# ALGER HORATIO JR.

## THE YOUNG ACROBAT OF THE GREAT NORTH AMERICAN CIRCUS

Horatio Alger

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**Alger H.**

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# Содержание

# Jr. Horatio Alger
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## CHAPTER I.
## KIT WATSON

There was great excitement in Smyrna, especially among the boys. Barlow's Great American Circus in its triumphal progress from State to State was close at hand, and immense yellow posters announcing its arrival were liberally displayed on fences and barns, while smaller bills were put up in the post office, the hotel, and the principal stores, and distributed from house to house.

It was the largest circus that had ever visited Smyrna. At least a dozen elephants marched with ponderous steps in its preliminary procession, while clowns, acrobats, giants, dwarfs, fat women, cannibals, and hairy savages from Thibet and Madagascar, were among the strange wonders which were to be seen at each performance for the small sum of fifty cents, children half price.

For weeks the young people had been looking forward to the advent of this marvelous aggregation of curiosities, and the country papers from farther east had given glowing accounts of the great show, which was emphatically pronounced greater and more gorgeous than in any previous year. But it may be as well to reproduce, in part, the description given in the posters:

**BARLOW'S GREAT NORTH AMERICAN CIRCUS**

**Now in its triumphal march across the continent, will**

**give two grand performances,**

**AT SMYRNA**

**On the afternoon and evening of May 18th**

**Never in all its history has this**

**Unparalleled show embraced a greater variety of attractions,**

**or included a larger number of world famous**

**Acrobats, Clowns, Bare back Riders, Rope walkers, Trapeze**

**Artists, and Star Performers,**

**In addition to a colossal menagerie, comprising**

**Elephants, Tigers, Lions, Leopards,**

**and other wild animals in great variety**

**All this and far more, including a hundred**

**DARING ACTS,**



**Can be seen for the trifling sum of Fifty cents;**

"Shall you go to the circus, Dan?" asked Kit.

"I would like to, but you know, Kit, I have no money to spare."

"Don't let that interfere," said Kit, kindly. "Here is half a dollar. That will take you in."

"You're a tip-top fellow, Kit. But I don't think I ought to take it. I don't know when I shall be able to return it."

"Who asked you to return it? I meant it as a gift."

"You're a true friend, Kit," said Dan, earnestly. "I don't know as I ought to take it, but I will anyhow. You know I only get my board and a dollar a week from Farmer Clifford, and that I give to my mother."

"I wish you had a better place, Dan."

"So do I; but perhaps it is as well as I can do at my age. All boys are not born to good luck as you are."

"Am I born to good luck? I don't know."

"Isn't your uncle Stephen the richest man in Smyrna?"

"I suppose he is; but that doesn't make me rich."

"Isn't he your guardian?"

"Yes; but it doesn't follow because there is a guardian there is a fortune."

"I hope there is."

"I am going to tell you something in confidence, Dan. Uncle Stephen has lately been dropping a good many hints about the necessity of being economical, and that I may have my own way to make in the world. What do you think it means?"

"Have you been extravagant?"

"Not that I am aware of. I have been at an expensive boarding school with my cousin Ralph, and I have dressed well, and had a fair amount of spending money."

"Have you spent any more than Ralph?"

"No; not so much, for I will tell you in confidence that he has been playing pool and cards for money, of course without the knowledge of the principal. I know also that this last term, besides spending his pocket money he ran up bills, which his father had to pay, to the amount of fifty dollars or more."

"How did your uncle like it?"

"I don't know. Ralph and his father had a private interview, but he got the money. I believe his mother took his part."

"Why don't you ask your uncle just how you stand?"

"I have thought of it. If I am to inherit a fortune I should like to know it. If I have my own way to make I want to know that also, so that I can begin to prepare for it."

"Would you feel bad if you found out that you were a poor boy—like me, for instance?"

"I suppose I should just at first, but I should try to make the best of it in the end."

"Well, I hope you won't have occasion to buckle down to hard work. When do you go back to school?"

"The next term begins next Monday."

"And it is now Wednesday. You will be able to see the circus at any rate. It is to arrive to-night."

"Suppose we go round to the lot to-morrow morning. We can see them putting up the tents."

"All right! I'll meet you at nine o'clock."

They were about to separate when another boy, of about the same age and size, came up.

"It's time for dinner, Kit," he said; "mother'll be angry if you are late."

"Very well! I'll go home with you. Good morning, Dan."

"Good morning, Kit. Good morning, Ralph."

Ralph mumbled out "Morning," but did not deign to look at Dan.

"I wonder you associate with that boy, Kit," he said.

"Why?" inquired Kit, rather defiantly.

"Because he's only a farm laborer."

"Does that hurt him?"

"I don't care to associate with such a low class."

"Daniel Webster worked on a farm when he was a boy."

"Dan Clark isn't a Webster."

"We don't know what he will turn out to be."

"I don't consider him fit for me to associate with," said Ralph. "It may be different in your case."

"Why should it be different in my case?" asked Kit, suspiciously.

"Oh, no offense at all, but your circumstances and social position are likely to be different from mine."

"Are they? That's just what I should like to find out."

"My father says so, and as you are under his guardianship he ought to know."

"Yes, he ought to know, but he has never told me."

"He has told me, but I am not at liberty to say anything," said Ralph, looking mysterious.

"I think I ought to be the first to be told," said Kit, not unreasonably.

"You will be told soon. There is one thing I can tell you, however. You are not to go back to boarding school on Monday."

Kit paused in the street, and gazed at his companion in surprise.

"Are you going back?" he asked.

"Yes; I'm going to keep on till I am ready for college."

"And what is to be done with me?"

Ralph shrugged his shoulders.

"I am not at liberty to tell you," he answered.

"I shall ask my uncle this very day."

"Just as you please."

Kit walked on in silence. His mind was busy with thoughts of the change in his prospects. He did not know what was coming, but he was anxious. It was likely to be a turning point in his life, and he was apprehensive that the information soon to be imparted to him would not be of an agreeable nature.

# CHAPTER II.
# INTRODUCES THREE CURIOSITIES

Stephen Watson, uncle of Kit and father of Ralph, was a man of middle age. It was difficult to trace any resemblance between him and his nephew. The latter had an open face, with a bright, attractive expression. Mr. Watson was dark and sallow, of spare habit, and there was a cunning look in his eyes, beneath which a Roman nose jutted out like a promontory. He looked like the incarnation of cold selfishness, and his real character did not belie his looks.

Five years before Kit Watson's father had died. He resembled Kit in appearance, and was very popular in Smyrna. His brother wound up the estate, and had since been living in luxury, but whether the property was his or his nephew's Kit was unable to tell. He had asked the question occasionally, but his uncle showed a distaste for the subject, and gave evasive replies.

What Kit had just heard made him anxious, and he resolved to attack his uncle once more. After dinner, therefore, he began:

"Uncle Stephen, Ralph tells me I am not going back to school on Monday."

"Ralph speaks correctly," Mr. Watson replied in a measured voice.

"But why am I not to go?"

"I will explain before the time comes."

