

Davenport Spencer

**The Rushton Boys at Rally Hall:
or, Great Days in School and
Out**



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CHAPTER I A RASH IMPULSE

“Get back, Jim. It’s over your head.”

The ball had left the bat with a ringing crack that made it soar high into the air toward left field. Jim Dabney, who was playing left, made a hard run for it, but stumbled over a clump of grass, and the ball just touched the end of his fingers.

“Wow!” he yelled, wringing his hand, “there’s another nail gone.”

“Never mind your hand, Jim!” yelled the second baseman. “Put it in here. Quick!”

Fred Rushton, who had hit the ball, was streaking it for second, and Jim, forgetting his injured hand, picked up the ball and threw it in. Fred saw that it was going to be a tight squeeze and made a slide for the base. The ball got there at almost the same time, and for a moment there was a flying tangle of arms and legs. Then Fred rose to his feet and brushed the dust from his clothes.

“Never touched me,” he remarked, with a slight grin.

“No,” agreed Tom Benton, the second baseman. “It was a pretty close call though.”

He threw the ball to the pitcher and Fred danced about between second and third.

“Bring me in now, Jack!” he shouted to Jack Youmans, the batter. “Hit it right on the trademark.”

Jack made a savage swing but met only the empty air.

“Never mind, Jack,” called Fred cheerfully. “Better luck next time. What did I tell you?” he added, as the ball, meeting the bat squarely, went whizzing past just inside third.

Jim Dabney, who was playing close up, made a clever pick-up and threw it straight as a die for home. Fred had passed third and was legging it for the plate with all his might. But this time the ball had a shade the better of it, and Fred was nabbed just as he slid over the rubber.

“Good try, old boy, but you just didn’t make it,” cried Bob Ellis, the catcher, as he clapped the ball on him.

“Sure thing,” admitted Fred, “but it was worth taking a chance.”

There were three out, and the other side came in for its inning. Jim Dabney was all smiles, as he came over to Fred.

“How was that for a throw, Fred?” he asked. “Pretty nifty, I call it.”

“It was a peach,” assented Fred. “You got me good and proper and I’m not saying a word. That wing of yours is certainly all right. How’s the hand? Did you hurt it badly?”

“Only started another nail,” answered Jim. “I suppose that will turn black now and begin to come off. That’ll make the third I’ve lost this year. Lucky it was on the left hand, though.”

“Cheer up, Jim,” laughed Bob, “you’ve got seven nails left.”

But, obviously, Jim did not need cheering up. His good-natured face was aglow with satisfaction. He had made a good stop and had thrown his man out at the plate. Then, too, he rather gloated over his scars in secret, and would exhibit them on occasion with all the pride of a soldier showing his wounds received in battle. They were so many proofs of his prowess on the diamond.

It would be straining a point, perhaps, to call the field on which the boys were playing a “diamond.” At the best it was a “diamond in the rough.” Half a mile away, on the other side of the village of Oldtown, there was a real baseball field, well laid out and kept in good condition. There

was a fine turf infield, a spacious and closely cut outfield and the base lines were clearly marked. The townspeople took considerable pride in the grounds, that were much above the average for villages of that size, and, on Saturday afternoons, almost the whole male population of the town was to be found watching the game and “rooting” for the home team.

But on this day the boys were practicing on a lot directly behind the home of Fred Rushton, who was the captain of their school nine. Big stones marked the position of the bases, and the “rubber” at the home plate was a sheet of tin. Although the infield was fairly smooth, the lot further out was rough and clumpy, and it was risky work running for high flies, as Jim had proved to his cost. But it was good practice, and the enthusiasm and high spirits of the boys made up for all defects in the playing field. It is safe to say that no highly paid athlete, prancing over the velvet sward of major league grounds, got so much real fun out of the game as these lads with their makeshift diamond.

Most of the boys playing were members of the Oldtown school team, but enough others had been picked up to make a scrub game of seven on a side. Two players had to cover the whole outfield, and each side was minus a shortstop. Even with this handicap, the game had been a good one, and, after one more inning had been played, Fred’s side had come out two runs ahead. It was getting late in the afternoon, and the boys, flushed and dusty, had begun to draw on their coats.

“Oh, don’t go yet, fellows,” urged Teddy Rushton, Fred’s younger brother. “I haven’t had half enough baseball yet. I’m as full of pep as when I began.”

“Oh, come off,” retorted Bob Ellis. “Don’t you see where the sun is? It’s getting near supper time. It’s too late to start another game.”

“Who said anything about another game?” replied Teddy. “I’m going to do some fungo hitting. Get out there, you fellows, and I’ll knock you some flies. Go along, Jim, and I’ll take off another nail.”

“You’d better not,” grinned Jim, but scampered out just the same, followed by three or four others, whose appetite for the game, like Teddy’s own, had not been fully satisfied.

Teddy had a keen eye and a good arm, and there were few boys of his age who could hit the ball harder or send it further. Usually, too, he could gauge the distance and knock a fly so that it would fall almost in the fielder’s hands. But to-day the ball seemed to take a perverse delight in falling either too short or too far out, and the boys were kept on the run, with only an occasional catch to reward their efforts.

“Have a heart, Teddy!” shouted Jim, red and perspiring. “Put ’em where a fellow can get ’em.”

“Get a move on, why don’t you?” called Teddy in return. “I can’t help it if you run like ice wagons. I hit them all right.”

“Hit!” snorted Jim wrathfully. “You couldn’t hit the water, if you fell overboard.”

A little nettled by the taunt, Teddy looked about him. He caught sight of a stage, drawn by two horses, jogging along the road that ran beside the field. A glint of mischief came into his eyes and he gripped his bat tightly. Here was a chance to prove that Jim was wrong.

The stage coach was coming from the railroad station at Carlette, a mile away, where it had been to meet the five-thirty P. M. train. Business had not been very brisk, judging from the fact that the ramshackle old vehicle carried only one passenger, a rather elderly man dressed in black, who sat on one of the side seats with his back toward the boys. A bag of mail was on the front seat alongside the driver, a lank, slab-sided individual, in a linen duster that had evidently seen better days. He held the reins listlessly over the horses, who moved slowly along, as though they were half asleep. Coach and horses and driver were so dead and alive, so Rip Van Winkle-like, that the temptation was almost irresistible to stir them up, to wake them out of their dream. To Teddy, with his native love of mischief, it proved wholly irresistible.

“Can’t hit anything, eh?” he yelled to Jim. “Just watch me.”

He took careful aim, caught the ball full on the end of the bat and sent it straight as a bullet toward the coach. Even as he swung, he heard the startled cry of his brother:

“Don’t, Teddy, don’t!”

But it was too late.

The ball struck the gray horse a glancing blow on the flank and caromed off into the coach, catching the solitary passenger full in the back of the neck. He fell over toward the opposite side, grasping at the seat to steady himself.

The effect was electric. If Teddy had wanted action, he got it—got it beyond his wildest dream.

The gray horse, stung and frightened by the sudden blow, reared high in the air and threw himself against his companion. The sorrel, catching the contagion, plunged forward. The startled driver tried to hold them in, but they had gotten beyond him. The frenzied brutes rushed on down the hill, the old coach bumping and swaying wildly behind them.

Dazed and scared, the author of the mischief dropped his bat. Horror stole into his eyes and his face showed white beneath its coat of tan.

The horses were running away!

