipes, while they held their eyes to the window, fearful that Tusker Joe might yet return. Not that he would have terrorized them altogether. When a man finds another holding a revolver levelled at his head, and knows that the slightest movement or protest will bring a bullet in his direction, he by force of circumstances keeps very still. Even if he happens to be a courageous man – and many of these miners were undoubtedly that – common sense teaches him not so much as to lift a finger. He swallows his chagrin, and registers the vow to live for another day, when matters may be more equal. Tusker Joe had got the drop on his comrades in the saloon, to use a mining expression. He had drawn his revolver at the very beginning

of the quarrel, and all knew that he was a dead shot. But now he could have no advantage, and had he appeared again, he would undoubtedly have met with strenuous opposition.

"He's cleared, yer bet," said the third man after a while. "Tusker knows as thar won't be no livin' fer him here after this, and he's bound ter git. Suppose it's a case fer the sheriff?"

"Yep; thar ain't nothin' more ter do. Guess the verdict'll be murder. Thar's bound to be a howl in Salem Falls, and men'll get ter swear that they'll shoot Tusker on sight. Then it'll blow over. Tusker won't be fool enough ter show up this side of the grave, and things'll be forgotten. Suppose we git a move on."

The three stepped towards the door, Red Sam rising at the same time and joining them, evidently with the idea of obtaining some sort of protection from their company. He lifted the latch, and was about to emerge, when a sound came from the far end of the room, bringing the four facing round in that direction. And this is what they saw.

Close to the far wall was a second table – a long affair composed of rough boards, with a bench perched just behind it, between the table and the wall. On this bench a man was seated, with his hands sprawled out on the table top, and his head resting on his hands. He might have been asleep for all one could tell, as his posture was the most natural one possible. Certainly one would never have imagined that he was the victim of a shooting affray. But Lord Tom was dead, without any doubt. Closer inspection of his body showed a hole in his forehead, now reclining on his hands, while an ugly dark pool was spreading out between his fingers. At his feet lay a man as dead apparently as he. His feet were pointed towards the centre of the saloon, while his head and shoulders lay beneath the bench, almost directly under his dead comrade. It seemed that he had been holding a paper when the affray started, for he had dragged that to the ground with him, and it now covered his face and chest, while one arm peeped from beneath it, exposing the hand to view, with a revolver gripped in the latter. A moment before Jim had lain an inert mass. Now, at the sound of departure of the others, he stirred and called gently to them. Then the hand which gripped the revolver loosed its hold, and gently drew the paper from his face.

"Jest pull me out from under this here consarn," he asked in the coolest possible voice. "Now set me up on the table. Gently, boys! That ere chap's broken my arm. Now, Peter, something wet ter drink, quick as yer can."

They lifted him on to the table very gently; for these miners, when all was said and done, were exceedingly good and kind to one another when in distress. And there they supported him, while the negro behind the bar mixed some spirit and water and brought it.

"Huh! that'll make me wake up," said Jim, still cool and collected. "So Lord Tom's dead? I guessed it'd come ter that when he got ter flingin' names about. And Tusker's gone. Wall, there ain't nothin' more ter do now but ter git well and started in again at the diggin'. Guess he's took all. A fine pardner he's been, to be sure! He's seen me and Tom slavin' every day and guess he's jest chuckled. He's bided his time, and got clean off with all the stuff. Boys, we'd cleaned up the claim only yesterday, and thar was enough to take every mother's son of us back to New York, with something in hand ter start up business with. And Tusker's got it all, and has rubbed poor Tom out."

He looked round at the miners, and each in turn nodded his agreement.

"Rubbed him clean out, yer bet," said one. "It don't take twice lookin' ter tell that. Tom's dead, and we'd a notion yer was the same. Yer lay that still."

"And yer didn't move over sprightly," came from the wounded man dryly. "I saw every little bit of the theatricals, and thar wasn't a man as dared ter show fight, small blame to yer. For me, he'd got the drop before I'd a hand on my shooter, and jest sent his lead through my arm. I wasn't askin' fer more. I knew a move meant death, sure. And so I did same as you. Lay still as a mouse, with the paper over my face, and jest a small tear in it through which I could watch what was happening. Mates, I'll tell yer somethin'. I've been diggin' and minin' this five years. I've met bad men and good, rough and honest, and downright ruffians. But Tusker's jest a murderer. I gives him notice, here and

now, that I shoot on sight at the next meetin'. If only for Lord Tom's sake, I shoot on sight. Tusker's a thief and a murderer."

When the whole matter came to be discussed, it was the decision of the inmates of the camp at Salem Falls that Tusker Joe was indeed a thief and a murderer. It cropped up in the evidence offered to the sheriff, who duly made an enquiry, that this man, some thirty years of age only, had twice before entered into partnership with other miners, and, having waited till the claims panned out well, and earnings were collected, disappeared with all that he could lay his hands on. And on this occasion it was his intention to do the same. But Lord Tom, a man of a different stamp to the miners, had detected his intention, and in an unwary moment had taxed him with the crime, and had not hesitated to call him a thief. Then it was that Tusker had deliberately shot his partner down, and done the same for Jim. It was a clear case of murder. A warrant was issued for the arrest of the man, and in a little while the event was forgotten. But Jim did not forget, while in course of time the news of Lord Tom's death filtered through to New York State, where his widow was living. Mary Kingsley did not forget. She mourned her husband for many a long day, and then, like the sensible woman she was, set herself to think of her son. And that son, Jack Kingsley, is the lad who is the hero of this story.

CHAPTER II

Jack Kingsley's Dilemma

Mary Kingsley may be described as an eminently unfortunate woman. Married at an early age, it was not long before her husband fell out of employment, and found himself hard put to it to make a living. That was in or about the year 1848; and presently, when a fever for gold digging in California spread over the United States of America, Tom Kingsley became badly bitten with the desire to try his own fortune. A town-bred man, he fared but ill at first; but in a little while his fortunes mended, so that he was able to send money to his wife. Then had come a partnership, bringing great profit at first, and later on the disaster with which the reader is acquainted.

Five years after the death of Tom Kingsley, Mary married again – a man of uncertain temper, who quickly began to look upon his stepson Jack as an encumbrance. There were quarrels between himself and his wife with regard to the boy, and very soon Jack himself came in for ill-feeling and frequent chastisement.

"I don't think I shall put up with it much longer, Mother," said Jack one day when there had been an unusually stormy scene. "I learned last year that when I was away from home, on a visit up the Hudson, you and Father got on well together; but immediately I returned there were quarrels, of which I was the cause. I think he's jealous of your care for me."

"It seems so," admitted Mary with tears in her eyes. "I've noticed the same, Jack. Phineas is a good and kind husband when things do not disturb him, but when he's upset, matters are – well, unpleasant for all. If he had had a son of his own perhaps things would have been different; but he hasn't, and so one has to look facts in the face. You know, boy, that your mother would not have you leave. But –"

"Just so, Mother," interrupted Jack. "There is always a but in these affairs. I've talked it over with Uncle up the Hudson, and he thinks I should cut from home and strike out for myself. I'm old enough. I'm seventeen and a half."

"And big enough, bless you!" cried Mary. "Ah, if only the question had never arisen! But I'm not a fool anyway, Jack, and I'm looking facts in the face. I see clearly that it would be better for you, better for me, and happier altogether. Though I shall miss you, boy. How I shall you do not know. What'll you do?"

Jack thought for a moment; and while he stands there, his hands sunk deep in his pockets, let us take a good look at him. Jack Kingsley was of that peculiarly fair complexion which is generally, and too often wrongly, associated with a hasty and hot temper. His hair was distinctly red, not the lank red hair one often meets with, but crisp red curls that clung closely to his head. Indeed the colour suited his general complexion remarkably well, and Jack was by no means a bad-looking fellow. For the rest, he was a typical American; well grown for his age, in fact quite tall, though a little lanky, for he was too young to have filled out yet. Still Jack was well covered with muscle, light and active on his feet, with his head well set back on a pair of stout shoulders. There was a deep white scar on his cheek, which seemed to set off the good lines of his face as a patch sets off that of a lady. That scar was the result of a determined struggle with an old school enemy, whom Jack had fought three times in succession, suffering defeat on the first two occasions. Eyes which looked at you frankly and steadily, a firm chin and expressive lips, hiding a set of excellent teeth, made up an appearance which was as decidedly attractive and confidence – inspiring as Tusker Joe's had been the opposite.

"Yes, I'm old enough and big enough," said Jack, with that easy assurance so common to young Americans. "And I ain't afraid of work."

"A good thing too," echoed his mother. "Because you will have to look to yourself. Your father hasn't enough to be making you allowances, and you've nothing else to look to. I'm not sorry either."

A young man should look at the world for himself. The fact that he has to make his way should give him greater determination. If Tom had lived it might have been different. But that rogue who murdered him stole all he possessed, including his papers. But there – I'll not bother you with the tale. What will you do?"

"I've talked it over twenty times, Mother, and Uncle has advised me to go west, down to the camps."

"To dig! Gold prospecting!" exclaimed Mary Kingsley with horror in her voice; for she thought of her first husband.

"Perhaps. But only if other things fail. I'm told that a smith is always wanted down there. There are spades and picks to mend, ironwork to prepare, and, in fact, lots of jobs for a handy man."

"But you don't – "

Mary threw her hands up in consternation. She knew that Jack had but recently left school, and had as yet no knowledge of any trade. He had done a great deal of amateur joinery at home; but then that was not smith's work.

"I've tried it," said Jack sturdily. "Uncle sent me to the forge near his house, and last holidays I did a month on end. I can use a hammer now, and in a few months shall be able to do ordinary jobs, as well as shoeing horses. The older I get the stronger I shall become, no doubt; and strength is what is wanted, once one has the training and knowledge."

"But for the moment you are useless to all intents and purposes," exclaimed Mary.

"I can earn my bread and butter and a trifle for spending in leisure times," said George. "I stopped at Hopeville as I came through from up the Hudson, and James Orring, the smith, will take me at a dollar a week, with board and lodging thrown in. If you're willing I'll go at once."

It may be imagined that Mary was thrown into a condition of unhappiness at her son's news. True, she had begun to realize more and more that the best thing for the boy was to leave home and strike out a career for himself. But she had put the evil day as far from her as possible, satisfied in her unselfishness to put up with her husband's tempers if her son could be near her. And now to hear that he was prepared to go at once, that the day was actually at hand for him to cut adrift from the nest which had held him all these years, was a bitter blow. She shed tears, and then, like the sensible woman she was, encouraged Jack to carry out his determination.

She busied herself for the next two days with his clothes, and then bade farewell to him bravely. So, in due course, our hero reached Hopeville, and took up his residence with James Orring.

"You'll have to fetch and carry besides smithing," said James, a blunt, kind-hearted fellow. "Labour's hard to get hereabouts. Mighty hard, I tell you, and a chap who wants wages has to earn them. But I'll not be stingy. Show us that you're a willing fellow, and the money'll be good and plenty."

For a month Jack laboured steadily in the forge, his sleeves rolled to the elbow, and his leathern apron round his waist. And, little by little, James allowed him to undertake work at the anvil.

"He's shapin' well," he told his wife, "and since that's the case I'm giving him jobs. It'll help to make him know his powers, besides giving a body time for a smoke in his own parlour. He ain't no trouble, that lad."

Three months later Jack had become so good at the work that James was able to enjoy even more leisure. He began to take a holiday every now and again, and left the little township with his wife in order to visit friends. He felt he was justified in doing so, for his apprentice was wonderfully steady, and easily earned the four dollars a week he was now receiving.

"We're off for the day and night," he said when he came to the forge in the early morning, his white cuffs and collar showing that he did not intend to work. "You can manage any ordinary job that comes in. But if it's something big, and you don't fancy tackling it, why, it'll wait till to-morrow. Me and the missus is off to see her sisters, way back of the forest, and we'll be here again by noon to-morrow."

Jack nodded, and stopped hammering for a moment. "There are plenty of small jobs to keep me going to-day," he said. "I'll look to things. Go and enjoy yourself."

Some two hours later he was disturbed at his work by the arrival of a buggy. It was driven up to the door of the forge, and a man whose clothing showed that he came from a town descended briskly.

"Mornin'," he said. "Busy?"