"Can you not tell me now? I am anxious to know."

"You must curb your curiosity. You will know in good time."

Kit regarded his uncle in silence. He wished to know what had caused this remarkable change, but it seemed useless to ask any more questions.

The next morning he and Dan Clark, according to agreement, met in front of Stoddard's store.

"I had hard work to get away," said Dan. "Let us go right over to the circus grounds."

These were located about a third of a mile from the hotel, in a large twenty-acre pasture. The lot, as it was called, was a scene of activity. A band of canvas men were busily engaged in putting up the big tent. Several elephants were standing round, and the cages of animals had already been put in place inside the rising tent.

On a bench outside sat a curious group, comprising Achilles Henderson, the great Scotch giant, who was set down on the bills as eight feet three inches in height, and was really about seven feet and a half; Major Conrad, the dwarf, who was about the size of an average child of three years, and Madame Celestina Morella, the queen of fat women, who was credited on the bills with a weight of five hundred and eighty seven pounds. She was certainly massive, but probably fell short a hundred and fifty pounds of these elephantine proportions.

Kit and Dan paused to look at this singular trio.

"I wonder how much pay they get?" said Dan, turning to Kit.

"I saw in some paper that the fat woman gets fifty dollars a week."

"That's pretty good pay for being fat, Kit."

"Would you be willing to be as fat for that money?"

"I think not," said Dan, "though it's a good deal more than I get now."

They were standing near the bench on which the three were seated. Achilles, who looked good-natured, as most big men are, addressed the boys.

"Well, boys, are you coming to see the show?"

"Yes," answered both.

"I used to like to myself when I was a boy. I didn't expect then I should ever travel with one."

"Were you very large as a boy?" asked Dan, with curiosity.

"When I was twelve years old I was six feet high, and people generally thought then that I was eighteen. I thought perhaps I shouldn't grow any more, but I kept on. When I was sixteen I was seven feet tall, and by twenty I had reached my present height."

"Are you eight feet three inches tall, Mr. Henderson?"

"Is that what the bills say?"

"Yes."

"Then it must be so," he said with a smile.

"How long have you been traveling with the circus?"

"Five years."

"How do you like it?"

"It's a good deal easier than working on a farm, especially in Vermont, where I was born and bred."

"But they call you the Scotch giant."

"It sounds well, doesn't it? My father was born in Scotland, but my mother was a Vermont Yankee. You know Americans are more willing to pay for a foreign curiosity than for one home born. That's why my *great* friend here"—emphasizing the word great—"calls herself Madame Celestina Morella."

The fat lady smiled.

"People think I am French or Italian," she said, "but I never was out of the United States in my life."

"Where were you born, Madame Morella?"

"In the western part of New York State. I know what you are going to ask me. Was I always fat? No, when I was sixteen I only weighed one hundred and twenty. Then I had a fit of sickness and nearly died. After recovering, I began to gain flesh, till I became a monster, as you see."

As she said this, she laughed, and her fat sides shook with merriment. Evidently she did not let her size weigh upon her mind.

"I suppose your real name isn't Celestina Morella?" said Kit.

"My real name is Betsey Hatch. That is what they called me in my girlhood, but I should hardly know who was meant if I was called so now."

"Have you been long in the show business?"

"About seven years."

"Do you like it?"

"I didn't at first, but now I've got used to moving about. Now when the spring opens I have the regular circus fever. But I have my troubles."

"What are they?" asked Kit, seeing that the fat woman liked to talk.

"Well, I find it very difficult to secure at the hotels a bed large enough and strong enough to hold me. I suppose you won't be surprised to hear that."

"Not much."

"At Akron, Ohio, where the hotel was full, I was put in a cot bed, though I protested against it. As soon as I got in, the whole thing collapsed, and I was landed on the floor."

She laughed heartily at the remembrance.

"I remember that very well," said the giant, "for I slept in the room below. Half an hour after getting into bed, I heard a fearful noise in the room above, and thought at first the hotel had been struck by lightning, and a piercing shriek that echoed through the house led me to fear that my esteemed Italian friend was a victim. But my mind was soon relieved when I learned the truth."

"I suppose, major, you never broke down a bed," said the giant, turning to the dwarf.

"No," answered the major, in a shrill piping voice, "I never lie awake thinking of that."

"I believe you served in the civil war, major?"

"Yes, I was in the infantry."

It was a stale joke, but all four laughed at it.

"How much do you weigh, major?" Kit ventured to ask.

"Twenty-one pounds and a half," answered the dwarf. "I have with me some of my photographs, if you would like to buy," and the little man produced half a dozen cards from his tiny pocket.

"How much are they?"

"Ten cents."

"I'll take one," said Kit, and he produced the necessary coin.

"If you go into the tent you can see some of the performers rehearsing," suggested Achilles.

"Let us go in, Dan."

The two boys reached the portals and went into the big tent.

# CHAPTER III.
# KIT ASTONISHES TWO ACROBATS

The circus tent was nearly ready for the regular performance. Kit and Dan regarded the sawdust arena with the interest which it always inspires in boys of sixteen. Already it was invested with fascination for them. Two acrobats who performed what is called the "brothers' act" were rehearsing. They were placarded as the Vincenti brothers, though one was a French Canadian and the other an Irishman, and there was no relationship between them. At the time the boys entered, one had climbed upon the other's shoulders, and was standing erect with folded arms. This was, of course, easy, but the next act was more difficult. By a quick movement he lowered his head, and grasping the uplifted hands of the lower acrobat, raised his feet and poised himself aloft, with his feet up in the air, sustained by the muscular arms of his associate.

"That must take strength, Kit," said Dan.

"So it does."

"No one but a circus man could do it, I suppose?"

"I can do it," said Kit quietly.

Dan regarded him with undisguised astonishment.

"You are joking," he said.

"No, I am not."

"Where did you learn to do such a thing?" asked Dan, incredulous, though he knew Kit to be a boy of truth.

"I will tell you. In the town where I attended boarding school there is a large gymnasium, under the superintendence of a man who traveled for years with a circus. He used to give lessons to the boys, but most contented themselves with a few common exercises. I suppose I should also, but there was an English boy in the school, very supple and muscular, who was proud of his strength, and ambitious to make himself a thorough gymnast. He persuaded me to take lessons in the most difficult acrobatic feats with him, as two had to work together."

"Did you pay the professor extra to instruct you?" asked Dan.

"He charged nothing. He was only too glad to teach us all he knew. It seems he was at one time connected with Barnum's circus, and prepared performers for the arena. He told us it made him think of his old circus days to teach us. At the close of last term we gave him five dollars apiece as an acknowledgment of his services. He assured us then that we were competent to perform in any circus."

"Could you really do what the Vincenti brothers are doing?"

"Yes; and more."

"I wish I could see you do it."

The boys were seated near the sawdust arena, and the last part of their conversation had been heard by the acrobats. It was taken as an illustration of boyish braggadocio, and as circus men are always ready for practical jokes, particularly at the expense of greenhorns, they resolved that there was a good chance for a little fun.

One tipped the wink to the other, and turning to Kit, said: "What's that you're saying, kid?"