CHAPTER II

THE RUNAWAY

At the point where the coach was moving when Teddy's hit caused all the trouble the road wound down hill at a gentle incline. A few rods further on, however, it became steep, and here it was the custom of every careful driver to gather up the reins and press his foot on the brake, to keep his wagon from crowding too closely on the heels of his horses.

If old Jed Muggs, the driver of the coach, had been able to get his charges under control before they reached the steeper portion of the hill, he might have saved the day. But he had had very little experience with runaways, and it had never entered his mind that the sober old team he drove would ever have spirit enough to take the bit in their teeth and bolt. That they might some day drop in their shafts and die of old age would have struck him as likely enough. But here they were, running like colts, and the shock of it was too much for him.

He grabbed wildly at the reins that had been hanging loosely over the horses' backs.

"Stop! Whoa, consarn yer!" he yelled, half standing up as he sawed wildly with the reins. "Burn yer old hides! what in Sam Hill's got inter yer? Whoa, whoa!"

He was agitated through and through, and his wild yells and feeble handling of the reins only made the frightened brutes go faster and faster.

Inside the coach, the passenger was holding on for dear life, as the coach bumped and swayed from side to side of the road.

"Stop them, pull them in!" he shouted, and put out his hand to grasp Jed's arm.

The driver shook him off with a savage snarl.

"Leave me alone," he snapped. "What d'yer suppose I'm doin', encouragin' 'em?"

Streaming out behind the runaways came the boys, blazing with excitement. Most of them at first had seen only the funny side of the incident. They had howled with delight at the sight of the "old plugs," as they irreverently spoke of Jed's horses, rearing up into the air like frisky two-year-olds, and the frightened antics of Jed himself had added to their amusement. It was all a huge joke, and they chuckled at the thought of the story they would have to tell to those who had not been there to see the fun.

Jim Dabney was fairly doubled up with laughter.

"Take it all back, Teddy," he shouted. "You're some hitter, after all."

"Jiminy, look at those scarecrows dance!" exclaimed Jack Youmans.

"Who'd ever think those old has-beens had so much ginger in 'em," commented Tom Davis.

But boys as a rule, though thoughtless, are not malicious, and the laughter stopped suddenly when they saw that the joke might end in a tragedy.

Fred, alone of all the boys, had seen from the first this danger. Quicker witted than the others, he had thought of the hill that lay before the runaways. But his shout of warning to Teddy had come too late to stop that impulsive youth, and now the damage was done.

"This way, fellows!" he shouted, as he took a short cut across the field in an effort to get to the horses' heads. If he had been able to do this, the other boys, coming up, could have helped to hold them. But the distance was too great, and when he reached the road the team was twenty feet ahead and going too fast to be overtaken by any one on foot.

Behind the others pounded Teddy, the cause of it all. How he hated himself for yielding to that impish impulse that had so often gotten him into trouble! Now, all he could think of was that somebody would be killed, and it would be his fault and his alone. His heart was full of terror and remorse.

"I've killed them!" he kept repeating over and over. "Why did I do it? Oh, why did I do it?"

There was not a spark of real malice in Teddy's composition. He was a wholesome, good-natured, fun-loving boy, and a general favorite with those who knew him. His chief fault was the impulsiveness that made him do things on the spur of the moment that he often regretted later on. Anything in the form of a practical joke appealed to him immensely, and he was never happier than when he was planning something that would produce a laugh. When Teddy's brown eyes began to twinkle, it was time to look for something to happen.

He was a born mimic, and his imitation of the peculiar traits of his teachers, while it sent his comrades into convulsions of laughter, often got him into trouble at school. Notes to his parents were of frequent occurrence, and he was no sooner out of one scrape than he was into another. When anything happened whose author was unknown, they looked for Teddy "on general principles."

Sometimes this proved unjust, and he had the name without having had the game. More often, however, the search found him only too certainly to be the moving cause of the prank in question. His fourteen years of life had been full of stir and action, both for him and all connected with him, and nobody could complain of dullness when Teddy was around. Still, he was so frank and sunny-natured that everybody was fond of him, even those who had the most occasion to frown. He was a rogue, but a very likable one.

Fred Rushton, his brother, a year older than Teddy, was of a different type. While quite as fond of fun and full of spirits, he acted more on reason and good judgment than on impulse. As in the instance of the batted ball, where Teddy had seen only the fun of making the horses jump, Fred had thought of the runaway that might follow.

Teddy was the kind who would make a leap and take a chance of getting away without a broken neck. Fred, while quite as ready to take the leap if it were necessary, would first figure out where he was going to land. A deep affection bound the two boys together, and Fred was kept busy trying to get Teddy out of old scrapes and keeping him from getting into new ones.

At school, Fred was a leader both in study and sports. He was one of the best scholars in his class and it was his ambition to graduate at its head—an ambition that was in a fair way to be realized.

In the field of athletics, his unusual strength, both of body and will, made him easily the first among his companions. Tall, strong, self-reliant, with clear gray eyes that never flinched at any task set before him, the other boys admitted his leadership, though he never made any conscious claim to it.

He shone in football as the fastest and cleverest fullback that the school had known for years, and he had well earned his position as captain and pitcher of the baseball team.

With the boys trailing on in the rear, the coach had now nearly reached the bottom of the hill, and was gathering speed with every jump of the frightened horses. A man rushed out from a house beside the road and grabbed at the bridle of the gray, but was thrown to the ground and narrowly escaped being trodden under foot.

On and on they went, until they were close to the little river that ran along at the foot of the hill. A bridge, about twelve feet in width, crossed the river at this point, and along this Jed tried to guide the horses. But just before they reached it, the passenger, who evidently feared that the team would crash into the railing, took a flying leap over the side of the coach and plunged head first into the river below.

The stage took the bridge, escaping the rails by a miracle. On the other side, the path curved sharply, and the team, keeping on blindly, brought up in a mass of bushes on the side of the road. The shaft snapped, and the driver was thrown over the horses' heads and landed in a thicket, badly scratched but otherwise unhurt. Two of the boys, who had now come up, rushed to the heads of the trembling horses, and, with the aid of the driver, got them under control.

The others, including Fred and Teddy, ran to the assistance of the man in the water. He had come up, spluttering and snorting, but unharmed, except for the fright and the wetting. His hair was plastered over his face and his black clothes clung tightly to his angular frame.

The river was not deep at this point, and he waded to the bank, where many eager hands were outstretched to aid him. He felt that he presented a most undignified appearance, and, although, of course, thankful for his escape, he was angry clear through. He looked up, and for the first time they clearly saw his face.

A new horror came into Teddy's eyes. He stepped back, startled, and his legs grew weak under him.

“It's—it's Uncle Aaron!” he stammered.

CHAPTER III

A NARROW ESCAPE

Modesty was not one of Teddy's strong points, but just then he had a most violent desire to fade gently out of sight. He had not the slightest wish to be "in the limelight." Never had he been more eager to play the part of the shrinking violet.

He tried to slip behind the other boys who came crowding around. But, even though partly blinded by the water that streamed over his face, the sharp eyes of his uncle had recognized him.

"So it's you, is it?" he asked ungraciously. "I might have known that if there was trouble anywhere you'd be mixed up in it."

Fred, ever eager to shield Teddy, came forward.