"Moderate," answered Jack, for he was not anxious to lose a job.

"Got time ter do a little bit for me?"

"Depends what it is," said Jack. "If it ain't big, reckon I'll tackle it. But not now. I've a heap to get on with."

"Special money fer special work," exclaimed the stranger. "See here, I've broke the key of my front door, and blest if I know how I'm ter git in again. I could break a window, fer sure, but then that's more expensive than getting another key. The puzzle is that the business end is broken off in the lock, and I ain't got it."

He held up the shank of a big key, one which might have belonged to the lock of a large front door, and handed it to Jack. The stem was broken and twisted halfway up, and the most important item was missing. Jack shook his head.

"I could forge an end to it easy," he said. "But then, what'd be the use? It wouldn't open the lock unless you knew all about the wards. It would be waste of money."

"So it would, so it would, siree," agreed the stranger, a man of some thirty-five years of age, to whom, somehow or other, Jack took an instant dislike. "But I ain't sich a fool as I look. I can give yer a plan."

"Exact?" asked Jack.

"To a T; a wax impression. Thar's care for you! I'm fond of a bit of modelling in wax, and sometimes try my hand at amateur sculpture. Guess it was one of the first things I did ter take a wax impression of that 'ere key. And it's comin' in useful. I'd forgot it almost, and then remembered it was in the drawer."

He stopped suddenly and looked keenly at Jack; for this individual had overstepped himself. If he had broken the key of his own front door, and so locked himself out, how had he been able to get the impression from the drawer? Jack was no duffer, to be sure, but he had at the same time no cause for suspecting anyone who came to offer work. Moreover, he was pondering with all his youthful keenness how to set about the task.

"It's a longish job," he said, scratching his head.

"How much?" demanded the man quickly.

"I don't know for sure. Depends on how long it takes. Besides, I've other work, which can't be left."

"Ten dollars if it's ready in two hours," came from the stranger, making Jack open his eyes.

"Right!" he said promptly. "I'll do it. Leave the shank and the impression. I'll get at the job at once."

As a matter of fact it took our hero rather less than two hours to complete the task, for he was a quick workman, and this was a straightforward matter. In a very little while he had welded a piece of iron on to the broken shank, and had shaped it roughly to form the wards of the key. Then he placed it in the vice, and used a hack saw and file till all was completed.

"And I wonder why he's in such a hurry, and ready to pay such a figure for it," he wondered, as he put the finishing strokes. "Ten dollars would pay for more than window and key, and – jimminy!"

He gave vent to a shrill whistle, and stood looking out of the smoke-grimed window, his hand supported on a file. He was thinking of the stranger, and for the first time felt suspicious. What his suspicions were he could not say for the life of him. They were entirely intangible. But why did the man need that key? Was it actually for his front door, and, if so, how did he obtain the wax impression? Jack picked up the piece of wax and examined it.

"Certainly not old," he said emphatically. "This was moulded perhaps yesterday, or the day before. I wonder if – "

"Got it ready, youngster?" came a voice from the door, and looking there Jack saw the stranger. He had not come in his buggy on this occasion, but afoot; and as he spoke was gingerly stepping round the puddle and soft mud which existed near the door.

"Ready, sure," exclaimed Jack, reddening. "And I hope it'll do. You said it was for the front door?"

"Yes. Ye're right in one guess. It's the front door. That's a good job, lad. Let's see if it'll stand the pressure."

Placing the wards in the vice, the stranger tested the strength of the key by twisting with all his might.

"A strong job too," he exclaimed. "Here's the ten dollars. Four in notes, and the rest cash. Good day!"

He was gone almost before Jack had finished counting the money, and, having stepped again gingerly across the mud, disappeared along the road which led through the town. He left our hero staring after him, and unconsciously examining the wax impression which he still held in his hand.

"It's queer," he said. "Wish James was back home to discuss the matter. Now, if I was older, or had more experience, I suppose I should get to thinking that that fellow wanted the key for some other purpose. That it was not his own front door he wished to open with it. He told me a fib, I'm sure. He made a mistake when he talked about the impression being in his drawer. Well, there's the money, and James will be glad."

At six o'clock our hero shut the forge, took his tea in the house closely adjacent, and, having washed himself and put on a suit of respectable clothes, he went down into the town and out to the other side. He was fond of a sharp walk after being cooped up in the forge all day long, and often went off into the country. It was dark when he had covered six miles, and by then he was almost in the wilderness. The road had almost ceased to exist, while there was forest land on every side. On the left, however, as he faced home again, the country was divided by the Hudson River, beside which the road wound, but elevated from its surface. Indeed, it stood three hundred feet above the water.

"A fine place for a house," thought our hero, as his eyes were attracted by lights ahead and to the left. "The man who selected that site had an eye to beauty. They say he started without a dollar, and made all he has by hard work. I wonder if I shall ever be able to do anything like that. It doesn't seem possible, and yet I dare say he thought the same. It would be grand to have a big house overlooking the Hudson, and give mother a home there."

Jack was not above the building of castles in the air, and as he trudged along, his busy brain conjured up a future for himself, a future in which hard work and care would bring him riches and a rise in the world. For America was the home of numbers and numbers of men who had made wealth from nothing, aided by a strong arm, a firm purpose, and continuous application. Why should he, Jack Kingsley, not be able to follow in their footsteps? What if he were to own a big forge one of these days, and, leaving it to a manager, opened others elsewhere. That would be doing business. That would be rising in the world, and, if the thing were managed properly, money would be gained and would accumulate.

Jack was so entirely lost in the brilliant scenes he was conjuring up that he was barely conscious of his surroundings. He had strayed from the road now, and was traversing a strip of moorland which ran between it and the river. Then of a sudden something attracted his attention. It was a dusky outline right ahead, which presently took on the shape of a buggy. Jack halted when he was within ten paces of the cart and listened. He was no sneak at any time, but a familiar note caught his ear. Someone was speaking, and, since he could not settle the doubt in his mind at that distance, he stepped even closer, making not a sound as his feet trod the soft green carpet beneath them.

"Jest ten o'clock," he heard the voice say, while someone on the far side of the buggy struck a match, shielded it with his hand, and evidently examined his watch with the aid of the flame.

"Jest ten, and Jem Bowen's away down in New York city. That's good."

"Fer us. Guess it ain't fer him," responded someone else. "'Cos, seeing as he ain't here, and don't have need fer certain things, we'll make free with 'em. Did yer get the key?"

"Yer bet," and Jack instantly recognized that this was undoubtedly the voice of the man who had accosted him at the forge. "I ain't lived a while fer nothing. I've been down here for two weeks past lordin' it in Hopeville, and getting ter know the ropes. Thar's a young chap down at James Orring's forge as is a good workman, and soft."

Jack flushed in the darkness at this allusion to himself, and stood undecided how to act. His idea of common fairness bade him decamp at once, and no doubt he would have done so had not the words he had already heard, and others which followed immediately, persuaded him that he ought to stay.

"Soft?" queried the other man with a giggle which roused Jack's indignation. "Perhaps he's made a mistake."

"No fear of that. He's more simple than soft. That's jest what I meant. He's jest mighty keen on his work, and don't give a thought to other matters. I guessed he was the man fer us, so I cleared old man James out with a call from his wife's sisters. Then I went down ter the forge, and the young chap asked no questions. I jest stuffed him with a yarn, and he swallowed it. At any rate, thar's the key. A fine job."

"And it's like the impression?"

An oath escaped the first man. He remembered now for the first time that he had left the wax model behind him.

"Tain't no matter after all," he said after a while. "The model ain't no use to him, and ten to one he's tossed it into the fire. At any rate I compared the thing he made with the model, and I guess it was exact. Thar ain't a doubt but what it'll fit."

"Then thar's no use in waitin'. The lights yonder has been out fer the last three hours, save in the servants' quarters, and we know the old man who's in charge is as deaf as any adder. The sooner we break the place the better chance of getting clear. How's that?"

"Sense! Nothing more and nothing less. Let's git right now. Thar ain't no need ter exert ourselves. We'll drive pretty close, and walk right in."

The two figures appeared from the far side of the buggy, while Jack slid to the ground and crouched behind a bush. He caught the whiff of someone's pipe, and saw the red end of the barrel. Then the men sprang to their places, the whip cracked, and in a moment the buggy was moving away.

"Ought he to follow? Should he cling to the back of the buggy and give the alarm when they reached the house? Should he leave the matter? It was no affair of his."

The questions raced through Jack's mind, and for a few seconds he was undecided. Care for his own safety prompted him to pursue the easier course, to let matters drift, and not interfere himself. Then his duty – the common duty we owe one another – pulled him in the other direction. He would go and give the alarm. But those few seconds of indecision had altered the complexion of affairs. The buggy was already some yards away, and, though Jack ran, it rapidly increased its distance from him. Then the house to be burgled by these rascals was a good mile and a half away, and before he could arrive their purpose might be carried out.

"Not if I can stop them," said Jack stubbornly. "It's clearly for me to do something. I'll put a spoke in their wheel."

He took to his heels at once and cut straight across towards the house, at that moment hidden from him by a rise in the land. However, he soon sighted the light which had been referred to, and within a little while was at the gates which shut in the surroundings of the park attached to the mansion. They were open, and the buggy stood just within, the reins being secured to the ironwork. Jack stepped boldly through into the park, and ran along on the grass border. In a little while he

reached the drive, and, skirting that – for to have stepped into it would have been to make a noise – he presently came to the large front door. It was open.

"And the thieves have gone in. I'll follow, and then kick up a rumpus," he said. "They shall not get away with any booty if I can avoid it."

He stepped across the threshold, and was within the mansion immediately. Listening for a moment, he heard sounds in the distance, and set off in that direction.

"Better catch them red-handed than not," he thought. "Guess this'll be a surprise for 'em."

CHAPTER III

A Rude Awakening

"Guess this'll be a surprise for 'em."

His heart throbbing a little faster than it was wont to do, and his pulses beating tumultuously, Jack crept along a passage, and presently came to a large door which stood ajar. There was someone within the room without a doubt; for he heard whispering voices, while, though the place was not lighted, every now and again a ray swept past the door, and penetrated through the chink beneath it, as if one of the burglars had a lamp and were flashing it to and fro. Then he heard the chink of metal.

"Silver!" he heard someone exclaim.

"H – h – ush! You'll wake the house, booby! Silver it is, and plenty of it. Easier ter take Jem Bowen's glint than dig for gold in Californy. Put 'em in the sack. Never mind bending the things. They'll all come out the same in the melting-pot. Here, leave the job ter me and get to the other cabinet."

The dulled sound of footsteps came to Jack's ear, and every now and again a metallic sound, as the silver articles were dropped into the sack. As for himself, he had made no sound as he came along the passage, for it was luxuriously carpeted. He stood at the door, hesitating again, eager to enter and face the men, and yet doubting whether the right moment had yet arrived. And our hero was to discover again to his cost that indecision does not always pay. In fact, that the man who can make up his mind on the spur of the moment, in a flash as it were, and act upon it inflexibly, without doubts, without a second's delay, is the man who more often succeeds in this life than he who is dilatory. But expedition in such matters is not to be expected from a lad of Jack's age. It was only natural that he should hesitate. After all, he was suddenly face to face with a dilemma which might well have tried the discretion and courage and steadiness of an elder man. He hesitated.

"If I go now they will get clean away with that silver. If I wait till they are fully engaged, and then wake someone in the house, then they may well be captured. Guess I'll wait. Helloo!"

Another dull footfall had come to his ears, and he swung round to see who had caused it. A big man was stealing up to him along the corridor, a man dressed in nightshirt and trousers, bearing a small lantern, and armed with a club. Jack was thoroughly startled, and, to be honest, lost his head. He was between two fires, and was likely to be singed by both.

"S-s-s-sh!" he whispered, holding up his finger. "In there. In there."

He pointed to the room at the door of which he stood, and again held up his finger for silence. But the man who was creeping down that passage had but one idea in his mind. He had been awakened by a sound, and from his position in one wing of the mansion had caught the flash of a light in one of the living rooms. The instant he saw Jack he took him for a burglar, and, now that he was within striking distance, he disregarded our hero's signs, and, suddenly dashing in, brought his club down with a furious swish. Fortunately for Jack it missed the mark. But in another moment they were locked in one another's arms, the newcomer endeavouring to use his club, while Jack gripped his arm with all his might. They fell to the ground during the struggle, and continued the contest there.