"How does he know your name?" said Dan, mistaking kid, the circus name for boy, for his friend's nickname.

"He said kid, not Kit," answered our hero.

"Do you think you can do our act?" continued the acrobat.

"I think I can," replied Kit.

This elicited a broad grin from the acrobat.

"Look here, kid," he said, "do you know how long it took me to learn the business?"

"I don't know, but I should like to know."

"Three years."

"No doubt you can do a great deal more than I."

"Oh, no, certainly not!" said the acrobat, ironically.

"I see you don't believe me," said Kit.

"I'll tell you what you remind me of, kid. There was a fellow came to our circus last summer, and wanted to get an engagement as rider. He said he'd been a cowboy out in New Mexico, and had been employed to break horses. So we gave the fellow a trial. We brought out a wild mustang, and told him to show what he could do. The mustang let him get on, as was his custom, but after he was fairly on, he gave a jump, and Mr. Cowboy measured his length on the sawdust."

Kit and Dan both smiled at this story.

"I am not a cowboy, and don't profess to ride bucking mustangs," he said, "though my friend Dan may."

"I'd rather be excused," put in Dan.

"I'll tell you what, kid, if you'll go through the performance you've just seen I'll give you five dollars."

The fellow expected Kit would make some hasty excuse, but he was mistaken. Our hero rose from his seat, removed his coat and vest, and bounded into the arena.

"I am ready," he said, "but I am not strong enough to be the under man. I'll do the other."

"All right! Go ahead!"

The speaker put himself in position. Kit gave a spring, and in an instant was upon his shoulders.

There was an exclamation of surprise from the second acrobat.

"Christopher!" he exclaimed. "The boy's got something in him, after all."

"Now what shall I do?" asked Kit, as with folded arms he stood on the acrobat's shoulders.

"Keep your place while I walk round the arena."

Kit maintained his position while the acrobat ran round the circle, increasing his pace on purpose to dislodge his young associate. But Kit was too well used to this act to be embarrassed. He held himself erect, and never swerved for an instant.

"Pretty good, kid!" said the acrobat. "Now reverse yourself and stand on my hands with your feet in the air."

Kit made the change skillfully, and to the equal surprise of Dan and the other acrobat, both of whom applauded without stint.

"Can you do anything else?" asked Alonzo Vincenti.

"Yes."

Kit went through a variety of other feats, and then descending from his elevated perch, was about to resume his coat and vest, when the circus performer asked him, "Can you tumble?"

Kit's answer was to roll over the arena in a succession of somersaults and hand springs.

"Well, I'm beat!" said the acrobat. "You're the smartest kid I ever met in my travels. Are you sure you're not a professional?"

"Quite sure," answered Kit, smiling.

"You never traveled with a show, then?"

Kit shook his head.

"Where on earth did you pick up all these acts?"

"I took lessons of Professor Donaldson."

"You did! Well, that explains it. I say, kid, you ought to join a circus. You'd command a fine salary."

"Would I? How much could I get?" asked Kit, with interest.

"Ten or twelve dollars a week and all expenses paid. That's pretty good pay for a kid, isn't it?"

"It's more than I ever earned yet," answered Kit, with a smile.

"I shouldn't wonder if Mr. Barlow would give you that now. If you ever make up your mind to join a show, come round and see him."

"Thank you," said Kit.

Soon after the boys left the circus lot and went home.

"Would you really join a circus, Kit?" asked Dan.

"It isn't the life I would choose," answered Kit, seriously, "but I may have to find some way of earning a living, and that very soon."

"I thought your father left you a fortune."

"So did I; but I hear that I am to be taken from boarding school, and possibly set to work. Ralph has given me a hint of it. I shall soon know, as my uncle intimates that he has a communication to make me."

"I hope it isn't as bad as you think, Kit."

"I hope so too, but I can tell you better to-morrow. We will meet to-night at the show."

# CHAPTER IV.
# A SCENE NOT DOWN ON THE BILLS

Just before supper Kit was asked to an interview with his uncle.

"You wish to speak to me, Uncle Stephen?" he said.

"Yes; I have decided not to postpone the explanation for which you asked yesterday."

"I shall be glad to hear it, sir."

"Ever since your father's death I have supported you, not because I was morally or legally bound to do so, but because you were my nephew."

"But didn't my father leave any property?" asked Kit in amazement.

"He was supposed to have done so."

"This house and grounds are surely worth a good deal of money!"

"So they are," answered Stephen Watson, dryly, "but unfortunately they did not belong to your father."

"This is certainly a mistake," exclaimed Kit, indignantly.

"Wait till I have finished. These stood in your father's name, but there was a mortgage of two thousand dollars held by the Smyrna Savings Bank."

"Surely the place is worth far more than two thousand dollars!"

"Curb your impatience, and you will soon understand me. The place *is* worth far more than two thousand dollars. I consider it worth ten thousand."

"Then I don't see–"

"Your father left large debts, which of course had to be paid. I was therefore obliged to sell the estate, in order to realize the necessary funds."

"For how much did you sell the place?"

"For nine thousand dollars. I regarded that as a good price, considering that it was paid in cash or the equivalent."

"To whom did you sell?"

"I bought it in myself; I was not willing that the place which my brother had loved so well, should pass into the hands of strangers."

"May I ask who was my father's principal creditor?" asked Kit.

"Ahem! I was," answered Stephen Watson, in a tone of slight embarrassment.

"You!" exclaimed Kit, in fresh surprise.

"Yes; your father owed me twelve thousand dollars borrowed at various times."

"How could he have been obliged to borrow so much?" asked Kit. "He always seemed comfortably situated. I never once heard him complain of being pressed for money."

"Very likely; he was very reticent about his affairs. I would explain, but the matter is rather a delicate one."

"I think I am entitled to know all about it, Uncle Stephen," said Kit, firmly.

"Be it so! Perhaps you are right. Let me tell you in the briefest terms, then, that in his later years your father speculated in Wall Street—not heavily, for he had not the means, but heavily for one of his property. Of course he lost. Almost every one does, who ventures into the 'street.' His first losses, instead of deterring him from further speculation, led him on to rasher ventures. It was then that he came to me for money."

"Didn't you urge him to give up speculating?" asked Kit.

"Yes, but my words availed little. Perhaps you will think I ought to have refused him loans, but he assured me in the strongest terms that unless he obtained money from some source he would be ruined, and I yielded. I might have been weak—it was weak, for I stood a chance of losing all,

having merely his notes of hand to show for the money I lent. But it is hard to refuse a brother. I think I should do the same again."

Kit was silent. His uncle's words were warm, and indicated strong sympathy for Kit's father, but his tone was cold, and there seemed a lack of earnestness. Kit could not repress a feeling of incredulity. There was another obstacle to his accepting with full credence the tale which his uncle told him. He had always understood from his father that his uncle was a poor and struggling man. How could he have in his possession the sum of twelve thousand dollars to lend his brother? This question was certainly difficult to answer. He paused, then refraining from discussing the subject, said:

"Why have you not told me this before, Uncle Stephen?"