"Why, Uncle Aaron!" he exclaimed. "I'm awfully sorry this happened. Just wait a minute and I'll hustle round to get a rig to take you –"

"Happened!" broke in the shrill voice of his uncle. "Happened!" he snorted again, his wrath rising. "This thing didn't just happen. Something made those horses run away, and I want to know just what it was. And I'm not going to be satisfied till I find out," the man went on, glaring suspiciously from one to the other of the boys until he finally settled on Teddy.

But Teddy just then was intently studying the beautiful sunset.

Good-natured Jim Dabney tried, right here, to make a diversion.

"The horses must have got frightened at something," he ventured hopefully.

"Yes," said Jack Youmans, following his lead, "I could see that they were awfully scared."

"You don't say so!" retorted Uncle Aaron, with withering sarcasm. "I could guess as much as that myself." And the two boys, having met with the usual fate of peacemakers, fell back, red and wilted.

"Gee, isn't he an old crank?" muttered Jim.

"That's what," assented Jack. "I'd hate to be in Teddy's shoes just now."

To tell the truth, Teddy would gladly have loaned his shoes to any one on earth at that moment.

"Come here, Teddy," called his uncle sharply, "and look me straight in the eye."

Now, looking Uncle Aaron straight in the eye was far from being Teddy's idea of pleasure. There were many things he would rather do than that. There had been many occasions before this when he had received the same invitation, and he had never accepted it without reluctance. It was a steely eye that seemed to look one through and through and turn one inside out.

Still, there was no help for it, and Teddy, with the air of an early Christian martyr, was slowly coming to the front, when suddenly they heard a shout of triumph, and, turning, saw Jed Muggs hold up something he had just found on the floor of the coach.

"Here it is!" he cried; "here's the identical thing what done it!" And as he came shambling forward he held up, so that all could see it, the ball that had been only too well aimed when it had hit the gray horse.

Jed was a town character and the butt of the village jokes. He had been born and brought up there, and only on one occasion had strayed far beyond its limits. That was when he had gone on an excursion to the nearest large city. His return ticket had only been good for three days, but after his return, bewildered but elated, he had never tired of telling his experiences. Every time he told his story, he added some new variation, chiefly imaginary, until he at last came to believe it himself, and posed as a most extensive traveler.

"Yes, sir-ree," he would wind up to his cronies in the general store, as he reached out to the barrel for another cracker, "they ain't many things in this old world that I ain't seen. They ain't nobody kin take me fur a greenhorn, not much they ain't!"

For more years past than most people could remember, he had driven the village stage back and forth between Oldtown and Carlette, the nearest railway station. He and his venerable team were one of the features of the place, and the farmers set their clocks by him as he went plodding past. Everybody knew him, and he knew the past history of every man, woman and child in the place. He was an encyclopedia of the village gossip and tradition for fifty years past. This he kept always on tap, and only a hint was needed to set him droning on endlessly.

Jed's one aversion was the boys of Oldtown. He got on well enough with their elders, who humored and tolerated the old fellow. But he had never married, and, with no boys of his own to keep him young in heart, he had grown crankier and crustier as he grew older. They kept him on edge with their frequent pranks, and it was his firm conviction that they had no equals anywhere as general nuisances.

"I've traveled a lot in my time," he would say, and pause to let this statement sink in; "yes, sir, I've traveled a lot, and I swan to man I never seen nowhere such a bunch of rascallions as they is in this here town."

Then he would bite off a fresh quid of tobacco and shake his head mournfully, and dwell on the sins of the younger generation.

Now, as he hobbled eagerly up to the waiting group, forgetting for the moment his "roomatics," he was all aglow with animation. His loose jaw was wagging and his small eyes shone like a ferret's.

"Here's what done it," he repeated, in his high, cracked voice, as he handed the ball to his partner in the accident. "I knew them horses of mine wouldn't run away for nuthin'."

"Nobody ever saw them run before," Jack Youmans could not help saying.

"You shet up!" cried Jed angrily. "They was too well trained."

Aaron Rushton took the ball and examined it carefully.

"I found it in the corner of the coach under the seat," volunteered Jed. "It wasn't in there when we started. I kin stake my life on that."

"This explains the blow I got on the back of the neck," commented Teddy's uncle. "The ball must have hit one of the horses first, and then glanced off into the coach. Were you boys playing ball, when we went past?" he asked, turning to Fred.

"Yes, we were," answered Fred. "That is, we weren't playing a regular game. We'd got through with that and were having a little practice, batting flies."

"Why weren't you more careful then?" asked his uncle sharply. "Don't you see that you came within an ace of killing one or both of us? Who was doing the batting?"

Jim and Jack loyally looked as though they were trying their hardest to remember, but could not feel quite sure.

"Yes," broke in old Jed, "who was doin' it? That's what I want to know. 'Cos all I got to say is that it'll cost somebody's father a consid'able to make good the damages to the coach and the hosses. The pole is snapped and the sorrel is actin' kind o' droopy."

A smothered laugh ran around the group of boys, whose number had by this time been considerably increased. No one in Oldtown had ever known either sorrel or gray to be anything else than "droopy."

Jed transfixed the boys with a stony stare. He had, at least, the courage of his convictions.

"Yes, sir-ree," he went on, "them hosses is vallyble, and I don't kalkilate to be done out of my rights by nobody, just becos some fool boy didn't have sense enough to keep from scarin' 'em. Somebody's father has got to pay, and pay good, or I'll have the law on 'em, by ginger! Come along now. Who done it?"

"Jed is right, as far as that goes," said Mr. Aaron Rushton. "Of course, it was an accident, but it was a mighty careless one and somebody will have to make good the damage. Now, I'm going to ask you boys, one by one –"

Teddy stepped forward. His heart was in his boots. The game was up and he would have to face the consequences. He knew that none of the other boys would tell on him, and he would be safe enough in denying it, when the question came to him. But the thought of doing this never even occurred to him. The Rushton boys had been brought up to tell the truth.

“I’m sorry, Uncle Aaron,” he said, “but I’m the one that hit the ball.”

CHAPTER IV

FACING THE MUSIC

There was a stir of anticipation among the boys, and they crowded closer, as Teddy faced his angry relative.

“Jiminy, but he’s going to catch it!” whispered Jim.

“You bet he will. I wouldn’t like to be him,” agreed Jack, more fervently than grammatically.

His uncle looked at Teddy sourly.

“I’m not a bit surprised,” he growled. “From the minute I saw you on the bank I felt sure you were mixed up in this some way or other. You’d feel nice now, if you’d killed your uncle, wouldn’t you?”

Poor Teddy, who did not look the least like a murderer and had never longed to taste the delights of killing, stammered a feeble negative.

“Why did you do it?” went on his merciless cross-examiner. “Didn’t you see the stage coming? Why didn’t you bat the other way?”

The culprit was silent.

“Come,” said his uncle sharply, “speak up now! What’s the matter with you? Are you tongue-tied?”

“You see, it was this way,” Teddy began, and stopped.

“No,” said his uncle, “I don’t see at all.”

“Well,” Teddy broke out, desperately, goaded by the sarcasm to full confession, “I was batting flies to the fellows, and one of them said I couldn’t hit anything, and I wanted to show him that he was wrong, and just then I saw the coach coming, and I took aim at the gray horse. I didn’t think anything about his running away—I’d never seen him run hard, anyway—and—and—I guess that’s all,” he ended, miserably.