"Leave go!" shouted Jack at the top of his voice. "Can't you tell I'm on the same errand as you are. There are two men in there. Burglars! I've tracked them."

Crash! The club, seized in the man's other hand, came with a resounding bang against his head, and in a second our hero was unconscious. At the same moment the door of the room was torn open, and the lamp, which had rolled to the floor of the passage, but which was not extinguished, showed the two whom Jack had followed.

"Hands up!" shouted the fellow who had so unexpectedly appeared upon the scene, and who had made such a stupid error with respect to our hero. "Yer won't! Then take the consequences!"

He was a sturdy fighter, this caretaker of the mansion and in one brief half-second had broken the arm of one of the men. Then he attacked the second, and no doubt would have done him a like injury with his formidable weapon had not the fellow drawn back. Something bright glinted in his hand; there was a sharp report, which went echoing down the corridor, and instantly his attacker fell to the ground.

"Wall! If that don't beat everything! Dead, is he?"

The one with the broken arm bent over, supporting his injured limb with the other, and looked at the man who had been shot.

"As mutton," he said curtly; "and serve him right. He's broken my arm."

"Who's the other? Seems he must have been following us, and this old fool took him for one of our gang. Turn him over."

Together they rolled Jack over on to his back and inspected his face.

"Gee!" cried the leader, the one who had come to the forge that morning; "ef it ain't the youngster who made the key for me. And I thought he was soft. Phew! Wall, he's brought it on hisself. Get the sack, mate, and let's be moving. We know the old man was alone in the house, so thar's no hurry. But it won't do ter wait. Someone else might be in the game. Get the sack, and we'll drive."

Without a thought for the man they had shot, or for poor Jack, they decamped from the mansion, leaving the two victims lying on the floor. Ten minutes later their buggy was whirling them away, so that no trace was left of them when the morning came. And it was not till then that the crime was discovered. A gardener found the door open, and, being unable to make the caretaker hear, entered the mansion. An hour later Hopeville's solitary policeman was there.

"Hm! A burglary," he said knowingly; "and the old man came in at the right moment. Is he dead?"

"Left for dead, but still breathing ever so gently," answered the gardener. "I've sent for the doctor."

"And t'other fellow?"

"Head pretty nigh bashed in. Insensible, and likely to remain so for a day," was the report. "Reckon Davy caught him nicely. What'll you do?"

"Note the surroundings first. Then, when the doctor arrives, get 'em to bed. Reckon the thief couldn't be moved yet awhile."

It was an hour before surgical aid arrived, and very soon afterwards Jack was put into a bed in one of the attics, with a groom to watch him, and make sure that he did not escape. As for Davy, he was carried to a sofa, the movement nearly shaking the slender thread of life still remaining out of his body. He rallied slightly, opened his eyes, and in a feeble voice gave an account of the burglary. Then he closed his eyes, and died within ten minutes.

"Which makes the case worse for that young blackguard upstairs," said the man of law. "To think that James Orring's man should take to such ways. I've sent along for him, so as to ask a few questions. Guess he'll be mighty put about. It was only yesterday that he passed me on the road, and got to talking about young Jack Kingsley. It'll be a case of – " He jerked his head back, and indicated a hanging.

"Y-e-e-es," agreed the other doubtfully, "ef it's proved. In the States a man ain't guilty, and don't hang in consequence, till he's proved to have done murder."

"Proved! It's a clear case," exclaimed the policeman. "Clear as daylight. Here's the young blackguard discovered on the premises, knocked silly by Davy's club, and Davy himself dyin'. Ef that ain't clear, what is?"

His familiarity with the law, the necessity for showing greater knowledge than the gardener, caused the policeman to sniff with indignation. To his legal mind Jack was not only guilty of the offence, but was already condemned. Indeed, looking at the evidence clearly, things wore a black aspect for him. Now that Davy was dead there was no one to give evidence but himself, and the poor

fellow who had so recently died had definitely stated that Jack was one of the burglars, believing that to be the case himself.

Let the reader imagine our hero's feelings when at length he regained consciousness, and was taken to the station-house.

"Taken for one of the burglars, just because that poor, stupid fellow made the mistake! Surely not," he groaned. "That would be too cruel! I can prove that I was not. I can describe what happened – how I met them on the heath and followed. I can speak about the key, and – "

He broke off with a groan, for as he reviewed the matter he realized that he could but make a statement of what had happened, but that there was no one to bear it out. After all, facts were glaringly against him. Indeed he realized that to the full when he was brought up before the sheriff and judges.

"The prisoner states that he was at work in the forge when a man entered and desired to have a key made," counsel for the prosecution announced, when summing up the case. "That may or may not be the case, though we can believe that it happened, for there were footmarks in the mud outside the smithy which correspond with others on the lawn outside the mansion. But we maintain that those marks were those of an accomplice. The prisoner made the key to match a wax impression supplied by this accomplice, and carelessly left the impression in the smithy. Now let us follow the prisoner's movements. He shuts the smithy and goes off in the evening, as he has done many times before. But let us bear in mind an important item of evidence. On ordinary days he would have to be back by nine o'clock at the latest. But on this particular evening he owns that he walked so far that a return at that hour was impossible. With that we place the fact that James Orring and his wife were lured away from Hopeville for the night. Is that not very suggestive of prisoner's complicity in this crime? He lures his patron away, so that his absence shall not be detected. And why should he walk farther on this particular occasion? To meet the buggy with his two accomplices. The tracks on the heather are clear enough to show that three men were about the buggy. It stands to reason that one man could not have been spying, for he would certainly have been detected.

"And now we come to the mansion. Davy declares that this man was one of the miscreants, though he did not say who fired the shot. That is his dying deposition. Is it probable that he would have thrown himself upon a defenceless youth? Highly improbable. Unbelievable. Contrary to common sense. And had he done so, is it possible that he could still have persevered in his error? No, a thousand times no! Davy, at death's door, gave us his honest conviction."

Terrribly black was the evidence, and it may be imagined with what a sinking heart our unfortunate hero listened to it all. There was no one to speak for him, save honest James Orring, who sturdily maintained that his apprentice was innocent.

"Find the weapon with which he shot the man Davy," he asked savagely, "and then talk of the lad's guilt. A steadier boy never worked in a forge. Him a burglar! Not much! And ef he was, do yer think I shouldn't have spotted it, with him under my eyes day and night?"

Jack's case stirred the countryside, and filled the columns of the paper. Discussion as to his guilt or innocence waxed loud and furious, and was responsible for many incidents. People took up the cudgels for him in the saloons, and often enough that led to angry words and to broken heads. Even the jury wavered. Looking at Jack in the dock they were bound to confess that a franker face never before was seen. The prisoner faced his terrible position with a courage and fortitude which were commendable, while his answers were so direct, so evidently spontaneous and sincere, that even with that damning evidence before them the most experienced of the jury felt a qualm, hesitated a little, and was inclined to give some benefit to the prisoner.

"It'll be manslaughter," said James dolefully, "as he discussed the matter with his wife. They'll never hang Jack, even though the evidence is so black against him. He'll be given ten years, ten long years, in prison."

Mrs. Orring wept, and was joined by Jack's mother, who had come to stay with them during the trial.

"Ten long years," she moaned. "He'll be an old man by then. To think that a bonny fellow such as he must be shut up for the finest years of his life, must be treated like a wild beast. Oh, it is horrible!"

"He shan't! I tell yer he shan't!" cried James, banging his fist on the parlour table till the whole floor shook. "Even though I war the victim of a hoax that cleared me away for the time being, I ain't never had ought but a friendly feelin' for young Jack, and I'm dead sartin that he's as innocent as a babe. If them skunks who were in it had the pluck of sparrows, they'd come forward and declare theirselves. But they won't – trust 'em! And they'll see this young chap nigh hanged and put in prison, while they're free ter burglar other places. Jack's up against it hot and strong, and I'm his friend. I say again, he shan't go to prison."

His vehemence was remarkable, and stirred his listeners.

"Not go to prison! You won't – " commenced Mrs. Orring.

"Silence, woman!" thundered James, his brows knit close together, his eyes staring at the opposite wall. "Ye've heard what I've had to say. Then silence! Not another word! Don't breathe a syllable to a soul. Good night!"

The usually pleasant and easy-going smith got up and left the room abruptly, while the two women stared at one another, half-laughing and half-weeping.

"This is how I look at it," said James, when he was well away from the house. "I can't get to think in there with women round me, but here a man can see things clearer. Jack's done. If he ain't hanged, he'll be put away fer ten solid years. And how's he ter prove his innocence when he's cooped up within four walls? He can't, and thar's no one else to do it fer him. And supposin' he goes fer the ten years, he's branded as a felon, and won't have the spirit or the energy ter try to clear himself when at last he gets free. I don't, as a rule, get advisin' a man as is innocent ter skip before his trial's finished. It makes things all the blacker agin him. But here's a case where no good can come with waitin'. He's branded, sure, and he'll stay branded if he goes to prison. I'll go and see Pete."

Pete was an old friend of James's, and because of help he had had at a critical time, from the owner of the smithy, he always had an indulgent ear for James.

"Ef yer could get ter chat along with the policeman, maybe I'd be able ter take a look at Jack," said James, accosting his friend, and passing him a wink. "Not yet awhile, though, 'cos I'm busy. But after tea. Jest about sevin o'clock."

Pete looked up quickly, and a sharp glance shot from his eyes. He was a man of sixty-five, perhaps, though he looked older, and was already as white as snow as to his hair and beard. But he was no fool, was Pete, and his glance showed that he half-understood James.

"You aer thinkin' that boy's innocent?" he asked, as he sucked at his pipe.

"Dead sartin," replied James. "Sit down and have a smoke. Try mine."

He handed out his tobacco skin, and Pete filled from it gratefully.

"Up!" he remarked, as he pulled at the pipe; "and you was thinkin' maybe that Jack – "

"Yer know what I was thinkin', Pete," exclaimed James bluntly. "Look ye here. Have yer ever been dead down on yer luck, right clean hard up agin it?"

Pete nodded, his ferrety little eyes watching the smoke curl up from the bowl, and his whole expression denoting satisfaction.

"I've been dead down on the rocks, with the pinnacles comin' clear through," he admitted, as if the recollection caused him enjoyment. "I've had fortune play me so scurvily that I couldn't see a crust anywheres, and hadn't but one friend ter turn to. Yes, James, I've knowd what it is ter be clean up agin it."

"And yer didn't want help?"

"Ye've struck it wrong. Every man wants help some day. It may be only when he's old and tottery, like me – " he stopped to smile, and watch the smoke again – "jest like me," he repeated. "Sometimes he don't want it even then. But there's others want it, soon and plenty, when they're just cuttin' their teeth. Guess Jack's one of 'em."

"And he's jest got one friend," said James slowly. "That's me."

"Then you've struck it wrong agin. Jack's got two. Jack's friend is my friend. I don't forget the time when I was up agin it."

The shrewd, sharp look came again from the old man, and James noted it. Taking his courage in both hands he blurted out his news.

"I'm goin' to fetch him out of that ere jug of a prison," he said curtly. "Help me with the policeman, and – and –"

"Why, bless us! what am I doin'," cried Pete, suddenly taking his pipe from his mouth. "It's five o'clock now, and I must be goin'. I've got a 'pointment with the constable at sivin, jest to do a bit of talkin'. So long, James."

"And bless you," thought the owner of the smithy, as Pete departed. "Now ef I don't fix it, my name ain't James Orring. First thing's an aliby."

He stood thinking for a few moments, and then hastened back home. Tea was ready, and after that, and a smoke, it wanted only a quarter to seven.

"Missus," said James suddenly, "I'm agoin' to bed. I've a headache. Jest come in and put the light out, will yer."

Mrs. Orring was not gifted with a brilliant wit, and stood for a while regarding her husband with questioning eyes. For James certainly did not look to have a headache. If ever a man looked in robust and absolute health it was he. But Jack's mother saved the situation.

"I think I should go and do as he says in a few moments, dear," she whispered. "You see, tomorrow you will be able to tell the people that James went to bed, and that you left him there, sick with a headache."

