

Stratemeyer Edward

# The Missing Tin Box: or, The Stolen Railroad Bonds



Edward Stratemeyer

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The Stolen Railroad Bonds**

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### CHAPTER I.

### AN INTERESTING CONVERSATION

"What are the bonds worth, Allen?"

"Close on to eighty thousand dollars, Hardwick."

"Phew! as much as that?"

"Yes. The market has been going up since the first of December."

"How did he happen to get hold of them?"

"I don't know the particulars. Mr. Mason was an old friend of the family, and I presume he thought he could leave them in no better hands."

"And where are they now?"

"In his private safe."

"Humph!"

The conversation recorded above took place one evening on a Pennsylvania Railroad ferry-boat while the craft was making the trip from Jersey City to New York.

It was carried on between two men, both well dressed. He, called Allen, was a tall, sharp-nosed individual, probably fifty years of age. The other was a short, heavy-set fellow, wearing a black mustache, and having a peculiar scowl on his face.

They sat in the forward part of the gentlemen's cabin, which was but partly filled with passengers. Two seats on one side of them were vacant. On the other side sat a shabbily-dressed boy of sixteen, his hands clasped on his lap and his eyes closed.

"The safe is often left open during the day," resumed Allen, after a brief pause, during which Hardwick had offered his companion a cigar and lit one himself.

"That won't do," replied Hardwick, shortly.

"Why not?"

"Because it won't."

"But we can make it appear – "

"Hush!" The heavy-set man, who sat next to the vacant seats, nudged his companion in the side. "That boy may hear you," he continued, in a whisper.

The man addressed glanced sharply at the youth.

"No, he won't," he returned.

"Why not?"

"He's fast asleep."

"Don't be too sure." The heavy-set man arose. "Let us go out on the forward deck, and talk it over."

"It's too cold, and, besides, it's beginning to – "

"Wrap yourself up in that overcoat of yours, and you will be all right. We don't want to run any chances, Allen."

"Some one may hear us out there just as well as in here," growled the elderly man.

Nevertheless, he pulled up his coat collar and followed his companion through the heavy swinging doors.

As the two walked outside, the eyes of the boy opened, and he glanced sharply after the pair.

"That was a queer conversation they held," he muttered to himself. "I am half of the opinion that they are up to no good. If I were a policeman I believe I would follow them and find out who they are."

Hal Carson hesitated for a moment, and then arose and walked to the doors.

Stepping outside, he saw the two men, standing in the gangway for horses, in deep conversation.

"They are hatching out some scheme," thought Hal, as he watched the pair.

But it was bitter cold outside for one without an overcoat, and the youth soon returned to his seat in the cabin, leaving the two men to themselves.

Hal was a poor-house boy, having lived at the Fairham poor-house ever since he could remember. Who his parents were he did not know, nor could Joel Daggett, the keeper of the institution, give him any definite information on the subject.

"You were picked up in front of Onders' carpenter shop on one Fourth o' July night," Daggett had said more than once. "They found out some strange man was responsible, but who he was, nobuddy knows, or leastwise they won't tell, and that amounts to the same thing."

There had been a peculiar golden locket about Hal's neck when he was found, but this had never led to the establishing of his identity, and after the boy was at the poor-house a year the facts concerning his being found were almost forgotten.

But Hal had clung fast to that locket as a sort of birthright, and it was at this moment safe in his trousers pocket.

Two days before the opening of this story the trustees of the Fairham Poor-house had decided to bind Hal out to Daniel Scrogg, one of the most miserly farmers in the county.

Hal had protested, stating he could make more in the town, where a lawyer named Gibson was willing to take the youth into his office on a salary of three dollars a week and found. The trustees were obdurate, and the upshot of the matter was that the youth quietly packed his clothing into a bundle and ran away.

He left a note behind for Joel Daggett, telling what he had done, and stating that as soon as he was in position to do so he would reimburse the trustees for all they had paid out for his keep for the past fifteen years; a big undertaking for any boy, but Hal was plucky, and meant what he said.