“No, it ain’t all, not by a long sight!” ejaculated Jed, who had been especially stung by the slur on his faithful gray. “Not much, it ain’t all! So, yer did it on puppose, did yer? I might have s’picioned from the fust thet you was at the bottom of this rascality. They ain’t anything happened in this town fur a long time past thet you ain’t been mixed up in.

“I’m mortal sure,” he went on, haranguing his audience and warming up at the story of his wrongs, “thet it was this young varmint thet painted my hosses with red, white and blue stripes, last Fourth of July. I jess had time to harness up to get to the train in time, when I found it out, and I didn’t have time to get the paint off before I started. And there was the people in Main Street laffin’ fit ter kill themselves, and the loafers at the deepo askin’ me why I didn’t paint myself so as to match the hosses. It took me nigh on two days before I could get it off, and the hosses smelt of benzine fur more than a week. Ef I could a ketched the feller what done it, I’d ’a’ taken it out of his hide, but I never had no sartin proof. Howsumever, I knowed pooty well in my own mind who done it,” and he glared vindictively at Teddy.

But Teddy had already done all the confessing he cared to do for one day, and the author of Jed’s unwilling Fourth of July display was still to remain a mystery.

Far more important to Teddy than Jed’s threats was the wrath of his uncle, who stood looking at him with a severity before which Teddy’s eyes fell.

“And you mean to tell me,” said Mr. Aaron Rushton slowly, “you have the nerve to stand there and tell me that you actually aimed at that horse—that you deliberately —”

“No, not deliberately, Uncle Aaron,” interrupted Fred, who had been trying to get in a word for his brother, and now seized this opening. “He didn’t think of what he was doing. If he had, he wouldn’t have done it. He didn’t have any idea the horses would run away. Teddy wouldn’t hurt —”

“You keep still, Fred,” and his uncle turned on him savagely. “When I want your opinion, I’ll ask you for it. If you weren’t always making excuses for him and trying to get him out of scrapes, he wouldn’t get into so many.

“Not another word,” he went on, as Fred still tried to make things easier for Teddy. “We’ll finish this talk up at the house. I want your father and mother to hear for themselves just how near this son of theirs came to killing his uncle.”

“I’ll see if I can get a rig of some kind to carry you up,” volunteered Fred.

“Never mind that,” answered his uncle shortly. “It isn’t far, and I don’t want to wait. Bring that valise that you’ll find in the coach along with you. I want to get into some dry things as soon as possible. Lucky it isn’t a shroud, instead of regular clothes,” and he shot a glance at Teddy that made that youth shudder.

“As to the damage done to the coach and horses,” Mr. Rushton said, turning to Jed, who had been watching Teddy’s ordeal with great satisfaction and gloating over what was still coming to him when he should reach home, “you need not worry about that. Either my brother or I will see you tomorrow and fix things up all right.”

“Thank yer, Mr. Rushton,” mumbled Jed, as he mentally tried to reach the very highest figure he would dare to charge, with any hope of getting it. “I knowed you would do the right thing. I’m only sorry that you should have so much trouble with that there young imp,” and he shook his head sorrowfully and heaved a sigh, as though he already saw ahead of Teddy nothing but the gallows or the electric chair.

Nor could he forbear one parting shot at that dejected youth.

“Don’t forget, young man, that you may have to reckon with Uncle Sam yet,” he hinted, with evident relish, as the party prepared to move away. “It ain’t no joke to interfere with the United States mail and them thet’s carryin’ it. The padlock on that mailbag was all bent and bunged up when the stage smashed up against that tree. Course, I ain’t sayin’ what may come of it, but them gover’ment folks is mighty tetchy on them p’int. They’ve got a big prison at Leavenworth and another at Atlanta where they puts fellers that interferes with the mails in any way, shape or manner. Oh, I know all about them places. I’ve traveled a good deal in my time, and – ”

But by this time, the uncle and nephews were well on their way up the hill, and Jed had to save the rest of his discourse for his cronies that evening at the general store.

The Rushton home stood on a beautiful elm-shaded street just beyond the field where the boys had been playing ball. It was a charming, up-to-date house, capacious and well arranged, and furnished with every comfort. A broad, velvety lawn stretched out in front, and towering elms threw their cool shadows over the roadway.

Around three sides of the house ran a hospitable veranda, with rugs and rattan furniture that made of it one large outside room. Tables, on which rested books and magazines, with here and there a vase of flowers fresh cut from the garden, showed that the inmates of the house were people of intelligence and refinement.

Mansfield Rushton, the boys’ father, was one of the most prominent citizens of Oldtown. He was a broker, with offices in a neighboring city, to which he commuted. His absorption in his business and his interest in large affairs left him less time and leisure than he would have liked to devote to his family. He was jovial and easy-going, and very proud of his two boys, to whom he was, in fact, perhaps too indulgent. “Boys will be boys,” was his motto, and many an interview, especially with Teddy, that ought, perhaps, to have ended in punishment, was closed only with the more or less stern injunction “not to do it again.”

His wife, Agnes, was a sweet, gracious woman, who, while she added greatly to the charm and happiness of the household, did not contribute very much to its discipline. She could be firm on occasion, and was not as blind as the father to what faults the boys possessed. Although each one of them was as dear to her as the apple of her eye, she by no means adopted the theory that they could

do no wrong. Like most mothers, however, she was inclined to give them the benefit of the doubt, and it was not hard to persuade her that they were “more sinned against than sinning.”

The Rushton system of household management, with love, rather than fear, the ruling factor, was not without its critics. The boys’ uncle, Aaron, some years older than his brother Mansfield, and wholly different in disposition, had been especially exasperated at it. On his occasional visits to Oldtown he never tired of harping on his favorite proverb of “spare the rod and spoil the child,” and his predictions of Teddy’s future were colored with dark forebodings.

To be sure, he had never gone so far as to prophesy that Teddy’s mischief would ever come near killing any one. And yet, that was precisely what had happened.

And as Aaron Rushton toiled up the hill the discomfort he felt from his wet clothes was almost forgotten in the glow of satisfaction that at last he had proved his theory. He would show Mansfield and Agnes that even if he was a bachelor—as they had at times slyly reminded him—he knew more about bringing up boys than they did.

The unsuspecting parents were sitting on the veranda, waiting for the boys to come in to supper. The table was spread and waiting, and Mr. Rushton had once or twice glanced impatiently at his watch.

“What on earth is keeping those boys?” he exclaimed. “Oh, here they are now. But who’s that with them? Why, it’s Aaron! Great Scott! What’s the matter?” he cried, as he sprang up excitedly.

Mrs. Rushton uttered a little shriek as her eyes fell on the three figures entering the gateway.

CHAPTER V

UNCLE AARON RAGES

It was no wonder that both were startled, for the little group coming up the walk showed that something far out of the ordinary had happened.

It was a surprise in the first place to see Aaron Rushton at all, as, contrary to his usual custom when he paid a visit to Oldtown, he had not notified them that they might expect him.

But to see him in such a plight as this was altogether beyond their experience. He was prim and precise in every detail of his clothes, and his sense of personal dignity was very strong. Neatness was a passion with him, and, in his regulated bachelor existence, this had grown upon him with the years.

But now, as he walked between the two boys, he presented an appearance that was almost grotesque. He was without his hat, which had floated down the stream and had not been recovered. His hair was plastered down on both cadaverous cheeks, his shirtfront was a mass of pulp, and his wet clothes clinging closely to him brought into full relief every bony angle of his figure. One leg of his trousers was torn from the knee to the ankle. His feet sloshed in his shoes with every step, and a wet trail marked his progress from the gate to the porch.