It dawned upon Mrs. Orring that this manœuvre of her husband's might have something to do with Jack, and promptly she carried out his wishes.

"And jest sit right there in the front parlour," said James, as the light was put out. "Then I shan't be disturbed with the talking. Yer can come in and see how my head's doin' when I call. Not before, 'cos I shall likely be sleepin'."

He yawned, turned over, and drew the clothes well across him, as if disposing himself for sleep. But within a minute of Mrs. Orring's departure, James was out of bed. To open the window and leap out was the work of a moment. Then he went straight to the smithy, procured a file and a hammer, and, covering his face with a scarf, set off towards the prison, choosing a path at the back of the houses.

"Better see as Pete's got the constable in tow," he said to himself as he went. "Now's the time to work a liberation, 'cos this jail ain't by no ways strong. But after the trial's over, and the verdict's given, guess Jack'll be taken to a place as strong as could be wanted. Now what in thunder aer we ter do with him when he's out."

The difficulty almost floored James, and for a time he sat pondering.

"Got it!" he cried at last. "Thar's bound ter be a hue and cry, and a dickens of a fuss; and the country-side'll be searched high and low. Guess I'll help ter put 'em off the tracks."

Some ten minutes later he was close to the prison, and had safely hidden himself in the angle of a house from which he could watch the street. Hopeville boasted of a town hall and a jail, both perched at the edge of a square, which, now that the township was a dozen years old, had become the fashionable promenade of the inhabitants. It was lighted by some half-dozen swaying oil lamps, and was provided with a few benches. On one of these, some distance from the tiny prison, Pete was seated as James looked, smoking quietly, and engaged in earnest conversation with the only constable that Hopeville possessed. And if that conversation could have been overheard, it would have appeared at once that the artful Pete was playing on the constable's vanity.

"Good for me! Good for Jack!" thought James. "Now, I won't lose no time about it, and I'll go at it like a man."

Being the only smith in the place, he was thoroughly acquainted with the ins and outs of the prison, and knew the solitary cell it boasted. James was no believer in half-measures. He clambered on to a wall at the back of the prison, made his way along it, and gained a roof. The grilled window of the cell looked on to this, and in a twinkling James was at it.

"Hist!" he called through the bars. "That you, Jack!"

He had to repeat the summons before our hero put in an appearance.

"What is it?" he asked sleepily. "You! James!"

"Fer sure. Look here, Jack! Ye're innocent, and we knows it."

Our hero nodded curtly. He had heard the same tale from James before, and had blessed him for his support. But the iron of this terrible time had seared his mind; his feelings were dulled; he felt that he was already branded a thief and a murderer.

"And I've made up me mind ter give yer a chance. Look here, lad! Ef yer go to prison it'll be fer ten solid years, and thar'll be no one ter clear you."

"Well," asked Jack, his eyes brightening a little.

"Ef yer bolts, people can't say more than they have done. Yer ain't more guilty than yer wur afore, but yer have a chance ter get hold of that chap and make him clear yer. Savvy? Wall, yer can take yer liberty or leave it. It's right here, outside the windy. Will yer have it?"

Jack thought for a moment. He realized that to leave was practically to declare his guilt. Then he looked at the other side, the prison side: the impossibility of being able to show his innocence – the hopelessness of his future life. Rightly or wrongly he chose liberty.

"I'll take it," he said breathlessly. "How'll you manage the bars? I'll leave 'em to you, while I scribble a note."

He went across to the far side of the cell, where light entered the place in a thin stream from a candle placed in a niche in the corridor outside. Pulling out a pocket-book, he wrote boldly and in large letters:

"This is to declare solemnly, on my word of honour, that I am entirely innocent, and that every word I have uttered is true. I have to face death or imprisonment under the brand of a felon, and without hope of justice reaching me. On the far side of my prison bars I see liberty: if I can gain it, the chance to clear my good name and bring the right men to justice. I choose the last, whether it stamps me guilty or not. I will return when the time arrives, and will deliver myself up again to the law."

He scrawled his name boldly beneath the words, and left the sheet of paper on the tiny table. Meanwhile James had stripped off his coat, had wrapped it into a thick buffer, and, placing this against the bars, had broken them with a few lusty blows from his hammer. In a minute Jack was free, shaking himself like a dog just emerged from the water.

"And now?" he asked.

"Jest come along with me, and doggo aer the order. Do yer remember the store of scrap, back of the smithy? Then ye're goin' thar. Thar's a place pretty well built all ready for yer. I'll look after things when ye're hid, and send 'em off on the wrong scent. But doggo it's got ter be. Yer must lie as quiet as any mouse."

James led him swiftly from the broken cell and took him to the smithy. At the back, in the open, was a mass of odds and ends of iron. Axletrees, plough-irons, swingle-bars, rods and hoops, and old horseshoes galore. The heap was piled high, and leaned against the side of the smithy. But James was a tidy man, and for a long while had insisted on piling his old horseshoes wall-fashion, and in course of time quite a big wall had been formed.

"Thar's room and plenty for yer," he whispered to Jack, indicating the heap. "Get along in, while I sling a few bars up agin it. And not a word till I give the signal, not even if you're starvin'."

Jack crept into the hole, which, by the way, he had never noticed before in the scrap heap, and James threw a number of bars and hoops up against the opening.

"Ter-morrow there'll be shoes and sichlike to sling," he said. "So long, and don't forget it, it's doggo."

Running as fast as possible, James made for the river, and in ten minutes had beaten in the boards of an old dinghy which had once been Pete's, and which was now old and useless. He cut the painter and let the wreck drift.

"It'll be down ten foot and more in a jiffy," he said, "and in a while it'll reach the bottom, or get broken up and float away. Anyway, it'll give 'em a scent. They'll turn to the river, or the far shore."

Satisfied with his labours he retreated to his house, clambered in through the window of the bedroom, and presently called loudly for his wife.

"Wuss," he said as she entered, sitting up and treating her to a broad wink. "It's wuss, that head of mine. Feels like a swollen pertater. Can't think. Can't even sleep. What's the clock?"

"The time? Why, ten," answered Mrs. Orring. "You've been asleep, sure."

"That's likely. I thought it war somewhere's in the neighbourhood of sevin. Good night!"

James threw himself flat again, and grunted, while Mrs. Orring retired.

"He's been fast asleep all this while, I do believe," she said, addressing Jack's mother, and nodding significantly. "Poor dear, I've left him to it!"

Having safely established his alibi, James Orring fell into a deep slumber, and indeed was still snoring heavily when the constable appeared and insisted on searching the premises.

CHAPTER IV

The Road to California

Jack Kingsley's escape from the jail at Hopeville caused a huge sensation, and the hue and cry raised by the constable and by the officials in charge of the case extended into the country on every side. It was clear that he had been aided by some outside individual, and, as was perfectly natural, suspicion fell upon James Orring.

"He's been the one all through that's stuck up for the prisoner," reported the constable, at his wits' end to provide a tale which would clear himself from blame, "and I can't help thinking he's done it. But he's too clever."

"How?" demanded the official who was interrogating him.

"Just this way. James has witnesses to swear he was at home from after tea till I went round to inspect and search the premises. I went to his house the instant I learned that the prisoner had escaped, and found James fast asleep."

"Or kidding," suggested the official.

"No; right down fast asleep, and no mistake. And Mrs. Orring, whom I've known all my life, declared he'd gone to bed with a baddish headache soon after tea, and had been there ever since. He'd wakened once, and had called her."

"Is there anyone else whom you suspect of complicity in the escape?" he was asked.

"Nary one. Jack Kingsley was a stranger, so ter speak, and hadn't any friends. That's why I'll stake my davy James was in it."

"Well? And have you any news as to the direction he took?"

"Down stream," answered the constable emphatically. "I searched James Orring's yard thoroughly, yer bet, and then someone told me that a boat was missing. Later on it was reported stranded on the far shore, with the planks kicked in. So the prisoner is at large over thar."

"Where we shall lay our hands on him," said the official. "I will send his description to all the stations."

But a week passed and still there was no trace of the prisoner.

"Yer must jest lie low and doggo a little longer," said James one early morning, standing at the door of the smithy, and speaking apparently to the air. "Find it comfortable in thar?"

"Been in a worse spot," sang out Jack cheerily, for he was still ensconced behind James's scrap heap. "It's a little cramping to the legs, that's all."

"And had enough to eat?"

"Heaps, thanks!"

"Then stick it out a bit longer. That 'ere Simpkins, the constable, can't get it out of his mind that I war the one to free yer. He's got a sorter idea you're here, and he comes slinking round most times of the day. So don't yer show so much as a finger."

Jack, fortunately for him, obeyed these instructions to the letter, never emerging from his retreat even at night-time. For one evening the constable put in an unexpected appearance, coming from the back of the houses. He found James Orring washing before a bucket placed in the yard standing between the smithy and the house, and his wife holding a towel in readiness for him.

"Why, it aer the constable!" said James in surprise, as his face emerged from the pail and he stretched out for the towel. "What in thunder aer he come along fer? Say, Simpkins, will yer come and have a bit of tea with us? I knows ye've been a trifle put out over this affair, and have got it stuck into yer head that I'm the man that's done it. Jest try to get the idea put clean aside, and let bygones be bygones. Come and have a bit of tea and a smoke afterwards."

But Simpkins was not to be beguiled. He strode into the smithy, and afterwards carefully searched every corner of the yard, climbing on to the top of the scrap heap. Evidently he disbelieved James, and thought he was being hoaxed. His attitude vexed Mrs. Orring till her patience gave out.

"Look ye here, young man," she called out at last, "ef yer want to come searching round here most hours of the day and night, yer'd better by half come and take up yer quarters here altogether, so as to save trouble. Trade's not been that good that we'd sniff at a lodger, and we'd make yer comfortable. Then yer could sit right at the smithy door, and count the people what comes during the day. Or yer could sit right thar in the parlour, and make sure as sure that we ain't feedin' young Jack. More shame to yer to hound after him so! A wee, young chap such as he."

James Orring laughed heartily, while Simpkins looked confused, and reddened. He had a very great idea of his own importance, and banter irritated him. Moreover, cases in Hopeville being few and far between, he had made the utmost of this one of burglary and murder. He had been so energetic, in fact, that he had won the commendation of the sheriff. And now the escape of his prisoner at the eleventh hour had brought ridicule down on his head. People joked him in the street, and his wounded dignity was ready to blaze out at anything. If Mrs. Orring had been alone he would have given her a piece of his mind. But James was there, looking particularly formidable, and laughing heartily, thereby showing he cared not a fig for the constable.

"If I was you I'd jest git," said James. "This here smithy ain't a healthy place for sech as you. Don't yer take my missus serious. She don't want you ter stop up here; not at all."

"I'm open to lay anything that you helped the prisoner to escape," blustered Simpkins; "and I believe that if I searched high and low I'd find him."

"Then why not get to at it?" asked James with a bantering smile. "One would have thought yer had already done it pretty thoroughly."

"Then I haven't. I'd like to pull the smithy down and see what's behind those bellows, or up in the loft Besides, there's that heap of scrap. Fer all I know you've hidden him there."

James Orring went off into a peal of gruff laughter while his wife turned away to hide her dismay. As for Simpkins, he walked to the tumbled heap of iron rusting against the smithy, and began to pull portions of it away.

"Say, constable, you'll be the death of me," gasped James, doubling up with laughing. "Why, if that ain't Seth and Piggy Harten! Say, boys, what do yer think's the latest? This here Simpkins guesses as Jack Kingsley's hidden up somewhars here, and he wants a man or two ter pull the smithy about, tear down the bellows and sichlike, and cart away that heap of scrap. He's jest took on that heap. He believes as Jack's lyin' there at the bottom."

It happened that Seth was not on the best of terms with the constable, and at James's words he giggled audibly, and turned a scornful face to Simpkins.

"You're jest about right," he cried. "Jack's 'way down below that heap o' iron scrap, and yer'd best get a horse or so to pull it about. Reckon he'll be no use as a prisoner though."

Simpkins turned an enquiring look upon him. He was a stubborn fellow, this constable, and all the banter only made him more determined.

"Why no use?" he asked.

"Cos he'll jest be as flat as a pancake. Jest like a sheet, you bet. There's three ton o' iron there, man, and it'd squeeze the life out of even a constable."

