

**BAUM LYMAN
FRANK**

PHOEBE DARING

Лаймен Фрэнк Баум

Phoebe Daring

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L. Frank Baum

Phoebe Daring / A Story for Young Folk

CHAPTER I

HOW TOBY CLARK LOST HIS JOB

“It’s a shame!” cried Becky Daring, indignantly shaking her scraggly red locks for emphasis.

“So say we all of us,” observed her brother Don in matter-of-fact tones. “But that won’t help it, Beck.”

“Wasn’t it all Judge Ferguson’s fault?” asked little Sue, listening with round, solemn eyes.

“Why, the poor old judge couldn’t help dying, you know,” said Don, judicially. “And he hadn’t an idea his candle would flicker out so soon. Old Mr. Ferguson liked Toby Clark and I’m sure, if he’d thought his own end was so near, he’d have fixed it so his clerk wouldn’t be left out in the cold.”

“And now Toby hasn’t any job, or any money, or any friends,” remarked Sue, sighing deeply.

“Yes, he has!” declared Becky. “He has me for a friend, for one, and all the village to back me up. But friends ain’t bread-an’-butter and I guess a poor cripple out of work is as bad off as if he hadn’t a friend in the world. That’s why I say it’s a shame Judge Ferguson didn’t leave him any money. It’s worse than a common shame – it’s just a *howling* shame!”

“Dear me,” said Phoebe, entering the room with a smiling glance at her younger sisters and brother, “what’s wrong now? What’s a howling shame, Becky?”

“The way Judge Ferguson treated Toby Clark.”

Phoebe’s smile vanished. She went to the window and stood looking out for a moment. Then she turned and seated herself among the group.

“You’ve heard the news, then?” she asked.

“Yes. Doris Randolph told us the Fergusons read the will this morning, and Toby wasn’t mentioned in it,” replied Don.

“That is not strange,” said Phoebe, thoughtfully. “Toby Clark was not a relative of the Fergusons, you know; he was just a clerk in the judge’s law office.”

“But he’s a cripple,” retorted Becky, “and he was made a cripple by saving Judge Ferguson’s life.”

“That is true,” admitted Phoebe. “Judge Ferguson went into grandfather’s vault, where he suspected all the Daring money had been hidden by old Elaine, our crazy housekeeper, and while he was in there, in company with Toby and the constable, old Elaine tried to shut the heavy door and lock them all up. Had she succeeded they would soon have suffocated; but Toby stopped the door from closing, with his foot, which was badly crushed, and so by his quick wit and bravery saved three lives – including his own. The judge was grateful to him, of course, and had he lived Toby would have remained in his law office until in time he became a partner. That his friend and patron suddenly died and so deprived Toby of further employment, was due to the accident of circumstances. I do not think anyone can be blamed.”

They were silent a moment and then Sue asked: “What’s going to become of Toby now, Phoebe?”

“I don’t know. He hasn’t any father or mother; they both died years ago, long before Judge Ferguson took the boy to work for him. The Clarks owned a little cabin down by the river – a poor place it is – and there Toby has lived and cooked his own meals while he studied law in the judge’s office. He lives there yet, and since the judge died, a week ago, he has done nothing but mourn for

his friend and benefactor. But Toby will find some other work to do, I'm sure, as soon as he applies for it, for everyone in the village likes him."

"Can't we do something?" asked Becky earnestly. "We owe Toby a lot, too, for he helped the judge to save grandfather's fortune for us."

"We will do all we can," replied Phoebe, positively, "but we can't offer Toby charity, you understand. He is very proud and it would hurt him dreadfully to think we were offering him alms. I'll ask the Little Mother about it and see what she thinks."

That ended the conversation, for the time, and the younger Darings all ran out into the crisp October air while Phoebe went about her household duties with a thoughtful face. She and her twin, Phil, were the real heads of the Daring family, although the orphans had a "Little Mother" in Cousin Judith Eliot, a sweet-faced, gentle young woman who had come to live with them and see that they were not allowed to run wild. But Phil was now in college, paving the way for mighty deeds in the future, and Phoebe knew her twin would be deeply grieved over the sudden death of their father's old friend, Judge Ferguson. The judge had also been their guardian and, with Cousin Judith, a trustee of the Daring estate – a competence inherited from their grandfather, Jonas Eliot, who had been one of the big men of the county. The fine old colonial mansion in which the Darings lived was also an inheritance from Grandpa Eliot, and although it was not so showy as some of the modern residences of Riverdale – the handsome Randolph house across the way, for instance – it possessed a dignity and beauty that compelled respect.

The loss of their guardian did not worry the young Darings so much as the loss of their friend, for the shrewd old lawyer had been very kind to them, skillfully advising them in every affair, big or little, that might in any way affect their interests. Mr. Ferguson – called "Judge" merely by courtesy, for he had always been a practicing lawyer – had doubtless been the most highly esteemed member of the community. For a score of years he had been the confidential adviser of many of the wealthiest families in that part of the state, counseling with them not only in business but in family affairs. In his dingy offices, which were located over the post office in Riverdale, many important transactions and transfers of property had been consummated, and the tall wooden cupboard in the lawyer's private room contained numerous metal boxes marked with the names of important clients and containing documents of considerable value. Yet, in spite of his large and varied practice, Mr. Ferguson attended to all his clients personally and only a young boy, Toby Clark, had been employed as a clerk during the past few years.

At first Toby swept out the office and ran errands. Then he developed an eagerness to study law, and the judge, finding the young fellow bright and capable, assisted his ambition by promoting Toby to copying deeds and law papers and laying out for him a course of practical study. In many ways Toby proved of value to his employer and Mr. Ferguson grew very fond of the boy, especially after that adventure when Toby Clark heroically sacrificed his foot to prevent them both from being hermetically sealed up in old Mr. Eliot's mausoleum, where they would soon have perished from lack of air.

Knowing ones declared that so strong was the affection between the old lawyer and his youthful clerk that Toby would surely inherit the fine law business some day. But no one realized then that the grizzled old lawyer's days were numbered. He had been so rugged and strong in appearance that it was a shock to the entire community when he was suddenly stricken by an insidious heart disease and expired without a word to even the members of his own family. Many grieved at Judge Ferguson's death, but none more sincerely than his office boy and daily companion, Toby Clark. He had no thought, at the time, of his own ruined prospects, remembering only that his one staunch friend had been taken from him.

Except that the lawyer's friendship had distinguished him, Toby was a nobody in Riverdale. The Clarks, who were not natives of the town but had strayed into it years before, had been not only poor and lowly but lacking in refinement. They had not even been considered "good citizens,"

for the man was surly and unsociable and the woman untidy. With such parents it was wonderful that the boy developed any ability whatever, and in his early days the barefooted, ragged urchin was regarded by the villagers with strong disapproval. Then his mother passed away and a year or so later his father, and the boy was left to buffet the world alone. It was now that he evinced intelligence and force of character. Although still considered a queer and unaccountable little fellow, his willingness to do any odd job to turn an honest penny won the respect of the people and many gave him a day's employment just to help him along. That was how the waif came under Judge Ferguson's notice and the old lawyer, a shrewd judge of humanity, recognized the latent force and cleverness in the boy's nature and took him under his wing.

Toby wasn't very prepossessing in appearance. At nineteen years of age he was so small in size that he seemed scarcely fifteen. His hair was unruly and of a dull tow color, his face freckled and red and his nose inclined to turn up at the point. He was awkward and shuffling in manner and extremely silent and shy of speech, seldom venturing any remark not absolutely necessary. The eyes redeemed the boy in many ways. They were not large nor beautiful, but they were so bright and twinkled in such a merry, honest fashion that they won him many friends. He had a whimsical but engaging expression of countenance, and although a bad conversationalist he was a good listener and so alert that nothing seemed to escape his quick, keen glance or his big freckled ears.

"If Toby said all he knows," once remarked Will Chandler, the postmaster and village president, "he'd jabber night an' day. It's lucky for us his tongue don't work easy."

The only thing Toby inherited from his shiftless parents was a shanty down by the river bank, on property that no one had any use for, and its contents, consisting of a few pieces of cheap, much-used furniture. His father, who had won the reputation of being too lazy to work, often fished in the river, partly because it was "a lazy man's job" and partly to secure food which he had no money to purchase. The villagers said he built his shanty on the waste ground bordering the stream – at a point south of the town – for two reasons, one, because he was unsociable and avoided his fellows, the other, because it saved him a walk to the river when he wanted to fish. The house seemed good enough for Toby's present purposes, for he never complained of it; but after entering Mr. Ferguson's office the boy grew neater in appearance and always wore decent clothes and clean linen. Living simply, he could afford such things, even on the small weekly wage he earned.