"Would it have made you any happier?" returned Stephen Watson.

"No."

"Till you had acquired a fair education, I thought it better to keep the unpleasant truth from you. It would only have annoyed you to feel that you owed everything to my generosity, and were in fact a child of charity."

Kit's face flushed deeply as he heard this expression from his uncle's lips.

"Do you mean that my father left absolutely nothing?" he asked.

"Yes, absolutely nothing. Well, no, not quite that. I think there was a balance of a little over a hundred dollars left after paying all debts. That is hardly worth counting."

"Yes, that is hardly worth counting," said Kit in a dull, mechanical tone.

"Still, I determined to educate you, and give you equal advantages with my own son. I have done so up to the present moment. I wish I could continue to do so, but Ralph is getting more expensive as he grows older (and you also), and I cannot afford to keep you both at school. You will therefore stop studying, and I shall secure you some work."

"If things are as you say, I cannot complain of this," Kit said in a dull, spiritless tone, "but it comes upon me like a thunderbolt."

"No doubt, no doubt. I knew it would be a shock, and I have postponed telling you as long as possible."

"I suppose I ought to thank you. Have you anything more to say to me now?"

"No."

"Then, sir, I will leave you. I will ask further particulars some other day."

"He takes it hard," muttered Stephen Watson, eyeing the retreating form of his nephew thoughtfully. "I wonder if he will suspect that there is anything wrong. Even if he does, he is only a boy, and can prove nothing."

"What makes you so glum, Kit?" asked Dan Clark, when they met at seven o'clock, as agreed, to go together to the show.

"Not much, Dan, only I have learned that I am a pauper."

"But the estate—the house and the grounds?" said Dan, bewildered.

"Belong to my uncle."

"Who says so?"

"He says so. But I don't want to say any more about it now. Let us start for the circus, and I will try to forget my pauper position, for one evening at least."

Before they reached the lot, they heard the circus band discoursing lively music. They were in a crowd, for all Smyrna, men, women and children, were bound for the show. It was a grand gala night. In the city, where there are many amusements, the circus draws well, but in the country everybody goes.

Outside the great tent were the side shows. In one of them Kit found his friends of the morning, the giant, the dwarf, and the fat lady, with other curiosities hereafter to be mentioned. Just inside the tent, in what might be called the ante chamber, was the collection of animals. The elephants were accorded more freedom than the rest, but the lion, tiger, and leopard were shut up in cages. The lion

seemed particularly restless. He was pacing his narrow quarters, lashing his tail, and from time to time emitting deep growls, betokening irritation and anger.

"How would you like to go into the cage?" asked Dan.

"I don't care for an interview with his majesty," responded Kit.

A stranger was standing near the cage.

"Don't go too near, boys!" he said. "That lion is particularly fierce. He nearly killed a man last season in Pennsylvania."

"How was that?"

"The man ventured too near the cage. The lion stretched out his claws, and fastened them in the man's shoulder, lacerating it fearfully before he could be released. He came near dying of blood poisoning."

Kit and Dan sheered off. The lion looked wicked enough to kill a dozen men.

At eight o'clock the performance commenced. First there was a procession of elephants and horses, the latter carrying the bareback riders and other members of the circus, with the curiosities and freaks. Then came two bareback riders, who jumped through hoops, and over banners, and performed somersaults, to the wondering delight of the boys. Then came tumblers, and in preparation for another scene a gaudily dressed clown entered the ring. Suddenly there was heard a deep baying sound, which struck terror into every heart. It was the lion; but seemed close at hand. In an instant a dark, cat-like form, rushing down the aisle, sprang into the ring.

The great Numidian lion had broken from his cage, and the life of every one in the audience was in peril. Ladies shrieked, strong men grew pale, and all wildly looked about for some way of escape.

Striking down the clown, and standing with one foot on the prostrate form, the lion's cruel eyes wandered slowly over the vast assemblage.

Only ten feet from him, in front seats, sat Kit and Dan.

Kit rose in his seat pale and excited, but with a resolute fire in his eyes. He had thought of a way to vanquish the lion.

# CHAPTER V.
# HOW KIT VANQUISHED THE LION

The danger was imminent. Under the canvas there were at least two thousand spectators. Smyrna had less than five thousand inhabitants, but from towns around there were numerous excursion parties, which helped to swell the number present. Had these people foreseen the terrible scene not down on the bills, they would have remained at home and locked the doors of their houses. But danger is seldom anticipated and peril generally finds us unprepared.

Dan Clark saw Kit about to leave his seat.

"Where are you going?" he cried.

"I am going into the arena."

"What? Are you out of your head?" asked Dan, and he took hold of Kit to detain him. But the boy tore himself from the grasp of his friend, and with blanched brow, for he knew full well the risk he ran, he sprang over the parapet, and in an instant he stood in the sawdust circle facing the angry monarch of the wilds, whose presence had struck terror into the hearts of two thousand members of a superior race.

The sudden movement of Kit created a sensation only less than the appearance of the lion.

The residents of Smyrna all knew him, but they could not understand the cause of his apparent fool-hardiness.

"Come back! Come away, for your life!" exclaimed dozens of Kit's friends and acquaintances.

"Who is that boy? Is he one of the circus men?" asked strangers who were present.

"You will be killed, Kit! Come back!" implored Dan Clark, appalled at the danger of his friend.

Kit heard, but did not heed, the various calls. He knew what he was about, and he did not mean to be killed. But there seemed the greatest danger of it. He was six feet from the angry beast, who lashed his tail with renewed wrath, when he saw his new and puny foe. Kit knew, however, that the lion's method of attack is to spring upon his victims, and that he needs a space of from twelve to fifteen feet to do it. He himself, being but six feet distant, was within the necessary space. The lion must increase the distance between them in order to accomplish its purpose.

Now it happened that Mr. Watson had in his kitchen an elderly woman, who had for years been addicted to the obnoxious habit of snuff taking—a habit, I am glad to be able to say, which is far less prevalent now than in former days. Just before Kit had started for the circus, Ellen, who was a Scotch woman, said: "Master Kit, if you are going near the store, will you buy me a quarter of a pound of snuff?"

"Certainly, Ellen," answered Kit, who was always obliging.

The snuff he had in his pocket at the time of the lion's appearance in the ring, and it was the thought of this unusual but formidable weapon that gave him courage. If he had merely had a pistol or revolver in his pocket, he would not have ventured, for he knew that a wound would only make the lion fiercer and more dangerous.

The lion stood stock still for a moment. Apparently he was amazed at the daring of the boy who had rushed into his presence. His fierce eyes began to roll wickedly and he uttered one of those deep, hoarse growls, such as are wont to strike fear alike into animals and men. He glared at Kit very much as a cat surveys a puny mouse whom she purposes to make her victim.

It was a few brief seconds, but to the audience, who were spellbound, and scarcely dared to breathe, it seemed as many minutes that the boy and lion stood confronting each other without moving. Indeed, Kit stood as if fascinated before the mighty beast, and a thrill passed through his frame as he realized the terrible danger into which he had impulsively rushed. But he knew full well

that his peril was each instant growing greater. He could not retreat now, for the furious beast would improve the chance to spring upon him and rend him to pieces.