Seth went off laughing, while the constable again reddened. Turning on his heel, he gave James one quick, vindictive look, and then departed.

"He means mischief," said Mrs. Orring. "That man suspects something, and he'll not be satisfied till he's rummaged the smithy and every corner. Jack'll be found."

"Ef he's here," answered James cunningly; "ef he's here, missus. Jest yer hop right in and tell Mrs. Kingsley as her son'll be at the back door a bit after sevin. He'll be sayin' goodbye. Ef she's got a trifle for him, she'd better have it ready."

It was already getting dusk, so that there was little fear of being disturbed. James went promptly to Jack's hiding place and dragged away the odds and ends of iron he had thrown against the heap so as to hide the opening.

"Yer can hop out right now," he said. "Now, ye've got ter git, and precious slippy, else Simpkins'll have yer. How aer yer off for brass?"

"I've saved fifty-eight dollars," answered Jack promptly.

"And here's another fifty. On loan, lad. Yer can pay me back some o' these days when things have shaped a little differently. Now, what aer yer going ter do?"

Jack had been thinking it over during his enforced idleness in his retreat, and answered promptly. "I'll make west to California," he said. "Once there I shall be perfectly safe. It's the getting there that will be difficult. There's this red head of mine to tell tales everywhere."

"To be sure there is. But yer ain't no need ter fear. Mrs. Orring and me thought of that. We've sent down river for a bottle of hair dye, and guess it'll change yer nicely. Come along into the smithy, and we'll try it right now. So you'll make for Californy? And how?"

"By road. If I tried the rail I should certainly be detected. I'll make down by road somehow. Perhaps I'll get a job on the way. If not, I'll walk at night and hide up during the day."

"That's a cute idea; and say, youngster, when you gets there jest send a line. We've took your mother's address, and we can post on to her. Don't give no proper address, and don't sign a name. Savvy? Now fer the hair."

An hour later our hero was well outside the township of Hopeville, on the road to California, hundreds and hundreds of miles to the west. He was glad now to have said farewell to his friends and to be alone; for he felt that he could think better, that he could shape his actions for the future, and decide what course to follow. Uppermost in his mind, swamping all other considerations, was the overwhelming desire to prove his innocence. That was a task which he would never neglect nor forget. But for the moment he must get clear away from Hopeville, and be lost, as it were.

"In a year or so I'll be able to grow a beard," he said to himself. "By then this matter will have been forgotten, and so long as I do not come to Hopeville I shall be secure. Yes, I must get away, and wait till my appearance is changed. For the present I have a long walk before me."

All that night he trudged on in a westerly direction, traversing a road which was hardly deserving of the name. It was little better than a cart track. And the following night found him some thirty miles from his starting-point. He had met no one, and so far as he knew no one had seen him. As the evening of the third day from Hopeville closed in he ate the remainder of his provisions and took the road again; for he had slept during the day hidden in a small wood.

"To-morrow I shall have to show myself," he said. "I must buy food, or I shall be unable to stand the walking. I'll try some farm. That will be better than going to a town."

It was, indeed, the only sensible course to pursue under the circumstances, for, had he but known of it, the constable at Hopeville had supplied a description of the runaway to all towns within a hundred miles, while so greatly had the trial preyed upon Jack that, in spite of the change in his complexion, he felt nervous of discovery, as if the first woman or child who met him would recognize him at once. It was a horrible feeling, and not to be conquered till time had elapsed.

Jack had covered some five miles of his tramp that night when his ear detected sounds in the distance. He moved forward cautiously, and presently discovered a cart and horse halted in the roadway. A man was walking to and fro beside the cart, talking to himself excitedly, and kicking the ground as if he were in a temper. Our hero took as close a look at him as possible, for now and again the stranger crossed before the beam of light thrown out from a solitary lantern. He was ridiculously short, and ludicrously dressed. On his head was a black wideawake, from beneath the brim of which rolls of hair descended till they trailed on to his shoulders. He wore a short frockcoat, the tails of which came little lower than his waist, and served to accentuate his lack of stature, while a massive chain flashed across a rather ample waistcoat. The face was neither ugly nor handsome, while at

the same time, in spite of the temper in which this individual undoubtedly was, it gave promise of kindness. Jack took his courage in both hands.

"Goody!" he said, striding up. "Anything amiss?"

The stranger started back at first, and looked not a little frightened. Then he took the lamp and inspected our hero carefully, while it was as much as the latter could do to return his glances. That odious accusation, the fact that he was an escaping criminal, had almost robbed his youthful face of its refreshing frankness.

"My word! Thought you was that villain George at first," said the stranger. "Jest see here. I hired him out to look after the hosses and act the professional man. He took good wages too. And he's jest bolted. Said as he'd follow, and hasn't. Met him on the road?"

Jack shook his head. "Seen no one," he said.

"Wall, that jest proves it. He's done a bolt, and my tin box has gone with him. Guess it's lucky I cleared the cash last night. What might you be doin'?"

"Travelling west," said Jack.

"Business?" asked the stranger.

"N-n-no. Just travelling west," answered Jack. "I'm making for the diggings."

"Oh!" exclaimed the little man. "Likely enough you're goin' to meet friends there."

"I haven't any," said Jack, shaking his head, and thinking rather bitterly of his position.

"Then you ain't in a hurry, and you ain't fixed for a job. P'raps you've no need fer one."

Again Jack shook his head. He was not going to be communicative to this little man, and yet at the same time he could not afford to throw away a chance of help. If this stranger needed a man, why should he, Jack, not accept the post?

"I'm ready for a job when I find one," he said quietly. "But I'm bound for the west."

"And so am I, and I need someone to accompany me. See here," cried the little man, "you're a fair height, and would make up splendidly. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll give you ten dollars a week and your food to come with me. You'll have to feed and mind the horses, and clean out the van. Then, when we set up shop at the towns, you'll have to dress up fine and come on the stage."

"Stage!" exclaimed Jack, somewhat bewildered.

"Jest so. I'll explain. I'm a travelling conjuror and mesmerist. I have to have help. Wall, to be candid, there are tricks that can't be worked without a second man. You'll have a beard and moustache, and will dress in a frockcoat, and all that, to look professional, and you'll hang about till I call for one of the audience to come on the stage. That'll be your chance. You'll hop up, and the trick will go like fire. And for the job, ten dollars a week, your grub, and lodging in the van. It's as snug as any house."

It was a tempting offer, and Jack decided to accept it at once. But he asked another question.

"How about California? I'm bound there, and must go. I warn you I could not stay very long in your service."

"And no need. I'm makin' west, and you and me'll be strangers wherever we go. Leastwise, you will, for I've been along the route before. Wall, now, you'll get known, and ef on the return run the same man appears, and walks up on the stage, the people would spot something wrong and funny. You can leave at the end of the trip, and I'll pick up another man."

"Then I accept," said Jack.

He had been thinking keenly all the while, and saw in the offer now made him an excellent opportunity of obtaining work and a disguise at the same time. One thing, however, he did not like entirely. He asked himself whether he was to be a dupe, whether the post he had accepted would entail behaviour likely to gull the public. If that were so, he decided offhand that he would leave this little man promptly; for, though his position was critical, and arrest stared him in the face at any moment, Jack was not the one to lend himself to dishonesty.

"I'm innocent, Heaven knows," he thought, somewhat bitterly, "and I have to clear myself of that crime for which I was about to be condemned. But I will not begin the task I have set myself by acting dishonestly in any way."

"What name, please?" he asked.

"Amos Shirley, at your service from right now."

In the feeble light given by the solitary lamp the little man pulled off his huge hat with a theatrical gesture, and bobbed in Jack's direction. Indeed, looking at him there, he was, without doubt, a comical little man, full of his own importance, with plenty of humour and kindness, and, if the truth be told, given not a little to pomposity.

"Amos Shirley, conjuror, clairvoyant, mesmerist, known up and down the country. And you?"

"Tom Starling," answered Jack, reddening under Amos's gaze, a fact which the little man noted, for he coughed significantly.

"And I wish to say that I reserve the right of giving a week's notice at any time, and also that while I will help you willingly, and to the best of my ability, I will not lend myself to any underhand tricks, any sort of subterfuge, likely to gull your public."

Amos Shirley gave vent to a shrill whistle.

"Then the job's off," he said promptly, watching our hero closely. For this conjuring business was no easy one to manipulate, particularly with the intelligent people to be met with in America. Amos had before now discovered that an audience of miners, for instance, not wholly convinced of the genuineness of a trick, were apt to insist on embarrassing conditions, and were not above pelting the conjuror, or even perforating the stage with their bullets. He had, indeed, found before now that miners and cowboys required clever humouring; and while they were ready to pay liberally, and, indeed, to throw dollar notes on the stage if pleased in some particular, that they were at the same time a merry, high-spirited lot, apt now and again to become playfully reckless, and attempt a counter attraction, which chiefly took the form of showing how easily they could shoot the front lights of the stage away, or puncture the broad-brimmed hat of the conjuror with their bullets without doing any real harm.

"I'm sorry," replied Jack. "Goody!"

"Hold on. Say now," said Amos, feeling that he was about to lose a chance. "Who said there was any gulling?"

"No one," answered our hero. "At the same time I gathered there might be some sort of wish on your part. I'll help in every way when it's a case of conjuring, for we all know that sleight of hand is required, and general smartness. But in mesmerism, or anything of that sort, I'll not take a hand."

"Gee! That's straight. Say now," cried Amos, "I'll take you on those terms. You're a queer fish, you are, sticking out about such a trifle. But we won't quarrel. You will learn what's expected, and I've sufficient good tricks to play without overstepping your decision. Let's git along. Had any food?"

For five weeks in succession our hero travelled west with Amos, and the two became excellent friends. He found the work to his liking, and the post an excellent passport. No one, unless well acquainted with Jack, could have detected in Amos's helper the escaped prisoner from Hopeville. The hair die disguised him well, while the beard and moustache he donned, as soon as the stage was erected before the travelling wagon, made him even more secure. But it is always the unforeseen that happens. One evening, when he had stepped on to the stage, dressed in top hat, frockcoat, beard, and moustache, to help his employer in some conjuring trick, his eyes, roaming over the faces of the collected audience, met one which was familiar. It was Simpkins, the constable from Hopeville, sharp and alert, closely inspecting his neighbours in the audience, and every person within his vision.

CHAPTER V

On the Railway

As the constable's eyes travelled round the audience watching Amos Shirley's conjuring performance, and finally alighted on the stage, Jack felt as if he would have given anything if the rough boards beneath his feet would open. He sat in a chair, holding in his hand a handkerchief, in which his employer had, a moment or so before, wrapped a silver dollar, before the eyes of the gazer.

"You are sure it is there, ain't yer, friends?" said the little man, stepping to the front of the stage, and wagging his head in a peculiar way he had. "Did I hear someone say it was not there? Yes, I guess so. Then will you please to open the handkerchief, sir, and show the audience whether it contains something or nothing."

He tripped up to Jack, tapped the handkerchief with his wand, and displayed to the eyes of all the dollar he had placed there.

"And now to proceed with the feat," he cried, in his most pompous manner. "We wrap the coin so, and thar ain't no mistake about it. That dollar's thar solid. Yer can hear the tap of the wand. It's thar, and in a moment I'll transfer it to the audience. Now, one, two, three. There she goes."

He waved the wand again, and then caught the handkerchief from Jack's fingers.

"Say, did yer feel it fly?" he asked.

Simpkins's eyes were now on our hero, and for the moment the latter felt as if the constable were a snake whose gaze fascinated him. Jack was almost trembling. In his mind's eye he saw the cell from which he had so recently escaped, that sombre court in which the trial had proceeded, and in the near distance the prison to which he would be sent to spend ten solitary, hopeless years of his life. He could only shake his head to the question.

"Yer didn't feel it fly. But it's gone. Ye're sure of that?"

Jack nodded his head vigorously, while for one brief second he looked squarely into Simpkins's eyes. Did he see suspicion there? Or was that only a morbid fancy? The doubt was terrifying, and to speak the truth Jack Kingsley was at that moment as near to acting foolishly as ever in his life. The impulse was with him to leap to his feet, to jump from the platform, and race away for his life. For there was suspicion in Simpkins's eyes. Every man he regarded while on this special journey upon which the officials had sent him was a suspect, the prisoner who had escaped from Hopeville. Even the same man with the black beard and moustaches who had clambered on to the stage at the call of the conjuror might be the man he was searching for. And in consequence the constable regarded him with a fixed stare, and struck by something, the height perhaps, or some unconscious pose of Jack's, moved a trifle closer. A moment later a movement on the part of Amos arrested further advance.