On each side of him walked one of the boys, Fred staggering under the weight of a big suit case, while Teddy carried nothing but a guilty conscience. But probably his burden was the heavier of the two, and he would gladly have changed loads with his brother.

Under other circumstances, the pair on the veranda would have been unable to restrain their laughter. But Aaron was not a man to take a joke, and, besides, they did not know as yet but that he had received some hurt more serious than a wetting.

They hurried down the steps to meet him.

“Why, Aaron, what on earth has happened?” asked Mr. Rushton, as he grasped the clammy hand of his brother.

“Can’t you see?” snarled Aaron ungraciously. “I’ve been in the river. It’s a wonder I’m here to tell you that much.”

“In the river!” gasped Mrs. Rushton. “How did you get there?”

“How do you suppose?” growled Aaron. “Think I went in swimming with my clothes on? I fell in, or rather, I jumped in to save my life, when Jed Muggs’ horses ran away.”

“Ran away!” exclaimed Mr. Rushton. “I never heard of their doing anything like that before. What made them run away? Did you get hurt?”

“Nothing but my feelings and my clothes,” said Aaron. “But if you want to know what made them run away, ask that precious son of yours there.” And he shot a vicious glance at Teddy, who colored as the eyes of his father and mother turned toward him.

“Teddy!” exclaimed Mrs. Rushton. “What did he have to do with it?”

“What didn’t he have to do with it, you mean. He had everything to do with it. He hit one of the horses with a baseball—aimed deliberately at him, mind you—and the horses took fright and ran away. They came within an ace of killing the driver, and, as it is, you’ll have a pretty penny to pay for the damage to the coach and horses. As for me, I might have been killed in the smash-up, if I hadn’t had the gumption to jump before we came to the bridge.”

“Oh, Teddy,” moaned Mrs. Rushton, “how could you do a thing like that?”

“Go into the house, sir,” commanded his father sternly. “I’ll attend to your case later.”

Teddy obeyed with alacrity, glad to escape for the moment from the sharpness in his father’s voice and the sadness in his mother’s eyes.

His despondency was lightened somewhat by the savory smells from the kitchen. He made his way there, to see what they were going to have for supper. It was behind the regular time, and he was ravenously hungry.

Appetizing odors came from the dishes, already taken up and ready to be conveyed to the dining-room.

“Um-yum,” he gloated. “Chicken—and green peas—and strawberries—and peach pie. Bully!”

The colored cook, Martha, who was whipping up some cream for the strawberries, turned and saw him.

“Laws sakes, honey, wut’s keepin’ the folks? I’ve just tuckered out tryin’ to keep things hot.”

“It’s Uncle Aaron,” explained Teddy. “He’s just come.”

“Umph,” sniffed Martha, none too well pleased. She had no liking for unexpected company, and least of all for Uncle Aaron, whom she disliked heartily.

Martha was an old family servant, who had been with Mrs. Rushton from the time of her marriage. She was big and black and good-natured, although she did not hesitate to speak her mind at times when she was ruffled. She was devoted to her master and mistress, and they, in turn, appreciated her good qualities and allowed her many privileges, letting her run her end of the house largely to suit herself. Long before this she had come to regard herself as one of the family.

She had dandled and crooned over the boys as babies, and, as they had grown up, she had become almost as fond of them as the parents themselves. They always knew where to get a doughnut or a ginger cake when they came in famished, and, though at times they sorely tried her patience, she was always ready to defend them against any one else.

And the one reason more than any other why she detested their Uncle Aaron was because he was “allus pickin’ on dem po’ chillen.” That the “pickin’” was only too often justified did not weigh at all in Aunt Martha’s partial judgment.

“Here dey cum, now,” she said, as she heard footsteps in the hall. “Get out of my way now, honey, and let me serve de supper. Goodness knows, it’s time.”

“I tell you what it is, Mansfield,” Aaron Rushton was saying, “you’ve simply spoiled those boys of yours. You’ve let the reins lie loose on their backs, and they’re going straight to perdition. And Agnes is just as bad as you are, if not worse. What they need is a good hickory switch and plenty of muscle behind it. If they were my boys, I’d let them know what’s what. I’d put things in order in jig time. I’d show them whether they could run things as they liked. They’d learn mighty quick who was boss. I’d – ”

“Yes, yes, Aaron, I know,” said his brother soothingly. “I feel just as bad about this as you do, and I’ll see that Teddy pays well for this mischief.”

“Mischief!” mimicked Aaron angrily. “That’s just the trouble with you folks. You excuse everything because it’s simply ‘mischief.’ Why don’t you call it crime?”

“Now, Aaron, that’s too much,” cried Mrs. Rushton, bristling in defence of her offspring. “It was an awful thing to do, of course, but Teddy didn’t realize – ” then, seeing the retort trembling on Aaron’s lips, she went on hastily: “But go right up to your room now, and get a bath and change your clothes. Mansfield will get you some things of his to put on, and I’ll have supper waiting for you when you come down.”

And Aaron, still rumbling like a volcano, was led to the upper regions, where the splashing of water shortly after told of a bath more grateful than the involuntary one he had taken an hour before.

Mrs. Rushton, with tears in her eyes, turned to Fred, in the lower hall.

“It’s just awful,” she said. “Tell me, Fred, dear, how it all happened.”

“Uncle Aaron makes too much of it, Mother!” exclaimed Fred, who had had all he could do to keep still during his uncle’s tirade. “Of course, it might have been a bad accident. But you know just as well as I do that Teddy wouldn’t have done it for all the world, if he had thought anybody would get hurt. The boys were teasing him about hitting the ball straight, and, as luck would have it, Jed’s team

came along just that minute. It just struck Teddy that here was something to aim at, and he let fly. Of course, there was only one chance out of ten of hitting the horse at all, and, even if it had hit him, it might have only made him jump, and that would have been the end of it. But everything went wrong, and the team ran away. Nobody felt worse about it than Teddy. If you'd seen how white he looked – ”

“Poor boy!” murmured Mrs. Rushton softly. Then, recollecting herself, she said a little confusedly: “Poor Uncle Aaron, I mean. It must have been a terrible shock to him. Think what a blow it would have been to all of us, if he had been killed!”

“Sure, it would!” assented Fred, though his voice lacked conviction. “But he wasn't, and there's no use of his being so grouchy over it. He ought to be so glad to be alive that he'd be willing to let up on Teddy. I suppose that all the time he's here now he'll keep going on like a human phonograph.”

“You mustn't speak about your uncle that way, Fred,” said his mother reprovingly. “He's had a great deal to try his temper, and Teddy is very much to blame. He must be punished. Yes, he certainly must be punished.”

“There's one thing, too, Mother,” went on Fred, determined to put his brother in the best light possible, “Ted might have lied out of it, but he didn't. Uncle Aaron put the question to the boys straight, or rather he was just going to do it, when Teddy spoke up and owned that he was the one who hit the ball.”

“Bless his heart,” cried Mrs. Rushton delightedly, pouncing on this bit of ammunition to use in Teddy's behalf when the time came.

Fred went to his room to wash and brush up, and a few minutes later the family, with the unexpected guest, were gathered about the table, spread with the good things that Martha had heaped upon it.