The boy was ambitious. He realized perfectly that he was now a nobody, but he determined to become a somebody. It was hard to advance much in a small town like Riverdale, where everyone knew his antecedents and remembered his parents as little better than the mud on the river bank. The villagers generally liked Toby and were willing to extend a helping hand to him; but he was odd – there was no doubt of that – and as he belonged directly to nobody he was wholly irresponsible.

It is a mystery how the waif managed to subsist before Judge Ferguson took charge of him; but he got an odd job now and then and never begged nor whined, although he must have been hungry more than once.

With his admission to the law office Toby's fortunes changed. The representative of a popular attorney was entitled to respect and Toby assumed a new dignity, a new importance and a new and greater ambition than before. He read in the law books during every leisure moment and found his mind easily grasped the dry details of jurisprudence. The boy attended court whenever he was able to and listened with absorbed interest to every debate and exposition of the law. Not infrequently, during the last few months, he had been able to call Mr. Ferguson's attention to some point of law which the learned and experienced attorney had overlooked. Toby seemed to live in every case his employer conducted and in his quiet way he noted the management of the many estates held in trust by the old judge and the care with which every separate interest was guarded. The boy could tell the contents of nearly every one of the precious metal boxes arranged on the shelves of the oak cupboard, for often the lawyer would hand him the bunch of slender steel keys and tell him to get a paper from such or such a box.

This trusteeship was the largest part of Mr. Ferguson's business, for not many legal differences came to court or were tried in so small and placid a district. There were other prominent lawyers in neighboring towns and a rival in Riverdale – one Abner Kellogg, a fat and pompous little man who had signally failed to win the confidence Judge Ferguson inspired but was so aggressive and meddlesome that he managed to make a living.

CHAPTER II

HOW MRS. RITCHIE DEMANDED HER PROPERTY

Toby Clark was inexpressibly shocked when one morning he learned that his dear friend and patron had been found dead in his bed. At once the lame boy hobbled over to the Ferguson home, a comfortable house at the far end of Riverdale, to find Mrs. Ferguson prostrated with grief, and Janet, the only daughter, weeping miserably and rejecting all attempts to comfort her. So he crept back to town, mounted the stairs to the homely law offices over the post office and sat down to try to realize that the kindly face he loved would never brighten its dingy gray walls again.

All the morning and till past noon Toby sat in the silent place, where every object reflected the personality of his departed master, bemoaning his loss and living over in memory the happy days that were past. Early in the afternoon steps sounded on the stairs. A key turned in the outer door and Will Chandler, the postmaster, entered the office, accompanied by a stranger.

Toby knew that Chandler, who owned the building, usually kept Judge Ferguson's office key. Whenever the old judge, who was absent-minded at times, changed his trousers at home he would forget to change the contents of the pockets. So, to avoid being obliged to return home for his key on such occasions, he was accustomed to leave it in Chandler's keeping, where it might be conveniently found when needed. Of late years the judge had seldom required the key to the outer door, for Toby Clark was always on hand and had the offices swept, dusted and aired long before his master arrived. Mr. Chandler was a reliable man and as fully trusted by Mr. Ferguson as was Toby.

"Oh, you're here, eh?" exclaimed the postmaster, in surprise, as his eyes fell upon the boy.

Toby nodded his reply, staring vacantly.

"The Fergusons have been inquiring for you," continued Chandler. "I believe Janet wants you at the house."

Toby slowly rose and balanced himself on his crutch. Then he cast a hesitating glance at the stranger.

"You'll lock up, sir, when you go away?" he asked.

"Of course," replied Will Chandler. "I only came to show this gentleman, Mr. Holbrook, the offices. He's a lawyer and has been in town for several days, trying to find a suitable place to locate. As poor Ferguson will not need these rooms hereafter I shall rent them to Mr. Holbrook – if they suit him."

The stranger stepped forward. He was a young man, not more than twenty-five years of age, handsome and prepossessing in appearance. He had a dark moustache and dark, expressive eyes, and his face was cheery and pleasant to look at. In the matter of dress Mr. Holbrook was something of a dandy, but neat and immaculate as was his apparel there was little cause to criticise the young man's taste.

"The rooms need brightening a bit," he said, glancing around him, "but the fact that Judge Ferguson has occupied them for so long renders them invaluable to a young lawyer just starting in business. The 'good will' is worth a lot to me, as successor to so prominent an attorney. If you will accept the same rent the judge paid you, Mr. Chandler, we will call it a bargain."

The postmaster nodded.

"It's a fair rental," said he; but Toby waited to hear no more. The daughter of his old master wanted him and he hastened to obey her summons, leaving Chandler and Mr. Holbrook in the office.

Janet was pacing up and down the sitting room, red-eyed and extremely nervous. In an easy-chair sat an elderly woman in black, stony-faced and calm, whom Toby at once recognized as Mrs. Ritchie, who owned a large plantation between Riverdale and Bayport. She was one of Judge

Ferguson's oldest clients and the lawyer had for years attended to all of the eccentric old creature's business affairs.

"This woman," said Janet, her voice trembling with indignation, "has come to annoy us about some papers."

Mrs. Ritchie turned her stolid glare upon the clerk.

"You're Toby Clark," she said. "I know you. You're the judge's office boy. I want all the papers and funds belonging to me, and I want 'em now. They're in the office, somewhere, in a tin box painted blue, with my name on the end of it. The Fergusons are responsible for my property, I know, but some of those papers are precious. The money could be replaced, but not the documents, and that's why I want 'em now. Understand? Now!"

Toby was puzzled.

"I remember the blue box marked 'Ritchie,' ma'am," said he, "but I don't know what's in it."

"All my money's in it – hard cash," she retorted, "and all my valuable papers besides. I could trust the judge with 'em better than I could trust myself; but I won't trust anyone else. Now he's gone I must take charge of the stuff myself. I want that box."

"Well," said Toby reflectively, "the box is yours, of course, and you're entitled to it. But I'm not sure we have the right to remove anything from the judge's office until an inventory has been made and the will probated. I suppose an administrator or trustee will be appointed who will deliver your box to you."

"Shucks!" cried Mrs. Ritchie scornfully; "you're a fool, Toby Clark. You can't tie up my personal property that way."

"The law, madam – "

"Drat the law! The property's mine, and I want it now."

Toby looked helplessly at Janet.

"That's the way she's been annoying me all the afternoon," declared the girl, stifling a sob. "Can't you get rid of her, Toby? Give her anything she wants; only make her go."

"I'll go when I get my property," said Mrs. Ritchie, obstinately settling herself in the chair.

Toby thought about it.

"I might ask Lawyer Kellogg's advice," he said. "He wasn't Judge Ferguson's friend, but he knows the law and could tell us what to do."

"Kellogg! That fat pig of a pettifogger?" cried the old woman, sniffing disdainfully. "I wouldn't believe him on oath."

"Never mind the law; give her the box, Toby," implored Janet.

But Toby had a high respect for the law.

"Do you know Mr. Holbrook?" he asked.

"No," said Janet.

"Who's Holbrook?" inquired Mrs. Ritchie. "Never heard of him."

"He is a young lawyer who has just come to Riverdale to practice. I think Will Chandler has rented him our offices," explained the boy.

"Is he decent?" asked the old woman.

"I – I think so, ma'am. I've never seen him but once, a half hour ago. But I'm sure he is competent to advise us."

"Go get him," commanded Mrs. Ritchie.

"It will be better for you to come with me," replied Toby, anxious to relieve Janet of the woman's disturbing presence. "We will go to the hotel, and I'll leave you there while I hunt up Mr. Holbrook. He may be stopping at the hotel, you know."

The woman rose deliberately from her chair.

"It's getting late," she said. "I want to get my property and drive home before dark. Come along, boy."

“Thank you, Toby,” whispered Janet, gratefully, as the two passed out of the room.

Mrs. Ritchie’s horse was hitched to a post in front of the house. They climbed into the rickety buggy and she drove into town and to the rambling old clapboard hotel, which was located on the main street. It was beginning to grow dusk by this time.

On the hotel porch stood the man they were seeking. Mr. Holbrook was smoking a cigarette and, with hands thrust deep in his pockets, was gazing vacantly down the street. Turning his attention to the arrivals the young lawyer seemed to recognize Toby. When the boy and the woman approached him he threw away his cigarette and bowed in deference to Mrs. Ritchie’s sex.

