

ALGER

HORATIO JR.

THE YOUNG EXPLORER;
OR, CLAIMING HIS
FORTUNE

Horatio Alger

**The Young Explorer; Or,
Claiming His Fortune**

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CHAPTER I

BEN'S INHERITANCE

"I've settled up your father's estate, Benjamin," said Job Stanton. "You'll find it all figgered out on this piece of paper. There was that two-acre piece up at Rockville brought seventy-five dollars, the medder fetched a hundred and fifty, the two cows—"

"How much does it all come to, Uncle Job?" interrupted Ben, who was impatient of details.

"Hadn't you better let me read off the items, nephew?" asked Job, looking over his spectacles.

"No, Uncle Job. I know you've done your best for me, and there's no need of your going through it all. How much is there left after all expenses are paid?"

"That's what I was a-comin' to, Ben. I make it out that there's three hundred and sixty-five dollars and nineteen cents. That's a dollar for every day in the year. It's a good deal of money, Ben."

"So it is, Uncle Job," answered Ben, and he was quite sincere. There are not many boys of sixteen to whom this would not seem a large sum.

"You're rich; that is, for a boy," added Uncle Job.

"It's more than I expected, uncle. I want you to take fifteen dollars and nineteen cents. That'll leave me just three hundred and fifty."

"Why should I take any of your money, nephew?"

"You've had considerable trouble in settling up the estate, and it's taken a good deal of your time, too."

"My time ain't of much vally, and as to the trouble, it's a pity ef I can't take some trouble for my brother's son. No, Ben, I won't take a cent. You'll need it all."

"But you said yourself it was a good deal of money for a boy, Uncle Job."

"So it is, but it's all you've got. Most boys have fathers to take care of 'em, while you're alone in the world."

"Yes I am alone in the world," said Ben sadly, his cheerful face clouding over.

"But you've got an uncle, lad," continued Job Stanton, laying his hand gently on the boy's shoulder. "He's a poor man, but as much as in him lies, he'll be your friend and helper."

"I know it, Uncle Job. You've always been kind to me."

"And allus will be, Ben. Now, Ben, I've got a plan for you. I don't know what you'll think of it, but it's the best I've been able to think of."

"What is it, Uncle Job?"

"Ef you'll stay with me and help me in the shop, I'll give you a home, such as it is, and fifty dollars a year toward your clothes. Your Aunt Hannah and your Cousin Jane want you to make your home with us."

"I'm very much obliged to you, Uncle Job," said Ben slowly.

"You needn't be, boy. It's a sort of mutooal arrangement. It'll be as good for me as for you. You can put your money in the bank, and let it stay till you're twenty-one. Why, it'll be nigh on to five hunderd dollars by that time."

"I'm much obliged to you, Uncle Job, as I said before, but there's one thing in the way."

"What's that, Ben?"

"I don't like shoemaking."

"Perhaps it isn't genteel enough for you, Ben," said his uncle.

"I don't care for that, Uncle Job, but I don't like being shut up in a shop. Besides, it doesn't give steady work. Last year you were without work at least a third of the time."

"So I was, Ben," said Job. "I'm willin' to own that's a great drawback."

"And it isn't likely to be any better hereafter. Last year was as good as the average."

"It was better," Job admitted. "The year before I was out of work five months."

"Well, Uncle Job, I want to work at something that'll give me employment all the year round."

"So do I, Ben, but I don't see what you can find, unless you go to work on a farm. You're used to that, and I guess you could find a chance before long. There's Deacon Pitkin wants a boy, and would be glad of the chance of gettin' you."

"I suppose he would," said Ben, laughing. "Would you advise me to go there?"

"Well, there might be some objections, but--"

"You know I wouldn't get enough to eat, Uncle Job," interrupted Ben. "Why, Deacon Pitkin's the meanest man in the village."

"You mustn't be hasty in your judgments, nephew."

"I'm not. I know what I'm talking about. I worked for the deacon two days once. He gave me ten cents a day and board-and such board! Why, I got up from the table hungry every meal, and yet the deacon reported afterward that I was a great eater. Mrs. Pitkin cuts a small pie into eight pieces, each about two mouthfuls, and when I asked for a second piece, she asked if I was allowed to have two pieces at home."

"What did you say?" asked Uncle Job, evidently amused.

"I said yes, and that each piece was twice as big as she gave."

"I'm afraid that was rather forward, Ben. Did she say anything to that?"

"She said I must be very greedy, and that boys always ate more'n was good for 'em. No, Uncle Job, I don't care to work for Deacon Pitkin."

"Have you formed any plans, Ben? You don't want to go on a farm, and you don't want to go into a shoeshop, and that's about all you can find to do in Hampton."

"I don't mean to stay in Hampton," said Ben quietly.

"Don't mean to stay in Hampton!" exclaimed Uncle Joe, amazed.

"No, uncle. There's a good many places besides Hampton in the world."

"So there is, Ben," answered Uncle Job, with a disregard of grammar more excusable than his nephew's, for he had never had any special educational advantages,—"so there is, but you don't know anybody in them other places."

"It won't take me long to get acquainted," returned Ben, not at all disturbed by this consideration.

"Where do you want to go?"

"I want to go to California."

"Gracious sakes! Want to go to California!" gasped Job. "What put that idee into your head?"

"A good many people are going there, and there's a chance to get rich quick out among the gold-mines."

"But you're only a boy."

"I'm a pretty large boy, Uncle Job," said Ben complacently, "and I'm pretty strong."

"So you be, Ben, but it takes more than strength."

"What more, Uncle Job?"

"It takes judgment."

"Can't a boy have judgment?"

"Waal, he may have some, but you don't often find an old head on young shoulders."

"I know all that, uncle, but I can work if I am a boy."

"I know you're willin' to work, Ben, but it'll cost a sight of money to get out to Californy to start with."

"I know that. It will take two hundred dollars."

"And that's more'n half of all you've got. It seems to me temptin' Providence to spend such a sight of money for the chance of earning some on t'other side of the world, when you can get a livin' here and put all your money in the bank."

"In five years it would only amount to five hundred dollars, and if I go to California, I expect to be worth a good deal more than that before two years are past."