Hal's destination was New York. Once in the great metropolis, he felt certain he would find something to do. To be sure, his capital was less than a dollar, but he was used to being without any money, and consequently this did not bother him.

It was about eight o'clock in the evening, and as the man Allen had said, it was just beginning to snow, the first fall of the season. Hal looked out of the window as the flakes glittered in the electric light and fell into the waters of the river.

Presently there came a bump, and the ferry-boat veered to one side. The slip had been reached, and, pulling shut the rather thin jacket he wore, and bringing his cap further down over his forehead, Hal mingled with the crowd outside, and a minute later went ashore.

Once on West Street, Hal stood still, undecided what to do next. He did not know a soul in New York, did not know one street from another, but understood very well that it would be next to useless to try to obtain employment at this late hour.

As Hal stood meditating, the two men mentioned above brushed past him. The boy noticed them, and then almost mechanically followed the pair.

The men passed up Cortlandt Street until they came to the Sixth Avenue Elevated Railroad. Hal saw them mount the stairs on the opposite side of the street, and a minute after knew they had taken an uptown train.

"I suppose I'll never see them again," thought the youth.

But Hal was mistaken. The two men were to play a most important part in the youth's future life in the great metropolis.

Hal walked along under the elevated road until he came to Barclay Street. He passed several fruit stands and a queer little booth where coffee and cakes were sold.

The sight of the latter made him remember how hungry he was. He had not had anything to eat since early morning, and although he was accustomed to a very scanty fare at the poor-house, his stomach rebelled at this unusually long fast.

He counted up his money, and resolved to invest fifteen cents of it in a plate of pork and beans and some buttered cakes.

He entered a restaurant near the corner, and was soon served.

While Hal was eating he became interested in the conversation of several young men who stood near the counter, smoking.

"You say Nathan wants more help?" he heard one of the young men say.

"Yes."

"Thought he took on two new hands yesterday."

"So he did, but the holiday trade is very heavy this year."

"Then I'll send Billy around to see him. I suppose he could do the work."

"Anybody could who is strong and willing," was the reply. "Nathan wants three young fellows."

At these words Hal's eyes brightened.

He arose and touched the speaker on the arm.

"Excuse me, sir," he began.

"What is it?" asked the man, rather abruptly.

"I heard you telling your friend that somebody wanted help. I am looking for work."

The man looked Hal over, and gave a short laugh.

"I'm afraid you ain't strong enough, my boy," he said.

"I was brought up to hard work," replied Hal, earnestly.

"Well, that makes a difference."

"If you will tell me where that place is – "

"Certainly. It is the first warehouse this side – "

The man got no further. There was a commotion on the street, and two or three rushed outside.

"Brady's place just below here is on fire!" shouted some one.

"Brady's place?" ejaculated the man. "By George! I wonder how that happened?"

He seemed to forget all about Hal, and making a rush for the door, disappeared down the street.

The youth started after him. He had eaten and paid for his meal, and he did not wish to miss the opportunity of questioning the fellow further.

On the street all was commotion. Wagons were scattering right and left to make way for the steam engines, hose carts and hook and ladder trucks which came dashing up to the spot.

Hal soon found himself surrounded by a crowd. The man had disappeared, apparently for good, and with a sigh the youth walked away, there being no signs of a fire, so far as he could see.

The youth started to cross the street. He was directly behind an elderly gentleman, and was about to pass the man when there came a warning cry:

"Get out of the way there! Here comes another engine!"

Hal looked up and saw that the engine, pulled by three fiery horses, was close at hand. He started to return to the curb. As he did so the elderly gentleman slipped and went down flat on his back.

"He'll be killed!" cried half a dozen, who saw the accident.

Hal's heart seemed to leap into his throat. The horses were not over ten feet away. A moment more and the elderly gentleman would be crushed to death.

The youth leaped forward, and caught the man by the arm. Then he gave a sudden jerk backward, and both he and the gentleman went rolling into the gutter, while the engine went thundering by.

## CHAPTER II.

### A BRAVE YOUTH'S REWARD

A cheer arose from the by-standers.

"Good for the boy!"