“I am Judge Ferguson’s clerk, sir,” began Toby.

“Yes; I know.”

“And this is Mrs. Ritchie, who employed the judge as her confidential business agent.”

“I am glad to know you, madam. Step into the hotel parlor, please. There we may converse with more comfort.”

When they had entered the parlor Toby explained the situation. Mrs. Ritchie wanted her box of private papers and Toby was not sure he had the right to give them up without legal authority.

“That is correct,” observed Mr. Holbrook. “You must have an order from the Probate Court to dispose of any property left by Judge Ferguson.”

“It’s *my* property!” snapped the woman.

“Very true, madam. We regret that you should be so annoyed. But you can readily understand that your interests are being safeguarded by the law. If anyone, without authority, could deliver your box to you, he might also deliver it to others, in which case you would suffer serious loss. There will be no difficulty, however, in securing the proper order from the court; but that will require a few days’ time.”

“There’s money in that box,” said Mrs. Ritchie. “I don’t trust those swindling banks, so the judge kept all my ready money for me. In that box are thousands of dollars in cold cash, an’ some government bonds as good as cash. I need some money to-day. Can’t this boy let me into the office so I can take what I want out of the box? I’ve got a key, if Toby Clark will open the cupboard for me. I drove to town to-day for money to pay off my hands with, and found the judge died las’ night, without letting me know. A pretty pickle I’ll be in, if the law’s to keep me from my rightful property!”

“You have no right to touch your box, Mrs. Ritchie. The boy has no right to allow you in Mr. Ferguson’s offices.”

“Never mind that; no one will know, if we keep our mouths shut.”

Mr. Holbrook smiled but shook his head.

“I am sorry you should be so distressed,” he said gently, “but the inconvenience is but temporary, I assure you. If you employ me to get the order from the court I will see that there is no unnecessary delay.”

“Humph!” said the woman, looking at him shrewdly. “Will it cost anything?”

“Merely my expenses to the city, a slight fee and the court charges.”

“Merely a job to rob me, eh? You want me to pay good money to get hold of my own property?”

“If you are in a hurry for it. Otherwise, by allowing the law to take its course, the property will be returned to you without charge.”

She considered this statement, eyeing the young man suspiciously the while.

“I’ll think it over,” was her final verdict. “To-morrow I’ll drive into town again. Don’t you blab about what I’ve told you is in that box, Holbrook. If you’re goin’ to settle in this town you’ll have to learn to keep your mouth shut, or you’ll get run out in short order. Judge Ferguson never blabbed and you’ll do well to follow his example. Come, Toby; I’m goin’ home.”

“By the way,” remarked Mr. Holbrook, addressing the boy in meaning tones, “you’d better keep out of Mr. Ferguson’s offices until after an inventory is made by the proper authorities. If you have

a key, as I suspect – for I saw you in the office – get rid of it at once; for, if anything is missing, you might be held responsible.”

Toby saw the value of this advice.

“I’ll give my key to Mr. Spaythe, at the bank, for safe keeping,” he said.

“That’s right,” returned the young man, nodding approval.

“Mr. Spaythe was the judge’s best friend and I think he’ll be the executor, under the terms of the will,” continued Toby, thoughtfully.

“In any event, get rid of the key,” counseled Mr. Holbrook.

“I will, sir.”

When they were standing alone by Mrs. Ritchie’s buggy the woman asked in a low voice:

“So you’ve got the key, have you?”

“Yes,” said Toby.

“Then we’ll go to the office and get my box, law or no law. I’ll make it worth your while, Toby Clark, and no one will ever know.”

The boy shook his head, casting a whimsical smile at the unscrupulous old woman.

“No bribery and corruption for me, ma’am, thank you. I’m somewhat inclined to be honest, in my humble way. But I couldn’t do it, anyhow, Mrs. Ritchie, because Judge Ferguson always kept the key to the cupboard himself, on the same ring that he kept the keys to all the boxes.”

“Where are his keys, then?”

“At his house, I suppose.”

“Tcha! That impudent girl of his has them, an’ there’s no use asking her to give ’em up.”

“Not the slightest use, Mrs. Ritchie.”

“Well, I’m going home.”

She got into the buggy and drove away. Toby stood motionless a moment, thoughtfully leaning on his crutch as he considered what to do. Spaythe’s Bank was closed, of course, but the boy had an uneasy feeling that he ought not to keep the key to the office in his possession overnight. So he walked slowly to Mr. Spaythe’s house and asked to see the banker, who fortunately was at home.

“I’d like you to take the key to the office, sir, and keep it until it’s wanted,” he explained.

“Very well,” answered the banker, who knew Toby as the trusted clerk of his old friend Judge Ferguson.

“There’s another key,” remarked Toby. “It belonged to the judge, but he always left it in Will Chandler’s care.”

“I have that key also,” said Mr. Spaythe. “Mr. Chandler sent it to me early this afternoon, by the young lawyer who has rented the offices – Holbrook, I think his name is.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, Mr. Spaythe.”

“I looked in at the offices a while ago and found them in good order,” continued the banker. Then he looked at Toby as if wondering if he had better say more, but evidently decided not to. Toby marked the man’s hesitation and waited.

“Good night, my boy.”

“Good night, Mr. Spaythe.”

Toby hobbled slowly to his lonely shanty on the river bank, prepared his simple supper, for he had forgotten to eat during this eventful day, and afterward went to bed. Every moment he grieved over the loss of his friend. Until after the funeral the boy, seemingly forgotten by all, kept to his isolated shanty except for a daily pilgrimage to the Ferguson house to ask Janet if there was anything he could do.

The day following the funeral the judge’s will was read and it was found that he had left his modest fortune to his wife, in trust for his only child, Janet. There were no bequests to anyone. Mr. Spaythe was named sole executor.

Toby was present during the reading of the will, but he was not surprised that he was not mentioned in it. The boy had never entertained a thought that his former master would leave him money. The judge had paid him his wages and been kind to him; that was enough. Now that the sad strain was over and the man he had known and loved was laid to rest, Toby Clark returned thoughtfully to his poor home to face a new era in his life.

The prime necessity, under the new conditions, was employment.

CHAPTER III

HOW THE DARINGS PLANNED

Phoebe Daring, who was fond of Toby Clark – as were, indeed, all of the Darings – did not forget her promise to ask the Little Mother what could be done for the boy. This “Little Mother” was Cousin Judith Eliot, scarcely more than a girl herself, who had come to live with the orphaned Darings and endeavor to train her wild and rather wayward charges in the ways they should go. The youngsters all adored Cousin Judith, yet she had no easy task, being a conscientious young woman and feeling deeply her grave responsibilities. Judith was an artist and had been studying miniature painting abroad when summoned to Riverdale by the sudden death of Mr. Daring. She painted some, still, in the seclusion of her pretty room, but was never too busy to attend to the children or to listen when they wished to consult her or to bewail their woes and tribulations.

Phoebe was no bother, for she was old enough and sufficiently mature not only to care for herself but to assist in the management of the younger ones. Phil, a frank, resourceful young fellow, was away at college and working hard. Becky was perhaps the most unruly of the lot; a tender-hearted, lovable child, but inclined to recklessness, willfulness and tomboy traits. It was hard to keep Becky “toein’ de chalk-line,” as old Aunt Hyacinth tersely put it, for restraint was a thing the girl abhorred. She fought constantly with Donald, the next younger, who always had a chip on his shoulder and defied everyone but Cousin Judith, while the clashes between Becky and little Sue – “who’s dat obst’nit she wouldn’t breave ef yo’ tol’ her she had to” (Aunt Hyacinth again) – were persistent and fearful. Before Judith came, the three younger Darings had grown careless, slangy and rude, and in spite of all admonitions they still lapsed at times into the old bad ways.

Judith loved them all. She knew their faults were due to dominant, aggressive natures inherited from their father, a splendid man who had been admired and respected by all who knew him, and that the lack of a mother’s guiding hand had caused them to run wild for a while. But finer natures, more tender and trustful hearts, sweeter dispositions or better intentions could not be found in a multitude of similar children and their errors were never so serious that they could not be forgiven when penitence followed the fault, as it usually did.

A few days after the conversation recorded at the beginning of this story Phoebe went to Judith’s room, where the Little Mother sat working on a miniature of Sue – the beauty of the family – and said: “I’d like to do something for Toby Clark. We’re all dreadfully sorry for him.”

“What has happened to Toby?” asked Judith.