"I'm afraid you've got large idees, Ben."

"You won't interfere with my going, Uncle Job?" asked Ben anxiously.

"I won't actooly interfere, but I'll do all I can to have you give it up."

"But if my mind is set upon it, you'll let me go, won't you, uncle?"

"I suppose I must," said Job Stanton. "A wilful lad must have his way. But you mustn't blame me if things turn out unlucky."

"No, I shall only blame myself."

"There's one promise you must make me," said his uncle.

"What is that?"

"Take a week to consider whether you hadn't better take my advice and stay at home."

"Yes, uncle, I'll promise that."

"And you'll think it over in all its bearin's?"

"Yes, uncle."

"It ain't best to take any important step without reflection, Ben."

"You're right, uncle."

This conversation took place in Job Stanton's little shoe-shop, only a rod distant from the small, plain house which he had occupied ever since he had been married. It was interrupted by the appearance of a pretty girl of fourteen, who, presenting herself at the door of the shop, called out:

"Supper's ready, father."

"So are we, Jennie," said Ben, promptly.

"You are always ready to eat, Ben," said his cousin, smiling.

"That's what Mrs. Pitkin used to think, Jennie. She used to watch every mouthful I took."

CHAPTER II

DEACON PITKIN'S OFFER

Ben's father had died three months before. He had lost his mother when ten years old, and having neither brother nor sister was left quite alone in the world. At one time his father had possessed a few thousand dollars, but by unlucky investments he had lost nearly all, so that Ben's inheritance amounted to less than four hundred dollars.

This thought troubled Mr. Stanton, and on his death-bed he spoke about it to his son.

"I shall leave you almost destitute, Ben," he said. "If I had acted more wisely it would have been different."

"Don't trouble yourself about that, father," said Ben promptly. "I am young and strong, and I shall be sure to get along."

"You will have to work hard, and the world is a hard taskmaster."

"I don't feel afraid, father. I am sure I shall succeed."

The dying father was cheered by Ben's confident words. Our hero was strong and sturdy, his limbs active, and his face ruddy with health. He looked like a boy who could get along. He was not a sensitive plant, and not to be discouraged by rebuffs. The father's brow cleared.

"I am glad you are not afraid to meet what is in store for you," he said. "I believe you will do your part, and God helps those who help themselves."

After his father's death, Ben became an inmate of his uncle's family while the estate was being settled. He paid for his board partly by work in the shop, and partly by doing chores. This brings us to the day when the conversation detailed in the first chapter took place.

On the following morning Ben was sent on an errand to the village store. On his way he overtook Deacon Pitkin.

"Good mornin', Ben!" said the deacon. "Where are you goin'?"

"To the store, sir."

"So am I. Ef you ain't in a hurry, le'ss walk along together."

"All right, sir," answered Ben. "I think I know what's comin'," he said to himself.

"You're stayin' at your Uncle Job's, ain't you?" asked Deacon Pitkin.

"Yes, sir."

"You don't calc'late to keep on there, do you?"

"No, sir; he would like to have me stay and work in the shop, but I don't fancy shoemaking."

"Jest so. I wouldn't ef I was you. It's an onsartin business.

There's nothin' like farmin' for stiddy work."

"The old man kept me at work pretty stiddy," thought Ben. "He'd always find something for me to do."

"I've been thinkin' that I need a boy about your age to help me on my farm. I ain't so young as I was, and I've got a crick in my back. I don't want a man-

"You'd have to pay him too high wages," Ben said to himself.

"A strong, capable boy like you could give me all the help I need."

"I expect I could," said Ben demurely.

"I was sayin' to Mrs. Pitkin this mornin' that I thought it would be a good plan to take you till you was twenty-one."

"What did she say?" asked Ben, interested.

"Waal, she didn't say much," answered the deacon slowly; "but I guess she hasn't no objections."

"Didn't she say that I had an awful appetite?" asked Ben, smiling.

"She said you was pretty hearty," answered the deacon, rather surprised at Ben's penetration. "Boys should curb their appetites."

"I don't think I could curb mine," said Ben thoughtfully.

"I guess there wouldn't be any trouble about that," returned the deacon, whose meanness ran in a different channel from his wife's, and who took less note of what was eaten at his table. "Ef you think you'd like to engage, and we could make a bargain, you might begin next week."

"Jest so," said Ben.

The deacon looked at him rather sharply, but Ben didn't appear to intend any disrespect in repeating his favorite phrase.

"Did your father leave you much?" inquired Deacon Pitkin.

"A few hundred dollars," said Ben carelessly.

"Indeed!" said the deacon, gratified. "What are you goin' to do with it?"

"Uncle Job thinks it would be best to put it in the bank."

"Jest so. It would fetch you some interest every year-enough to clothe you, likely. I'll tell you what I'll do, Ben. I'll give you your board the first year, and your interest will buy your clothes. The second year I'll give you twenty dollars and board, and maybe twenty more the third year."

Ben shook his head.

"I guess we can't make a bargain, Deacon Pitkin," he said.

Deacon Pitkin knew that he had made a very mean offer, and felt that he could afford to increase it somewhat; but he was a close hand at a bargain, and meant to get Ben as cheap as he could.

"What was you expectin'?" he asked cautiously. "You must remember that you're only a boy, and can't expect men's wages."

Ben had no idea, as we know, of engaging to work for Deacon Pitkin at all; but he decided that the easiest way to avoid it was to put such a value on his services as to frighten the old man.

"I am almost as strong as a man," he said, "and I can earn a great deal more than my board the first year."

"I might be willin' to give you twenty dollars the first year," said the deacon.

"I've been thinking," said Ben soberly, "that I ought to have a hundred and fifty dollars and board the first year."

Deacon Pitkin fairly gasped for breath. He was fairly overpowered by Ben's audacity.

"A-hundred-and-fifty-dollars!" he ejaculated, turning his wrinkled face toward our hero.

"That's about the figure," said Ben cheerfully. "A hundred and fifty dollars and board, or three hundred dollars, and I'll board with my uncle."

"Is the boy crazy?" asked the deacon, in a bewildered tone.