"Ah, there is no mistake, my friends! That coin is gone, flown, as I said it would. And already I can see it. Pardon me, sir, but you have it."

The wand pointed direct at Simpkins, much to the latter's annoyance. He attempted to move away, but the crowd wedged him in, and, moreover, all eyes were on him. A chorus of laughter greeted his attempt.

"He never made a dollar easier in all his life," cried one of the audience. "Stop him! That ain't his money."

The sally drew another roar from the crowd, and set Simpkins scowling. Amos, with all his showman's instincts, made the most of the occasion.

"Say, sir," he called out, "if I may trouble yer. That money ain't yours altogether, though yer happen to have it on you. Would you jest mind stepping along this way and handin' it over? I wouldn't trouble yer, but then, if I was to come down myself, the gentlemen here might think there was some faking, and that I'd jest dropped the coin right where it is. Jest a moment, sir, and thank ye."

Simpkins could not draw back, and, finding that his scowls only made merriment for the crowd, he came forward unwillingly, shaking his head all the while.

"Ye're mistook," he called out. "There's not a stray dollar about me. Yer can hunt if yer like."

He mounted to the platform, and stood there awkwardly, within three feet of Jack, and directly facing him. Would he stretch out his hand and take the prisoner? Did he actually recognize the young man sitting there apparently so cool, and yet in reality quaking?

"Excuse me," said Amos. "Yer said you hadn't got that 'ere dollar, and I call the audience to witness as yer added that yer hadn't a stray dollar anywheres. But if that ain't a silver dollar, why – "

"Good fer you! He's got it," came the same voice from the crowd. "Didn't I say he was fer walkin' off. Hold on to it, siree. We're all able to swear as it's yours."

The reader can imagine the confusion of the constable, as Amos, standing on tiptoe, reached for his hat, and, having removed it from Simpkins's head, showed a dollar resting in it. And still more so, when, as if not yet satisfied, the conjuror discovered a second in the lining of the hat, a third in his handkerchief, and others elsewhere, not to mention a variety of objects from his pockets, such as silk neckcloths, a toy gun, and last of all a live rabbit. Then indeed was the constable overcome. He dashed from the stage and away from the audience, followed by their shouts of merriment. But he left his mark behind. Never before had Amos found his assistant so unsympathetic. His carelessness was remarkable, and more than one trick was almost spoiled. For our unfortunate young hero was more than perturbed. The chilling influence of the law was on him, and, do what he could, he failed to drive from his mind that ever-present dread that his disguise was discovered.

"I shall have to bolt again," he thought, as he sat in the chair facing the audience. "There is nothing else for it. Simpkins will be asking questions all round, and the instant he hears from Amos that I met him back east on the road, he'll know that I'm his man. I must go the instant this business is over."

It seemed an eternity before the performance was ended, and he was able to retire to the wagon. Then, at once, he accosted his employer.

"I want to say something," he said quietly, "and I hope you won't think badly of me. But I must leave you at once. Never mind the reason. I must go right now without another minute's delay. I know it will put you out a little, for you will want someone else. But I am willing to hand back half the wages you have paid me."

Amos regarded his young helper with an expression of surprise and concern. He had come to like his right-hand man very much, and indeed treated him now more as if he were his son.

"Gee!" he cried. "What's this? Leave right now, but – "

"I am sorry. It must be, though," said Jack. "Here's the money. Half of what I have earned. Shake hands and let me go."

There was a moment's pause while Amos regarded him critically and with a kindly eye.

"Ye've acted straight and willing by me all through, yer have, Tom," he said at last, "and if yer must go, why yer must. But you'd better by half trust a man who's to be trusted. I ain't a fool. I've seen all through that yer had something hard on yer mind, and I've often felt sorry for yer. It does a chap good sometimes to find a real friend who won't give him away, and who'll be right alongside to lend him some advice. What's it all about, lad? Yer can trust me as you could yer own mother. What's the trouble? If it's bad I may be able to advise, fer after all these years I'm a knowing old bird. In any case I'm sound. Your secret stays with me safe as if it was locked up in a bank."

He held out a friendly hand, and Jack gripped it, gulping hard all the while at the lump which filled his throat. He, too, had become much attached to Amos. Indeed, they had been more like father and son. And in his employer he had long since discovered a man who lived on no bed of roses, but who had to work hard for a living. But with it all he was a good fellow, by no means grasping, ready always to lend a helping hand. More than that, too, he was trustworthy, and sufficiently a man of the world to be able to look at two sides of a question.

"I'm an escaped prisoner," he said suddenly, blurting out the words. "I was taken at Hopeville, and broke out of my cell. The charge was one of burglary in which a murder was concerned."

"Wall?" asked Amos coolly, still gripping his hand.

"I can't tell the whole tale here. I haven't time."

"And no need, neither," came the answer. "I've seen it in the papers, and all about the escape. What else?"

"I swear I am innocent. As you know the whole story, you will remember how I was taken. I swear that I had followed those men to warn the people of the house. James was the only one to believe me – James Orring of the smithy at Hopeville. I hadn't another friend, save his wife and my mother. So I made up my mind to bolt, for outside a prison I have a chance of finding those men and of clearing myself."

"Guess you have," came the reply. "Guess, too, that yer did right, and Jim Orring aer a good man to help yer."

There was a smile on his face now, and it increased as Jack regarded him with a startled expression.

"Yer see," he explained, "Jim and me aer friends, and have been since we were nippers together at Hopeville. That 'ere place is where I war born, and reckon I know every man, woman, and child thar. But I've been away a heap, and have seen so many people that I begin to forget. For instance, I didn't quite fix that 'ere Simpkins when first I set eyes on him. Jim Orring aer an old friend, and now that you tell me he's yours too, and that he was one of few to believe in you, I ain't surprised he helped yer to break out. Yer needn't get startled," he continued, for Jack showed his concern at the last statement, for he was anxious that no harm should come to the smith. "I've jest guessed the last part, and reckon I'm dead right. It's the sort of handsome thing Jim would get to doin'. But you haven't any need to admit that he helped yer. Don't say a word. Wall, now, I suppose it is Simpkins that's disturbed you?"

Jack nodded. He was so taken up with thoughts of his escape that he could scarcely speak, and, in spite of Amos's kindness, was anxious to flee.

"I recognized him after a bit," went on Amos, "but I didn't connect him with you. I thought perhaps that he meant trouble with me, for six months ago, back there close to Hopeville, there was a ruction round my stand one night. A rough in the audience wouldn't give me a fair show to get on with my performance. Wall, it came to blows, and jest when I saw Simpkins I thought he was here on that concern. Seems he ain't; but I took the pluck out of him anyway. Now, let's think. He's a nasty fellow is Simpkins, suspicious, and all that; and, as sure as eggs are eggs, he'll be round here asking me where I've been, who's my man, and where I got him; for of course he knows I always have a man to help in the show. Yes, Tom, guess ye've got to git slippy. I won't stop yer. Yer hop right off, and jest put that money back in yer pocket. I'll get another man easy, and no bother. Jest remember this, ef you're in any trouble, Amos is the one to call on. He's alongside of Jim. He believes that you're as innocent of that 'ere crime as any baby."

He gave Jack's hand a firm and kindly squeeze, and put courage into him. Indeed, those few seconds did a great deal for our hero. The fact that another man believed in him put heart into the lad, braced him for the work before him, and lifted a load from his mind. He seemed at once to be able to look more clearly and resolutely into the future.

"Thank you, sir," he answered gratefully. "Then I'll go, and go all the happier for what you've said."

"And how'll yer move?" asked Amos curiously.

"I don't know one bit. I want to get out of the town, and then I can think."

"Wall, I ain't going to ask more, but a nod's as good as a wink they say. Supposin' you was to make fer the station. We ain't at the end of the rail yet. It runs on another hundred miles easy. Wall, supposin', I say, yer was to make for the station, and found a train likely to leave for the west. It ain't

difficult to climb aboard when she's under weigh. That means yer havn't booked, and no one here'll be the wiser, specially Simpkins. Twenty miles out you get down and buy a ticket. To-morrer you'll be as safe as a house. Goodbye, lad, I've been pleased to meet yer."

There were tears in Jack's eyes as he bade farewell to his employer and sped from the wagon. Somehow or other the fear of arrest, the consciousness, ever present with him, that he was under the ban of the law, that he was a criminal at large, had undermined his natural resolution and courage. The feeling was so strange to him, and in course of time had so mastered the lad, that he began almost to feel as if he were actually guilty. But a few moments' conversation with Amos had done wonders. Jack's head was set well back on his shoulders again. As he left the wagon he walked like a man conscious of his own uprightness, ready and willing to face the world frankly and courageously.

"I'll take his hint," he thought, as he threaded his way through the streets. "But let me take one last look to see that I am not followed."

He cast his eyes down the road, and saw at the end the wagon which sheltered Amos. A man was walking towards it from the far distance, and our hero watched as he stopped at the wagon and finally entered. It was Simpkins, the constable.

"And likely to hear a tale which will put him off the scent," said Jack, now by no means dismayed. "Here's the station. I'll get into a corner and wait till it's dark."

There were a number of men lounging about the place, for the station was a sort of no-man's land where the idlers and curious gathered. There was no platform to be seen. Only a wooden flooring under a barnlike roof, while the train lying in the station was composed of rough carriages, which bore no resemblance to the magnificent vehicles now plying to and fro on American railways. At the tail of the train was an open truck with deep sides. Jack looked at it longingly.

"When does she start?" he asked one of the idlers.

"Sevin, sharp," was the curt answer. "Goin' west."

"Then she'll suit me," thought Jack. "I'll go along the line and look out for a spot from which I can board her."

It was already getting dusk, and by the time he had walked half a mile it was almost dark. He had traversed a level stretch of rail till now, but was delighted to find that he had reached a steep up gradient.

"It is a heavy train," he thought, "and will be sure to slow down here. I must manage to get aboard."

He sat down and waited patiently, wondering the while what Amos was doing, and what had happened during his interview with Simpkins. If only he had known it, that interview had been more than humorous. For the astute little showman had been suddenly afflicted with forgetfulness. He could hardly even remember Simpkins, much less the fact that he was a constable. As to his man, well, he might be wandering in the town. In any case Simpkins might see him when he cared to call. Yes, he was a good young chap, had been with the van quite a time, but how long he wasn't altogether certain. In fact, Amos threw abundance of dust in the eyes of the constable. But he did not smother his natural suspicions.

"I believe the old hound knows a heap more than he will say," growled Simpkins as he walked away. "And I can't help thinking that thar was something about that man on the stage which struck me as being sort of familiar. Ef it was young Jack Kingsley, whew!"

He whistled loudly, for he realized that re-arrest of the prisoner would mean commendation for the constable, and promotion to a certainty. The very thought stimulated him in his efforts. He went straight off to the station, and was just in time to inspect the train about to leave, from the engine right back to the truck trailing at the end.

"Not here," he said as he walked away, having seen the train run out of the station. "He'll be in the town, I expect. Now that I come to think about it, that fellow on the stage was jest about the right size for the prisoner, and, in spite of the beard he wore, about the same age. Gee!"

There was something else which struck him, something again to do with the pose of the man he had in his mind's eye. And now he remembered that he had often and often watched Jack as he sat in the court under trial. His pose there was precisely that of the man he had so lately seen on the conjurer's stage. In a flash it occurred to him that this must be the prisoner he sought, and he went off at a run to speak again with Amos. Meanwhile the train had run from the town at a smart pace, which, however, dropped as it ascended the rise.

"It will be a job to clamber aboard, all the same," thought Jack, as he saw it coming. "I suppose it is doing seventeen miles an hour. But I have got to get aboard somehow, if I have to dive for it."