“Mr. Ferguson’s death has thrown him out of employment and it will be hard for him to find another place,” explained Phoebe. “His bad foot bars him from ordinary work, you know, and jobs are always scarce in Riverdale. Besides, Toby wants to become a lawyer, and if he cannot continue his study of the law he’ll lose all the advantages he gained through the judge’s help and sympathy. Our dear old friend’s passing was a loss to us all, but to no one more than to Toby Clark.”

“Has he any money saved up?” asked Judith thoughtfully.

“Not much, I fear. His wages were always small, you know, and – he had to live.”

“Won’t the Fergusons do anything for him?”

“They’re eager to,” replied Phoebe, “but Toby won’t accept money. He almost cried, Janet told me, when Mrs. Ferguson offered to assist him. He’s a terribly proud boy, Cousin Judith, and that’s going to make it hard for us to help him. If he thought for a moment we were offering him charity, he’d feel humiliated and indignant. Toby’s the kind of boy that would starve without letting his friends know he was hungry.”

“He won’t starve, dear,” asserted Judith, smiling. “There’s a good deal of courage in Toby’s character. If he can’t do one thing to earn an honest living, he’ll do another. This morning I bought fish of him.”

“Fish!”

“Yes; he says he has turned fisherman until something better offers. I’m sure that Riverdale people will buy all the fish he can catch, for they’re good fish – we shall have some for dinner – and his prices are reasonable.”

“Oh, dear; I’m so sorry,” wailed Phoebe, really distressed. “The idea of that poor boy – a cripple – being obliged to carry fish around to the houses; and when he has the making of a fine lawyer in him, too!”

“Toby’s foot doesn’t bother him much,” observed Judith, dabbing at her palette. “He limps, to be sure, and needs the crutch; but his foot doesn’t hurt him, however much he uses it. Yet I think I admire his manly courage the more because the boy is capable of better things than fishing. I asked him, this morning, why he didn’t apply to Lawyer Kellogg for a position; but he said the judge never liked Kellogg and so Toby considered it disloyal to his friend’s memory to have any connection with the man. The chances are that he escaped a snub, for Mr. Kellogg detests everyone who loved Judge Ferguson.”

Phoebe nodded, absently.

“Mr. Kellogg will have the law business of Riverdale all to himself, now,” she said.

“I doubt it,” replied Judith. “Toby tells me a young man named Holbrook, a perfect stranger to Riverdale, has come here to practice law, and that he has rented Mr. Ferguson’s old offices.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Phoebe, surprised. “Then perhaps Mr. Holbrook will take Toby for his clerk. That would be fine!”

“I thought of that, too, and mentioned it to Toby,” answered Cousin Judith; “but Mr. Holbrook said he didn’t need a clerk and refused Toby’s application.”

“Then he doesn’t know how bright and intelligent Toby is. Why should he, being a stranger? If some one would go to him and tell him how valuable the boy would be to him, after his experience with Mr. Ferguson, I’m sure the new lawyer would find a place for him.”

Judith worked a while reflectively.

“That might be the best way to help Toby,” she said. “But who is to go to Mr. Holbrook? It’s a rather delicate thing to propose, you see, and yet the argument you have advanced is a just one. A young lawyer, beginning business and unknown to our people, would find a clever, capable young fellow – who is well liked in the community – of real value to him. It seems to me that Janet Ferguson would be the best person to undertake the mission, for she has an excuse in pleading for her father’s former assistant.”

“I’ll see Janet about it,” declared Phoebe, promptly, and she was so enthusiastic over the idea and so positive of success that she went at once to the Ferguson house to interview Janet.

This girl was about Phoebe’s own age and the two had been good friends from the time they were mere tots. Janet was rather more sedate and serious-minded than Phoebe Daring, and had graduated with much higher honors at the high school, but their natures were congenial and they had always been much together.

“It’s an excellent idea,” said Janet, when the matter was explained to her. “I will be glad to call on Mr. Holbrook in regard to the matter, if you will go with me, Phoebe.”

“Any time you say, Janet.”

“I think we ought to wait a few days. Mr. Spaythe is trustee of father’s estate, you know, and he has arranged to sell the office furniture to Mr. Holbrook. To-morrow all the papers and securities which father held in trust for his clients will be returned to their proper owners, and on the day after Mr. Holbrook will move into the offices for the first time. He is staying at the hotel, right now, and

it seems to me best to wait until he is in his offices and established in business, for this is strictly a business matter.”

“Of course; strictly business,” said Phoebe. “Perhaps you are right, Janet, but we mustn’t wait too long, for then Mr. Holbrook might employ some other clerk and Toby would be out of it. Let’s go to him day after to-morrow, as soon as he has possession of the office.”

“Very well.”

“At ten o’clock, say,” continued Phoebe. “There’s nothing like being prompt in such things. You stop at the house for me at nine-thirty, Janet, and we’ll go down town together.”

The arrangement being successfully concluded, Phoebe went home with a light heart. At suppertime Donald came tearing into the house, tossed his cap in a corner and with scarcely enough breath to speak announced:

“There’s a big row down at Spaythe’s Bank!”

“What’s up, Don?” asked Becky, for the family was assembled around the table.

“There’s a blue box missing from Judge Ferguson’s cupboard, and it belonged to that old cat, Mrs. Ritchie. She’s been nagging Mr. Spaythe for days to give it up to her, but for some reason he wouldn’t. This afternoon, when Spaythe cleaned out the old cupboard and took all the boxes over to his bank, Mrs. Ritchie was hot on his trail and discovered her blue box was not among the others. It’s really missing, and they can’t find hide nor hair of it. I heard Mr. Spaythe tell the old cat he did not know where it is or what’s become of it, and she was just furious and swore she’d have the banker arrested for burglary. It was the jolliest scrap you could imagine and there’ll be a royal rumpus that’ll do your hearts good before this thing is settled, I can promise you!”

The news astonished them all, for sensations of any sort were rare in Riverdale.

“What do you suppose has become of the box?” asked Phoebe.

“Give it up,” said Don, delighted to find himself so important.

“Perhaps Mr. Ferguson kept it somewhere else; in the bank vault, or at his house,” suggested Judith.

“Nope. Spaythe has looked everywhere,” declared Don. “Old Ritchie says she had a lot of money in that box, and bonds an’ s’curities to no end. She’s rich as mud, you know, but hates to lose a penny.”

“Dear me,” exclaimed Phoebe; “can’t she hold the Fergusons responsible?” appealing to Cousin Judith.

“I’m not sure of that,” replied the Little Mother, seriously, for here was a matter that might cause their lately bereaved friends an added misfortune. “If the box contained so much of value it would ruin the Fergusons to replace it. The question to be determined is when the box disappeared. If it was there when Mr. Spaythe took possession of the office, I think he will be personally responsible.”

“I don’t know anything about that,” said Don. “I was on my way home when I heard Mrs. Ritchie screeching like a lunatic that her box was stolen. I joined the crowd and we all followed to the bank, Mr. Spaythe in his automobile with the load of boxes and Ritchie running along beside the car jawing him like a crazy woman. She called him a thief and a robber at ev’ry step, but he paid no attention. Eric Spaythe had just closed the bank when we got there, but he helped his father carry in the truck, and Mrs. Ritchie watched every box that went in and yelled: ‘That ain’t it! That ain’t it!’ while the crowd laughed an’ hooted. Then Mr. Spaythe tried to explain and quiet her, but she wouldn’t listen to reason. So Eric and his father both went into the bank and locked the woman out when she wanted to follow them. It was lots of fun, about that time. I thought she’d smash in the glass with her umbrella; but while she was screaming an’ threatening the Spaythes, Lawyer Kellogg happened to come along and he drew her aside. He whispered to her a minute an’ then they both got into her buggy an’ drove away. That broke up the circus, but ev’ryone says there’ll be something doing before this thing is settled, unless that lost box turns up.”

The information conveyed was not entirely lucid, but sufficiently so to disturb the whole Daring family. They were not at all interested in Mrs. Ritchie, but the Fergusons were such old and close friends that there was a general impression that the lost box might cost them all the judge had left and practically ruin them.

“We know,” said Phoebe, in talking it over later, “that the judge was honest. Mrs. Ritchie knew that, too, or she wouldn’t have put her valuables in his keeping.”

“But it seems very unbusinesslike, on his part, to keep her valuables in an old wooden cupboard,” declared Judith. “Judge Ferguson was quite old-fashioned about such matters and evidently had no fear of either fires or burglars.”