"You'd have to pay a man as much as twenty dollars a month," pursued Ben. "That's about a hundred dollars a year more."

"Benjamin," said the deacon solemnly, "do you want to ruin me?"

"No, sir, I hope not," answered our hero innocently.

"Then why do you ask such an unheard-of price?"

"I think I'm worth it," said Ben.

"Boys haven't much judgment," said the deacon. "You'd better let me talk over this matter with your Uncle Job."

"It won't be any use, Deacon Pitkin. Uncle Job won't interfere with me."

"You can't get such wages anywhere. You'll have to work for less."

"Perhaps I can't get my price in Hampton," said Ben.

"Of course you can't. There ain't no one goin' to pay you men's wages."

"Perhaps you are right, Deacon Pitkin. In that case, my mind is made up."

"What will you do?" asked the deacon, showing some curiosity.

"I'll leave town."

"It's a resky thing, Benjamin. You ain't old enough to take care of yourself."

"I think I can do it. Deacon Pitkin. I am not afraid to try. Still, if you'll give me a hundred and fifty dollars and board—"

"You must think I'm crazy," said the deacon hastily. "I don't throw money away that way."

"Then I'm afraid we can't make a bargain, deacon. Here is the store, and I'll bid you good morning."

"If you think better of my offer, you can let me know, Benjamin. You can talk it over with your uncle."

"All right, sir. If you think better of mine, just let me know within a week, or I may be gone from Hampton."

"That's a cur'us boy," said the deacon meditatively. "He's got the most conceited idea of his vally to work of any boy I ever came across. A hundred and fifty dollars and board! What'll Mrs. Pitkin say when I tell her? She ain't much sot on the boy's comin' anyway. She thinks he's too hearty; but I don't mind that, so much. He's strong and good to work, an' he's the only boy in town that would suit me."

"I wonder what the deacon thinks of me," soliloquized Ben. "I thought I should scare him a little when I named my price. If I'd thought he would take me at that figure, I'd have said more. It wouldn't suit me to work for him at all."

In the evening Deacon Pitkin came over to see Job Stanton, and renewed his offer for Ben's services.

"The boy's got wild idees about pay," he said; "but boys haven't much jedgment. You're a sensible man, Mr. Stanton, and you and me can make a fair bargain."

"It won't be of much use, Deacon Pitkin. Ben's got his idees, an' he sticks to 'em."

"But you're his uncle. You can make him see his true interest."

"Ben's young," said Job, suspending his work; "but he's got to look out for himself. He may make mistakes, but I've promised not to interfere. I've got confidence in him that he'll come out right in the end. Truth is, deacon, he don't want to work at farmin', and that's why he asked you such a steep price. He knew you wouldn't agree to give it."

This put the matter in a new light, and Deacon Pitkin reluctantly concluded that he must abandon the idea of obtaining Ben as a helper on his farm.

CHAPTER III

SAM STURGIS' NEW IDEA

During the week which Ben had agreed to take before coming to a final decision, he had another offer of employment.

This is how it came about:

A little out of the village, in a handsome house, the best in Hampton, lived Major Sturgis, a wealthy landholder, who had plenty to live upon and nothing in particular to do, except to look after his property. He was a portly man, who walked with a slow, dignified step, leaning on a gold-headed cane, and evidently felt his importance. His son, Sam, was a chip of the old block. He condescended to associate with the village boys, because solitary grandeur is not altogether pleasant. He occasionally went to New York to visit a cousin of about his own age. From such a visit he had just returned, bringing back with him a new idea.

"Father," he said, "Cousin Henry has a boy about his own age to wait on him, black his boots, and run errands."

"Has he?" asked the major mechanically, not looking up from the daily paper which he was reading.

"Yes, sir. He don't pay him much, you know, only five dollars a month and his board, and Henry finds it very convenient."

Major Sturgis did not reply. In fact, he was too much interested in the article he was reading.

"Ain't you as rich as uncle?" asked Sam, who was gradually leading up to his proposal.

"Yes, Sam, I think so," answered his father, laying down the paper and removing his gold-bowed spectacles.

"Then why won't you let me have a servant, too?"

"What do you want of a servant? There are servants enough in the house."

"I want a boy to follow me round, and do just what I bid him."

"I don't see any necessity for it."

"He could do errands for you, too, father," said Sam diplomatically.

"We would have to send to the city for a boy, in case I let you have one."

"No, we wouldn't," answered Sam.

"Do you know of any one around here?"

"Yes; there is Ben Stanton. He's got to find something to do."

"I thought you didn't like Ben Stanton," said the major, in some surprise. "I have heard you say—"

"Oh, he's rather uppish-feels too big for a poor boy; but I would soon train him. I'd make him know his place."

"Your remarks are well founded, my son. Only yesterday I met the boy on the village street, and instead of taking off his hat and making a low bow, as he should do to a man of my position, he nodded carelessly, and said. 'How are you, major?' Really, I don't know what the country is coming to, when the rising generation is so deficient in veneration."

"The fact is, father, Ben thinks himself as good as anybody. You'd think, by the way he speaks to me, that he considered himself my equal."

"That is one of the evils incident to a republican form of government," said the major pompously. "For my part, I prefer the English social system, where the gentry are treated with proper deference."

"Well, father, may I engage Ben as my servant?"

"I am afraid you would not find him properly subordinate."

"Just leave that to me," said Sam confidently. "If I can't teach him his place, then nobody can. I should enjoy having him to order about."

Sam generally carried his point with his father, and the present instance was no exception.

"I don't know that I have any particular objection," said the major.

"How much wages may I offer, father?"

"The same that your Cousin Henry's servant gets."

"All right, sir," said Sam, with satisfaction. "I guess I'll go round, and see him about it this afternoon. I suppose he can come any time?"

"Yes, my son."

As Sam went out of the room his father thought, complacently:

"My son has all the pride and instincts of a gentleman. He will do credit to the family."