"That's what I call a genuine hero!"

"He deserves a medal."

Paying no attention to what was said, Hal assisted the elderly gentleman to his feet.

"Are you hurt, sir?" he asked kindly.

"I – I think not," was the labored reply. "That was a narrow escape, young man." The last with a gasp.

"You are right, sir. How did you happen to go down?"

"The snow made a slippery spot on the ice, I believe. My wind is almost gone."

"Wait till I brush you off," said Hal, and taking off his cap he commenced to strike off the snow and dirt from the gentleman's clothing.

"Oh, never mind that," was the comment. "Come along with me. I don't like crowds."

The gentleman caught the youth by the arm, and walked him toward Broadway.

"You did me a great service," he went on, as the two stood on the corner, opposite the post-office.

"I didn't do much," replied Hal, modestly.

"Don't you call saving my life much?" asked the man, with a smile.

"Oh, I don't mean that, sir. But any one would have done what I did."

"I'm not so sure about that. In New York it is every one for himself. What is your name?"

"Hal Carson."

"You live here, I suppose?"

"No, sir."

"Where then, if I may ask?"

"I just came to New York not over half an hour ago. I intend to stay here."

The elderly gentleman looked puzzled.

"I don't quite understand you," he said.

"I came from a small place in Pennsylvania, sir, and I intend to try my luck here."

"Ah! Are you alone?"

"Yes, sir."

"Any friends here?"

"No, sir."

"Yes, you have."

"I have?"

"Yes – myself." The elderly gentleman laughed at his little joke. "No one shall say he saved my life and I didn't appreciate it. So your name is Hal Carson. Parents living?"

"I don't know, sir." Hal blushed in spite of himself. "I was brought up at the poor-house."

"Humph! Well, you are a manly looking chap and a brave one. Have you any idea where you are going to obtain employment?"

"No, sir. I intend to hunt around until I strike something."

"You'll find that rather up-hill work, I fancy."

"I didn't expect any snap, Mr. –"

"My name is Horace Sumner. I am a broker, and have an office on Wall Street, near Broad. I am just returning from a visit to my sister, who lives in Morristown. Have you any sort of an education?"

"I can read and write, and figure pretty well, and I've read all the books I could get hold of."

"The reason I ask is because I think I may be able to help you to obtain employment. I won't offer you money as a reward – I don't believe in such things."

"I would not accept your money. But I would like work."

Horace Sumner meditated for a moment.

"Supposing you stop at my office to-morrow morning," he said.

"I will, sir. What time?"

"Ten o'clock."

"And what number, please?"

"Here is my card." Horace Sumner handed it to him. "Do you know where you are going to stop over night?"

"I shall hunt up some cheap hotel."

Mr. Sumner was about to say something to the effect that Hal could accompany him to his house and sleep in one of the rooms over the barn, but he changed his mind.

"Let the boy hoe his own row. It will do him good," he thought to himself.

Horace Sumner was a self-made man, and he knew that self reliance is one of the best traits a boy can cultivate.

"I am going over to the Third Avenue elevated now," he said. "Remember, I expect to see you at ten sharp."

"I will be on hand, sir," returned Hal.

"Then good-night."

"Good-night, Mr. Sumner, and much obliged."

Hal watched the gentleman cross City Hall Park, and then started up Broadway.

The brilliant holiday display in the show windows charmed him, and he spent fully two hours in looking at all that was to be seen.

"Who knows but what I may go to work to-morrow, and then I won't get much chance to look around," he reasoned to himself.

He was accustomed to work at the poor-house from six in the morning until eight or nine at night, and he did not know but what he would have to do more in such a bustling city as New York.

By ten o'clock Hal found himself tired out. The snow was now six inches deep and was still coming down.

He turned from Broadway through Grand Street and presently found himself well over on the east side.

"Good Beds for 25 Cents per Night."

This was the announcement on a banner strung over the sidewalk, and after reading it, Hal glanced at the building.

It was rather a dingy affair, but to the youth direct from the Fairham poor-house it appeared quite comfortable. He entered the office, and approached the clerk at the desk.