“They never bothered him, neither,” Don reminded her. “That old cupboard’s been stuffed full of valuable papers and tin boxes for years, an’ not a soul ever touched ’em.”

“Oak doors, strong boxes and good locks,” said Phoebe; “that accounts for their past safety. Those cupboard doors are as strong as a good many safes, and as far as burglars are concerned, they manage to break in anywhere if they get the chance. I don’t believe anyone but a professional burglar could steal Mrs. Ritchie’s box, and no burglar would take hers and leave all the others. Still, if it wasn’t stolen, where is it? That’s the question.”

“It’s more than a question, Phoebe,” replied Don; “it’s a mystery.”

CHAPTER IV

HOW PHOEBE BECAME WORRIED

Reflecting on the astonishing information Don had conveyed, Phoebe went to her room and sat down at a small table near the window to which was fastened a telegraph instrument, the wire leading outside through a hole bored in the lower part of the sash.

A telegraph instrument is indeed a queer thing to be found in a young girl's room, yet its existence is simple enough when explained. Riverdale was an out-of-the-way town, quite as unenterprising as many Southern towns of its class. Its inhabitants followed slowly and reluctantly in the wake of progress. They had used electric lights since only the year before, getting the current from Canton, ten miles away, where there was more enterprise and consequently more business. Canton also supplied telephone service to Bayport and Riverdale, but the cost of construction and installation was considered so high that as yet Riverdale had but three connections: one at the post office, a public toll station; one at Spaythe's bank and one at the newspaper office. The citizens thought these three provided for all needs and so they did not encourage the Canton telephone company to establish a local exchange for the residences of their village.

Some were annoyed by this lack of public interest in so convenient a utility as the telephone. The Randolphs would have liked one in their house, and so would the Darings, the Camerons, the Fergusons and a few others; but these were obliged to wait until there was sufficient demand to warrant the establishment of an exchange.

The telegraph operator of the village was a young fellow who had been a schoolmate of both Phil and Phoebe Daring, although he was some few years their elder. Dave Hunter had gone to St. Louis to study telegraphy and afterward served as an assistant in several cities until he finally managed to secure the position of operator in his home town.

The Hunters were nice people, but of humble means, and Dave was really the breadwinner for his widowed mother and his sister Lucy, a bright and pretty girl of Phoebe's age. Encouraged by her brother's success, Lucy determined to become a telegraph operator herself, as many girls are now doing; but to avoid the expense of going to a school of telegraphy Dave agreed to teach her during his leisure hours. In order to do this he stretched a wire from his office to his home, two blocks away, and placed instruments at either end so that Lucy could practice by telegraphing to her brother and receiving messages in reply.

She was getting along famously when Phoebe Daring and Nathalie Cameron called on her one day and were delighted by her ability to telegraph to her brother.

"Why, it's as good as a telephone, and much more fun," declared Phoebe, and Nathalie asked:

"Why couldn't we have telegraphs in our own houses, and get Dave to teach us how to use them? Then we could talk to one another whenever we pleased – rain or shine."

The idea appealed to Phoebe. Lucy telegraphed the suggestion to her brother and he readily agreed to teach the girls if they provided instruments and stretched wires between the various houses. That would be quite an expense, he warned them, and they would have to get permission from the village board to run the wires through the streets.

Nothing daunted, they immediately set to work to accomplish their novel purpose. Marion Randolph, the eldest of the Randolph children, was home from college at this time and entered heartily into the scheme. They were joined by Janet Ferguson, and the four girls, representing the best families in the village, had no trouble in getting permission to put up the wires, especially when they had the judge to argue their case for them.

Dave, seeing he could turn an honest penny, undertook to put up the wires, for there was not enough business at the Riverdale telegraph office to demand his entire time and Lucy was

now competent to take his place when he was away. He connected the houses of the Darings, the Randolphins, the Camerons and the Fergusons, and then he connected them with his own home. For, as Lucy was the original telegraph girl, it would never do to leave her out of the fun, although she could not be asked to share the expense.

Lucy seemed a little embarrassed because Dave accepted money for his work and for teaching the four girls how to operate. "You see," she said one day when they were all assembled in her room, "Dave has lately developed a money-making disposition. You mustn't breathe it, girls, but I've an idea he's in love!"

"Oh, Lucy! In love?"

"He's been very sweet on Hazel Chandler, the postmaster's daughter, of late, and I sometimes think they've had an understanding and will be married, some day – when they have enough money. Poor Hazel hasn't anything, you know, for there are so many in the Chandler family that the postmaster's salary and all they can make out of the little stationery store in the post office is used up in living."

"It's used up mostly by Mrs. Chandler's social stunts," declared Nathalie. "She's proud of being the leader of Riverdale society, and a D. A. R., and several other things. But doesn't Hazel get anything for tending the shop and handing out the mail when her father is away?"

"Not a cent. She's lucky to get her board. And when she's not in the shop her mother expects her to do housework. Poor thing! It would be a relief to her to marry and have a home of her own. I hope Dave'll manage it, and I'd love to have Hazel for a sister," said Lucy. "Mind you, girls, this is a secret; I'm not even positive I'm right in my suspicions; but I wanted to explain why Dave took the money."

"He was perfectly right in doing so, under any circumstances," declared Phoebe, and the others agreed with her.

Phoebe and Marion learned telegraphy very quickly, developing surprising aptitude; Nathalie Cameron was not far behind them, but Janet Ferguson, a remarkably bright girl in her studies, found the art quite difficult to master and made so many blunders that she added materially to the delight they all found in telegraphing to one another on all possible occasions. When Marion went back to college the other four continued to amuse themselves by gossiping daily over the wire; but gradually, as the novelty of the thing wore away, they became less eager to use their lately acquired powers and so, at the period of this story, the click of an instrument was seldom heard except when there was some question to ask or some real news to communicate. By concerted arrangement they were all alert to a "call" between six and seven in the evening and from eight to nine in the mornings, but their trained ears now recognized the click-click! if they were anywhere within hearing of it.

Cousin Judith was much amused and interested in this odd diversion of Phoebe's, and she recognized the educational value of the accomplishment the girl had acquired and generously applauded her success. Indeed, Phoebe was admitted the most skillful operator of them all. But aside from the amusement and instruction it furnished, the little telegraph circuit was of no practical value and could in no way be compared with the utility of the telephone.

On this evening, after hearing the exciting news of the loss of Mrs. Ritchie's box, Phoebe went to her room with the idea of telegraphing to Janet and asking about the matter. But as she sat down before the instrument she remembered that the Ferguson household was a sad and anxious one just now and it was scarcely fitting to telegraph to her friend in regard to so personal and important an affair. She decided to run over in the morning for a quiet talk with Janet and meantime to call the other girls and ask them for further news. She got Lucy Hunter first, who said that Dave had come home full of the gossip caused by the missing box, but some one had come for him and he had suddenly gone away without telling the last half of his story.

Then Phoebe, after a long delay, got Nathalie Cameron on the wire and Nathalie had a lot to tell her. Mr. Cameron was a retired manufacturer who was considered quite wealthy. Several years ago he had discovered Riverdale and brought his family there to live, that he might "round out his life,"

as he said, amid quiet and peaceful scenes. He was a director in Spaythe's bank, as had been Judge Ferguson. Mr. Cameron also owned a large plantation that adjoined the property of Mrs. Ritchie, on the Bayport road. Nathalie told Phoebe that the Cameron box, containing many valuable papers but no money, had also been in the judge's cupboard, but Mr. Spaythe had reported it safe and untampered with. Nor had any box other than Mrs. Ritchie's been taken. So far as they knew, the Ritchie box was the only one in Mr. Ferguson's care that contained money, and it seemed as if the thief, whoever he might be, was aware of this and so refrained from disturbing any of the others. This theory, reported Nathalie, was sure to limit the number of suspects to a possible few and her father was positive that the burglar would soon be caught. Mr. Cameron had been at the bank and witnessed Mrs. Ritchie's display of anger and indignation when her box could not be found. He had thought Mr. Spaythe rather too cold and unsympathetic, but the banker's nature was reserved and unemotional.

"Father says the woman was as good as a vaudeville," continued Nathalie, clicking out the words, "but not quite so circumspect – so you can imagine the scene! She is said to be rich and prosperous, but was furious over her loss and threatened Mr. Spaythe with so many horrible penalties, unless he restored her property, that he had to take refuge inside the bank and lock the door on her."

This was merely such gossip as Phoebe had heard from Don, but it was interesting to have the details from another viewpoint.