Few persons in the village would have agreed with the major. Sam Sturgis was decidedly unpopular. No boy who puts on airs is likely to be a favorite with any class of persons, and Sam put on rather more than he was entitled to. From time to time he received a rebuff, but still money will tell. He had his followers and sycophants, but we may be sure that Ben was not numbered among them. It was quite useless for Sam to patronize him—he would not be patronized, but persisted in treating the major's son with the most exasperating familiarity. Of course this would be impossible if he became Sam's servant, and this more than anything else was the motive of the young aristocrat in wishing to engage him. As to conferring a favor on Ben, that was the last thing in his thoughts.

Sam bent his steps toward the humble home of Job Stanton, but he did not have to go the whole distance. He met Ben with a fishing-pole over his shoulder.

"How are you, Sam?" was Ben's familiar greeting. "Want to go fishing with me?"

"He's entirely too familiar," thought Sam. "I'll cure him of that when he is under my orders."

At present Sam did not think it politic to express his feelings on the subject. Ben was so independent that it might frustrate his plan.

"I will walk along with you, Ben," said Sam condescendingly.

"All right. Haven't you got a fishing-pole at home?"

"Yes, I have a very handsome one; it cost five dollars."

"Then it's rather ahead of mine," said Ben.

"I should say so," remarked Sam, surveying Ben's pole with contempt.

"But I'll bet you can't catch as many fish with it," said Ben promptly. "I don't think it makes much difference to the fish," he added, with a laugh, "whether they are caught with a five-dollar pole or a five-cent one."

"Very likely," said Sam briefly, "but I prefer to use a nice pole."

"Oh, there's no objection," said Ben, "if you fancy it. It doesn't make any difference to me."

"When are you going to work?" asked Sam abruptly.

"I am working every day—that is, I am helping Uncle Job."

"But I suppose you mean to get regular work somewhere, don't you?"

"What's he after, I wonder?" thought Ben. "Maybe I do," he said aloud.

"Perhaps I can throw something in your way," said Sam, in a patronizing way.

"You are very kind," said Ben, who supposed Sam had heard of some business position which he could fill. Our hero decided that perhaps he had misjudged the major's son, and he was prepared to make amends. "If you get me a position, I shall be much obliged."

"The fact is," said Sam, "I should find it convenient to have a boy go about with me, and be at my orders. My Cousin Henry has one, and father says I may engage you."

Ben faced round, and looked steadily at Sam. He felt that he would far rather work for Deacon Pitkin, in spite of his meager table, or toil twelve hours a day in his uncle's shoe-shop, than accept such a place as was now offered him. He penetrated Sam's motive, and felt incensed with him, though he did not choose to show it.

"What are you willing to pay?" asked Ben, in a businesslike tone.

"Five dollars a month and your board," said Sam. "You'll live better than you ever did before in your life, and your duties will be easy."

"What would you want me to do?" asked Ben.

"Why, I would take you with me whenever I went out rowing or fishing. That would be easy enough. Then, in the morning you would black my shoes and keep my clothes well brushed, and go of any errands I had for you. Oh, well, I can't tell you all you would have to do, but you'd have an easy time."

"Yes, I don't think it would tire me out," said Ben. "You'd want me to black your boots?"

"Yes."

"Well, I might agree to that on one condition."

"What is that?"

"That you would black mine."

"What do you mean?" demanded Sam, his face flushing angrily.

"Just what I say."

"Do you mean to insult me?"

"Not a bit; any more than you mean to insult me,"

"Do you dare to propose that I, a gentleman, should black your low-lived shoes?" exclaimed Sam furiously.

"I think you're rather hard on my shoes," said Ben, laughing. "I'll come for four dollars a month, if you'll do that."

"I never heard such impudence," said Sam, in concentrated wrath. "I never was so repaid for kindness before."

"Look here, Sam," said Ben, "I understand just how kind you are. You want the satisfaction of ordering me round, and you can't have it. I decline your offer. I'd rather beg for bread than accept it."

"You may starve, for all me," said Sam. "It's ridiculous for a poor boy to put on such airs. You'll die in the poorhouse yet."

"I won't live there, if I can help it. What! are you going to leave me?"

"I won't condescend to be seen with you."

"Good-by, Sam. I hope you won't have to black your own boots."

Sam did not deign a reply.

"He looks mad," thought Ben. "I'd live on one meal a day rather than let him order me round."

CHAPTER IV

A BRILLIANT CHANCE

The week was over, and Ben persisted in his determination to leave Hampton.

"I'm sorry you are going, Ben," said his Cousin Jennie. "I shall miss you awfully."

As Jennie was the prettiest girl in the village, though she did not inherit any good looks from her plain-looking father, Ben was gratified.

"You'd forget me soon," he said.

"No, I won't."

"Especially when Sam Sturgis comes round to see you."

"I don't want to see him. He's a stuck-up boy, and thinks himself too good to associate with common people."

"He wanted to have me black his boots," said Ben.

"He isn't fit to black yours," said Jennie energetically.

"Oh, yes, he is," said Ben, laughing. "That's where you and I disagree."

"I guess we both mean about the same thing," said Jennie, who saw the point.

Ben's resolve to go to California was modified by an advertisement in a New York daily paper which he saw at the village tavern.

It ran thus:

"Wanted, six boys, from fifteen to eighteen years of age, to fill positions of trust. Ten dollars per week will be paid; but a deposit of fifty dollars is required as a guarantee of honesty. This sum will be repaid at the close of term of service. Address Fitch & Ferguson, No.—Nassau Street."

This advertisement looked quite attractive to Ben. He copied it, and showed it to Uncle Job.

"Isn't that a good chance, Uncle Job?" he said. "Just think! Ten dollars a week!"

"You'd have to pay your board out of it," said his uncle.

"I know that, but my board wouldn't cost more than four dollars a week. That would leave me six."

"So it would. I declare it does seem to be a good chance. Maybe they've got all the boys they want."

"Why, you see, uncle, there's a good many boys that couldn't pay the deposit money. That would limit the number of applicants. Now, I have the money, and I guess I'd better write to New York at once about it."

"Maybe you had, Ben."

Ben immediately procured a sheet of paper and wrote to the advertisers, stating that he would like the position, and assuring them of his ability to furnish the required sum. The letter went to New York by the afternoon mail.

Naturally Ben was a little excited and suffered a little from suspense. He feared that all the places would be filled, and such another chance was hardly to be expected again very soon. However, on Monday morning he was gratified by the receipt of the following letter:

"No.—NASSAU STREET, NEW YORK.