With curious deliberation he drew from his pocket a paper parcel, while the lion, as if stirred by curiosity, eyed him attentively. He opened it carefully, and then, without an instant's delay, he flung a handful of the snuff which it contained full in the eyes of the terrible animal.

No sooner had he done so than he gave a spring, and in a flash was over the parapet and back in his seat.

It was not a moment too soon!

The lion was blinded by the snuff, which caused him intense pain. He released the terrified clown, who lost no time in escaping from the arena, while the vanquished beast rolled around on the sawdust in his agony, sending forth meanwhile the most terrible roars.

By this time the circus management had recovered from its momentary panic. The trainer and half a dozen animal men (those whose duty it was to take care of the animals) rushed into the circle, and soon obtained the mastery of the lion, whose pain had subdued his fury, and who was now moaning piteously.

Then through the crowded tent there ran a thrill of admiration for the boy who had delivered them all from a terrible danger.

One man, an enthusiastic Western visitor, sprang to his feet, and, waving his hat, exclaimed: "Three cheers for the brave boy, who has shown more courage than all the rest of us put together! Hip, hip, hurrah!"

The call was responded to with enthusiasm. Men and even women rose in their seats, and joined in the cheering. But some of the friends of Kit amended the suggestion by crying, "Hurrah for Kit Watson!"

"Hurrah for Kit Watson!" cried the Western man. "He's the pluckiest kid I ever saw yet."

Kit had not been frightened before, but he felt undeniably nervous when he saw the eyes of two thousand people fixed upon him. He blushed and seemed disposed to screen himself from observation. But at this moment a tall, portly man advanced from the front of the tent, and came up to where Kit was sitting.

"My boy," he said, "do me the favor to follow me. I am Mr. Barlow."

It was indeed the proprietor of the circus. He had come in person to greet the boy who had averted such a tragedy.

Mechanically Kit followed Mr. Barlow, who led him again into the arena. Then the manager cleared his throat, and said:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have nothing to show you here to-night that is better worth your attention than the young man whose heroic act you have just witnessed and profited by. I introduce to you the boy hero, Kit Watson!"

"Speech! speech!" exclaimed the spectators, after a liberal meed of applause.

Kit stood erect, and spoke modestly.

"I don't pretend to be a hero," he said. "I was as much frightened as anybody, but I thought of the snuff in my pocket, and I recalled to mind a story of a man who subdued a lunatic by means of it. So, on the impulse of the moment, I jumped into the ring. I am very much obliged to you for your cheers, and I wish I was as brave as you seem to think. I won't take up any more of your time, for I know you want the show to go on."

Kit retired amid a burst of applause, and resumed his seat.

The entertainment of the evening now proceeded, greatly to the satisfaction of the crowded ranks of spectators. But from time to time glances were cast towards the seat which Kit occupied.

"Kit," whispered Dan, "I am proud of you! I didn't think you had it in you."

"Don't say any more, Dan, or I shall become so vain you can't endure me. Look! there are our friends, the acrobats."

# CHAPTER VI.
# KIT'S POOR PROSPECTS

There was one of the spectators who did not admire Kit's heroic conduct, nor join in the applause which was so liberally showered upon him. This was Ralph Watson, who sat on the opposite side of the tent, with his chum, James Schuyler, a boy who had recently come to Smyrna from the city of New York. Ralph had been very pale when the lion first made his appearance in the arena, and trembled with fear, and no one had felt greater relief when the danger was past. But, being naturally of a jealous disposition, he was very much annoyed by the sudden popularity won by Kit.

"Isn't that your cousin?" asked James Schuyler.

"Yes," answered Ralph shortly.

"What a brave boy he is!"

Ralph shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't see much bravery about it," he said. "It isn't as if the lion was a wild one in his native forest. This one was tame."

"He didn't look very tame to me," rejoined James, who, though rather snobbish, was willing to admit the danger they had all incurred. "The people didn't think so either. Hear them cheer your cousin."

"It will make him terribly conceited. He will actually think he's a hero."

"I wouldn't have given much for any of our lives if he hadn't jumped into the ring, and blinded the lion."

Meanwhile Kit was enjoying the performance, and thinking very little of how his action would be regarded by Ralph, for whom he had no very cordial feeling, though they had been, from the necessity of the case, close companions for many years.

On their return home, Kit and Ralph reached the gate together.

"It seems you're a great hero all at once," said Ralph, with a sneer.

Kit understood the sneer, but did not choose to notice it.

"Thank you for the compliment," he responded quietly.

"O, I didn't mean to flatter you! You are puffed up enough."

"Are you sorry I jumped into the ring, Ralph?" asked Kit good-naturedly.

"I don't believe there was any real danger."

"Then I must congratulate you upon your courage. All the rest of us were frightened, and even Mr. Barlow admitted that there was danger."

"The lion was half tame. It isn't as if he were wild."

"He looked wild enough to me when I faced him in the ring. I confess that my knees began to tremble, and I wished myself at home."

"You'd better set up as a lion tamer," said Ralph.

"Thank you; I think I should prefer some other business, where my life would be safer."

"You are likely to have your wish, then."

"What do you mean?" asked Kit quickly, detecting a significance in Ralph's tone.

"I mean that father intends to have you learn a trade."

"Has he told you so?"

"Yes."

"Doesn't he propose to consult me?"

"Why should he? You are only a boy, and can't judge what is best for yourself."

"Still I am likely to be more interested than any one else in the way I am to earn my living. What trade are *you* going to learn?"

"What trade am I going to learn?" repeated Ralph, with the assumption of insulted dignity. "None at all. I shall be a merchant or a professional man."

"And why should not I be the same?" asked Kit.

"Because you're a poor boy. Didn't my father tell you this afternoon that you had no money coming to you?"

"Yes; but that needn't prevent me from becoming a merchant, or studying a profession."

"So *you* think. You can't expect my father to pay for sending you to college, or support you while you are qualifying yourself to be a merchant."

"I don't know yet what I am entitled to expect."

"You will soon know."

"How soon?"

"To-morrow. There's a blacksmith in the next town, Aaron Bickford, who has agreed to take you as an apprentice."

"So it's all settled, is it?" Kit asked, full of indignation.

"Yes, if Mr. Bickford likes your appearance. He's coming to Smyrna on business to-morrow, and will call here. You're to live at his house."

"Indeed! I am very much obliged for the information."

"Oh, you needn't get grouty about it. I've no doubt you'll have enough to eat."

"So I am to be a blacksmith, and you a merchant or–"

"Lawyer. I think I shall decide to be a lawyer," said Ralph, complacently.

"That will make quite a difference in our social positions."

"Of course; but I will help you all I can. If you have a shop of your own, I will have my horses shod at your place."

"Does your father think I am particularly well fitted to be a blacksmith?"

"He thinks you will get along very well in the business, if you are industrious. A poor boy can't choose. He must take the best he can get."

