

ALGER

HORATIO JR.

MAKING HIS MARK

Horatio Alger
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Horatio Alger Jr. Making His Mark

CHAPTER I AN UNPLEASANT TALK

Gerald Lane rose from the breakfast table and was about to leave the room, when his stepmother addressed him:

"Stop a minute, Gerald, I have something to say to you."

Mrs. Lane was a thin woman, rather above the usual height, with a prominent nose and thin lips. It was easy to see that she was not Gerald's mother. He was a strong, well-made boy, with red cheeks and a pleasant face, but his expression at this moment was grave and sad.

He paused and looked inquiringly at his stepmother.

"Sit down," she said, "I have considerable to say to you."

Gerald drew a chair from the table and seated himself.

"Your father's sad death," began Mrs. Lane, "will, of course, make a difference in the family arrangements."

"It makes a great difference to me," said Gerald, bitterly. "I am disinherited and I have no prospects."

"Ahem! I hope you don't reproach your father so soon after his death. It is unbecoming to say the least."

"I don't reproach him, but I can't understand why he should leave all his property to you, and nothing to me."

"That statement is misleading."

"Isn't it true?"

"Yes, he has shown his confidence in me sufficiently to leave the property in my hands, but he commends you to my care. Therefore, you cannot be said to be disinherited."

"I am left dependent upon you," said Gerald, with a tinge of bitterness in his voice.

"So you were dependent upon him."

"That was different. He was my father."

"And I am your mother."

"My stepmother."

"At any rate, I was your father's wife, and I am ready to do my duty by you. I have been carefully considering what was my duty, and I have asked you to stop after breakfast in order to talk over my plans for you."

"I am listening."

"I think I shall withdraw you from the academy, as under present circumstances it would be impossible to send you to college, and you already have a good education."

"Why impossible?"

"It would be very expensive."

"My father intended to send me to college."

"That may be, but he was earning an income apart from his property, and I am not."

"What is your plan for me, then?"

"I think it will be well for you to go to work at once."

"Mrs. Lane, will you allow me to say a word?"

"Go on," she said coldly.

"I have reason to think that my father left a good deal of property. I have heard it estimated at fifty thousand dollars."

"Property is almost always very much over-estimated."

"Call it thirty thousand, then. If I go to Bowdoin, my father's college, I will get through for fifteen hundred dollars, probably."

"That's a good deal of money."

"Not when spread over four years. I shall be ready to enter next fall."

"In the four years you were at college you might work up to a good income."

"Perhaps so. If I were a poor boy, that would be a consideration."

"It is a consideration now."

"Then you have made up your mind to deny me the education my father intended me to enjoy. Will you tell me what plans you have formed for me?"

"I don't like your tone, Gerald; you are too independent and are scarcely respectful. However, I will answer your question. Mr. Tubbs, the grocer, needs a boy to tend in his store and to help keep his books. You have studied book-keeping, I believe?"

"Yes," answered Gerald, eying his stepmother, intently.

"He will take you and pay you three dollars a week. You can stay at home, and I will allow you half your salary, but I shall expect you to buy your own clothing."

"Out of a dollar and a half a week?"

"Yes; I look upon that as a very fair income. One dollar a week will suffice for your clothes, and you will have fifty cents for spending money."

Gerald's face flushed. At this rate he would derive very slight advantage from the handsome property his father left behind him.

"Do you think, Mrs. Lane," he said, "that in making this arrangement you are carrying out my father's wishes?"

"Probably I am as well qualified to judge on that point as you," said Mrs. Lane, stiffly.

"When do you wish me to leave school?" asked Gerald, after a pause.

"Mr. Tubbs wishes you to begin work a week from next Monday. You can go to school another week, if you wish."

"I shall not care to do so. I shall want a week to think over the change in my life."

"Just as you please."

"Have you anything more to say to me?" asked Gerald rising.

"Yes."

To Gerald's surprise his stepmother's manner changed, and she seemed nervous and no longer cool and self-possessed.

"Very well."

"I am about to tell you something that may surprise you, though it was, of course, known to your father."

Gerald's curiosity was excited. It must be something of importance, or Mrs. Lane's self-possession would not be disturbed.

"Probably you are aware that when I married your father I was a widow."

"I have heard so."

"But you did not know that I have a son about your own age?"

"No, I didn't know that," returned Gerald, his face showing his amazement. "Why have I never seen the boy? Why did you not bring him here?" he asked.

"Your father thought it was not best. He thought you and Abel might not agree."

"Am I so difficult to get along with, then?"

"Ahem! You are very independent and self-opinioned."

"And Abel?"

"He has quite a proper pride. You would probably have made him feel that he was in an inferior position, and then there would have been trouble."

"Still I don't see why his existence should have been concealed from me?"

"Your father thought it best."

Gerald eyed his stepmother thoughtfully. Was this true—this statement of hers? Not about the boy's existence—he had no doubt of that—but as to his father's being in the plot to keep it secret.

"Where, then, is Abel, since he has never been here?" he asked.

"He has been at a boarding-school, fifty miles away, in the town of Fulton. I am expecting him here to-night."

"So the secret is out!" thought Gerald. "But is there not the same objection as before?" he asked. "Perhaps we may not agree."

"The circumstances are changed. He will no longer be in an inferior position."

"I don't understand."

"As my son, he will take precedence of you," said Mrs. Lane, with a triumphant smile.

"But the money belonged to my father."

"It belongs to me, now," said his stepmother, sharply.

Gerald was thunderstruck. It was not enough that his stepmother should appropriate the property which he felt ought properly to be his, but this unknown boy whom he had not yet seen, and of whose existence he thought it not improbable that his father had been ignorant, was to be invested with a right superior to his own. He remained silent for a moment. Then he said:

"I hope Abel and I will be friends."

"It will be wise for you to treat him well," said his stepmother.

"When do you expect him here?"

"Some time this afternoon."

"Have you any more to say to me?"

"Not at present."

Gerald rose slowly and left the house. He felt crushed and humiliated. He felt that his stepmother had the upper hand. He remembered well the day, only two years before, when Mrs. Ruth Tyler entered their home as his father's wife. She had come to Portville and opened a milliner's shop on a very small scale. She attended the same church as his father, and in a short time managed to make his acquaintance. She consulted him on business matters, and exerted herself to please him. Finally, marriage followed. During his father's life Gerald had no fault to find with her treatment of him, but since the funeral she had thrown off the mask. Gerald could only think of her as one who had defrauded him of his rightful inheritance.

CHAPTER II

MR. TUBBS, THE GROCER

Gerald was so disturbed by the communication which his stepmother had made that he walked at random, hardly knowing in what direction he was going. Before he was well aware of it, he found himself passing the grocery store in which, according to Mrs. Lane's plans, he was to find employment. Raising his eyes he saw Mr. Tubbs standing in the doorway.

The grocer was a short, stout man, not over five feet four inches in height and weighing well on to two hundred pounds. His features relaxed into a smile as he recognized Gerald.

"Come here, Gerald," he said.