"MR. BENJAMIN STANTON: Your letter of yesterday is at hand. Fortunately we have one vacancy, the other places being already filled. We have rejected three applicants for it on account of unsatisfactory penmanship. Yours, however, is up to the mark, and we will engage you on the strength of it. It will be necessary for you to report as soon as possible at our office for duty. We require the deposit on account of the sums of money which you will handle. We do not doubt your honesty, but it seems desirable that you should furnish a guarantee, particularly as we pay a much larger salary than is usually given to young clerks.

"Yours respectfully,

"FITCH & FERGUSON.

"P. S. Your engagement will not commence until the fifty dollars are in our hands."

Ben was quite elated by his success.

"I must start to-morrow morning," he said, "or I shall be in danger of losing the place."

"It seems very sudden," said his aunt. "I am afraid I sha'n't have time to get your clothes ready. Some are dirty, and others need mending. If I'd had a little notice-

"It won't make any difference, Aunt Sarah," said Ben. "I'll take a few clothes in a carpetbag, and you can send the rest by express when they are ready."

"Yes, Sarah, that will be the best way," said Uncle Job. "Ben don't want to run the risk of losing the place by delay."

Mrs. Stanton acquiesced rather unwillingly, and for the remainder of the day Ben was busy making preparations to leave his country home.

CHAPTER V IN SEARCH OF A PLACE

Ben took the early train to New York on Tuesday morning, and in due time arrived in the city. He carried with him seventy-five dollars out of his small patrimony. Fifty were to be deposited with Messrs. Fitch & Ferguson, as required, and the balance was to defray his expenses till he began to receive a salary. Ben didn't expect to need much of it, for at the end of a week he would be paid ten dollars for his services, and until then he meant to be very economical.

Ben had only been in New York twice before, but he happened to know his way to Nassau Street, and went there at once, with his carpetbag in his hand.

As he entered Nassau Street from Printing-House Square, a bootblack accosted him.

"How are you, country?"

"Are you very anxious to know?" asked Ben, stopping short.

"Yes."

"I'm well enough and strong enough to give you a licking."

"Good for you, country! Have you come to stay long?"

Ben laughed. He concluded not to take offense, but to answer seriously.

"That depends on whether I get the place I am after."

"What is that?" asked the bootblack, in a friendly tone.

Now, on the way to the city, Ben had overheard a conversation between two gentlemen, relative to certain swindlers in New York, which, for the first time, had aroused in him a suspicion that possibly there might be something wrong about the firm whose advertisement he had answered. He felt the need of an adviser, and though his choice may be considered rather a strange one, he decided to consult his new acquaintance, the bootblack. He briefly told him of the advertisement, and what it offered.

The bootblack surveyed him with pitying curiosity.

"You don't mean to say you swallow all that?" he said.

"Don't you think it's all right?" asked Ben anxiously.

"Look here," said the street boy, "do you think anybody's going to pay a boy ten dollars a week, when there's hundreds ready to work for three or four? Why, a man in Pearl Street advertised last week for a boy at three dollars, and there was a whole shoal of boys went for it. I was one of 'em."

"Don't you earn more than that by your business?"

"Sometimes I do, but it ain't stiddy, and I'd rather have a place."

"Why do they advertise to give ten dollars, then?" asked our hero.

"They want to get hold of your fifty dollars," said the bootblack.

"Them fellers is beats, that's what they are."

"What had I better do?" asked Ben, in perplexity.

"Go and see 'em, and have a talk. If they're not after your fifty dollars, you'll know what it means."

"It may be all right, after all," said Ben, who did not like to give up hope.

"I may be General Grant," retorted the bootblack, "but if I know myself I ain't."

"Well, I'll go round and talk with them. Where can I meet you afterwards?"

"I'll be standin' here, if you ain't gone too long."

"What's your name?"

"Tom Cooper."

"I am Ben Stanton. Thank you for your advice."

"You're a good feller if you do come from the country. Just look out for them fellers. Don't let 'em hook you in."

"All right, Tom."

Ben moved on, watching the numbers as he walked slowly along, till he came to the one mentioned in the advertisement. There was a hallway and a staircase, with a directory of persons occupying offices on the floors above. From this Ben ascertained that Fitch & Ferguson occupied Room 17, on the fourth floor.

"I wonder what business they are in," thought our hero as he mounted the stairs. "They must have considerable or they wouldn't need so many boys-that is, if they are on the square."

Presently he stood in front of a door bearing the number 17.

He knocked for admittance.

CHAPTER VI

MR. PITCH, THE SENIOR PARTNER

"Come in," said a loud voice.

Ben opened the door and entered.

He found himself in a square room, almost bare of furniture. In an office chair at a table sat a dark-complexioned man of near forty. He appeared to be reading the morning paper.

"Is this the office of Fitch & Ferguson?" inquired Ben.

A glance at Ben's carpetbag indicated that he had come in answer to the advertisement, and he was received very graciously.

"Come in," said the man in the chair, smiling affably. "This is the office of Fitch & Ferguson. I am Mr. Fitch."

"My name is Stanton-Ben Stanton," said our hero. "I wrote you from Hampton about your advertisement."

"For a boy at ten dollars a week?" suggested the dark man, with a pleasant smile.

"Yes, sir."

"We agreed to take you, did we not?" asked Mr. Fitch.

"Yes, sir."

"Have you had any business experience?" inquired Pitch.

"No, sir."

"I am sorry for that," said Mr. Fitch gravely. "Experience is important. I am not sure whether we ought to pay you ten dollars a week."

Ben did not reply. He was not so much concerned about the amount of his compensation as about the reliable character of Fitch & Ferguson.

"Still," mused Mr. Fitch, "you look like a boy who would learn fast.

What do you think about it yourself?"

"I think I could," answered Ben. "I should try to serve you faithfully."

"That is well. We want to be served faithfully," said Mr. Fitch.

"What kind of a business is it?" Ben ventured to ask, surveying the empty office with a puzzled look, which Mr. Fitch observed and interpreted aright.