To understand the excitement caused by the disappearance of Mrs. Ritchie's box it is only necessary to remember that Riverdale is a sleepy old town where anything out of the ordinary seldom happens. In a big city such an occurrence would be a mere detail of the day's doings and the newspapers would not accord it sufficient importance to mention it in a paragraph; but in Riverdale, where a humdrum, droning life prevailed, the mysterious incident roused the entire community to a state of wonder and speculation. The theft, or loss, or whatever it was, became indeed the "talk of the town."

The principals in the scandal, moreover, were important people, or as important as any that Riverdale possessed. Mrs. Ritchie owned one of the largest plantations – or "farms" – in the neighborhood, left her long ago by her deceased husband; Mr. Spaythe was the local banker; Judge Ferguson had been known and highly respected far and wide. Therefore the weekly newspaper in the town was sure to print several columns of comment on the affair, provided the tipsy old compositor employed by the editor could set so much type before the paper went to press.

The following morning Phoebe walked over to see Janet and found that the Fergusons were face to face with a new and serious trouble. It was true that the Ritchie box had vanished and no one could imagine where it had gone to.

"Papa was very orderly, in his way," said Janet, "and he had a book in which he kept a complete list of all papers and securities in his care and a record of whatever he delivered to the owners. Mrs. Ritchie's account shows he had received money, bonds and mortgages from her, amounting in value to several thousand dollars, and these were kept in a heavy tin box painted blue, with the name 'Ritchie' upon it in white letters. With many similar boxes it was kept in the oak cupboard at the office, and my father always carried the keys himself. We gave these keys to Mr. Spaythe because we knew he was father's executor, and he found all the boxes, with their contents undisturbed, except that of Mrs. Ritchie. It is very strange," she added, with a sigh.

"Perhaps the judge removed it from the cupboard just before his – his attack," said Phoebe. "Have you searched the house?"

"Everywhere. And it is not among father's papers at the bank. One of the most curious things about the affair," continued Janet, "is that Mrs. Ritchie came to the house the very day after father's death to demand her box, and she was so insistent that I had to send for Toby Clark to take her away. No one else bothered us at all; only this woman whose property was even then missing."

"Are you sure she didn't go to the office and get the box?" asked Phoebe, suddenly suspicious of this queer circumstance.

“Why, she hadn’t the keys; nor had Toby. Mr. Spaythe found the cupboard properly locked. On the bunch of small keys which father carried is one labelled ‘Ritchie,’ and it proved there was a complicated lock on the box which could not have been picked.”

“That’s nothing,” returned Phoebe. “Whoever took the box could break it open at leisure. It was merely tin; a can-opener would do the job.”

“Yes; I’m sure that was why the entire box was taken away. It was the only one that contained money to tempt a thief. Mrs. Ritchie, for some reason, never trusted banks. She has some very peculiar ideas, you know. Whenever she needed money she came to father and got it out of the box, giving him a receipt for it and taking a receipt when she deposited money. The record book shows that she had about three thousand dollars in currency in her box when it – disappeared; and there were government bonds for several thousands more, besides notes and mortgages and other securities.”

“Can she hold you responsible for this property?” inquired Phoebe.

“Mr. Spaythe says that she can, but he is confident she will not attempt to collect it from us. He was here this morning and had a long talk with mother. He assured her the box will surely be found in time, and told her not to worry. We are liable to suffer our greatest annoyance from Mrs. Ritchie, who won’t be patient and wait for an investigation. The woman is very nervous and excitable and seems to think we are trying to defraud her.”

“I – I don’t suppose there is anything I can do?” said Phoebe helplessly.

“No, dear; nothing at all. Mr. Spaythe says not to pay any attention to Mrs. Ritchie and has asked us not to talk about the affair until the mystery is solved. If anyone asks questions we must refer them to Mr. Spaythe. So you mustn’t repeat what I’ve told you, Phoebe.”

“I won’t. Don says Mrs. Ritchie went away with Lawyer Kellogg last night.”

“I suppose Mr. Kellogg would like to take her case and make us all the trouble he can,” replied Janet bitterly.

“Why doesn’t Mr. Spaythe see Mr. Holbrook?” asked Phoebe.

“I don’t know. Perhaps he has seen him. Anyhow, I’m sure Mr. Spaythe will do everything in his power to find the box. He was one of father’s best friends and we know him to be an honorable man and very capable in all ways. We feel that we may trust Mr. Spaythe.”

Phoebe did not reply to this. She was wondering if anyone could be trusted in such a peculiar complication.

CHAPTER V

HOW PHOEBE INTERVIEWED THE LAWYER

Phoebe Daring returned home more mystified than ever in regard to the missing box. The girl was by nature logical and inquiring and aside from the interest she felt in the Fergusons the mystery appealed to her curiosity and aroused in her a disposition to investigate it on her own account. That day, however, there was no development in the affair. Mrs. Ritchie kept out of sight and aside from the gossip indulged in by the villagers concerning the discreditable scene at the bank the night before, the excitement incident to the loss of the precious blue box seemed to have subsided. Don and Becky reported that all the school children were talking about the lost box and that many absurd statements were made concerning its disappearance.

“I had to punch one of the fellows for saying that Judge Ferguson spent Mrs. Ritchie’s money and then committed suicide,” announced Don. “He took it back, afterward, and said that Kellogg robbed the judge for revenge. There may be some truth in that, for Kellogg paid his board bill the other day. Another kid said he dreamed it was Will Chandler, the postmaster, who cut a hole through the ceiling of the post office and so got into the judge’s cupboard. Nearly everybody in town is accused by somebody, they say, and I wouldn’t be surprised to hear that I stole the box myself.”

“I don’t believe there *was* any box,” muttered Becky. “Ol’ Mam Ritchie’s half crazy, an’ I guess she just imagined it.”

“Wake up, Beck,” said Don; “you’re dreaming.”

“That proves I’ve a brain,” retorted his sister. “No one can dream who hasn’t a brain; which is the reason, my poor Don, you never dream.”

“He snores, though,” declared Sue.

“I don’t!” cried Don indignantly.

“You snore like a pig; I’ve heard you.”

“Never!”

“I’ll leave it to Becky,” said Sue.

“If she sides with you, I’ll pinch her till she’s black-an’-blue,” promised Don angrily.

“I dare you,” said Becky, bristling at the threat.

“Now – now!” warned Phoebe; “there’ll be a fight in a minute, and some one will be sorry. Cool off, my dears, and don’t get excited over nothing. Have you got your lessons for to-morrow?”

At nine thirty next morning Janet Ferguson stopped at the house, as she had promised to do, and Phoebe put on her things and joined her friend on the way to town, to interview Mr. Holbrook.

“Any news?” asked Phoebe.

Janet shook her head.

“We haven’t heard from Mr. Spaythe since I saw you. Mother’s dreadfully nervous over the thing, which followed so soon after father’s death. I hope Mrs. Ritchie’s box will be found, for it would relieve us both of much anxiety.”

“I hope so, too,” replied Phoebe.

When they arrived at the well-known stairway leading to the offices which Judge Ferguson had occupied for so many years, Janet was rather shocked to find a showy new sign suspended above the entrance. It bore the words: “JOHN HOLBROOK, Attorney at Law,” and another but smaller tin sign was tacked to the door at the head of the stairs.

Phoebe knocked and a voice bade them enter. Mr. Holbrook was seated at a table with several law books spread open before him. But he sat in an easy attitude, smoking his cigarette, and both the girls decided the array of legal lore was intended to impress any clients who might chance to stray into the office.

“I am Miss Ferguson,” said Janet in stiff and formal tones. He bowed and tossed his cigarette through the open window, looking at Janet rather curiously and then turning to Phoebe. “Miss Daring, sir.”

He bowed again, very courteously, as he placed chairs for them. Somehow, they felt relieved by his polite manner. Neither had expected to find so young a man or one so handsome and well dressed and it occurred to Phoebe to wonder why Mr. Holbrook had selected this out-of-the-way corner, where he was wholly unknown, in which to practice law. Riverdale was normally an exceedingly quiet town and possessed few attractions for strangers.

Janet began the conversation.

“We have come to see you in regard to Toby Clark,” she said. “He was in my father’s employ for several years, first as office boy and then as clerk, and Judge Ferguson thought very highly of him and trusted him fully. Toby injured his foot a year ago and limps badly, but that doesn’t interfere much with his activity, and so we thought – we hoped – ”

She hesitated, here, because Mr. Holbrook was looking at her with an amused smile. But Phoebe helped her out.

“Toby is without employment, just now,” she explained, “and we believe it will be to your advantage to secure him as an assistant.”