Gerald paused, and as he looked into the grocery store with its sanded floor, barrels of flour, and boxes of potatoes, with the dried codfish hanging against the wall, his heart sank within him. He was not afraid of work, but to work in such a place and with such surroundings seemed to him dismal indeed.

"Then you are coming to work for me?" said Mr. Tubbs smiling broadly. "Hasn't your mother told you?"

"My stepmother mentioned it this morning," said Gerald, gravely.

"We made the bargain last week. You'll get good pay, too. Three dollars a week. I never paid so much before, but I expect you will earn it. You look like a good, strong boy."

"Yes, I am strong," said Gerald, briefly.

"And you are willing to work, I suppose?"

"I don't know, Mr. Tubbs. Mrs. Lane had no right to make a bargain for me. My father always intended that I should go to college."

"That would cost a sight of money, Gerald. Here you would learn business. In a few years you may be earning ten dollars a week."

He spoke as if this were a very large sum.

"I am not afraid to work, Mr. Tubbs, but I don't think I shall like the grocery business."

"Pooh, pooh! a boy like you doesn't know what he would like. How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"Sixteen? Why, at sixteen I could lift a barrel of flour. I worked well, if I do say it myself. I only got two dollars a week in this very store, and now it's my own."

He looked around him with an air of pride. His highest ambition was realized in the possession of a grocery store.

"What do you say to that?"

"You have done well, Mr. Tubbs."

"Haven't I? And you can do as well. Why, in five years if your mother will advance a little money, I may give you an interest in the business."

Gerald did not reply. His heart was sore, and he felt that life had few attractions for him if it was to be passed here.

"Are you going to school now?"

"I have been."

"Your mother told me you might come here a week from Monday, but I'd like to have you come a week earlier, if you can as well as not."

"No, I will wait," said Gerald, hastily.

"Well, just as you like, but if you'll come in evenings so as to get a little used to the work, I'll give you—say, seventy-five cents for a week."

"I think you will have to excuse me, Mr. Tubbs."

"Oh, well, I won't insist upon it," said the grocer, half dissatisfied.

It was Saturday, the weekly school holiday. To-day, at least, Gerald was free. He decided to walk to Crescent Pond and go out in his boat. He had a small dory there, which his father had given him on his last birthday. On the way he passed a small cottage belonging to his father's estate. It was tenanted by a widow named Holman. Her son, John, had been one of his schoolmates but was now employed in a shoe shop.

John was sitting on a wheelbarrow in the yard.

"Come and have a row, John," said Gerald, "that is, if you are not working to-day."

"No, the shop is shut down for a fortnight," said John, soberly. "It is likely to be a bad job for us."

"How is that?"

"Our rent was due yesterday, and we can't pay it."

"But this is one of father's houses."

"Yes; if your father was alive there would be no trouble."

"Have you had any notice to pay?" asked Gerald, quickly.

"Your stepmother says that if the rent is not paid on Monday we must turn out."

"Surely she would not be so inhuman."

"That is exactly what she said when mother went to the house yesterday afternoon. My being out of work made no difference to her. I wish the house was yours, Gerald."

"Nothing seems to be mine, John," said Gerald, gravely. "Mrs. Lane told me this morning that I must leave school and go to work."

"What a shame! How could your father leave you in the power of such a woman?"

"I can't tell, John. That is what puzzles me. But how much is the rent?"

"Six dollars."

"Have you got anything toward it?"

"No. What money we have must go toward food."

"Then I'll tell you what I'll do. I have some money in the savings bank. I'll go and draw out six dollars and lend it to you, but you mustn't let Mrs. Lane know where it came from."

"You are awfully kind, Gerald; but I don't think we ought to accept your offer."

"Why not? The money is mine."

"Your stepmother might object."

"I don't think she knows that I have any money in the bank; besides, it has always been mine to do what I pleased with. Father never interfered with it at any time."

"Still, as you have no money left to you, you may need it."

Gerald admitted to himself that this might very probably be true, but he felt that Mrs. Holman needed the money more than he did.

"We won't worry about the future," he said. "At present you need the money and I don't."

"I am afraid I shall have to accept the money for mother's sake."

"That is right, John; come with me and I'll get it out."

The savings bank was a small building on the main street. It was scarcely a quarter of a mile distant, and the two boys were soon inside. Gerald made out a check at a small table near the door and presented it to the paying teller. Gerald was a favorite with the bank officer, who said to him jocosely:

"What are you drawing this money for? Are you going to get married?"

"Not just yet, Mr. Barton, I am afraid my account isn't large enough for that."

"It wouldn't last long, I am afraid, if you wanted it for that purpose. How will you have it?"

"It doesn't matter. A five and a one will do."

"Here it is."

Gerald took the bills and went out into the street.

"Here, John, take the money," he said, "I am glad it will help you."

"It will relieve us very much. Mother has been worrying a good deal over our trouble. She didn't know where to go."

Now it happened that Mrs. Lane, who was walking on the opposite side of the street, saw the two boys coming out of the bank. Her curiosity was aroused, and unseen by Gerald, she crossed over and entered the savings bank.

"Mr. Barton," she said, "didn't I see Gerald come out of the bank just now with the Holman boy?"

"Yes, Mrs. Lane."

"What did he come in for?"

Mr. Barton had never liked Mrs. Lane, and he wasn't pleased with her somewhat peremptory tone.

"He came on business connected with the bank," he said briefly.

"Oh, he did, did he? What business can he have here?"

"You had better ask him."

Mrs. Lane was provoked, but she saw that she could not browbeat the bank officer.

"Mr. Barton," she said, "has Gerald any money in this bank?"

"Yes."

"Did he draw any this morning?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"I don't answer such questions in regard to our depositors."

"Has he any left here?"

"Yes."

"Then don't let him draw any more out—do you hear?—without communicating with me."

"Mrs. Lane, this deposit is in Gerald's name and has always been under his control. His father never interfered with it, nor have you any right to do so."

"Gerald Lane is my stepson. It is my duty to see that he doesn't waste his money, do you hear?"

"Whenever Gerald presents a draft, I shall honor it, do you hear?" retorted the cashier.

Mrs. Lane's face became red with anger.

"You are very impolite," she said.

"So are you, Mrs. Lane. You did not even know that Gerald had an account here, and as his father did not interfere with it, I fail to see why you should. Good morning, madam!"

Mrs. Lane left the bank in a passion. She was not used to being thwarted and she would have had Mr. Barton discharged from his post if she could have had her way.

CHAPTER III

MRS. LANE'S DISAPPOINTMENT

Half an hour later the two boys were passing the savings bank, when Mr. Barton espied them. Leaving his place, he went to the door and called them.

"I have a word to say to you, Gerald," he said. "Does your stepmother know that you have a deposit in our bank?"

"Not that I know of. It is nothing to her, anyway, as my father put the money here under my name, and it was left to my control."

"Precisely; but I have to tell you that Mrs. Lane does know you have money here."

"How did she find out?" asked Gerald, amazed.

"She saw you go out of the bank and, suspecting something, came in and inquired."

"Well?"