"We do a commission business," he said. "Of course, we keep no stock of goods here. Business is not done in the city, my young friend, as it is in the country."

"No, I suppose not," returned our hero.

"Without entering into details as to the character of our business," said Mr. Fitch, "I may say that you would be chiefly employed in making collections. It is because considerable sums of money would pass through your hands that we require a deposit in order to protect ourselves. By the way, have you the fifty dollars with you?"

Ben admitted that he had.

Mr. Fitch's face brightened up, for he had not felt quite sure of that.

"I am glad to hear of it," he said. "It shows that you mean business. You may hand it to me, and I will give you a receipt for it."

"I would like to ask you one or two questions first," said Ben, making no movement toward his pocket.

Mr. Fitch frowned.

"Really, I fail to catch your meaning," he said, in a changed tone.

"Do you wish to enter my employ, or do you not?"

"I should like to earn ten dollars a week."

"Precisely. Then all you have to do is to hand me the fifty dollars and go to work."

"You might keep me only a week," suggested Ben.

"We shall keep you if you suit us, and you can if you try. If you are discharged, we give you back your money, and pay you for the time you work for us. That is fair, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then we may as well settle the matter at once," and he waited for Ben to draw forth his money. Our hero would, undoubtedly, have done so, if he had not been cautioned by Tom Cooper. As it was, he could not help feeling suspicious.

"I should like to propose something to you, sir," he said.

"What is it?" asked Fitch impatiently.

"Suppose you keep five dollars a week out of my wages for ten weeks-that'll make fifty dollars-and only pay it to me when I leave you."

"Young man," said Mr. Fitch sternly, "this is trifling, and my time is too valuable for such discussion. Have you, or have you not, brought fifty dollars with you?"

"I have."

"Then you can secure the place-a place such as few New York boys are fortunate enough to fill. You must decide for yourself."

He threw himself back in his chair and looked at Ben.

"He seems very anxious about the money," thought our hero, "and I don't see any signs of any business. I'd better back out."

"There are plenty of boys who want the place," continued Fitch, trying to look indifferent.

"I guess you can give it to one of them," said Ben coolly.

Mr. Fitch could not conceal his disappointment. The fifty dollars had a great attraction for him. He saw that Ben was in earnest, for he was already opening the door to go out. He must make an effort to detain him.

"Wait a moment, my young friend. I like your appearance, and we may be disposed to take you on a little easier terms. Fifty dollars is probably a large sum to you."

Ben admitted that it was.

"Probably your means are limited?"

"Yes, sir; I am a poor boy."

"Just so. I will then relax our rules a little in your case. Of course, you won't mention it to our other boys, as it might create dissatisfaction."

"No, sir."

"We will take you on a deposit of forty dollars, then."

Ben shook his head, and moved as if to depart.

"In fact," said Mr. Fitch hastily, "I believe I will say thirty dollars, Though I am afraid my partner will blame me."

Ben was not versed in city ways, but now he distrusted Mr. Fitch more than ever.

"I would rather take a situation where no deposit is required," he said.

"But you can't get any unless you agree to accept three or four dollars a week."

"Can you afford to pay me ten dollars a week on account of my deposit?" asked Ben shrewdly.

Mr. Fitch flushed, for Ben's question was a home thrust.

"We don't want cheap boys," he said pompously. "We want boys who are worth high wages, and no others."

"And you think I am worth high wages?" asked Ben.

"I think so, but I may be mistaken."

Ben was not required to answer, for the door opened hastily, and a man entered in visible excitement.

"What is your business, sir?" asked Mr. Fitch, rather nervously.

"Are you Fitch or Ferguson?" demanded the intruder.

"I am Mr. Fitch."

"Two days ago my son, James Cameron, entered your service."

"Yes, sir."

"Where is he now?"

"We have sent him to Brooklyn to collect a bill."

"He paid you a deposit of fifty dollars?"

"Certainly. We require it as a guarantee of honesty and fidelity."

"Well, I want you to pay it back."

"I don't understand you, sir," said Mr. Fitch, looking very much disturbed. "It will be given up when your son leaves our employment."

"Well, he's going to leave it to-day," said the other.

"Can you get him another place as good? Ten dollars a week are not often paid to boys."

"No, sir; it's that that makes me suspicious. Give me back the fifty dollars, and James shall leave your employment."

"That is entirely irregular, sir," said Fitch. "Your son has been only two days in the office. At the end of the week he can leave us, and receive back his money."

"That won't do," said the angry father.

"It will have to do," said Fitch. "You are doing a very foolish thing, Mr. Cameron."

"I'll risk that."

"When your son returns from Brooklyn we will consider what can be done."

"When will that be?"

"In a couple of hours."

"I will come in then."

Cameron went out, and Ben followed him, the discomfited Fitch making no effort to detain the lad.

"I was thinking of engaging myself to Mr. Fitch," said Ben to his companion. "Do you know anything against him?"

"I hear that he's a swindler," said Cameron. "I was a fool to fall into his snare. Keep your money and you'll be better off."

"Thank you, sir."

Fifteen minutes afterward Mr. Fitch left his office, and when Mr. Cameron came back, the door was locked. He found his son waiting in the entry.

"Did you collect any money in Brooklyn?" asked his father.

"No; I guess Mr. Fitch gave me the wrong number. There was no such man living at the house he sent me to."

"We've been fooled!" said the father bitterly. "Come home, James. I doubt we've seen the last of our money. If I ever set eyes on that man Pitch again I'll give him in charge for swindling."

The senior partner of Pitch & Ferguson was at that moment on his way to Philadelphia with the remains of the fifty dollars in his pocket. But for Ben's caution he would have had another fifty dollars in his possession.

CHAPTER VII

BEN'S DINNER-GUEST

Ben slowly retraced his steps to where he had left his friend, Tom Cooper.

"Well," said the bootblack, "did you see Fitch and Ferguson?"

"Yes," answered Ben soberly; "that is, I saw one of them."

"Did you take the place?"

"No; I found he was too anxious for my fifty dollars, though he offered after a while to take me for thirty."

Tom Cooper laughed derisively.

"I'll do better nor that," he said. "If you'll give me twenty dollars, I'll make you my private secretary, payin' you ten dollars a week."