"I would like a room for to-night," he said.

"A room or a bed?" asked the clerk.

"I mean a twenty-five cent place."

"Oh, all right. Pay in advance."

Hal handed out a quarter. Then he was conducted to a long, narrow apartment on the third floor. There were eight beds in the room, six of which were already occupied.

To a person used to good accommodations this apartment would have almost disgusted him. But quarters at the poor-house had been but little better, and Hal did not complain. He managed to get a bed in one corner, and, as the window was slightly open, he slept very well.

He was up and dressed at six o'clock and out on the street. The snow was now all of a foot deep, and Hal was much interested in the snow-plows on the car tracks.

As he passed down the street a snow-ball whizzed past the youth's ear. Another followed, striking him in the head. He turned, and saw a boy slightly taller than himself standing close at hand and laughing heartily.

Instead of getting angry, Hal laughed in return. Then he picked up some snow, made it into a hard ball, and let fly.

The snow-ball took the other boy in the chest, and in his effort to dodge he went over head first into a drift near the gutter. Hal burst out laughing, and then ran back and helped the stranger up.

"Say, wot did yer do dat fer?" demanded the other boy, as soon as he was once more on his feet.

"Tit for tat, you know," returned Hal. "I guess you're not hurt, are you?"

The stranger stared at Hal. He had never met with such a kindly answer before.

"Hurt! o' course I ain't hurt," he returned, slowly.

"You threw at me first, didn't you?"

"Wot if I did?"

"Nothing, only that's why I threw back."

The stranger stared at Hal for a moment.

"Who are you?" he asked, abruptly.

"My name is Hal Carson. What's yours?"

"Jack McCabe."

Hal held out his hand.

"I'm glad to know you. I just came to New York, and I only know one person here."

"Git out! is dat so?" Jack McCabe shook hands rather gingerly. "Den yer ain't one o' der boys, is yer?"

"What boys?"

"Der fellers around town."

"Hardly."

"Got work here?"

"I expect to get work from a man in Wall Street."

"Goin' ter be a broker, hey?" grinned Jack.

"Here, get to work there, you lazy dog!" shouted a man from the inside of a near-by store, and Jack dropped his conversation and began to clean off the sidewalk with vigor.

Hal walked on. He did not know under what exciting circumstances he was to meet Jack McCabe again.

Promptly at ten o'clock Hal presented himself at the number given him on Wall Street. The sign over the door read Sumner, Allen & Co., Brokers.

He opened the door and entered. There was a small place in the front partitioned from the rear office by a counter and a brass grating.

A man sat writing at a desk in the rear. He glanced at Hal, and seeing it was only a boy, went on with his work.

Five minutes passed. Then the man swung around leisurely, got down from his stool, and came forward.

As soon as Hal caught sight of the man's face he was astonished.

It was Hardwick, the fellow whose conversation he had overheard on the ferry boat the evening before.

## CHAPTER III. A SERIOUS CHARGE

"What do you want?" asked Hardwick abruptly.

"Is Mr. Sumner in?" returned Hal.

"No."

"Then I'll wait till he comes."

Hardwick stared at Hal.

"Won't I do?" he asked sharply.

"I'm afraid not, sir."

"What do you want to see him about?"

"He asked me to call," replied the youth. He was not particularly pleased with Hardwick's manner.

"I am the book-keeper here, and I generally transact business during Mr. Sumner's absence."

"Mr. Sumner asked me to meet him here at ten o'clock."

"Oh! You know him, then?"

"Not very well."

"I thought not." Hardwick glanced at Hal's shabby clothes. "Well, you had better wait outside until he comes. We don't allow loungers about the office."

"I will," said Hal, and he turned to leave.

It was bitter cold outside, but he would have preferred being on the sidewalk than being in the way, especially when such a man as Felix Hardwick was around.

But, as he turned to leave, a coach drove up to the door, and Mr. Sumner alighted. His face lit up with a smile when he caught sight of Hal.

"Well, my young friend, I see you are on time," he said, catching Hal by the shoulder, and turning him back into the office.