"Of course I told her that you had an account here. Then she forbade me to let you draw any of it."

"And you agreed to it?"

"No, I told her the money was under your control."

"Thank you. What did she say then?"

"She asked how much money you had here; I declined to inform her."

"Mr. Barton, you are a true friend."

"I don't mind telling you, Gerald, that I don't like your stepmother, and that I do like you."

"I am afraid there will be trouble. What do you advise me to do?"

"To draw out all your money except one dollar. Our rules will admit of that."

"But what shall I do with it? If I keep it at home she may get hold of it."

"Put it in the hands of some friend you can trust."

"Will you take charge of it for me?"

"Yes, Gerald, if you think you can trust me," said Mr. Barton, with a smile.

"There is no one I would trust with more confidence."

"Then draw a check for forty-three dollars. That, together with the six dollars you have already drawn, will leave one dollar in the bank."

"Good! I will do it."

Gerald made out a check for forty-three dollars, and, when received, handed the money to Mr. Barton, who gave him a memorandum of it.

"Keep this from your stepmother," he suggested, "or she will ask me for it."

"Won't you keep the memorandum yourself, Mr. Barton?"

"But that would be hardly businesslike."

"Never mind that. I have perfect confidence in you."

"Very well, since you have confidence in me, I will put it in my tin box at home, and if anything should happen to me it will secure you."

"Well, I am glad that is off my mind," said Gerald; "I think I have checkmated Mrs. Lane."

"It must be disagreeable to find it necessary to take such extreme precautions."

"It is, but I must submit to it."

"You told me you were going to work, Gerald," said John, suddenly. "Have you engaged any place?"

"No, but Mrs. Lane has made an arrangement for me with Mr. Tubbs, the grocer."

"You don't mean it? You work in a grocery!"

"It is respectable, and I am not afraid of work, but it will be very disagreeable."

"I can tell you it will be. I once worked for old Tubbs myself."

"How did you like it?"

"Not at all. I had to work twelve hours a day, and received but two dollars and a half a week."

"I am to have the munificent sum of three dollars. Evidently Mr. Tubbs thinks that very liberal. He tells me that by the time I am twenty-one I may be getting ten dollars a week, and if my stepmother will advance a thousand dollars he may sell me an interest in the business."

"What a shame!"

"That I should have an interest in the business?" asked Gerald, with a smile.

"No, but that a boy of your scholarship should tend in a grocery, and for such a sum. Why, I earn six dollars a week as a pegger."

"I should rather work in your shop than in the grocery."

"But there is no vacancy. That, too, would be unfit for you. Why, you know Latin and French, don't you?"

"I have studied them. If Mr. Tubbs has any Latin or French customers I may be able to wait on them."

"I am glad you can joke about it, Gerald."

"I don't feel much like joking, I assure you."

About twelve o'clock Gerald turned his steps in the direction of home, though, since his father's death, it no longer seemed to him like home. Dinner would be on the table at half-past twelve, and he always aimed to be punctual.

Mrs. Lane took her place at the table, stiff and rigid as usual. She had not forgotten the savings bank deposit of Gerald, and had made up her mind to get it under her control.

Mrs. Lane did not immediately introduce the subject, but when the dessert came on she said: "I saw you coming out of the savings bank this morning."

"Now for it!" thought Gerald.

"Yes," he said, in brief assent.

"How long have you had an account there?"

"About two years."

"Did you withdraw any money this morning?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"You must excuse me, Mrs. Lane, but that is my own private business."

"You are quite mistaken. You are my stepson, and you are under my guardianship."

"I suppose, then, you have charge of my property. Let me know how much it is."

Mrs. Lane winced.

"You have no property," she said, coldly, "except what money you may have in the savings bank."

"Then I am to understand that none of the property belonging to my father comes to me."

"You will receive a certain advantage from it. Your home is in this house, and the dinner you are eating is provided with your father's money."

"Yet you want me to pay you half the money I am to receive for work!"

"Yes; but if you are guided by my wishes, I shall lay it aside for you, to be given to you hereafter."

"I am not prepared to say that I shall be guided by your wishes."

"Do you positively refuse to tell me how much money you have in the savings bank?"

"I do."

"I require you to give me your bank-book. It is proper that I should keep it."

Gerald expected this.

"Mrs. Lane, ever since I had any money in the bank, the book has been in my possession. My father desired me to keep it."

"Your father was foolishly indulgent."

"I don't think you are likely to be. Perhaps you will tell me what you want of the book?"

"I want to prevent your withdrawing any more money."

"So I supposed, and that is the reason why I decline to give you the book."

"Very well; we will drop the subject for the present. I trust that with time for reflection you will take a different view of your duty."

Gerald was surprised at his stepmother's change of front.

"She wants to put me off my guard," he decided. "She will search my room for the book."

As there was but a dollar to his credit now, this didn't disturb him particularly, nor did it prevent his going to his chamber and putting the book into his trunk.

"I should like to be here when she finds it," he said to himself.

Gerald had promised to go out on the pond in his boat, and John had agreed to go with him. He stopped at his friend's house on the way, and John joined him.

Meanwhile Mrs. Lane waited till Gerald was safely distant, and then with a look of expectation, ascended the staircase to his room. She had noticed that her stepson went up-stairs, and thought it probable that he had put the book away.

Gerald's trunk was in one corner of the room. It was locked, but this did not interpose any obstacle. Mrs. Lane kneeled down in front of it and took from her pocket a bunch of keys. She did not immediately find one that fitted the lock, but presently the right key turned up.

"Ha!" she said, triumphantly, as the key turned in the lock and the lid was raised. "Now, Master Gerald, we will see how much money you have to your credit."

The bank-book was just below the tray, and no time was wasted in finding it.

She opened the book eagerly, and scanned the entries. But her first elation was succeeded by a look of anger and disappointment. Fifty dollars was entered to Gerald's credit, but his drafts amounted to forty-nine. There was only one dollar left.

"Two drafts this morning!" said Mrs. Lane, angrily. "What has he done with the money?"

She searched the trunk carefully, hoping to find somewhere a roll of bills, but as we know, she was doomed to disappointment.

"He is sly," she muttered; "but I will trap him yet."

She left the book in the tray, whereas it had been placed underneath. When Gerald opened his trunk, he discovered the change, and knew that his trunk had been opened and examined by his stepmother.

CHAPTER IV

THE LOST LETTER

Mrs. Lane's early life had been embittered by poverty, both before and after her first marriage. It was for this reason she married Mr. Lane, and for this reason also that she rejoiced in the possession of his property. She meant to make up for past privations by living liberally. Already she contemplated a series of journeys with her own son. As for Gerald, she had always disliked him, having an instinctive feeling that he distrusted and disliked her.

Mr. Lane's property was, except the home property, invested in stocks, bonds and bank deposits, and the task of an executor was therefore easy. She had lost no time, after her husband's death, in making an estimate of the value of the estate. Almost daily she opened the tin box of securities and looked them over. It was a feast for her eyes.

After her failure with Gerald's trunk she gave a few minutes to this congenial task. When it was over a look of pleasure lighted up her face.