“The young man has already applied to me,” said the lawyer. “I was obliged to decline his application.”

“I know,” said Phoebe; “but perhaps you did not realize his value. Toby is very popular in Riverdale and knows every one of Judge Ferguson’s former clients personally.”

“I do not need a clerk,” returned Mr. Holbrook, rather shortly.

“But you are a stranger here and you will pardon my saying that it is evident you wish to secure business, or you would not have opened a law office. Also you are anxious to succeed to Judge Ferguson’s practice, or you would not so promptly have rented the office he had occupied. Nothing will help you to succeed more than to employ Toby Clark, who was the judge’s old clerk and knew a good deal about his law business. Toby is as much a part of the outfit of this office as the furniture,” she added with a smile.

“I thank you for your consideration of my interests,” said Mr. Holbrook.

Phoebe flushed.

“I admit that we are more interested, for the moment, in Toby Clark,” she replied. “Like everyone else in Riverdale who knows the boy, we are fond of him, and so we want him to have the opportunity to continue his studies of the law. He is very poor, you know, and cannot afford to go to college just yet; so nothing would assist him more than for you to employ him, just as Judge Ferguson did.”

Mr. Holbrook drummed with his fingers on the table, in an absent way. He was evidently puzzled how to answer this fair pleader. Then he suddenly straightened up, sat back in his chair and faced the two girls frankly.

“I am, as you state, an entire stranger here,” said he, “and for that reason I must tell you something of myself or you will not understand my refusal to employ Toby Clark. I – ”

“Excuse me,” said Janet, rising; “we did not intend to force your confidence, sir. We thought that perhaps, when you were informed of the value of my father’s clerk, you might be glad to employ him, and we would like to have you do so; but having presented the case to the best of our ability we can only leave you to decide as you think best.”

“Sit down, please, Miss Ferguson,” he replied earnestly. “It is indeed to my advantage to make friends in Riverdale, rather than enemies, and as I am unable to employ Toby Clark you are likely to become annoyed by my refusal, unless you fully understand my reasons. Therefore I beg you will allow me to explain.”

Janet glanced at Phoebe, who had remained seated. Her friend nodded, so Janet sat down again. The truth was that Miss Daring was curious to hear Mr. Holbrook's explanation.

"I've had my own way to make in the world," began the young man, in a hesitating, uncertain tone, but gathering confidence as he proceeded. "There was no one to put me through college, so I worked my way – doing all sorts of disagreeable jobs to pay expenses. After I got my degree and was admitted to the bar I was without a dollar with which to begin the practice of law. Yet I had to make a start, somehow or other, and it occurred to me that a small town would be less expensive to begin in than a city. During the past summer I worked hard. I don't mind telling you that I tended a soda-fountain in St. Louis and remained on duty twelve hours a day. I earned an excellent salary, however, and by the first of October believed I had saved enough money to start me in business. Seeking a small and desirable town, I arrived in Riverdale and liked the place. While hesitating whether or not to make it my permanent location, Judge Ferguson died, and that decided me. I imagined I might find a good opening here by trying to fill his place. I rented these offices and paid a month's rent in advance. I purchased this furniture and the law library from Mr. Spaythe, the executor, and partly paid for it in cash. My board at the hotel is paid for up to Saturday night, and I had some letterheads and cards printed and my signs painted. All this indicates me prosperous, but the cold fact, young ladies, is that I have at this moment exactly one dollar and fifteen cents in my pocket, and no idea where the next dollar is coming from. Absurd, isn't it? And amusing, too, if we consider it philosophically. I'm putting up a good front, for a pauper, and I'm not at all dismayed, because I believe myself a good lawyer. I've an idea that something will occur to furnish me with a paying client in time to save the day. But you can readily understand that under such circumstances I cannot employ a clerk, even at a minimum salary. I must be my own office-boy and errand-boy until my living expenses are assured and I can see the week's wage ahead for my assistant. And now, Miss Ferguson and Miss Daring, you have the bare facts in the case and I hope you will be able to forgive me for refusing your request."

The girls had listened in some amazement, yet there was little in Mr. Holbrook's ingenuous statement to cause surprise. Such a condition was easily understood and quite plausible in this aggressive age. But the story affected the two girls differently. Janet developed an admiration for the bold, masterful way in which this impecunious young fellow had established himself. Such a combination of audacity and courage could scarcely fail to lead him to success.

Phoebe, on the other hand, thought she detected a false note running through the smooth recital. It seemed to her that Mr. Holbrook had either invented the entire story on the spur of the moment or was holding something back – perhaps both – for reasons of his own. She did not doubt the main point of the story, that he was absolutely penniless and dependent upon the uncertainties of his law business for a living; but she felt sure he had not confided to them his actual history, or any important details of his past life. She reflected that this young fellow wore expensive clothes and that every detail of his apparel, from the patent-leather shoes to the white silk tie with its jeweled stick-pin, denoted extravagance rather than cautious economy, such as he had claimed he had practiced. A silk-lined overcoat hung upon a peg and beside it was a hat of better quality than the young men of Riverdale wore. A taste for expensive clothes might be a weakness with the lawyer, and while Phoebe hesitated to condemn him for the endeavor to present a prosperous appearance she could not help thinking he would have saved a good deal more money as soda-water clerk had he been content with more modest attire. Imagine dapper Mr. Holbrook a soda-water clerk! Phoebe was almost sure that was one of the inventions. Yet she, as well as Janet, admitted the frank and winning personality of the young lawyer and felt she knew and appreciated him better since listening to his story.

"Of course," continued Holbrook, a little anxiously, "this confidence places me at a disadvantage in your eyes. If Riverdale knows me as you do I shall be ruined."

"We shall respect your confidence, sir," said Janet, less stiffly than before, "and we now fully understand why you cannot, at present, employ Toby Clark. Perhaps, by and by –"

"If I succeed, I shall give Toby the first job in my office," he promised earnestly.

“Thank you, sir. Come, Phoebe.”

But Phoebe again refused to stir. She was pondering something in her mind and presently gave it expression.

“Toby Clark,” said she, “injured his foot while endeavoring to serve the family fortunes of the Darings, so we are really under serious obligations to the boy. But he is so proud and shy, Mr. Holbrook, that were we to offer him assistance at this crisis in his affairs, he would be hurt and humiliated. And he would refuse to accept any help that savored of charity.”

Mr. Holbrook nodded, smiling at her.

“I understand that disposition, Miss Daring,” said he, “for I have similar qualities of independence myself.”

“Yet something must be done for Toby,” she continued, “or else the boy will lose all the advantages of his former association with Judge Ferguson and perhaps starve or freeze when the cold weather comes on. From your explanation, sir, and the promise you have just made to Miss Ferguson, I understand your sole reason for not employing Toby is the lack of money with which to pay his wages. Is that correct?”

“Entirely so, Miss Daring. I appreciate the advantages of having this young fellow with me, since he is so well acquainted hereabouts and is somewhat posted in Mr. Ferguson’s business affairs; but – ”

“Then,” said Phoebe, “we must organize a conspiracy, we three, and help Toby without his ever suspecting it. We Darings are not wealthy, Mr. Holbrook, but we have more means than we absolutely require and it will be a great pleasure to us to pay Toby Clark’s salary as your clerk until you become prosperous enough to pay it yourself. Judge Ferguson was not over-liberal in the matter of wages and gave Toby but five dollars a week in money; but he also gave him a wealth of kindly sympathy and much assistance in the study of law. I want you to hire Toby at the same wages – five dollars a week – and try to assist him at odd times as the judge did. No one but we three shall ever know how the wages are supplied, and especially must the secret be guarded from Toby. What do you say to this proposition, Mr. Holbrook?”

Janet was filled with admiration of this clever idea and looked appealingly at the young man. Mr. Holbrook flushed slightly, then frowned and began drumming on the table with his fingers again. Presently he looked up and asked:

“Will this arrangement be a source of satisfaction to you young ladies?”

“It will give us great pleasure,” declared Phoebe.

“And it will be splendid for Toby,” added Janet.

“Do you also realize that it is an assistance to me – that it will add to the false evidences of my prosperity?” inquired the young man.

“Oh, I was not considering you at all,” said Phoebe quickly, fearing he might refuse. “I was only thinking of Toby; but if you find any advantage in the arrangement I hope it will repay you for your kindness to our friend – and to ourselves.”

Mr. Holbrook smiled. Then he nodded cheerfully and replied:

“It would be very ungracious of me to say no, under such quaint conditions, and therefore we will consider the matter as settled, Miss Daring.”