"Yes, sir."

"That's right." Mr. Sumner turned to Hardwick. "Where is Dick?" he asked.

"I don't know, sir," returned the book-keeper.

"Hasn't he been here this morning?"

"I think not."

"The sidewalk ought to be cleaned. That boy evidently doesn't want work."

"I will clean the walk, if you wish me to," put in Hal.

"I have an office boy who is expected to do such things," replied Mr. Sumner. "That is, when the janitor of the building doesn't get at it in time. But he is getting more negligent every day. Yes, you might as well do the job, and then come into the back office and have a talk with me."

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Hardwick, just show Carson where the shovel and broom are."

The book-keeper scowled.

"This way," he said, and led the boy to a small closet under a stairs.

Just as Hal was about to leave the office with the broom and the shovel, a tall, well dressed boy entered.

He was whistling at a lively rate, but stopped short on seeing Mr. Sumner.

"Well, Ferris, this is a pretty time to come around," said the broker, sharply.

"I couldn't help it," returned the boy, who was considerably older than Hal, and had coarse features and fiery red hair.

"Why not?"

"My aunt forgot to call me."

"That is a poor excuse."

Dick Ferris began to drum on the railing with his flat hands.

"Didn't I tell you to be here every morning at nine o'clock?" went on the broker. "I am sure that is not very early for any one."

"Tain't my fault when it snows like this," returned the boy. "My aunt ought to call me."

"Did you arrange that file of papers yesterday afternoon after I left?" continued Mr. Sumner.

"I was going to do that this morning."

"I told you to do it yesterday. You had plenty of time."

"I ain't got nothing to do this morning."

"There are a great number of things to do, Ferris, but evidently you are not the boy who cares to do them. I warned you only a week ago that you must mend your ways. I think hereafter we will dispense with your service. Mr. Hardwick, please pay him his wages in full for the week. We will get some one else to fill his position."

Mr. Sumner turned to the rear office.

"I don't care," muttered Ferris. "Hand over the stuff," he said to Hardwick.

Having received his money, he calmly lit a cigarette, puffed away upon it for a minute, and then went out slamming the door as hard as possible after him.

Hal was already at work, clearing away the snow at a lively rate. Ferris approached him.

"Say, are you the fellow that did me out of my job?" he asked, savagely.

"I haven't done any one out of a job," returned Hal. "Do you work here?"

"I did, but I don't any more."

"Why not?"

"Because old Sumner expects the earth from me and he can't get it; see?" Ferris winked one eye. "I'm too smart to allow myself to be stepped onto, I am. You had better quit working; he won't pay you much for your trouble."

"I'll risk it," replied Hal.

"If I find you played me foul, I'll break you all up," went on Ferris. And with this threat he hurried off.

Hal looked after the boy for an instant and then continued his work. The sidewalk was soon cleaned, and he returned to the office.

Hardwick let him in behind the railing, giving him a sharp look as he passed.

"I've seen him somewhere before," he muttered to himself, as he continued at his books. "But where I can't remember."

"What! done already?" exclaimed Mr. Sumner to Hal.

"Yes, sir."

"It didn't take long."

"It wasn't much of a job, sir."

"Ferris would have taken all of the morning."

"Was that the boy who just left?"

"Yes."

"He said he would whip me if I played him foul."

"Humph! He is a bad boy. You must be careful, and not get into any trouble."

"I will, sir. But I am not afraid of him."

"No; you look as if you could take care of yourself." Mr. Sumner rubbed his chin. "So you say you have no prospects ahead?"

"No, sir, but I am not afraid – "

"Let me see your handwriting."

The broker shoved a pad toward Hal, and handed him a pen filled with ink.

Hal put down a sentence or two, and added his own name.

"That will do very well. You say you can figure fairly?"

"I have been through the common school arithmetic."

"What would my commission be on six thousand dollars' worth of bonds, sold at one hundred and fifteen, commission one-quarter of one per cent?"

Hal figured for a moment.

"Seventeen dollars and twenty-five cents," he said.

Mr. Sumner gave him several other sums. The youth answered all of them quickly and correctly.