"Fifty thousand dollars!" she said to herself. "That is, indeed, a windfall for one who, till two years since, was compelled to subsist on an income of less than twelve dollars a week. The arrangements I have made for Gerald will prevent his being much expense to me, and my husband's fortune will be under my own control. Within a few hours my son—my dear Abel—will be here, and there will be no further need of concealing his existence. Had Mr. Lane known that I had a son as old as his own it is doubtful if he would have married me. Well, it is all over now! And I shall have Abel with me hereafter."

From the bottom of the tin box she drew out a folded paper. It was in Mr. Lane's handwriting, and was addressed "To the Executor." It ran thus: "There is a possible claim against my estate, of which it is imperatively necessary that I should speak. Five years since my old friend and school-fellow, John Graves, on the eve of his departure for Australia, placed in my hands, for safekeeping, his entire fortune amounting to thirty thousand dollars. His wife had died; he had no heirs, and he had made up his mind to take a long journey to occupy his mind, and if possible assuage his grief. 'I may never come back,' he said, 'and in that case, old friend, the money I leave with you becomes yours. I could not leave it better than to my old schoolmate and friend.' I was touched by this proof of his confidence in me and assumed the trust. From time to time I heard of him, but for two years no tidings have come of the wanderer. Whether he is still living I cannot tell. If dead, the property is mine. It will more than double any estate I may leave; but I cannot be certain. I sincerely hope that John is still alive. Though two years have passed, he is liable to return at any time and reclaim the sum he placed in my hands. Should this claim be made after my death, it will be the sacred duty of my executor to give him back his own. Even if he has lost the acknowledgment I gave him, this property must be given up on his proving his identity. There will still be left of my own property a sum sufficient to support those whom I leave behind me in modest style."

This was the paper, signed by Ernest Lane, which Mrs. Lane read with frowning brow. It was the one drop of bitterness in her cup.

"Thirty thousand dollars!" she reflected. "Why, that would leave me only twenty thousand. It would be insufficient to carry out my plans. Probably this man Graves is dead; but should he reappear it would be a terrible disappointment. The money must and shall remain in my possession! I will deny the claim if it is ever made. But should this paper be found—should it remain in evidence—this would be impossible. Better destroy it. It is the only safe way."

She locked the box of papers and put it in the safe. The important paper she was about to take and dispose of when there was a cry of terror in the kitchen. Laying the paper on the table temporarily, she ran down-stairs to find that a fierce dog had made his way into the kitchen to the

great alarm of the cook. Mrs. Lane was no coward. She seized a broom, and with well-directed blows drove the animal out. Then she went up-stairs to destroy the message from Mr. Lane.

It was gone!

In much perturbation, Mrs. Lane looked for it. The window was open, and it might have been blown out. With this idea in mind she went out on the lawn and searched carefully, but in vain; the missing paper was nowhere to be found.

Mrs. Lane sank into a chair in dismay.

"What a fool I was not to take it with me!" she said to herself. "I would have destroyed it and no one would have been the wiser. Now, should it fall into the hands of some third person it may be used to my detriment."

Again she hunted about the room, and searched the lawn. It certainly was very mysterious. She had been gone less than five minutes, yet the paper had disappeared and there was no trace of it.

"If some child found it he would probably tear it up, and this would answer my purpose," she thought, "and all would be safe."

She looked about, hoping to see some child near at hand, but none was visible.

Toiling along the road at a little distance was a man, whose outward appearance and shabby habiliments proclaimed him a tramp. Mrs. Lane's glance fell upon him, but did not connect him with the lost document. Yet it could have been found in one of his inside pockets, where he had carefully placed it.

This is the way it happened:

When Mrs. Lane left the room two windows were open, making a draught through the room. In a line between the windows was the table on which she had placed the letter. Scarcely had Mrs. Lane gone down-stairs when the wind, in a frolicsome mood, lifted the paper and wafted it through the front window on the lawn outside. James Skerrett, the tramp, spied it from the road, and it occurred to him that it might be of some value. He entered the gate and a few steps brought him to the paper. He picked it up and put it in his pocket, not as yet knowing what it was. It might, however, be worth something, and it was on the chance of this that he took it. He did not stop to examine it lest he should be observed. Time enough for that later. Indeed, he did not venture upon this till he was a quarter of a mile away.

Though a tramp, James Skerrett had received a fair education, and was a man of some intelligence. He was qualified to earn a good living in some respectable position, but drink was his enemy and was likely to be through his life.

When he read the letter, he guessed correctly that it was of importance.

"Will the woman give me anything for it if I return it?" he asked himself.

It hardly seemed likely. It would be better for her, perhaps, if it were destroyed. Besides, he had seen her through the open window, and her face had impressed him as that of a very mean woman.

"She would be more likely to charge me with stealing and threaten me with arrest," he thought. "What shall I do? Shall I keep it? That would not pay me, as I may never come this way again. If I could get some one to take it and allow me even a dollar for it, it would be better to get it off my hands at once."

This thought was strengthened by the knowledge that his whole available stock of money amounted to but seven cents. Lifting his eyes casually, his glance rested on a sign over a small office building on the opposite side of the street.

This was the sign:

Enoch Perkins,

Attorney-at-Law

As a rule, the tramp avoided any person who had any connection with the law, but he was about to pose as a virtuous man returning lost property. Again, a lawyer would know the worth of the paper. At any rate he decided to call upon him and open negotiations.

Mr. Perkins was sitting at his desk making out a conveyance, when he heard a furtive step at the door of his office.

Lifting his eyes, he noticed James Skerrett opening the door, with an apologetic look upon his face. Now, a client was always welcome, for Mr. Perkins was a young man, and his business was as yet limited. But the visitor did not look like a client.

"What do you want, my man?" he asked, rather gruffly.

"Are you a lawyer?"

"Yes; do you want me to make your will?" asked Perkins, smiling.

"Well, no; not at present. I expect to live a little longer."

"Just so. Still, life is uncertain, and if you should die suddenly your property might go into the wrong hands."

"That's so, squire; but I guess there's no hurry about my will. I wanted to ask your advice."

"Exactly. I am ready to give it for a consideration."

"Oh, you're a sharp one!" said the tramp. "But I'll come to the point. I was walkin' along the street five minutes since, when I saw a folded paper on the sidewalk. I picked it up and I'll show it to you, for I think the party that lost it might be willin' to pay me somethin' for it."

Enoch Perkins took the paper from his strange client. As he unfolded and read it, he looked surprised.

"Where did you pick this up?" he asked, abruptly.

"A little way down the road."

"Near a house with two elm trees in front?"

"Yes," replied Skerrett, eagerly.

"I think I know the party that lost it. I will take charge of it and return it to her."

"All right, squire; but there may be a reward."

"Exactly. Well, you ought to have some thing for picking it up. Here's a dollar."

"Thank you, sir," said Skerrett, taking the bill with avidity.

"I suppose you are only passing through the town?"

"Yes, sir."

"Don't mention finding the paper; it might annoy the lady who lost it."