Last of all, came Teddy. Usually, he was among the first. But a certain delicacy, new to him, seemed to whisper to him to-night that he would do well not to thrust himself obtrusively into the family circle. Perhaps, also, a vague desire to placate the “powers that be” had made him pay unusual attention to his face and nails and hair. He was very well groomed—for Teddy—and he tried to assume a perfectly casual air, as he came down the stairs.

Martha caught sight of him from the kitchen, and shook her head ominously. She had heard enough to know that storm signals were out.

“Dat po' chile!” she mourned, “he sho am goin' like a lam' to de slo'ter!”

CHAPTER VI

TEDDY'S BANISHMENT

Teddy slipped in like a ghost. That is, as far as noise was concerned. If he could also have had the other ghostly quality of being invisible, it would have suited him to a dot.

He drew out his chair and was about to sit down, when his father lifted his hand.

“Stop!” he said, and there was a tone in his voice that was not often heard. “You don’t sit down at this table to-night.”

Teddy stared at him, mortified and abashed. With all eyes turned toward him, he felt as though he would like to sink through the floor.

“I mean it,” said his father. “Go straight to your room and stay there. I’ll have something to say to you later on. But before you go, I want you to apologize to your Uncle Aaron for the danger you put him in this afternoon.”

Teddy turned toward his uncle, and the sour smile he saw on the latter’s thin lips made him almost hate his relative.

“Of course, I’m sorry,” he blurted out sullenly. “I told him so, down at the bridge. He knows well enough, that I didn’t mean – ”

“That will do now,” interrupted his father. “There’s no need of adding impudence to your other faults.”

Teddy took his hand from the back of the chair and started for the hall, after one despairing glance at the table.

“But, Father – ” ventured Fred.

“Wouldn’t it be enough to make him go without dessert?” interposed Mrs. Rushton. “Can’t you let him have at least a piece of bread and butter? The child’s health, you know – ”

“Well,” hesitated Mr. Rushton. But he caught sight of the sarcastic grin on Aaron’s face.

“No,” he went on more firmly, “he can’t have a thing. It won’t hurt his health to go without his supper for once. No, nothing at all!”

“Except what Agnes or Fred may slip to him later on,” put in Aaron, with a disagreeable smile.

“Mansfield’s wish is law in this house, and Fred would not go against his father’s will,” answered Mrs. Rushton, with a coldness that for a moment silenced her brother-in-law and wiped the smile from his face.

Old Martha, over in one corner, glowered with indignation.

“Cantankerous ole skinflint,” she muttered under her breath. “Dey ain’t never nuffin’ but trouble when dat man comes inter dis house. Sittin’ dere, stuffin’ hisself, while dat po’ lam’ upstairs is starvin’ ter def. I on’y hopes one of dem chicken bones sticks in his froat. It’d be do Lo’d’s own judgment on ’im.”

But Martha’s wishes were not realized, and Aaron finished his supper without suffering from any visitation of Providence. In fact, he had seldom enjoyed a meal more. It was one of Martha’s best, and, to any one that knew that good woman’s ability in the culinary line, that meant a great deal. Then, too, Teddy, was in disgrace, and the discomfort he had suffered that afternoon was in a fair way to be atoned for. He was not by any means willing to let it rest at that, and he figured on putting another spoke in the wheel of that young man’s fortunes.

But, if Aaron had enjoyed his meal, nobody else had.

Mr. Rushton was wondering whether he had not been too severe. Mrs. Rushton, on the verge of tears, was sure he had. And Fred, who had been thinking all the time of poor Teddy, agreed with her.

That morning, their home had been one of the happiest in Oldtown. To-night, every inmate was thoroughly miserable, except their guest.

Why was it, Mrs. Rushton wondered, that trouble always came with Aaron? Never had he come except to her regret, and never had he left without a sigh of heartfelt relief on the part of every member of the family. He was a shadow on the hearth, a spectre at the feast.

He was not without good qualities, and plenty of them. In the community where he lived, he was highly respected. He was upright and square-dealing, and nobody could say that Aaron Rushton had ever wilfully done him a wrong.

But, though everybody esteemed him, there were few who really liked him. His was not a nature to inspire affection. He was too rigid and severe. The “milk of human kindness” had either been left out of his composition, or, at best, it had changed to buttermilk. Whenever one brushed against him, he was conscious of sharp edges. He was as full of quills as the “fretful porcupine,” and always ready to let them fly.

With young people especially, he had little sympathy. Although as far apart as the poles in many things, he and Jed Muggs were absolutely at one in this—their utter disapproval of boys.

Fred and Teddy had always felt in his presence that they ought to apologize for being alive.

But, if Aaron did not go so far as that, he at least resented the fact that they were so very much alive. Their noise offended him, and their pranks irritated him. Their boisterousness got on his nerves.

The bringing up of the boys had always been a bone of contention between Aaron and their parents. If their birth, in Aaron’s view, had been a misfortune, the way they were reared was nothing less than an outrage.

He never tired of storming at what he regarded as the lax and careless way in which the boys were allowed to do largely as they pleased. He magnified and distorted their boyish scrapes, until he had really convinced himself that they were headed straight for destruction, unless brought up with a round turn.

As a matter of fact, with all their faults, there were no finer boys in Oldtown.

Mr. and Mrs. Rushton, although conscious that they were perhaps a little too easy going, had always defended their methods good-naturedly. What especially irritated Aaron was their calm assumption that he did not know what he was talking about, because he had no children of his own, and their sly thrusts at the perfection of “bachelors’ children” made him “froth at the mouth.”

To-night, though, he had rather the advantage.

So he had been an old crank, had he? He hadn’t known what he was talking about! He had made too much of the boys’ little foibles! Well, what did they have to say now, now that through their younger son’s tomfoolishness, his pigheadedness, his criminal carelessness, his—there were so many good words that Aaron hardly knew which to choose, but lingered lovingly over them all—he had come within a hair’s breadth of causing his uncle’s death. Perhaps now they’d listen to his opinions with the respect they deserved.

The argument was with him for once, beyond a doubt. He had the whip hand, and he fairly reveled in his opportunity. In his heart, he was almost thankful to Teddy for having given him this advantage over the parents.

They, on their part, were sad and mostly silent. They had really been greatly shocked by the serious results that might have followed this latest prank of Teddy’s. They realized, however, the lack of malicious motive behind the act, and they knew that Aaron was failing to take this into account as much as he ought to have done.

They were at a disadvantage, too, from the fact that Aaron was their guest, and Mr. Rushton’s brother. If they defended Teddy too strongly, it would seem to be making light of Aaron’s danger and possible death.

So, with almost a clear field before him, their guest used his advantage to the full, and rumbled on to his heart’s content.

Mrs. Rushton, however, did what she could.

“You must admit, Aaron,” she ventured, “that Teddy might have lied about it, but didn’t. He didn’t let you think that somebody else had done it, but owned up, even before you asked him. Give him that much credit, anyway.”

“Ye-e-s,” admitted Aaron slowly. He was a truthful man himself, and respected the quality in others.

“Yes,” he repeated, “that was all right, as far as it went. But,” he went on, as though regretting his momentary weakness in making any concession to a criminal of the deepest dye, “what good would his telling the truth have done, if I’d been lying at the foot of the hill with a broken neck? Answer me that.”

As poor Mrs. Rushton could not think of any real benefit that could have come to Aaron under such unfortunate conditions, she was forced to abandon the attack, leaving the enemy in possession of the field.