Kit did not sleep very much that night. He was full of anger and indignation with his uncle. Why should his future be so different from his cousin's? At school he had distinguished himself more in his studies, and he did not see why he was not as well fitted to become a merchant or a lawyer as Ralph.

"They can't make me a blacksmith without my consent," was his final thought, as he closed his eyes and went to sleep.

Kit was up early the next morning. As breakfast was not ready, he strolled over to the hotel, which was only five minutes' walk from his uncle's house.

The circus tent had vanished. Late at night, after the evening performance was over, the canvas men had busied themselves in taking them down, and packing them for transportation to a town ten miles distant on the railroad, where they were to give two exhibitions the next day. The showy chariots, the lions, tigers, elephants and camels, with all the performers, were gone. But Mr. Barlow, the owner of the circus, had remained at the Smyrna Hotel all night, preferring to journey comfortably the next morning.

He was sitting on the piazza when Kit passed. Though he had never seen Kit but once, his business made him observant of faces, and he recognized him immediately.

"Aha!" he said, "this is the young hero of last evening, is it not?"

Kit smiled.

"I am the boy who jumped into the ring," he said.

"So I thought. I hope you slept well after the excitement."

A sudden thought came to Kit. Mr. Barlow looked like a kind hearted man, and he had already shown that he was well disposed toward him.

"I slept very poorly," he said.

"Was it the thought of the danger you had been in?"

"No, sir; I learned that my uncle, without consulting me, had arranged to apprentice me to a blacksmith."

Mr. Barlow looked surprised.

"But you look like a boy of independent means," he said, puzzled.

"I have always supposed that this was the case," said Kit, "but my uncle told me yesterday, to my surprise, that I was dependent upon him, and had no expectations."

"You don't want to be a blacksmith?"

"No, sir; I consider any kind of work honorable, but that would not suit me."

"You would succeed well in my business," said the showman, "but I am very careful how I recommend it to boys. It isn't a good school for them. They are exposed to many temptations in it. But if a boy has a strong will, and good principles, he may avoid all the evils connected with it."

Kit had not thought of it before, but now the question suggested itself: "Why should I not join the circus. I should like it better than being a blacksmith."

"How much do you pay acrobats?" he asked.

"Are you an acrobat?" asked Mr. Barlow.

Kit told the story of his practicing with the Vincenti Brothers.

"Good!" said Mr. Barlow. "If they indorse you, it is sufficient. If you decide to join my company, I will give you, to begin with, ten dollars a week and your expenses."

"Thank you, sir," said Kit, dazzled by the offer, "Where will you be on Saturday?"

"At Grafton on Saturday, and Milltown on Monday."

"If I decide to join you, I will do so at one or the other of those places."

Here the railroad omnibus came up, and Mr. Barlow entered it, for he was to leave by the next train.

# CHAPTER VII.
# AARON BICKFORD, THE BLACKSMITH

Kit returned to breakfast in good spirits. He saw a way out of his difficulties. Though he had no false pride, he felt that a blacksmith's life would be distasteful to him. He was fond of study, and had looked forward to a college course. Now this was out of the question. It seemed that he was as poor as his friend, Dan Clark, with his own way to make in the world. When he left school, at the beginning of the vacation, he supposed that he would inherit a competence. It was certainly a great change in his prospects, but now he did not feel dispirited. He thought, upon the whole, he would enjoy traveling with the circus. His duties would be light, and the pay liberal.

Before he returned to breakfast, Ralph had come down-stairs, and had a few words with his father.

"I think you are going to have trouble with Kit, father," he commenced.

"What makes you think so, and what about?" asked Mr. Watson.

"I told him last evening about your plan of apprenticing him to Mr. Bickford."

"You did wrong. I did not propose to mention the matter to him till Mr. Bickford's arrival. What did he say?"

"He turned up his nose at the idea. He thinks he ought to become a merchant or a professional man like me. He is too proud to be a blacksmith."

"Then he must put his pride in his pocket. It will be all I can do to pay the expenses of your education. I can't provide for two boys."

"When Kit is off your hands won't you increase my allowance, father?" asked Ralph, insinuatingly.

"Suppose we postpone that matter," replied Mr. Watson, in a tone of voice that was not encouraging. "I have lost some money lately, and I can't do anything more for you just at present."

Ralph looked disappointed, but did not venture to press the subject.

"Where have you been, Kit?" he asked, as he saw his cousin entering the gate, and coming up the path to the front door.

"I have been taking a walk," answered Kit, cheerfully.

"It's a good idea to rise early."

"Why?"

"Because you will probably be required to do so in your new place."

"What new place?"

"At the blacksmith's."

Kit smiled. To Ralph's surprise he did not appear to be annoyed.

"I see you are getting reconciled to the idea. Last evening you seemed to dislike it."

"Your father has not said anything about it to me."

"He will very soon."

"Won't you come round and see me occasionally, Ralph?" asked Kit, with a curious smile.

"Yes; I may call on Saturday. I should like to see how you look."

Kit smiled again. He thought it extremely doubtful whether Ralph would see him at the blacksmith's forge.

Half an hour after breakfast, while Ralph and Kit were in the stable, the sound of wheels was heard, and a stout, broad-shouldered man, with a bronzed complexion, drove up in a farm wagon. Throwing his reins over the horse's neck, he descended from the wagon, and turned in at the gate. Mr. Watson, who had been sitting at the front window, opened the door for him.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Bickford," he said.

"Is the boy ready?" asked the blacksmith. "I can take him right over with me this morning."

"Come into the house, I will send for him."

Mr. Bickford noticed the handsome appearance of the hall, and the front room, the door of which was partly open, and said: "If the boy's been used to livin' here, he must be kind of high strung. I can't give him no such home as this."

"Of course not, Mr. Bickford. He can't expect it. He's a poor boy, and will have to make his own way in the world. Beggars can't be choosers, you know."

A servant was sent to the stable to summon Kit. Ralph, who thought he should enjoy the scene, accompanied him.

Kit regarded the blacksmith with some curiosity.

"This is Mr. Aaron Bickford, of Oakford, Kit," began his uncle.

"I hope you are well, Mr. Bickford," said Kit, politely.

The blacksmith gazed at Kit with earnest scrutiny.

"Humph!" said he; "are you strong and muscular?"

"Pretty fair," answered Kit, with a smile.

"Kit," said his uncle, clearing his throat, "in your circumstances I have thought it desirable that you should learn a trade, and have spoken to Mr. Bickford about taking you as an apprentice."

"In what business?" asked Kit.

"I'm a blacksmith," said Mr. Bickford, taking it upon himself to reply, "and it's a good, healthy business as any you'd want to follow."

"I have no doubt of it," said Kit, quietly, "but I don't think I should like it all the same. Uncle Stephen, how does it happen that you have selected such a business for me?"

"I heard that Mr. Bickford needed an apprentice, and I have arranged matters with him to take you, and teach you his trade."

"Yes," put in Mr. Bickford, "I've agreed to give you your board and a dollar a week the first year. That's more than I got when I was 'prentice. My old master only paid me fifty cents a week."

Kit turned to his uncle.