"Yes, sir; I'll remember, sir."

He left the office, and the lawyer said to himself:

"I will keep this letter. It may be worth a good deal to me some time."

CHAPTER V

ABEL ARRIVES IN PORTVILLE

The train which reached Portville at four o'clock was full, and half a dozen persons were standing up. One seat, however, was not taken. At a window sat a boy of sixteen—a sallow-complexioned boy, with a face that was neither good-looking nor amiable. On the seat beside him was a valise.

"Is this seat taken?" asked a pale, tired-looking woman, who had made her way up from the other end of the car.

"Yes," answered Abel, gruffly, for this was the son of Mrs. Lane, now on his way to his mother's home.

The woman sighed, for she was in poor health and very tired.

A man sitting just behind said, indignantly:

"No, madam, it is not taken. Remove your valise, boy, and let the lady sit down."

"I am expecting a friend to get in at the next station," said Abel, crossly.

"That makes no difference. This lady is here, and is better entitled to a seat than a passenger in the next town."

"I don't see what business it is of yours," said Abel, irritably.

He made no offer to remove the valise.

"Then I will show you."

The gentleman took Abel's bag and set it down in the aisle.

"Now sit down, madam," he said.

"Thank you, sir, but I don't want to incommode the young gentleman."

"He has no right to feel incommoded. Take the seat. It is your right."

She sank into the seat with a sigh of relief.

Abel felt and looked very indignant. He was a boy who had always been accustomed to consult his own comfort and convenience, and he was vexed that he had been compelled to yield in the present instance.

The woman coughed. She evidently had a severe cold. Abel had opened the window, and a strong east wind entered. It would have been uncomfortable even to a person perfectly well, but to one having a cough it was very trying.

"Would you mind putting down the window?" she asked, timidly. "I have a terrible cold."

"I prefer it open," said Abel, rudely.

The passenger behind was cognizant of all that passed.

"Madam," he said, "will you exchange seats with me?"

She rose and took the rear seat while the gentleman seated himself beside Abel. He was a stout man, and filled more than half the seat. Abel looked disgusted.

"Now, young man, close that window!" said the stout man, in a tone of command.

Abel obeyed, but it was with great unwillingness. He did not dare to do otherwise.

"It is very close," he grumbled. "I like a little air."

"There is no other open window on this side the car. If the others can stand it, you can."

"I wish people would mind their own business," grumbled Abel, peevishly.

"Look here, young man, if you give me any more of your impudence I will give you a thrashing!" said the stout man, sternly.

He looked quite capable of carrying out his threat, and Abel, thoroughly cowed, relapsed into silence.

At length they reached Portville, and Abel, picking up his valise, stepped out of the car.

He looked about him on the platform, thinking he might see his mother, but she was not quite sure as to the train by which Abel would come, and had not come to meet him.

Abel looked about and espied a boy rather younger than himself. It was John Holman.

"Boy," he said, "can you tell me where Mrs. Lane lives?"

"The widow Lane?"

"Yes, she is a widow."

"About half a mile away. You go up this road and take two turns."

"Oh, bother, why didn't she come to meet me? How can I find the way?"

"Come along with me. I am going that way."

"All right! Won't you take my valise, too? That's a good fellow. I will pay you five cents."

"I will take it to oblige you. I won't charge you anything."

"You'd better take the nickel. You look like a poor boy."

"I am not in any special need of five cents," said John, not pleased with the patronizing tone of his new companion.

Abel was pleased, however, with the idea of not having to pay for the service.

"Do you know Mrs. Lane?" asked Abel.

"Yes. Gerald Lane is my intimate friend."

"Gerald? Oh, yes! that is Mr. Lane's son. What sort of a boy is he?"

"He is a tip-top boy. Everybody likes him."

"Humph! isn't he rather independent?"

"Why shouldn't he be? His family was one of the most prominent in the village."

"Ah, just so!" said Abel, complacently, for he felt that this made his mother's position the stronger.

"I suppose you wonder who I am," said Abel, after a pause.

"I suppose you are a friend of the family."

"I should say I was. I am Mrs. Lane's son."

This surprised John, for Gerald had neglected to tell him the information he had only just obtained himself.

"I never heard Gerald speak of you," he said, half incredulous.

"Gerald knew nothing about me."

"How is that?"

"Mother and Mr. Lane thought it best not to tell him."

"But, of course, he will know now."

"Certainly. I am going to live here."

John made no comments, but he thought it rather a strange state of things. However, they had by this time reached the Lane residence, and John, indicating it, gave the valise to Abel.

From the window Mrs. Lane saw the arrival of her son and opened the door for him. "Oh, my darling boy!" she exclaimed, throwing her arms about his neck. "So you have come home at last!"

"Don't choke me, mother," said Abel, impatiently. "It doesn't look well to hug a fellow in public."

"I can't help it, Abel. I am so delighted to see you. Come right in and sit down. Are you tired?"

"Rather. I say, mother, you are pretty well fixed here."

"Yes, Abel; you like the house, don't you?"

"Yes; it is ever so much better than that old, tumble-down house we lived in before you came to Portville."

"Hush! Don't let any one hear you refer to that."

"Who is there to hear?"

"The servant might overhear you some day. Besides, there is Gerald."

"Where is he?"

"Out somewhere. He will be home to supper."

"Did he get any of the property?"

"No, Abel; it is all mine."

"Good. You played your cards pretty well."

"Don't express yourself in that coarse way."

"It's true, though. Isn't it rather strange old Lane shut out his own son?"

"Don't call him old Lane. It doesn't sound well."

"I say, mother, how much does the property amount to?"

"About fifty thousand dollars, Abel."

"Well, mother, you have been smart. I suppose you'll settle half of it on me."

"There is no occasion to talk of that. Of course, when I die I shall leave all to you."

"And none to Gerald?"

"Well, perhaps a little, just for appearance' sake."

"You needn't leave him over a hundred dollars. But I say, mother, you'll give me a good allowance, won't you?"

"Yes, I will think of that."

"Have you got a nice room for me?"

"Come up, and I will show you."

On the second floor at the rear were two rooms—a large square room and a hall bedroom beside it.

"You will sleep in the small room to-night, Abel."

"But who has the large room?"

"It is occupied by Gerald."

"That's not fair. Why shouldn't I have it?"

"You shall have it after awhile. Gerald has always occupied it, and he may make a fuss."

"Suppose he does. You ain't afraid of him, are you?"

"What a question! As if I should be afraid of a boy who is wholly under my control."

"I hope you will give me the room to-morrow."

"I will see what can be done."

"I was thinking what Mr. Lane would say if he should see me here. He didn't know you had a son, did he?"

"No; I deemed it best to keep it from him."

"Perhaps if you had told him he might have left me some of his money."

"He left it to me, which amounts to the same thing."

"Not quite, unless you give me a large slice right off. Have you told Gerald about me?"

"I told him this morning."

"How did he take it?"

"He seemed surprised."

"Did he think it strange he had not heard of me?"

"Probably he did. I told him Mr. Lane knew about you."

"That's all right."