He stood back from the rails, so that the engine lamps should not show him to the drivers. But the instant it thundered past he stepped briskly forward. Yes, the long line of heavy vehicles was pounding along at a smart pace, and, more than that, their height above the rails was greater than he had reckoned for. He watched the carriages like a cat, seeking for a handy rail. But one after another they swung past till the last was near at hand. It was a species of conductor's van, and the step descended close to the ground. There was a strong rail beside it, and to this Jack clutched as it came level with him. In spite of the fact that he had begun to run with the train, he was jerked off his feet; for the vehicles were gathering pace every second. But Jack was not to be easily beaten. He clung desperately with one hand to the rail, while he gripped the step with his other. Then he managed to swing his body till it leaned on the step, and, later, to lift himself clean on to it.

"So far so good," he thought. "Now I make back for the truck behind. I'll wait till I have gained my breath, for there is no hurry, and no bridges likely to strike me. The train does not stop for twenty miles, and, as it has to ascend a long gradient, it takes a time to do the work and cover the distance. Gee! That dragging knocked my boots about."

Five minutes later he felt able to undertake the remainder of the task before him, by no means an easy one, namely to clamber along the outside of the coach, and cross to the truck trailing behind the train. It was getting chilly on the step, and he felt that if he did not move soon he would perhaps become too cramped. Clambering to his feet, he gripped the rail overhead, which ran horizontally to the back of the coach, and felt his way along the footboard with his toes. Presently he discovered that, whereas the rail continued to the end, the boards did not. They were cut off abruptly.

"Which makes it a trifle more difficult," he thought. "I shall have to swing my way along."

But to cling to a rail and swing one's way along it when a train is tearing away at thirty-five miles an hour, and swaying horribly, is no easy matter; for the wind tears and grips at one dangerously. Jack found it required all his strength to maintain a grip, and presently drew his legs up and felt desperately for some foothold.

"I'm still a couple of yards from the end," he thought grimly, casting his eyes over his shoulder, "and I'm dead sure I can't hold on like this all the way. I must try – ah, here's something!"

His toes lit upon a beading of the carriage work, and the support he thus obtained helped him wonderfully. Then, in the gloom above, he discerned a second rail, and reaching up with one hand managed to grasp it and haul himself a little higher, with his toes still on the bead. And now his head was on a level with the windows of the coach.

"Three men," he said to himself, withdrawing his head, for a hasty glance told him that the coach was occupied. "No, four. Whew!"

A second glance told him that there was a fourth person; and once he had seen him our hero dropped down again, and gave vent to a low whistle. Surprises seemed to be ever in store for him. The fourth individual he had seen was huddled in a corner of the coach, and the glimpse Jack had caught of him showed that he was bound hand and foot.

"Gee! Now what on earth is the meaning of that?" he asked himself. "Three men sitting at the far end, with a lantern at their feet, and the fourth a prisoner!"

It was not the most comfortable place in the world in which to puzzle about such a knotty question, and, think as he might, our hero could come no nearer a solution. Obviously he must reach some point of safety and then cogitate.

"I'll get along this beading somehow," he thought, "and then take a look round. There's queer doings in that coach."

Inch by inch he wormed his way along the coach, his feet on the beading and his hands on the rail; and in course of time he gained the end. Swinging round it, as the vehicle gave a tremendous lurch, almost tearing his grip away, he found himself close to the buffers. A moment later he was seated on an iron step secured to the coach.

"So far so good," he said to himself. "Now, up I go. There's a lantern on top, and through it I'll be able to see what's happening."

It required very little energy to reach the roof of the coach, so that in a couple of minutes he was spread out on it, the air sweeping past him in a perfect hurricane. But he had a firm hold of the lantern, while his face was pressed closely to it. And once more the shrill, low whistle escaped him. For one of the three men below had moved. He had dragged the individual who was bound, into a sitting position, and had placed the lamp so that it threw its light full upon him. As our hero stared down into the interior of the coach, the man pulled a revolver from his belt and levelled it at the head of the prisoner, while his two comrades approached nearer, and, taking up their stands close at hand, began to question the unfortunate man they had bound.

Jack ran his fingers over the lantern, and pulled gently at the framing nearest him. It moved noiselessly, though a little sound made no difference, for the roar of the train drowned anything. Little by little he contrived to open the lantern, till the window provided in it was standing at right angles from the main framework. Then he dragged himself forward, and slowly inserted his head. In two minutes he was in such a position that he could see the interior of the coach clearly, while he was directly above the four men. More than that, once his head was through the window the roar of the wind ceased entirely, while the rumble of the train was no greater than those below had to contend with. They were shouting at the prisoner, and Jack opened his ears wide to listen.

CHAPTER VI

A Hold-up

As Jack looked down into the coach with his head thrust through the window of the lantern, the view he was able to obtain of the contents was infinitely clearer than that he had had when a dirty pane of glass intervened between him and the interior. Almost directly beneath him was the man holding his revolver levelled, while a little to the left, his back propped against the side of the coach, was the prisoner. He was heavily-moustached, and his clothes bore witness to the fact that he was a railway employee. Farther off were the other two, young men to look at, and from their general appearance hardly the class of individuals to lend themselves to violence. But good looks are not always a criterion of good manners. It was very clear that both were unscrupulous ruffians.

"Now yer can jest listen here, conductor," one of them was saying in loud tones, so that the roar of the train should not drown his words, and with a menace in his voice which there was no mistaking; "ye've got ter weaken right now, and without any more bobbery, or – "

He wagged his head at the revolver, while the rascal who held the weapon squinted along the sights.

"Or what?" demanded the prisoner, his voice calm, his courage unshaken.

"Or get what yer deserve. Yer've heard tell of us before, I guess; but if yer ain't, why, we're Bill Buster's band, and that'll tell yer what to look out for. Now all we want is an answer to a little question. Whar's the strong box? Even if yer don't tell us, and we have to put lead into your carcass, it won't make much difference, 'cos, we'll have the whole train easy, and then it ain't hard to find the box. By tellin' us, yer jest make the thing easier and quicker. Now, whar is it? Number three coach? Eh?"

"Go and find fer yerselves," came the bold answer. "I ain't goin' to say. Look for yerselves."

Sturdily the prisoner faced his captors, and it seemed that he would remain stubborn. But a revolver held at the head of a defenceless man has a way of persuading; for the threat these rascals had made was no idle one. It was clear they would shoot the conductor without the smallest compunction.

"Wall, a man has only one life, and so you'd better have the answer," said the conductor at last, after a painful pause. "Number four's the wagon."

"Good! Thought you wasn't a fool," said the spokesman for the bandits. "Now for the amount. It war clearin' day back thar, and the bank has sent all the stuff it could spare. How much?"

"Guess it's not far short of twenty-five thousand dollars," said the conductor grudgingly. "But thar ain't nothin' definite on the way-bills. One jest gets ter kind of hear."

"Twenty-five thousand," cried the leader of the men below, a note of triumph in his voice. "And thar's fifty-six passengers in all. Take 'em at ten dollars a head, which is a small allowance; that means quite five hundred dollars more. But they'll have a heap, some of 'em. They're goin' down to buy farms, and stock, and sich like. Now look ye here, conductor. Ye're a sensible man, as yer've proved, and we ain't got no grudge agin yer, so long as yer don't get up ter no tricks. Ef yer do, my mate here'll have a talk with yer slippy."

"Yer ain't got any cause ter bother," came the answer. "Do I look as if I could do anything?"

The conductor cast his eyes down at the cords which bound him hand and foot, and then laughed harshly.

"Reckon it'll mean a lost job to me," he said. "But give me a smoke. One of yer may happen ter have a weed."

One of the conspirators produced a cigar promptly, bit off the end, and, having placed it in the conductor's mouth, held a light to the weed.

"What I call a sensible man," said the leader of the ruffians. "Now we can git ter thinking serious of this affair. Number four's the wagon. Jim, ye'll make along fer that, and stand up at the far

end. Tom here'll drop to the rails and run to the engine. I'll be with Jim before the train's stopped. She'll begin to go steadier soon, fer we're about at the foot of the long draw-up, and the incline soon tells upon her. When she's going slower you two can slip on to the footboards and make along to the first coach. I'll jest bring her up with the screw brake. That's clear? Then best have a look to see how the boards lie."

From the manner in which the rascals set about their work of raiding the train it was clear that they were old hands. The two told off to go forward did not trouble to wait till the pace had diminished. They threw open the door of the coach and swung themselves out on to the footboards. Then they moved along them with an ease which put Jack's efforts to shame, and, having reached the second coach, sat down on the boards. By then the train was well on the incline, and the pace was getting less. Half a mile farther on she was making only twenty miles an hour.

"Jest the moment fer me," said the man who had remained in the coach. "I'll give her the brake. Now mind it that yer don't interfere, conductor. Ef yer do, it'll mean a case of shootin'."

As cool as an icicle the man stepped across to the big wheel which controlled the tail brake of the train, and swung it round till it was hard on. Instantly the screech of the slippers on the wheels could be heard, while a line of fire sprang from the surface of the rails.

"That'll do it in five minutes or less," said the man, thrusting his head out of the open door. "No engine will be able ter pull agin it. So long! and don't git interferin'."

He, too, swung himself out of the coach, leaving the prisoner alone, with Jack still staring in through the lantern. And let the reader imagine for a moment the struggle going on in our hero's mind. Once before, but a short while ago, he had endeavoured to thwart a crime, to come between robbers and their prey; and he himself had been accused of the crime he was attempting to put a stop to. The bitterness of that bitter experience was still with him. It had clouded his young life, till he could think of little else. And here he was face to face with a similar experience, a crime about to be committed, and he alone to stand between the passengers on the train and the ruffians about to rob them. It was, indeed, a struggle. Jack was not naturally indecisive. He could make up his mind when he liked, and quickly too. But it must be owned that he hesitated. Fear of another terrible misunderstanding haunted him. Then he thought of the passengers, of the man below, and of his responsibility. In a moment he was clambering in through the window in the lantern, and a second later dropped down into the coach.

"My! What, another!"

The conductor had taken him for one of the gang, and looked at him with scowling face.

"No," cried Jack emphatically. "I heard all they said, and I've come to help you. There!"

He drew his knife and cut the cords, setting the man free.

"Now," he said, "I've taken the first step. I'm willing to do what you may suggest."

"But – but how on airth did yer get thar, up in the lantern?" asked the conductor. "Aer you a passenger?"

"Yes and no," answered our hero boldly. "I climbed aboard when the train was going, and got on the back of this coach. But I'd seen you tied up when I looked in through the window. I thought I'd help."

"And so ye've risked bein' shot by those villains. Lad, ye've grit in you. Shake a paw. Now, what's ter be done? The train's almost stopping. Ah, swing that wheel back! My hands and arms are too numbed to do it. That'll let the pace git up agin, and possibly leave one of the men behind. Next thing is to make along to the other coaches. Pull that er drawer open. Thar's a couple of shooters thar, and they're ready loaded."

Jack followed the man's orders swiftly, and felt the train gathering way already. Then he brought the revolvers.

"Get a grip of one yerself," said the conductor. "Now jest rub these arms of mine. That's the way. There's a bit more feelin' in 'em already. In a little I'll have a grip, and then we'll give them rascals sauce. Aer yer afraid?"

"No, I don't reckon I am," answered Jack. "I'll help you."

"Then come along. Stick the shooter in your pocket and grip the rail. But I forgot, yer've had experience jest lately. One warnin' though before we move. Ef yer get a sight of those fellers, shoot! Don't wait. Shoot!"

Our hero nodded, and made up his mind to do as he was told. He waited for the conductor to get on to the footboard, and followed promptly. Very soon they had gained the next coach.

"Next's Number four," shouted the conductor. "Let's get on the roof. We can make along there easier, and reach 'em better. Did yer hear that? They're at it."

The sharp sound of a pistol shot came to the ears of the two, and after it a shrill cry. They scrambled to the top of the coach as quickly as possible, and then went on hands and knees, and made their way along it. At the far end they descended by means of the iron steps and rails, and again took to the footboards.

"Now get ready fer shootin'," shouted the conductor. "Thar'll be a man posted at this end, and I'm going to fire through the window at him. Jest be prepared to hop right in and take a shot at the others."

Jack hung to the step, closely hugging the coach, and watched the figure of the conductor as he scrambled farther along. He saw him stand to his full height and peer in through a window. His revolver was raised swiftly, and then there came a sharp crack from the inside of the coach. The conductor dropped from the footboards without a sound, and Jack caught a fleeting glimpse of his body bounding over the side track. He was alone now, and the safety or otherwise of the passengers depended upon him.