"Do you think my education has fitted me for a blacksmith's trade?" he asked.

"It won't interfere," replied Mr. Watson, a little uneasily.

"Wouldn't it have been well to consult me in the matter? It seems to me I am rather interested."

"Oh, I supposed you would object, as you had been looking forward to being a gentleman, but I can't afford to keep you in idleness any longer, and so have arranged matters with Mr. Bickford."

"Suppose I object to going with him?" said Kit, calmly.

"Then I shall overrule your objections, and compel you to do what I think is for your good."

Kit's eye flashed with transient anger, but as he had no idea of acceding to his uncle's order, he did not allow himself to become unduly excited. Indeed he had a plan, which made temporary submission a matter of policy.

"What's the boy's name?" asked Aaron Bickford.

"I am generally called Kit. My right name is Christopher."

"Then, Kit, you'd better be getting your traps together, for I can't stop long away from the shop."

"I have arranged to have you go back with Mr. Bickford to-day," said Stephen Watson.

"That's rather short notice, isn't it?" Kit rejoined.

"The sooner the matter is arranged, the better!" answered his uncle.

"Very well," said Kit, with unexpected submission. "I'll go and pack up my clothes."

Mr. Watson looked relieved. He had expected to have more trouble with his nephew.

In twenty minutes Kit reappeared with his school valise. He had packed up a supply of shirts, socks, handkerchiefs, and underclothing.

"I am all ready," he said.

"Then we'll be going," said the blacksmith, rising with alacrity.

Kit took his place on the seat beside Mr. Bickford.

"Good-by, uncle!" he said; "it may be some time before we meet again."

"What does the boy mean?" asked Stephen Watson, turning to Ralph with a puzzled look.

"I don't know. He's been acting queer all the morning."

So Kit rode away with Aaron Bickford, but he had not the slightest intention of becoming blacksmith. Instead of blacksmith's forges, visions of a circus ring and acrobatic feats were dancing before his mind.

# CHAPTER VIII.
# KIT'S RIDE TO OAKFORD

Oakford was six miles away. The blacksmith's horse was seventeen years old, and did not make very good speed. Kit was unusually busy thinking. He had taken a decisive step; he had, in fact, made up his mind to enter upon a new life. He had not objected to going away with the blacksmith, because it gave him an excuse for packing up his clothes, and leaving the house quietly.

It may be objected that he had deceived Mr. Bickford. This was true, and the thought of it troubled him, but he hardly knew how to explain matters.

Not much conversation took place till they were within a mile of Oakford. Aaron Bickford had filled his pipe at the beginning of the journey, and he had smoked steadily ever since. At last he removed his pipe from his mouth, and put it in his pocket.

"Were you ever in Oakford?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Kit. "I know the place very well."

"How do you think you'll like livin' there?"

"I don't think I shall like it."

Mr. Bickford looked surprised.

"I'll keep you at work so stiddy you won't mind where you are," he remarked dryly.

"Not if I know it," Kit said to himself.

He knew Mr. Bickford by reputation. He was a close-fisted, miserly man, who was not likely to be a very desirable employer, for he expected every one who worked for him to labor as hard as himself. Moreover, he and his wife lived in a very stingy manner, and few of the luxuries of the season appeared on their table. The fact that complaints upon this score had been made by some of Kit's predecessors in his employ, led Mr. Bickford to make inquiries with a view to ascertaining whether Kit was particular about his food.

"Are you partic'lar about your vittles?" he asked abruptly.

"I have been accustomed to good food," answered Kit.

"You can't expect to live as you have at your uncle's," continued the blacksmith. "Me and my wife have enough to eat, but we think it best to eat plain food. Some of my help have had stuck up notions, and expected first class hotel fare, but they didn't get it at my house."

"I believe you," said Kit.

Mr. Bickford eyed him sharply, not being sure but this might be a sarcastic observation, but Kit's face was straight, and betrayed nothing.

"You'll live as well as I do myself," he proceeded, after a pause. "I don't pamper my appetite by no means."

Kit was quite ready to believe this also, but did not say so.

"What time did you get up at your uncle's?" asked the blacksmith.

"We have breakfast a little before eight. I get up in time for breakfast."

"You do, hey?" ejaculated the blacksmith, scornfully. "Wa'al, I declare! You must be tuckered out gettin' up so airly."

"O no, I stand it very well, Mr. Bickford," said Kit, amused.

"Do you know what time I get up?" asked Mr. Bickford, with a touch of indignation in his tone.

"I would like to know," answered Kit meekly.

"Wa'al, I get up at five o'clock. What do you say to that, hey?"

"I think it is very early."

"I suppose you couldn't get up so early as that?"

"I might, if there was any need of it."

"I reckon there will be need of it if you're goin' to work for me."

Kit cleared his throat. He felt that the time had come for an explanation.

"Mr. Bickford," he said, "I owe you an apology."

"What?" said Bickford, regarding his young companion in surprise.

"I have deceived you."

"I don't know what you're talkin' about."

"I don't think I did right to come with you to day."

"I can't make out what you're talkin' about. Your uncle has engaged to let you work for me."

"But I haven't engaged to work for you, Mr. Bickford."

"Hey?" and the blacksmith eyed our hero in undisguised amazement.

"I may as well say that I don't intend to work for you."

"You don't mean to work for me?" repeated Bickford slowly.

"Just so. I have no intention of becoming a blacksmith."

"Is the boy crazy?" ejaculated Aaron Bickford.

"No, Mr. Bickford; I have full command of my senses. You will have to look out for another apprentice."

"Then why did you agree to come with me?"

"That is what I have to apologize for. I wanted to get away from my uncle's house quietly, and I thought it the best way to pretend to agree to his plan."

Aaron Bickford was not a sweet tempered man. He had a pretty strong will of his own, and was called, not without reason, obstinate. He began to feel angry.

"Well, boy, have you got through with what you had to say?" he asked.

"I believe so—for the present."

"Then I guess it's about time for me to say something."

"Very well, sir."

"You'll find me a tough customer to deal with, young man."

"Then perhaps it is just as well that I do not propose to work for you."

"But you are goin' to work for me!" said the blacksmith, nodding his head.

"Whether I want to or not?" interrogated Kit, placidly.

"Yes, whether you want to or not, willy nilly, as the lawyers say."

"I think, Mr. Bickford, you will find that it takes two to make a bargain."

"So it does, and there's two that's made this bargain, your uncle and me."

Mr. Bickford was not always strictly grammatical in his language, as the reader will observe.

"I don't admit my uncle's right to make arrangements for me without my consent."

"You know more'n he does, I reckon?"

"No, but this matter concerns me more than it does him."

"Maybe you expect to live without workin'!"

"No; if it is true, as my uncle says, that I have no money, I shall have to make my living, but I prefer to choose my own way of doing it."

"You're a queer boy. Bein' a blacksmith is too much work for you, I reckon."

"At any rate it isn't the kind of work I care to undertake."

"What's all this rigmarole comin' to? Here we are 'most at my house. If you ain't goin' to work for me, what are you goin' to do?"