“I will send you a check for twenty dollars, which will be four weeks’ wages for Toby, in advance,” she said. “And each month I will send you twenty more, until you notify me you are able to assume the obligation yourself.”

He shook his head, still smiling.

“Send me five dollars each week,” said he. “Otherwise, in my present circumstances, I might be tempted to spend Toby’s wages on myself.”

“Very well, if you prefer it so.” Then, half turning toward the door, she added: “I thank you, Mr. Holbrook. Your cooperation in this little conspiracy of mine has relieved me of a great anxiety;

indeed, it will give pleasure to all who know Toby Clark and are interested in his welfare. I shall not forget that we owe you this kindness.”

He bowed rather gravely in acknowledgment of this pretty speech and then they heard hasty steps mounting the stairs and the door opened abruptly to admit Mr. Spaythe.

CHAPTER VI

HOW TOBY CAME TO GRIEF

The banker of Riverdale was perhaps the most important personage in the community, not even excepting Will Chandler. A man of considerable wealth and sterling character, Mr. Spaythe was greatly respected by high and low and was deemed reliable in any emergency. In character he was somewhat stern and unyielding and his sense of justice and honor was so strong that he was uncharitably bitter and harsh toward any delinquent in such matters. As an old friend of the late Judge Ferguson he had accepted the responsibilities of administering his estate and was engaged in fulfilling his duties with businesslike celerity and exactness when the unpleasant incident of Mrs. Ritchie's missing box came up to annoy him. Mr. Ferguson's affairs were in perfect order; Mr. Spaythe knew that the box had disappeared since his demise; but the affair required rigid investigation and the banker had undertaken to solve the mystery in his own way, without confiding in or consulting anybody.

Mr. Spaythe was usually so deliberate and unexcitable in demeanor that his sudden entrance and agitated manner made both the girls, who knew him well, gasp in astonishment. He seemed to be startled to find them in young Mr. Holbrook's office and his red face took on a deeper glow as he stared first at one and then at the other.

"We were just going," said Phoebe, understanding that Mr. Spaythe had come to see the lawyer, and then both the girls bowed and turned toward the door.

"One moment, please," said the banker earnestly, as he held out an arm with a restraining gesture. "A most extraordinary thing has happened, in which you will doubtless be interested. Mrs. Ritchie has just had Toby Clark arrested for stealing her box!"

Phoebe sank into a chair, weak and trembling, and as she did so her eyes swept Mr. Holbrook's face and noticed that it flushed scarlet. But the wave of color quickly receded and he turned a look of grave inquiry upon Mr. Spaythe.

"How absurd!" exclaimed Janet indignantly.

"Yes, it is absurd," agreed the banker, in a nervous manner, "but it is quite serious, as well. I am sure Toby is innocent, but Mrs. Ritchie has employed Abner Kellogg as her counselor and Kellogg would delight in sending Toby to prison – if he can manage to do so."

"That box must be found!" cried Phoebe.

Mr. Spaythe frowned.

"It *has* been found," he rejoined bitterly.

"Where?"

"In a rubbish-heap at the back of Toby Clark's shanty, down by the river. It is Mrs. Ritchie's box, beyond doubt; I have seen it; the cover had been wrenched off and – it was empty."

The two girls stared at one another in speechless amazement. Mr. Holbrook stood by his table, watching them curiously, but he did not seem to share their astonishment. Mr. Spaythe sat down in a chair and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief.

"Who arrested Toby?" asked Janet.

"Parsons, the constable. The warrant was issued by Powell, a justice of the peace, on a sworn statement made by Mrs. Ritchie and Abner Kellogg."

"And Sam Parsons – Toby's friend – has put him in jail?"

"Yes; he was obliged to do that, you know."

Phoebe was gradually recovering her composure.

"He can be bailed out, I suppose," she suggested.

Mr. Spaythe turned to the lawyer.

“That is what I have come to see you about, Mr. Holbrook,” he said. “Since this remarkable development in the matter of the missing box, I shall be obliged to employ counsel. I would like to engage you to defend Toby Clark.”

The young man bowed.

“I am fortunate, sir, to have so important a case brought to me so early in my career,” he replied. “I will do my best for your protégé, I assure you.”

“Toby Clark is no protégé of mine,” declared the banker sternly. “But,” he added, more mildly, “he was Judge Ferguson’s protégé and I believe the boy incapable of this alleged theft. Therefore I propose he shall be properly defended. I will be personally responsible for your fee, Mr. Holbrook.”

“That is quite satisfactory to me, sir.”

“But about the bail,” cried Janet impatiently. “We cannot allow Toby to remain in that dreadful jail!”

“The county seat is at Bayport,” observed the lawyer. “We have no judge here who is authorized to accept bail for an accused criminal. Toby Clark must be taken to Bayport for a preliminary hearing, at which I will appear in his behalf, instruct him to plead not guilty and then demand his release on bail. If you will drive over with me, Mr. Spaythe, I’ve no doubt the bail can be easily arranged.”

“When will his case be tried?” asked the banker.

“The next term of court is the first week in December. The trial will of course be at Bayport.”

“What a long time to wait!” exclaimed Janet.

“Never mind; it will give us time to discover the real criminal,” said Phoebe decidedly. “In that event Toby’s case will never be tried.”

Mr. Spaythe nodded. Then he shifted uneasily in his chair a moment and asked:

“Ought we to employ a detective, Mr. Holbrook?”

“Of course!” said Phoebe. “That is the first thing to be done.”

“Pardon me, Miss Daring,” returned the lawyer seriously, “I think that should be reserved as our final resource. Riverdale is so small a place that the movements of every inhabitant may easily be traced. I believe I possess some small talent in the detective way myself – a good criminal lawyer ought to be a good detective, it is said – so if Clark is really innocent it ought not to be difficult to discover the real criminal.”

“I don’t like that ‘if,’ Mr. Holbrook,” said Phoebe resentfully.

The young man flushed again. It seemed to be one of his characteristics to change color, on occasion, and he was aware of this failing and evidently annoyed by it. At Phoebe’s remark he bit his lip and hesitated a moment. Then he replied with dignity:

“The ‘if’ was not intended to condemn your friend, Miss Daring. Even the law holds him innocent until he is proved guilty. But you must remember that Toby Clark is a perfect stranger to me and perhaps you will admit that circumstantial evidence is at present against him. The box was found on his premises, it seems, and he had the keys to this office at the time of Judge Ferguson’s death. Even before there was a rumor that anything was missing from the place I urged the boy to get rid of the key – merely as a matter of ordinary precaution.”

“I know that is true,” said Mr. Spaythe. “When Toby brought the key to me he said you had advised him to do so.”

“Still,” continued the lawyer reflectively, “the circumstantial evidence, while it might influence a jury, can have no effect upon those who know the boy’s character and believe in his honesty. The thing for me to do, if I undertake this case, is first to discover who knew of Mrs. Ritchie’s box –”

“Why, everybody, nearly, knew of it,” said Phoebe. “She’s a queer old creature and, having used the judge for a banker, was constantly coming to him to deposit money or to get it from her box. I’ve no doubt she imagined it was a secret, but Mrs. Ritchie’s box was a matter of public gossip.”

“The next thing,” continued Mr. Holbrook quietly, “is to discover who were Toby Clark’s enemies.”

“I don’t believe he had one in Riverdale,” asserted Phoebe.

“The real criminal placed the rifled box on Toby Clark’s premises, where if found it would implicate him in the theft. No one but an enemy would have done that,” declared the young man, but he spoke argumentatively and there was not an earnest ring to his words. “Then,” he resumed, “we must watch and see what citizen has suddenly acquired money. There are no professional burglars in Riverdale, I imagine, so the thief will be unable to resist the temptation to use some of the stolen money. Really, Mr. Spaythe, the case is so simple that I am positive we shall have no need of a detective. Indeed, a detective in town would be quickly recognized and his very presence would defeat us by putting the criminal on guard. Let us proceed quietly to ferret out the mystery ourselves. I already feel reasonably certain of success and, when I have interviewed Toby Clark, which I shall do at once, he will perhaps be able to furnish us with a clew.”

This logical reasoning appealed to Mr. Spaythe and silenced even Phoebe’s objections. The girls left the office filled with horror of the cowardly charge brought against the poor boy they had so earnestly sought to aid.

On their way home Janet said:

“Of course this will prevent Mr. Holbrook from carrying out his agreement, for until Toby’s innocence is proved we cannot expect anyone to give him employment.”

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