"I'll do it," he said to himself, his blood afire, and all hesitation gone. "If I break in through the door I shall be dropped for a certainty. And if I attempt to shoot through the window I shall meet with the conductor's fate. I'll try the roof again."

He went scrambling up, and within a minute had reached one of the round lanterns through which the lamps were dropped. Lifting the lid, he found he had a fair view of the interior, for there was no lamp in this lantern, and in those days the apertures were very large when compared with modern fittings. Directly below him he detected a carpeted floor and one end of a seat, while a pair of legs stretched over the carpet. They evidently belonged to some unfortunate individual who had been shot.

"Likely enough the one whose call we heard," thought Jack. "Now, let me think. From his position he fell on to his back. He didn't tumble face downwards and then roll over. That means that the man who shot him is somewhere underneath me. I'll lean over and get a better view."

He was in the act of thrusting his head into the wide lantern, when sounds at the side of the track caught his attention. Even in spite of the roar of the train he heard shouts, while an instant later the darkness was punctuated by red flashes. At the same time he became aware of the disagreeable fact that the spluttering, hissing sounds round about him were caused by bullets. Then he grasped the significance of the situation.

"Gee!" he cried. "Then they are the friends of those three rascals who boarded the cars. Now I see through the whole business. They were to tie up the conductor, and then put the brakes on. That would bring the train to a halt on the incline, and those men out there would ride up and support the robbery. Ah! They're done nicely! We've run through them. We shall see what's going to happen."

If Jack was elated one cannot blame him. But if he thought he was going to master the difficult situation without further trouble he was much mistaken. He thrust his head into the lantern and took a careful survey of the interior of the coach. Now he could see the complete figure of the man lying on his back, and saw that he was dead. There were four other persons near him, crouching on the seat, and two were ladies. Just a little farther back, almost beneath where his own feet lay, a man stood

with arms folded. He was tall, sunburned – for that Jack could see, since he was bareheaded – and had a pair of fine flowing moustaches. His arms were crossed on his breast, and his whole attitude was one of resolution. A further effort on our hero's part showed him the muzzle of a revolver, held within six inches of the tall man's head, and finally of the figure of one of the robbers.

Should he fire now? Was he to shoot the man down in cold blood as it were, though to speak the truth Jack's pulses were tingling. Was that fair play?

Who will blame the young American that he hesitated to take life? He waited a second, and that wait nearly proved his undoing. The robber caught a glimpse of him, and at once sent a stream of bullets through the roof. They tore through the boards on every side, sending the splinters flying, and drumming against the ironwork of the lantern, and by the merest chance they missed Jack.

"But he'll have me if I ain't extra smart," thought our hero, determined more than ever now to get the best of the man. "Ah, here's something to give me a hold! I'll try through the window."

He gripped a short smokestack which projected through the roof, and holding firmly with one hand leaned over the side of the car. A window was directly beneath, and well within his reach. Jack broke it with the butt of his revolver without the smallest hesitation. Then, quick as lightning, he returned to the lantern on top. One glance told him that the man inside was standing prepared to fire, either through the window or through the lantern.

"I'll make him think of the lantern," thought Jack. "It's my only chance now."

Stretched full length on the roof, with his head depending downwards, he once more gripped the smokestack, and leaned over the edge of the car. Then he deliberately kicked the lantern with his feet, and continued to drum his toes against it. Now was the time. He stretched over till he could obtain a clear view of the interior of the coach through the window, and at once caught sight of the robber standing in the same position as before, his eye half-fixed on the lantern, and half on the tall man standing so close to him. Up went Jack's revolver, though aiming was out of the question considering his inverted position. His finger went to the trigger just as the rascal within caught sight of him. And then Jack pressed unconsciously, while at the same instant the cracked glass to his right was shattered into thousands of fragments and a cloud of cutting dust was blown into his face.

"Gee! Got him! But I do believe he's managed to hit me. Seems mighty like it. Ugh! My shoulder!"

As if in a dream he saw the rascal within the coach crumple into a heap, and watched the tall man dart forward and bend over him. Then a sharp, burning pain shot through his own shoulder, and for one brief instant made him feel faint. But it was no safe place in which to encourage weakness, and with an effort Jack braced himself to the task still before him. He scrambled back on to the roof, slid to the end, and descended the swaying steps. Then he clutched his way along the footboard, and gained the door of the coach. It was opened by the man he had seen standing with his arms so resolutely folded.

"Come right in! come right in!" he cried, extending a hand. "Now, where are the others?"

Jack was winded with his exertions, but managed to answer. "One was to have gone forward to the engine," he said quickly, "and one was to make for this coach, where the third would join him. Where they are now I don't know. The conductor was tied hand and foot, but I released him. But he was hit, and dropped from the train. I think we ran through the men who were waiting to help them."

"Then we've had a fine escape," came the answer. "But we've got to take those men, and the sooner the better. Get a pull on that cord, and then be ready to shoot. They'll drop from the coaches the first chance they have, and git for their lives."

Jack tugged at the alarm fitted just outside the window, and presently the brakes began to grind and the train to slow down. As it did so two figures dropped from it and raced away, Jack and his companion firing at them, while a number of passengers in other coaches did the same. Then lamps were brought, and an inspection made.

"Guess we're lucky, down right lucky!" exclaimed the man whom Jack had spoken to. "Thar's one man killed in this coach. He swung round when this rascal entered, and put his hand to his shooter. That was quite enough to bring a bullet his way. Reckon there wasn't a move left in the rest of us. The fellow had it all his own way. A chap can't grope for his shootin' iron when a revolver's grinnin' at him. What's the news elsewhere?"

"Much the same as yourn," came from a passenger. "We were kind er dozing, and I'd jest begun ter wonder why in thunder the chap behind had put on his brakes so hard, specially when we were on a sharp incline, when the door bursts open, and a young chap climbs in smart. 'Hands up!' he says, just as quiet as may be, and 'hands up!' it had ter be. We was cornered. That young chap was Bill Buster, as he'd got to be called hereabouts, one of the expertest leaders of railway breakers and thieves that's ever been. What's the driver say?"

"I ain't heard nothing," came from the latter, who stood inside the coach rubbing his dirty hands with a piece of waste. "I wondered why the conductor had put on his brakes, 'cos it ain't too easy a job to pull out over the rise, particular when thar's a heavy train like this. But he took 'em off quick, and so we was able to pull along. Seems thar's been shootin'."

"Shootin'! Rather! And it ain't the fault of the rascals as came aboard that thar wasn't more," said the tall man. "We owe it to this here young stranger that things ain't worse. How'd it all come about? Didn't see you climb aboard way back there."

"Because I climbed aboard down the road," answered Jack boldly, the old frankness in his eyes, his face flushed with delight and triumph. For success had at last come his way. Though he hesitated to interfere at first, frightened by the cruel disappointment of that other experience, he had in the end undertaken what was clearly his duty, as it would have been the duty of any other person similarly placed. And success had come his way, though in gaining it he had incurred danger. His head was well set back on his shoulders, his eyes flashed, and Jack Kingsley looked his old, bonny self as he answered:

"I got aboard after she'd started, and managed to reach the conductor's coach. When I took a peep inside, there he was, tied up like a sack, with three men sitting over him. That's one of the fellows."

He nodded towards the body lying on the floor, and wondered vaguely whether it was his bullet which had struck him, and, if so, where. Then, leaning against the woodwork of the coach, he continued:

"So I climbed to the roof," he said, "and managed to hear what was going on. You see, there's a large lantern back there, and it has a window in it. I learned all about the attack, and saw the robbers separate while the last put on the brakes hard. Then I slipped in quick."

"Yes," came eagerly from the assembled passengers.

"There ain't much more," said Jack lamely. "The conductor led the way along to coach Number four, and I followed. He was shot. Guess he's way back there on the track, and needs our help. I climbed right up on to the roof, and – and the gentlemen here knows the rest."

"Gee! I do. This young chap never'll have a nearer shave. There's many a grown man who would have funk'd it," exclaimed the tall man, "funk'd it, I say. But he bamboozled that fellow. How'd yer manage?"

Jack explained, lamely, that he had gripped the smokestack and kicked the lantern with his feet.

"Smart! real smart!" exclaimed the tall passenger, while a chorus of approval came from the others. "Say, siree, who may yer be, and where aer yer goin'? Yer ain't fer the plains?"

"I'm a smith," answered Jack limply, for his wound was very painful, and the carriage excessively hot.

"A smith, and – here, what's the matter with the lad? Let him sit down. Did the rascal wing yer?"

The big man gripped our hero in his arms as if he were a child, and laid him on the seat. Then he bent over him and spoke softly.

"Whar's the hit?" he asked. "Ah, thar ain't no more need ter ask!"

Suddenly his eyes had detected the dark stain trailing down Jack's sleeve, while he noticed how limply the arm hung. Then his whole attention was attracted to our hero, for Jack marked the occasion of this success of his by fainting. He fell back heavily on the seat, and lay there as deathly pale as the man from whom he had received the bullet.

CHAPTER VII

Friends and Hunters

"My, now, you've given us quite a fright! Feel a bit queerish? Eh?"

As if in a dream, Jack heard the words and struggled to answer. But for some reason or other, which his disordered mind could not fathom, and which distressed him greatly, the words would not come to his lips. Moreover, he could not concentrate his wandering thoughts on any one matter. Now he was in court, under trial for robbery, and a moment later he was on the stage with Amos, helping in some conjuring feat which drew roars of applause from the assembled audience. His thoughts even swept back to that eventful ride on the railway; but they never reached finality. The train ran on and on, while he clung to the rail and the footboard, immovable, desperate, unable to creep forward or back.

"Say, now, yer ain't feelin' quite so bad? A bit shook up and so on? But better, ain't yer?"

Jack opened his eyes, and saw a bearded face leaning over him. He shut them again promptly, as if the sight had been too much for him, as well it might, for the individual who had stared so closely at our hero was not prepossessing, to say the least of it. He was gently pushed aside by another individual, and a woman's gentle voice spoke.

"Leave him to me a little," she said. "He is still very weak, and not fully conscious. Leave him, please. In a little while he will be better."

Jack felt a warm pressure on his hand, and sank once more into oblivion. But it was a pleasant unconsciousness on this occasion. No longer was he distressed with views of the court, with counsel for the prosecution standing before the jury and encouraging them to find this young fellow guilty. No longer did he cling desperately to the rail of the train. He sank into a dreamless, comforting oblivion, which held him securely in its tender grip for another half-hour. And then he suddenly opened his eyes.

"Well, now," he exclaimed, somewhat feebly, for his tongue seemed to be heavily loaded, "where on earth am I? And what has been happening? Coming, sir, coming."

Back wandered his mind to Amos, and he fancied he heard the conjurer calling to him.

"Lie still and you'll feel better. Sip this," said someone, and at once, obedient to the command, too weak to be over curious as to why it was given or by whom, our hero sipped at the glass placed to his lips. And the spirit there revived him wonderfully. It was as if a spur were needed to stimulate his flagging energies. The cordial given him seemed to have acted as a strong fillip, and in a minute he was sitting up, pushing aside an arm which endeavoured to hold him down.

"Here, what's this?" he asked indignantly. "I'm not a baby! I – halloo! Where am I?"

"Still in the train, recovering from the wound you received," said the same gentle voice. "Now lie down again."

But Jack was stubborn, and had a horror of illness or of any show of weakness. He let his legs slide from the long seat on which he had been lying, and sat bolt upright. He looked round in a dazed fashion, and then gave a cry of recognition.

"Ah, the train!" he said. "Guess this is where that robber lay. What happened?"

"A heap," said someone standing near at hand, and, looking at him, our hero discovered the man who had stood with folded arms whilst the robber's revolver was pointed at him. "Jest a heap, young sir. But there ain't no further call to fear the robber. Guess he's rubbed out clean."

He pointed to the far end of the coach, where, under a piece of sailcloth, rested something which had the form of a body. Jack shuddered and turned away.

"And no need to blame yourself neither," came from the man. "It was done in fair fight, and thar warn't no favour. 'Sides, he managed to wing you. How's the arm?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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