At this moment Mrs. Lane heard the front door open.

"That's Gerald," she said. "Come down-stairs, and I will introduce you."

CHAPTER VI

THE SON AND HEIR

Gerald looked up as his stepmother appeared, followed by Abel. He understood, of course, that this was the son of whom Mrs. Lane had spoken.

"Gerald," said his stepmother, "this is my son, Abel."

"I am glad to see you, Abel," said Gerald, politely, holding out his hand.

Abel seemed undecided whether to take it or not, but finally held out his own. He surveyed Gerald disapprovingly. He could not help noticing, with a feeling of envy, that Gerald was superior to him in refinement and personal appearance.

"Have you ever been in Portville before?" asked Gerald.

"No," was Abel's brief reply.

"I shall be glad to go about with you whenever you like, and show you the village."

"Abel is too tired to-day," said Mrs. Lane, in her usual cold tone of voice.

"No," said Abel, unexpectedly; "I'll go along with you."

"Be back in half an hour," said Mrs. Lane. "We shall have supper early this evening."

"All right," said Gerald.

"I believe you have been at boarding-school," said Gerald, as they left the house.

"Yes; it's a beastly place."

"Indeed? I never was in such a school, and I don't understand what it is like. What were your objections to it?"

"The living was very poor."

"Did you learn much? Did you have good teachers?"

"Oh, I don't care much about studying. It's all very well for poor boys. But I sha'n't have to earn my living—mother'll take care of me."

Gerald winced. He understood very well that the money upon which Abel depended was, or should have been, his own.

"I suppose you had sports?"

"Yes; the boys played baseball and other things."

"Do you like baseball?"

"Not much. I wanted to be captain of the club, but the boys wouldn't let me."

"I hope you will like Portville. We have an academy here. Perhaps you will attend."

"Not just yet. I am tired of studying."

"Do you like boating?"

"Yes, have you got a pond?"

"Yes, and I have a dory. I will take you out on Monday, if you like."

"You have a dory? Did my mother give it to you?"

"No; it was given me by my father."

"I shall ask mother to give me a sail-boat."

"I would like one myself," said Gerald.

"I don't think she will give you one, but I will let you go out with me sometimes," said Abel, in a patronizing tone, which Gerald did not like.

"How did you find your way to the house? Of course you didn't know where it was, as you never were in town before."

"I got a poor boy to walk up with me and carry my valise. I wonder my mother didn't send you down to meet me."

"I would have gone with pleasure," said Gerald, politely.

"Are you going to school, or are you working?"

"I have been attending school."

"What did you study?"

"Latin and French, besides English studies."

Abel was surprised. He was a very ordinary scholar, and had never studied any language except his own.

"I shouldn't think such studies would do any good to a boy who has to work for a living."

"Then I suppose you have not studied them?"

"No."

"My father intended me to enter college."

"But you won't go now?"

"I suppose not," said Gerald, shortly.

Here they came upon two boys, who were jumping in competition with each other.

One was John Holman, the other Munroe Hill.

"Boys," said Gerald, "this is Abel Tyler, the son of Mrs. Lane."

"Glad to see you," said Munroe.

"I believe we have met before," said John, smiling.

"Yes; you took my valise to the house for me."

"Will you jump, Gerald?" asked Munroe.

"If you'll promise not to outdo me," said Gerald.

"I shall try to do it," said Munroe. "Will you join?"

This question was addressed to Abel.

"Yes," answered Abel.

He had legs unusually long for his size, and thought he could outdo the others. Arrangements were made, and John Holman started off. He jumped seven feet on a standing jump. Abel followed and beat his distance by three inches.

"How's that?" he asked, complacently.

"Very fair," said Gerald. "Now I will try."

His jump was seven feet four inches. Abel frowned and looked displeased, and was even more dissatisfied when Munroe jumped seven feet six inches.

"You boys are fresh," he said. "I am tired. I have jumped seven feet nine inches when I was in good condition."

None of the three boys believed him, but Munroe said, politely:

"We will try again some day when you can do yourself justice. None of us can jump as far as that."

"Are you going to stay in Portville some time?" he asked.

"Yes; I guess so. My mother says it will take her some time to settle the estate."

Gerald looked grave, remembering that it was his father's estate, and that his father's death appeared likely to make a great difference in his position and prospects.

"After the estate is settled mother and I may go to Europe," continued Abel, complacently.

None of the boys made any comments, and they soon separated.

"Who is this Munroe Hill?" asked Abel, when he was left alone with Gerald.

"His father is a lawyer."

"Is he well off?"

"I presume so. He lives in a nice house."

"And John Holman?"

"He works in a shoe shop. His father is dead, and he has to help support the family."

"I thought he was poor. Did you notice that his pants were patched?"

"Yes," said Gerald, gravely; "the poor fellow hasn't much money to spend on clothing."

"Is he a friend of yours?"

"Yes," replied Gerald, warmly; "he is a capital fellow."

"Humph! I sha'n't care to associate with him. Mother likes to have me particular."

"Do you think he is any the worse for his poor clothes?"

"Of course he isn't a gentleman."

"You and I have a different idea as to what constitutes a gentleman."

The time was when Abel had not been able to dress much better than John Holman; but, as this was unknown to Gerald, he posed as one who was "born in the purple."

"I shall try to get better acquainted with Munroe," proceeded Abel. "He seems like a gentleman."

"Everybody likes him; but he is also a friend of John Holman."

"It seems to me that society is rather mixed here."

"We don't judge each other by clothes or a good bank account," said Gerald, manfully.

"I do. I prefer to associate with those who are in my own social position."

"Abel appears to be a snob," thought Gerald. "I am sure I sha'n't like him."

On their way through the village they passed a drug-store.

"I suppose no soda water is to be had in a town like this," said Abel, with a quiet smile.

"Yes; we can get some in the drug-store. If you will come in I shall be glad to offer you some."

"I don't mind," replied Abel, who seldom declined a treat.

They entered the store and were speedily supplied. Gerald drew a dollar bill from his vest-pocket and paid the bill.

"I wonder how much money he carries round with him?" thought Abel. "I must ask mother."

"Now I guess we'll go home. I feel tired after my journey."

"Very well."

"Where did you go?" asked Mrs. Lane, when they re-entered the house.

"I took Abel round the village, Mrs. Lane."

"And what do you think of it, Abel?" asked his mother.

"Oh, it'll do; but I'd rather live in the city."

"The city would naturally be more attractive to a young person. You prefer it to Fulton, I hope?"

"Yes; I hope I shall never go back there. I hate boarding-school."

"I hope you don't hate study. At your age you can hardly have a sufficient education. There is a good academy here. I should like to have you attend next term."

"Perhaps I will," said Abel, vaguely; "but I want to rest a while."

When Gerald left the room he said:

"Gerald treated me to some soda water."

"Did he?"

"Yes, and he took out a dollar bill to pay for it. Do you allow him much money?"

"No; he won't have as much as you."

"I should hope not. He's only your stepson."

"I am quite aware of that, and so is he."

"Does he attend the academy?"