CHAPTER VII

THE MISSING PAPERS

Cheered by his victory in this skirmish, Aaron Rushton went on:

“I tell you what it is, Mansfield, what the boys need is to go to some good boarding school, where they’ll be under strict discipline and have to toe the mark. They’ve a soft snap here, and they know it. You let them run the whole shooting match.”

“Nothing of the kind, Aaron,” protested Mansfield. “I don’t believe in the knock-down and drag-out system of bringing up children, but, all the same, the boys always mind when I put my foot down.”

“When you put your foot down!” sneered Aaron. “How often do you put it down? Not very often, as far as I’ve been able to see. They twist you and their mother around their little fingers.

“A boy’s a good deal like a horse,” he continued. “Any horse can tell just from the feel of the reins how far he dares to go with his driver. Now, what your boys need to feel is a tight rein over their backs that’ll make ’em feel that their driver isn’t going to stand any nonsense. They don’t have that feeling at home, and it’s up to you to put them where they will feel it.”

“It might be out of the frying pan into the fire,” objected Mr. Rushton. “There are many boarding schools where the boys do just about as they like.”

“Not at the one I’m thinking about,” rejoined Aaron. “Not much, they don’t! When Hardach Rally tells a boy to do anything, that boy does it on the jump.”

“Hardach Rally,” inquired his brother, “who is he?”

“He’s a man after my own heart,” answered Aaron. “He’s one of the best disciplinarians I’ve ever met. He has a large boarding school on Lake Morora, about a mile from the town of Green Haven, the nearest railway station. I reckon it’s about a hundred miles or so from here. It’s a good school, one of the best I know of. Rally Hall, he calls it, and under his management, it’s made a big reputation. If I had boys of my own—thank Heaven, I haven’t—there’s no place I’d sooner send them.”

Mr. Rushton and his wife exchanged glances.

“Well, Aaron, we’ll think it over,” his brother said, “But there’s no special hurry about it, as they couldn’t start in till next fall, anyway. In the meantime, I’ll write to Dr. Rally and get his catalogue and terms.”

“It’ll be the best thing you ever did,” remarked Aaron.

He yawned and looked at his watch.

A surprised look came into his eyes.

“Why!” he exclaimed, “it must be later than that.”

He looked again, then put it up to his ear.

“Stopped,” he said disgustedly. “I haven’t let that watch run down for five years past. And it hasn’t run down now. That’s some more of Teddy’s work. I must have jarred it or bent a wheel or something when I went over into the river.”

“Let me have it,” said Mr. Rushton, holding out his hand. “I’m pretty handy with watches and perhaps I can get it started.”

Aaron handed the timepiece over. It was a heavy, double-cased gold watch, of considerable value, and he set a great deal of store by it. It was of English make, and on the inner case was an engraving of the Lion and the Unicorn. Under this were Aaron’s initials.

His brother shook the watch, opened it, and made several attempts to set it going, but all to no purpose.

“I guess it’s a job for a jeweler,” he said at last regretfully. “Of course, I’ll pay whatever it costs to have it fixed.”

“By the time you get through settling with Jed Muggs, you won’t feel much like paying anything else,” retorted Aaron, “Give me the watch and I’ll take it down town in the morning and leave it to be mended. Chances are it’ll never be as good again.

“I’m dead tired now,” and again he yawned. “If you folks don’t mind, I guess I’ll be getting to bed.”

They were only too glad to speed him on his way. Nobody ever attempted to stop him, when he was ready to retire. It was the one thing he did that met with everybody’s approval.

His brother went up with him to see that everything had been made ready for his comfort, and then, bidding him good-night, came back to his wife.

He smiled at her whimsically, and she smiled back at him tearfully.

“Been a good deal of a siege,” he commented.

“Hasn’t it?” she agreed. “But, oh, Mansfield, whatever in the world are we going to do about Teddy?”

He frowned and studied the points of his shoes.

“Blest if I know,” he pondered. “The young rascal has been in a lot of scrapes, but this is the limit. I don’t wonder that Aaron feels irritable. Of course, he rubs it in a little too much, but you’ll have to admit, my dear, that he has a good deal of justice on his side. It was a mighty reckless thing for Teddy to do.

“I wonder,” he went on thoughtfully, “if perhaps we haven’t been a bit too lax in our discipline, Agnes. Too much of the ‘velvet glove’ and too little of the ‘iron hand,’ eh? What do you think?”

“Perhaps—a little,” she assented dubiously. Then, defensively, she added: “But, after all, where do you find better boys anywhere than ours? Fred scarcely gives us a particle of trouble, and as for Teddy”—here she floundered a little—“of course, he gets into mischief at times, but he has a good heart and he’s just the dearest boy,” she ended, in a burst of maternal affection.

“How about that boarding school idea?” suggested Mr. Rushton.

“I don’t like it at all,” said Mrs. Rushton. “I simply can’t bear to think of our boys a hundred miles away from home. I’d be worrying all the time for fear that something had happened to them or was going to happen. And think how quiet the house would be with them out of it.”

“I know,” agreed her husband, “I’d feel a good deal that way myself. Still, if it’s for the boys’ good — ”

But here they were interrupted by a commotion on the stairs, and as they rose to their feet, Aaron came bouncing into the room. His coat and vest and collar and tie were off, but he was too stirred up to bother about his appearance. He was in a state of great agitation.

“What’s the matter?” they asked in chorus.

“Matter enough,” snarled Aaron. “I was just getting ready for bed, when I thought of some papers in the breast pocket of my coat. I just thought I’d take a last look to make sure they were all right, but when I put my hand in the pocket, the papers weren’t there. What do you make of that now?” and he glared at them as though they had a guilty knowledge of the papers and had better hand them over forthwith.

“Papers!” exclaimed Mrs. Rushton, her heart sinking at this new complaint. “What papers were they?”

“I hope they weren’t very valuable?” said Mr. Rushton.

“Valuable!” almost shrieked Aaron Rushton. “I should say they were valuable. There was a mortgage and there were three notes of hand and the transcript of a judgment that I got in a court action a little while ago. I can’t collect on any of them, unless I have the papers to show. I’m in a pretty mess!” he groaned, as he went around the room like a wild man.

“We’ll make a careful search for them everywhere,” said Mrs. Rushton. “They must be somewhere around the house.”

“House, nothing!” ejaculated Aaron. “I know well enough where they are. They’re down in the river somewhere, and I’ll never clap eyes on them again. They must have fallen out of my pocket when I jumped. Oh, if I just had the handling of that imp”—and his fingers writhed in a way that boded no good to Teddy, if that lively youth were luckless enough to be turned over to his uncle for punishment.

“I can’t tell you how sorry I am, Aaron,” his brother assured him. “We’ll have a most careful search made at the place where the accident happened, the first thing to-morrow morning. I’ll also put up the offer of a reward in the post office. The papers are not of much value to any one except you, and if somebody has found them, they’ll be glad enough to bring them to you. In the meantime, we’ll take one more look about the house.”

But the search was fruitless, and, at last, Aaron, still growling like a grizzly bear, went reluctantly to his room to await developments on the morrow.

In the meantime, Teddy, the cause of it all, although cut off from the rest of the household, had shared in the general gloom. He was devotedly attached to his father and mother, and was sincerely sorry that he had so distressed them. He would have given a good deal if he had never yielded to his sudden impulse of the afternoon.