"How long will you keep me?" asked Ben, smiling.

"Six days," answered Tom. "Then I'll have to sack you without pay, 'cause you don't understand your business."

"Is that the way they manage?" asked Ben.

The bootblack nodded.

Ben looked grave. The disappointment was a serious one, and he felt now how much he had relied upon the promises of Fitch & Ferguson. He had formed no other plans, and it seemed likely that he must return to the country to resume his old life. Yet that seemed impracticable. There was no opening there unless he accepted one of the two offers already made him. But he was neither inclined to enter the employ of Deacon Pitkin, nor to become the valet and servant of Sam Sturgis. He was not quite sure whether he would not prefer to become a bootblack, like his new acquaintance.

"What are you goin' to do?" asked Tom.

"I wish I knew," said Ben earnestly. "What can I do?"

"You might go into my business," suggested Tom.

Ben shook his head.

"I don't think I should like that."

"No more would I if I'd got fifty dollars in my pocket. If I was you I'd go into business."

"What kind of business?"

"Well," said Tom reflectively, "you might buy out an apple or a peanut-stand, and have lots of money left."

"Is there much money to be made that way?" inquired Ben.

"Well, I never knowed anybody get rich in that line. I guess you'd make a livin'."

"That wouldn't satisfy me, Tom. What I want most of all is to go to California."

The bootblack whistled.

"That's off ever so far, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's a long way."

"How do you go?"

"There are three ways," answered Ben, who had made himself familiar with the subject. "The first is to go by land-across the plains. Then there is a line of steamers by way of Panama. The longest way is by a sailing-vessel round Cape Horn."

"What would you do when you got to California?" asked Tom.

"Go to work. I suppose I would go to the mines and dig gold."

"I wish it wasn't so far off. I'd like to go myself. Do you think a feller could work his passage?"

"By blacking boots?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe he could. Sailors don't care much about having their boots blacked."

"How much does it cost to go?"

"I don't know."

"Why don't you go to the office and find out?"

"So I will," said Ben, brightening up at the thought. "Do you know where it is?"

"Yes."

"Will you show me?"

"I would if I'd make enough to buy me some dinner. I only had a five-cent breakfast, and I feel kinder holler."

"I feel hungry myself," said Ben. "If you'll go with me I'll buy you some dinner to pay you for your trouble."

"Nough said!" remarked Tom briefly, as he shouldered his box. "I'm your man. Come along! Where shall we go first?"

"To an eating-house. We might have to wait at the office."

Tom conducted Ben to a cheap restaurant, not far away, where the two for a moderate sum obtained a plentiful meal. Had either been fastidious, some exception might have been taken to the style in which the dishes were served, but neither was critical. A dapper young clerk, however, who sat opposite Tom, seemed quite disturbed by the presence of the bootblack. As his eye rested on Tom he sniffed contemptuously, and frowned. In truth, our friend Tom might be useful, but in his present apparel he was not fitted to grace a drawing-room. He had no coat, his vest was ragged, and his shirt soiled with spots of blacking. There were spots also upon his freckled face, of which Tom was blissfully unconscious. It didn't trouble him any to have a dirty face. "Dirt is only matter in the wrong place," as a philosopher once remarked. Tom was a philosopher in his own way.

The young clerk pulled out a scented handkerchief, and applied it to his nose, looking at Tom meanwhile.

"What's the matter of yer?" inquired Tom, suspecting the cause of the dandy's discomfort. "Be you sick?"

"It's enough to make one sick to sit at the table with you," answered the clerk.

"Why?"

"You are absolutely filthy. Don't you know any better than to come in where there are gentlemen?"

"I don't see any except him," said Tom, indicating Ben with his glance.

"This is really too much. Here, waiter!"

A waiter answered the summons.

"What is it, sir?"

"Just remove my plate to another table, will you?"

"Is anything the matter, sir?"

"I am not accustomed to associate with bootblacks," said the clerk loftily.

"All right, sir."

"I am really surprised that you admit any of that low class."

"As long as they pay their bills we are willing to receive them."

"I don't believe that boy has got enough to pay for his dinner."

The waiter, at this suggestion, looked at Tom rather suspiciously. After removing the plate of the sensitive customer, he came back to the table where the two boys were seated.

"Have you given your order?" he asked.

"Yes."

"If you haven't got money enough to pay your check you'll be bounced."

"Don't you trouble yourself, old woolly head," said Tom coolly. "My friend pays the bills. He's a banker down in Wall Street, and he's rich enough to buy out your whole place."

"The dinner will be paid for," said Ben, smiling.

"All right, gentlemen," said the waiter, more respectfully. "We'll be glad to see you any time."

"Tom," said Ben, "I'm afraid you don't always tell the truth."

"Why not?"

"You told the waiter I was a Wall Street banker, and rich."

"Oh, what's the odds? You're rich enough to pay for the dinners, and that's all he wants."

"You came near spoiling the appetite of that young man over at the opposite table."

"I'd like to spoil his beauty. He feels too big. I don't like to see a feller put on so many airs."

What's the matter of me, I'd like to know?"

"Why, you see, Tom, your face isn't very clean. There are spots of blacking on it."

"A feller can't be always washin' his face. I'll wash it to-morrow mornin' at the lodge. Does it take away your appetite, too?"

"Not a bit," said Ben, laughing. "Nothing but a good dinner will take away that."

"You're the kind of feller I like," said Tom emphatically. "You don't put on no airs."

"I can't afford to," said Ben. "I'm a poor boy myself."

"I wouldn't feel poor if I had fifty dollars," returned Tom.

"I hope you'll have it sometime, and a good deal more."

"So do I. When I'm a rich man, I'll wash my face oftener."

"And put blacking on your boots instead of your face," added Ben.

"It might look better," Tom admitted.

When dinner was over the two boys directed their steps to the California steamship office, on one of the North River piers.

CHAPTER VIII

A STRANGE ACQUAINTANCE

Tom Cooper was too familiar with the streets of New York to pay any attention to the moving panorama of which he and Ben formed a part. But everything was new and interesting to Ben, who had passed his life in a quiet country town.