"He has been doing so; but I have decided to withdraw him and put him to work."

"Where? In a shoe shop?"

"No. Mr. Tubbs, a grocer in the village, has agreed to take him."

"That's a good arrangement. He hasn't any money, and ought to work for a living like that Holman boy I met."

"Did you meet John Holman?"

"Yes. Who is he?"

"His mother is one of my tenants; but if she doesn't pay a month's rent on Monday I shall turn her out."

"That's right, mother. Business is business. I wish I were going to sleep in that large room to-night."

"You shall go into it to-morrow."

"I expect Gerald will make a fuss," chuckled Abel.

"No doubt he will."

"But you won't give in to him, will you, mother? You won't forget that I am to have the best of everything?"

"Yes, my darling; I will see that you are well provided for," said Mrs. Lane, fondly.

CHAPTER VII

A PLEBEIAN RELATIVE

On Sunday the family attended church. Many curious glances were fixed on the Lane's pew, and there was a general wonder who the new boy was. Abel was not at all troubled by this scrutiny, but held up his head and assumed airs of importance.

"Who is that new boy, Gerald?" asked Harry Lovell.

"It is Abel Tyler—Mrs. Lane's son."

"I never knew she had a son."

"Nor did I till lately."

"Is he going to live here?"

"I suppose so."

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

"Why not?" Gerald asked.

"He looks disagreeable. Do you like him?"

"I haven't made up my mind. He only came yesterday. We must give him a chance."

Toward evening Mrs. Lane said:

"Gerald, I am going to transfer you to the small room, and give your present room to Abel."

Gerald had a good temper ordinarily, but his eyes flashed with indignation.

"Why is this, Mrs. Lane?" he demanded.

"I don't acknowledge your right to question or criticise my arrangements," said his stepmother, coldly.

"Mrs. Lane, that room has always been mine. My father gave it to me when I was eight years old, and I have occupied it ever since. Abel is a stranger in the house. Why should my room be given to him?"

"When your father was alive he made such arrangements as he chose for you. He is dead, and his authority has descended to me."

"There is no justice in this change," said Gerald, bitterly, for he was attached to his chamber, and it was endeared to him by many associations.

"I don't want to hear any more on the subject," said Mrs. Lane, decisively. "I have made the change for good and sufficient reasons and nothing that you can say will alter my plan."

"That's right, ma," put in Abel. "Of course it is for you to say. I wouldn't stand any impudence."

"Nor will I," retorted Gerald, and he looked so fierce and determined that Abel shrank back in momentary fear of an attack.

"Enough of this," said Mrs. Lane, coldly. "Gerald, you will find that your trunk and clothing have been carried into the small room. You will get used to it in time."

"If this injustice continues," Gerald said to himself, "I may decide to leave my old home and strike out for myself."

He resolved, however, not to act hastily, but for the present to accommodate himself to the new arrangements. It was hard to bear Abel's triumphant glance as he walked into the larger room, which had so long been his own.

During the week following Gerald did not attend school. If, as seemed likely, a long season of hard work lay before him, he would have a preliminary vacation. A good deal of his time he spent in his dory, as he was very fond of the water and was a skilful oarsman. Two or three times Abel accompanied him and showed an ambition to use the oars; but, not being accustomed to rowing, he one day upset the boat, and might have been drowned but for the timely assistance rendered by Gerald. This seemed to disgust him with the water, and he gave up the idea of asking his mother for

a sail-boat. Gerald was not sorry to lose his company, especially as his place was frequently taken by John Holman, who was now back again in the shoe shop, but only working on half-time.

One afternoon, after leaving the boat, Gerald was on his way home when he was accosted by a stranger—a stout, muscular man, roughly dressed, who looked like a laboring man.

"Are you acquainted hereabout, young man?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"I have a sister living here somewhere, but as I have never been in Portville before I don't know where to find her."

"Perhaps I can direct you," said Gerald, politely. "What is her name?"

"Her first husband was a Tyler, but I hear she married a rich man in this town—his name was Lane, I'm told."

Gerald was amazed. Was it possible that this rough-looking man was the brother of his stepmother and the uncle of Abel? It must be so, for Abel's last name, as he recalled, was Tyler.

"You have come to the right person for information," he said. "Your sister married my father."

"You don't say! Well, that beats all. Is it true that my sister is again a widder?"

"Yes; my father is dead," said Gerald, gravely.

"And did he leave Melindy well fixed?" asked the stranger, vaguely.

"Yes."

Gerald did not feel like going into particulars. He felt too bitterly the injustice of his father's will to speak of its provisions before a stranger.

"Well, I'm glad on't. Melindy's first husband was a no-account sort of a man, and it's my belief he didn't leave her a hundred dollars. He was shif'less; and, besides, he drank."

So that was the man upon whom Abel must look as a father. Gerald felt glad to think that his father was a man of whom he had no reason to be ashamed.

"Have you seen your sister since—since her last marriage?" he asked, with some curiosity.

"No; I've never had an invitation to call upon her. I guess she was too much set up by her marriage to a rich man to notice a workin'-man. You see, I ain't one of your 'ristocrats—I'm only a blacksmith, and have to work hard for a living."

"You are none the worse for that, Mr.—" here Gerald hesitated, for he had not yet learned the name of his new acquaintance.

"Crane—Alonzo Crane—that's my name, young man. I'm glad you don't put on no airs, even if your father was a rich man. Do you know anything of my sister's son, Abel?"

"Yes, sir; he is in Portville, living with his mother."

"How do you like him?" Then, seeing that Gerald hesitated, he added: "You needn't mind telling me, for I ain't much stuck on the boy myself, even if he is my nephew."

"I don't like him much, Mr. Crane."

"I don't know anybody that does, except his mother. He and Melindy—that's his mother—have seen some pretty hard times. More'n once his mother has sent him to me for a little help when they hadn't a penny in the house."

This was news to Gerald, of course, but did not necessarily prejudice him against his stepmother and her son, but it made their present pretensions and airs rather ridiculous.

"Why haven't you been to call on your sister before?" he asked.

"Because she never invited me and I thought she wouldn't like to have her new husband see me."

"My father would have received you kindly, Mr. Crane."

"I am sure he would if you are like him. You ain't no kin to me, but I like you better already than Abel."

"Thank you, Mr. Crane."

"You needn't do that. It ain't sayin' much, for Abel, to my mind, is a disagreeable cub."

Gerald began to think that Mr. Crane, despite his relationship to Mrs. Lane and Abel, was a man of excellent sense.

"I wonder what sort of a welcome he will get," he thought.

He had considerable doubt whether it would be very cordial.

By this time they had reached a point in the road from which the Lane mansion was visible.

"That is where your sister lives," he said, pointing to it.

"You don't say! Well, it is a nice place. Melindy has feathered her nest pretty well."

"That is true enough," said Gerald to himself.

"It's lucky I fell in with you, young man. You didn't tell me your name."

"Gerald—I am Gerald Lane."

"I wish you was my nephew instead of Abel. How long has Abel been here?"

"Only since my father died."

"Melindy was sly. Like as not she never told your father she had a son."