Fred had spent most of the evening with him, and had done his level best to cheer him up. He had succeeded to some extent, but, after he had left him and gone to his own room, Teddy again felt the weight of a heavy depression.

It must be admitted that not all of this came from conscience. Some of it was due to hunger.

He had never felt so hungry in his life. And it seemed an endless time from then till breakfast the next morning.

He had just turned out his light, and was about to slip into bed when he heard a soft knock on his door. He opened it and peered out into the dark hall.

“It’s me, honey,” came a low voice. “Take dis an’ don’t say nuffin’.”

The “dis” was a leg of chicken and a big cut of peach pie!

The door closed, and old Martha went puffing slowly to her room in the attic.

“Ah doan’t care,” she said to herself defiantly. “Ef it wus right fer de ravuns ter take food ter de prophet ‘Lijuh in der wil’erness, et’s right fer me ter keep mah po’ lam’ frum starvin’. So, dere, now!”

CHAPTER VIII

A FRUITLESS SEARCH

There were no traces left the next morning of Martha's stealthy visit. The chicken bone had gone out of the window, but all the rest had gone where it would do the most good. And Teddy had slept the sleep of the satisfied, if not exactly the sleep of the just.

Breakfast was served at an unusually early hour, as there was a great deal to be done to right the wrong of the day before, and it was very important that the boys get an early start in the search for Uncle Aaron's missing papers.

He himself had little hope of finding them. If they were in the river, which seemed to him most likely, they might have been carried down the stream. And, even if they were found, they might be so spoiled by the soaking that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to make them out.

In any event, it meant for him a lot of trouble, and he was in a fiendish temper, when, after a sleepless night, he came downstairs. He responded gruffly to the greetings of the others, and favored Teddy with a black stare that showed that he had not forgiven him.

"What have you got up your sleeve for to-day?" he growled. "Some more mischief, I'll be bound."

"I'm going to look for your papers," answered Teddy promptly, "and I won't stop until I find them."

His mother shot him a bright glance at the respectful reply, which rather took the wind out of Aaron's sails.

"Humph," he muttered. "Talk is cheap." But he became silent and devoted himself to the breakfast, which Mrs. Rushton, with Martha's help, had made unusually tempting in order to coax him into good humor.

"Now," said Mr. Mansfield Rushton when they had finished, "your Uncle Aaron and I are going down to the village. He's going to leave his watch to be repaired, and I've got to see Jed Muggs and settle with him for the damage to his coach and horses"—here he looked sternly at Teddy, who kept his eyes studiously on the tablecloth—"from the runaway. I'm going, too, to put up a notice in the post-office, offering a reward to any one who may find and return Uncle Aaron's papers.

"As for you boys, I want you to get some of the other boys together and go over every foot of ground down near the river, where the accident —"

"*Accident!*" sneered Aaron contemptuously.

"Where the accident happened," went on Mr. Rushton, taking no notice of the interruption. "Look in every bush on both sides of the road. Slip on your bathing suits under your other clothes, and if you can't find the papers on land try to find them in the water.

"In most places it isn't so deep but what you can wade around. Get sticks and poke under the stones and in every hole under the bank. In places where it's over your heads, dive down and feel along the bottom with your hands."

"But do be careful, boys," put in Mrs. Rushton. "I'm always nervous when you get where the water is deep."

"Don't worry, Agnes," were her husband's soothing words. "Both of them can swim like fish, and now they've got a chance to do it for something else than fun.

"And mind, Teddy," he added, "it's up to you to get busy and make good for your own sake, as well as Uncle Aaron's. I haven't yet decided"—here Aaron grinned, unpleasantly—"just what I shall do to you for what happened yesterday, but I don't mind telling you that if you come home with those papers it's going to be a mighty sight easier for you than if you don't. Now get along with you," addressing both boys, "and make every minute tell."

The Rushton boys hurried about, put on their bathing suits under their other clothes, and hastened from the house, eager for action. They were glad to get out of the shadow of Uncle Aaron, and, besides, the task they had before them promised to be as much of a lark as a duty.

“I’ll pick up Jack and Jim as I go along, and you skip around and get Bob,” suggested Fred. “Probably we’ll find some other fellows down by the bridge, and they’ll be glad enough to help us do the hunting.”

Teddy assented, and soon had whistled Bob out of the house.

“Hello, Teddy,” was Bob’s greeting. “You’re still alive, I see. What did that old crab do to you last night?”

“Nothing much,” said Teddy cheerfully. “So far, I’ve only had to go without my supper. Didn’t go altogether without it, though,” and he poured into Bob’s sympathetic ears the story of the pie and the chicken.

“Bully for Martha,” chuckled Bob. “She’s the stuff!”

“You bet she is!” echoed Teddy heartily. “But let’s hurry now, Bob,” he went on. “Fred and the other fellows are down at the bridge by this time, and we’ve got a job before us.”

The two boys broke into a run and soon overtook the three other boys, who were looking carefully among the bushes on each side of the road as they went along. This they did more as a matter of form than anything else, for it was hardly likely that the papers had been dropped this side of the bridge.

It was almost certain that they had left Aaron’s pocket at the moment he had made his flying leap into the stream. In that case, they would be either in the bushes on the bank or in the water itself. It was barely possible, too, that they had fallen in the coach, when the blow of the ball had brought Aaron to his knees. If that were so, they might have been jarred out of the coach on the further side of the road, when it had smashed into the trees.

So when the boys reached the neighborhood of the bridge, the search began in earnest. The boys scattered about under the direction of Fred, who gave each one a certain section to search over.

“Now, fellows,” he urged, himself setting the example, “go over every foot with a fine-tooth comb. We’ve simply got to get those papers, or home won’t be a very healthy place for Teddy.”

Apart from their liking for Teddy, the boys were excited by the idea of competition. To be looking for papers that meant real money, as Fred had carefully explained to them, seemed almost like a story or a play. Each was eager to be the first to find them and stand out as the hero of the occasion.

But, try as they might, nobody had any luck. They reached and burrowed and bent, until their faces were red and their backs were lame. And at last they felt absolutely sure that the papers were not on either side of the stream.

There remained then only the river itself.

“Well, fellows,” summed up Fred, finally, “it’s no go on land. We’ve got to try the water. Here goes.”

And, stripping off his outer clothes, he dived in, to be followed a moment later by Teddy.

“Gee, that water looks good,” said Jim enviously. “I wish I’d thought to bring my bathing suit along.”

“So do I,” agreed Jack, as he looked at the cool water dripping from the bodies of the brothers.

“Well, what if we haven’t!” exclaimed Bob. “Don’t let’s stand here like a lot of boobs. We can take off our shoes and roll our pants almost up to our waists. Then we can wade along near the edge, while Fred and Teddy do their looking further out in the river.”

It was no sooner said than done, and they were soon wading along in the shallower parts, each armed with a long stick, with which they poked into every place that they thought might give results.

Fred and Teddy dived and dived again, keeping under water as long as they could, and feeling along the river bed. They kept this up until they were nearly exhausted, and had to go to the bank to rest.

“It isn’t our lucky day,” said Fred, puffing and blowing. “I’m afraid the river doesn’t know anything about those papers.”

“I hate to go home without them,” said Teddy, as visions of Uncle Aaron flitted across his mind.

“Oh, well, you fellows have certainly worked like truck horses,” remarked Bob, “but if they’re not there you can’t get them, and you might as well make up your minds to it.”

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