"I should like to pass the night at your house, Mr. Bickford. After breakfast I will pay you for your accommodations, and go–"

"Where?"

"You must excuse my telling you that. I have formed some plans, but I do not care to have my uncle know them."

"Are you going to work for anybody?" asked the blacksmith, whose curiosity was aroused.

"Yes, I have a place secured."

"Is it on a farm?"

"No."

"You're mighty mysterious, it seems to me. Now you've had your say, I've got something to tell you."

"Very well, Mr. Bickford."

"You say you're not goin' to work for me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I say you *are* goin' to work for me. I've got your uncle's authority to set you to work, and I'm goin' to do it."

Kit heard this calmly.

"Suppose we postpone the discussion of the matter," he said. "Is that your house?"

Aaron Bickford's answer was to drive into the yard of a cottage. On the side opposite was a blacksmith's forge.

"That's where you're goin' to work!" he said, grimly, pointing to the forge.

# CHAPTER IX.
# KIT MAKES A NEW ACQUAINTANCE

Grafton, where Barlow's circus was billed to appear on Saturday, was only six miles farther on. Oakford was about half way, so that in accompanying the blacksmith to his home, Kit had accomplished about half the necessary journey. Now that he had undeceived the blacksmith as to his intention of staying he felt at ease in his mind. It was his plan to remain over night in the house and pursue his journey early the next day.

"Are these all the clo'es you brought with you?" asked Bickford, surveying Kit's neat and rather expensive suit with disapproval.

"Yes. Am I not well enough dressed for a blacksmith?" asked Kit, with a smile.

"You're a plaguy sight too well dressed," returned Bickford. "You want a good rough suit, for the forge is a dirty place."

"I thought I told you I did not intend to work for you, Mr. Bickford."

"That's what you said, but I don't take no stock in it. Your uncle has bound you out to me, and that settles it."

"If he has bound me out, where are the papers, Mr. Bickford?" asked Kit, keenly.

This question was a poser. The blacksmith supposed that Kit might be ignorant that papers were required, but he found himself mistaken.

"There ain't no papers, but that don't make no difference," he said. "He says you're to work for me, and I'm goin' to hold you to it."

Kit did not reply, for he saw no advantage in discussion.

"You'll get a dollar a week and your board, and you can't do better. I reckon dinner is about ready now."

Kit felt ready for the dinner, for the morning's ride had sharpened his appetite. So when, five minutes later, he was summoned to the table, he willingly accepted the invitation.

"This is my new 'prentice, Mrs. Bickford," said the blacksmith, by way of introduction, to a spare, red headed woman, who was bustling about the kitchen, where the table was spread.

Mrs. Bickford eyed Kit critically.

"He's one of the kid glove kind, by his looks," she said. "You don't expect to get much work out of him, do you?"

"I reckon I will, or know the reason why," responded Bickford, significantly.

"Set right down and I'll dish up the victuals," said Mrs. Bickford. "We don't stand on no ceremony here. What's your name, young man?"

"People call me Kit."

"Sounds like a young cat. It's rediculous to give a boy such a name. First thing you know I'll be calling you Kitty."

"I hope I don't look like a cat," said Kit laughing.

"You ain't got no fur on your cheeks yet," said the blacksmith, laughing heartily at his own witticism. "What have you got for dinner, mother?"

"It's a sort of picked-up dinner," answered Mrs. Bickford. "There's some pork and beans warmed up, some slapjacks from breakfast, and some fried sassidges."

"Why, that's a dinner for a king," said the blacksmith, rubbing his hands.

He took his seat, and put on a plate for Kit specimens of the delicacies mentioned above. In spite of his appetite Kit partook sparingly, supplementing his meal with bread, which, being from the baker's shop, was of good quality. He congratulated himself that he was not to board permanently at Mr. Bickford's table.

When dinner was over, the blacksmith in a genial mood said to Kit: "You needn't begin to work till to-morrow. You can tramp round the village if you want to."

Kit was glad of the delay, as early the next morning he expected to bid farewell to Oakford, and thus would avoid a conflict.

He had been in Oakford before, and knew his way about. He went out of the yard and walked about in a leisurely way. It was early in June, and the country was at its best. The birds were singing, the fields were green with verdure, and Kit's spirits rose. He felt that it would be delightful to travel about the country, as he would do if he joined Barlow's Circus.

He overtook a boy somewhat larger than himself, a stout, strong country boy, attired in a rough, coarse working suit. He was about to pass him, when the country boy called out, "Hallo, you!"

"Were you speaking to me?" asked Kit, turning and looking back.

"Yes. Didn't I see you riding into town with Aaron Bickford?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to work for him?"

"That is what he expects," answered Kit diplomatically. He hesitated about confiding his plans to a stranger.

"Then I pity you."

"Why?"

"I used to work for him."

"Did you?"

"Yes, I stood it as long as I could."

"Then you didn't like it?"

"I guess not."

"What was the trouble?"

"Everything. He's a stingy old hunks, to begin with. I went to work for a dollar a week and board. If the board had been decent, it would have been something, but I'd as soon board at the poorhouse."

"I have taken dinner there," said Kit, smiling.

"Did you like it?"

"I have dined better. In fact I have seldom dined worse."

"What did the old woman give you?"

Kit enumerated the articles composing the bill of fare.

"That's better than usual," said the new acquaintance.

"I suppose the dollar a week is all right," said Kit.

"Good enough if you can get it. It's about as easy to get blood out of a stone, as money out of old Bickford. Generally I had to wait ten days after the time before I could get the money."

"How is the work?"

"Hard, and plenty of it. It's work early and work late, and if there isn't work at the forge, you've got to help the old woman, by drawing water and doing chores. You don't live in Oakford, do you?"

"No; I came from Smyrna."

"I thought not. Bickford can't get a boy to work for him here. What made you come? Couldn't you get a place at home?"

"I didn't try."

"Well, you haven't done much in coming here."

"I begin to think so," Kit responded, with a smile.

"Hasn't the circus been in your town?"

"Yes."

"I wanted to go, but I guess I'll manage to see it in Grafton. It shows there to-morrow."

"Are you going?" asked Kit with interest.

"Yes; I shall walk. I'll start early and spend the day there."

"We may meet there."

"You don't expect to go, do you? Bickford won't let you off."

Kit smiled.

"I don't think Mr. Bickford will have much to say about it," he said.

"Are you going to hook jack?" asked his new acquaintance.

"I didn't mean to tell you, but I will. I have made up my mind not to work for Mr. Bickford at all."

"Then why did you come here?"

"Because my uncle saw fit to arrange with him."

"What are you going to do, then?"

"I am offered work with the circus."

"You are!" exclaimed the country boy, opening wide his eyes in astonishment. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to be an acrobat."

"What's that?"

Kit explained as well as he could.

"What are they going to pay you?"

"Ten dollars a week and my expenses," answered Kit, proudly.

"Jehu!" ejaculated the other boy. "Why, that's good wages for a man. Do you think they'd hire me, too?"

"If you think you can do what they require, you can ask them."

"Why can't I do it as well as you?"

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.