"She said he knew it; but I never heard of Abel till a few days ago."

"It's likely she didn't tell him. Of course she wouldn't own it up to you."

"Do you live far away, Mr. Crane?"

"I live in the town of Gladwin, most sixty miles from here. I'm fifty years old, but I was never so far away from home before. I shouldn't have come now, only I've been unlucky. My shop burned down last week, and there warn't no insurance on it. Thinks I, Melindy is rich, and now is just the time when I need help. Don't you think she ought to help me?"

"Yes."

"I'm her only brother, and there's only two of us anyway. I've got a wife and two children at home, and they'll be pinched if I don't get help somewhere. Many's the time I've helped Melindy and Abel."

"Then you certainly have a claim upon Mrs. Lane."

They turned into the yard, and Gerald was about ushering his new acquaintance into the house, when Abel appeared at the door.

"Who are you bringing into the house, Gerald?" demanded Abel, sharply.

"Don't you know me, Abe?" asked Alonzo Crane, with an ingratiating smile.

"How should I?" asked Abel; but his face changed, for he did recognize his plebeian relative.

"This is your uncle," said Gerald, gravely. "Is your mother at home?"

CHAPTER VIII

A COLD RECEPTION

"I don't think she is," said Abel, reddening with mortification.

Just then Mrs. Lane's voice was heard from the head of the stairs.

"Who are you talking with, Abel?"

"It's me, Melindy—your brother Alonzo," said Mr. Crane.

Mrs. Lane descended the stairs slowly, looking very much annoyed. She was ashamed of her plebeian brother, and very much disturbed that Gerald should have seen him. It occurred to her to deny the relationship, but this seemed impracticable. So she said with an ill grace, not even offering her hand:

"What brought you here, Alonzo?"

"I reckon the cars brought me here, Melindy. It does me good to see you well fixed. You have feathered your nest well, I must say."

Mrs. Lane bit her lips.

"You can come in and sit down," she said. "I shall be glad if you will talk more like a gentleman."

"But I'm not a gentleman, Melindy. I am an honest, hard-working blacksmith. Carrie and the children send their love."

"I am obliged to them," said Mrs. Lane, stiffly. "I wonder you could get away from your work for a visit."

"Well, the truth is, Melindy, I'm in hard luck. My shop burned down day before yesterday, and I need money to build it up again."

"Wasn't it insured?" asked his sister, coldly.

"The insurance ran out a month ago. So I naturally thought of my only sister who is a rich woman, and I've come to ask a loan of two hundred dollars. That, I calculate, will set me on my feet again."

"The estate is not yet settled, and even if it were I should not feel at liberty to take Mr. Lane's money for such a purpose."

"I reckon you'll spend it on yourself and Abel, Melindy."

"My husband left a son."

"I know that, and he's a gentleman, too," said Mr. Crane, with a kindly glance at Gerald. "If he had money I am sure he would help me."

"Yes, Mr. Crane; I would," said Gerald.

"We won't discuss that matter now, Alonzo. As you are here, you can stay for the balance of the day."

"I shall have to stay till to-morrow, as there is no train from Portville till then. I hope you won't forget the help I gave you and Abel when you were first left a widder."

"It isn't very becoming to twit me with any little favors I may have accepted from you in the past," said Mrs. Lane. "If you want me to receive you in a friendly way, you must behave and talk differently."

As Mr. Crane went into the house, following his not over-cordial relative, Gerald walked away. He felt that he had no place in the family conclave, and was only sorry that it was not likely to prove very satisfactory to his new acquaintance.

He walked away, and, having nothing else to occupy his time, went to the lake and got into his rowboat. He rowed about lazily for half an hour when he heard a voice from the bank.

Looking up, he saw Alonzo Crane standing on the bank of the pond.

"Hello, Gerald!" he called out, "won't you give me a ride in your boat?"

"Certainly, Mr. Crane," and he rowed up to a little pier near where his new acquaintance was standing.

Alonzo Crane stepped into the boat and took a seat near the stern.

"This is a nice dory of yours," he said. "I always liked a rowboat, but I've been too busy in my business to use one. I don't think I've been in a boat for five years. Did my sister give it to you?"

"No," answered Gerald, hastily; "it was a gift from my father."

"I suppose, from what Melindy says, he left you most of his property?"

"She doesn't say that to me. She says it is all hers, and that I am entirely dependent upon her."

"Whew! Well, that beats all. Wasn't your father friendly to you?"

"I always found him the best of fathers, and that makes me wonder at his leaving me dependent upon Mrs. Lane."

Alonzo Crane looked thoughtful.

"You don't suspect nothing?" he said, interrogatively.

"What should I suspect?" asked Gerald.

"Well," said Alonzo, slowly, "Melindy always was tricky. She was always set on gettin' money, and I don't think she'd be over scrupulous. There might be such a thing as forgin' a will, though I don't know as I ought to say that considerin' that Melindy is my sister."

"Thank you for suggesting it, at any rate, Mr. Crane. The time may come when I shall look into the matter. At present I am only a boy—"

"And a boy ain't no match for a woman like Melindy. Oh, she's cunning! What do you think she said to get rid of lendin' me any money?"

"I can't guess."

"She said that she must provide for you."

Gerald smiled, bitterly.

"Because it would serve her purpose," he responded. "She has given Abel my place in the house. She has taken from me the large room I have for years occupied—given it to Abel—and put me in a small hall bedroom adjoining."

"That's too bad! Abel is a mean, conceited little upstart, who don't treat me half decent, though he would more than once have gone without a meal but for the help I gave his mother."

"Has Mrs. Lane refused to loan you money to rebuild your shop?"

"Yes; she won't think of it. She says I must have been careless, or the fire wouldn't have happened. It hasn't done much good to come to Portville. The only pleasure I've got out of it is meeting you."

"Thank you, Mr. Crane. I wish your sister were more like you."

"I'm a rough man, Gerald. There ain't much polish about me, but nobody can charge me with being mean and ungrateful. Some time I hope you'll come and see me."

"Thank you, Mr. Crane. It may come about some day. Is there no one in your town who will lend you money to rebuild your shop?"

"No; there ain't much money in Hillsdale. It's just a common country town, and the people are mostly farmers. I don't know what to do." And a look of sadness overspread his rugged countenance.

"You are no worse off than I am, Mr. Crane. I have lost an indulgent father, and am left dependent upon a woman I cannot like or respect."

"It does seem hard."

"But I have faith that some time things will come out for the best."

Gerald spoke gravely and calmly. He had been brought up to trust in God, and to have faith in His goodness. His words, young as he was, seemed to have a cheering effect on Mr. Crane.

"You're right, Gerald," he said, "and I'll try to believe things are comin' out right, though I can't see how."

"Why did you leave the house so soon, Mr. Crane? I thought you would have a long conversation with your sister and Abel."

"I thought so, too, but Melindy didn't seem to hanker much after my company. About fifteen minutes after you went out, she said: 'I shall have to leave you, as I have an errand in the village. Perhaps Abel will stay with you?'"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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