"I should think it was the Fourth of July," he said.

"Why?" asked the bootblack.

"Because there's such a lot of people and wagons in the streets."

"There's always as many as this, except Sundays," said Tom.

"Where do they all come from?" said Beu wonderingly.

"You've got me there," answered Tom. "I never thought about that. Look out!" he exclaimed suddenly, dragging Ben from in front of a team coming up the street. "Do you want to get run over?"

"I was looking the other way," said Ben, rather confused.

"You've got to look all ways to once here," said Tom.

"I guess you're right. Don't people often get run over?"

"Once in a while. There's a friend of mine—Patsy Burke—a newsboy, was run over last year and had his leg broke. They took him to Bellevue Hospital, and cut it off."

"Is he alive now?"

"Oh, yes, he's alive and to work, the same as ever. He's got a wooden leg."

"Poor boy!" said Ben compassionately.

"Oh, he don't mind it, Patsy don't. He's always jolly."

By this time they reached the office of the California Steamship Company. There was a large sign up, so that there was no difficulty in finding it.

The two boys entered. The room was not a large one. There was a counter, behind which were two young men writing, and there was besides a man of middle age, who was talking to two gentlemen who appeared to be engaging passage. Seated in a chair, apparently awaiting her turn, was a young lady, whose face was half-concealed by a thick, green veil.

When the two gentlemen were disposed of, the agent spoke to the young lady.

"What can I do for you, miss?" he asked.

"I am in no hurry, sir," she answered, in a low voice. "I will wait for those boys."

"What's your business, boys?" demanded the agent, shrugging his shoulders.

"When does the next steamer start, sir?" inquired Ben.

"In three days."

"What is the price of passage?"

"First-class?"

"No, sir, the cheapest."

"One hundred dollars. Do you wish to secure passage?"

"Not this morning, sir."

The agent shrugged his shoulders again, as if to say "I thought so," and turned again to the young lady.

"Now, miss," he said.

"I beg your pardon, sir," she said hurriedly. "I will call again."

As she spoke, she left the office, following the two boys so quickly that they almost went out together.

Ben had not taken particular notice of the young lady, and was much surprised when he felt a hand laid on his arm, and, turning, his eyes fell upon her face.

"May I speak a few words with you?" she said.

"Certainly," answered Ben politely, though he could not conceal his astonishment.

The young lady looked uneasily at Tom, and hesitated.

"Won't you move away a few steps, Tom?" said Ben, understanding the look.

"Thank you," said the young lady, in a low voice. "Are you intending to sail for California by the next steamer?"

"I should like to, miss, but I am poor, and I don't know whether I can afford the expense of a ticket."

"Would you go if your ticket were paid-by a friend?"

"You bet I would-I mean I certainly would," answered Ben, correcting his phraseology, as he remembered that he was addressing a young lady, and not one of his boy friends.

"Would you be willing to take care of me—that is, to look after me?"

Ben was certainly surprised; but he answered promptly and with native politeness: "It would be a pleasure to me."

"You were going alone-you had no friends with you?"

"None at all, miss."

"That is well," she said. "What is your name?"

"Ben Stanton."

"Do you live in the city?"

"No, miss. I came from the small town of Hampton."

"Where are you staying?"

"Nowhere. I only arrived in the city this morning."

"Will you be able to go by the next steamer?"

Ben hesitated. It almost took away his breath—it seemed so sudden-but he reflected that there really was no reason why he should not, and he answered in the affirmative.

"Then go back with me, and I will engage passage for us both."

The young lady and Ben reentered the office, Tom Cooper looking on with astonishment. She approached the counter, this time with confidence, and the agent came forward.

"I have concluded to engage passage for myself and this lad," she said.

The agent regarded her with surprise.

"Both first-class?" he asked.

"Certainly, sir. I should like the lad to occupy a stateroom near mine."

"Very well. I will show you on the plan those that are unengaged. I cannot give either of you a stateroom to yourselves. I can give you a room with a very agreeable lady, a Mrs. Dunbar, and the boy can occupy part of the adjoining room."

"Very well, sir."

"What name?" continued the agent.

"Ida Sinclair," answered the young lady, with visible hesitation.

"And the boy's name?"

Miss Sinclair had forgotten; but Ben promptly answered for himself.

The young lady drew out her pocketbook, and produced several large bills, out of which she paid the passage money. Then, turning to Ben, she said: "Now we will go."

Ben followed her out of the office, feeling completely bewildered. Well he might. The young lady had paid two hundred and fifty dollars for his passage, and for this large outlay only required him to take care of her. No wonder he thought it strange.

"You say you are not staying at any hotel?" said the young lady, as they emerged into the street.

"No, Miss Sinclair."

"I am staying at the Astor House, and it is important that you should be with me, as I may have some errands on which to employ you."

"Is it an expensive hotel?" asked Ben.

"That will not matter to you, as I shall pay the bill."

"Thank you, Miss Sinclair; but you are spending a great deal of money for me."

"I have an object in doing so. Besides, I have no lack of money."

"Shall I go with you to the hotel now?"

"Yes."

"May I speak a moment to the boy who was with me?"

"Certainly."

"May I tell him where I am going?"

"Yes, but ask him to keep it to himself."

"I will, Miss Sinclair," and Ben was about to walk away.

"On the whole, call the boy here," said Miss Sinclair. "Tom!" Tom Cooper answered the summons.

"I am going to California with this lady," said Ben. "She has paid my passage."

"You're in luck!" exclaimed Tom. "Say, miss, you don't want a boy to go along to black your boots, do you?"

Miss Sinclair smiled faintly.

"I think not," she answered.

"Tom," continued Ben, "you won't say a word about my going, will you?"

"Not if you don't want me to. Besides, there ain't nobody to tell."

Miss Sinclair looked relieved. She drew out her pocketbook, and took from it a ten-dollar bill.

"What is your name?" she asked.

"Tom Cooper, ma'am."

"Then, Tom, allow me to offer you a small present."

"Is it all for me?" exclaimed Tom, in amazement.

"Yes."

Tom thrust it into his vest pocket, and immediately executed a somersault, rather to Miss Sinclair's alarm.

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