"That will do first-class," said the broker. "Now to come to business. Would you mind telling me why you left Fairham?"

"Not at all, Mr. Sumner," replied Hal.

And, sitting down, he told how the trustees had intended to use him, and of his determination to do for himself.

"And I will not go back, no matter what happens," he concluded, decidedly.

"Well, I cannot say as I blame you," was the slow reply. "Of course, you owe them something, but perhaps you can pay them back quicker in the way you have undertaken. Have you any idea in regard to salary?"

"I intended to take what I could get, and then look around for something better."

"How would you like to work for me?"

"First-rate, sir."

"I need an office boy to take Ferris' place, and also somebody to help copy contracts and make out bills and statements. If you could combine the two I would give you seven dollars a week at the start, and increase the amount as you become more valuable."

Hal's heart beat fast. Seven dollars a week! It was more than twice what he could have earned at Lawyer Gibson's office in Fairham.

"Oh, thank you!" he cried. "I did not expect so much."

"I expect you to earn the money," replied the broker. He made this remark, but, nevertheless, he had not forgotten that Hal had saved his life. "Have you any money with you?"

"Fifty cents, sir."

"Then let me advance you a month's salary. Half of it I would advise you to invest in an overcoat and a stout pair of shoes. The remainder you will probably have to pay out for your board. Mr. Hardwick."

The book-keeper came forward.

"Just give Carson twenty-eight dollars for four weeks' salary in advance. He will take Ferris' place, and also help you on the copying."

"Yes, sir."

Hardwick gave Hal a contemptuous look, and then going to a large safe in the forward part of the main office, brought out the cash and handed it over.

"You may go to work at once," said Mr. Sumner. "I would advise you to hunt up a boarding-house after business hours, three o'clock."

"Yes, sir."

And so Hal was installed at Sumner, Allen & Co.'s place of business. He cleaned up the place, and then started in on the copying Hardwick brought him.

Mr. Sumner was well pleased with the boy's work for the day, and so expressed himself.

After business hours Hal bought the overcoat and the pair of shoes. Then he started out for a boarding-house, and at last found one on Tenth Street, kept by Mrs. Amanda Ricket, where he obtained a room on the top floor, with breakfast and supper, for five dollars a week.

On the second day at the office Hal was astonished to learn that the Mr. Allen of the firm was the man he had seen in company with Mr. Hardwick on the Pennsylvania ferry-boat. Mr. Allen

did not recognize him, and the youth thought it just as well not to mention the meeting. During the afternoon Mr. Sumner and Mr. Allen went out together. They were hardly gone when Hardwick put on his hat and coat and followed, leaving the youth in sole charge.

Five minutes later a stranger entered and asked for Mr. Allen. Finding the broker out, he said he would wait, and sat down inside the railing, near the stove.

He had hardly seated himself, when a snow-ball crashed against the plate-glass window. Fearful that the glass might be broken, Hal hurried out. Two boys had been snow-balling each other, and both ran away as fast as they could.

Hardly had Hal returned to the office than Hardwick came in. He had been paying a visit to a near-by wine-room, and his face was slightly flushed. He nodded to the man who was waiting.

"Anything I can do for you?" he asked.

"I want to see Mr. Allen."

"Gone away for the day, sir."

The stranger at once arose and left. Hardwick saw him to the door, and then sat down near a desk in the rear.

Hal bent over the writing he was doing. He proceeded with great care, as it was new work to him and he did not wish to make any errors.

Just before three o'clock Mr. Sumner returned. He walked to the rear office, gave a turn to the knob of the door of his private safe, and then addressed Hardwick:

"Anything new?"

"No, sir."

"Then we might as well close up."

Five minutes later the main safe was locked up, the rolled-top desks closed, and work was over for the day.

Hal spent the evening at his room in the boarding-house, writing to Lawyer Gibson, his only friend in Fairham. The letter finished, he walked to the corner and posted it, and then returned and went to bed.

The next morning he was the first at the office. He was engaged in cleaning up when Hardwick entered. The book-keeper had been out the greater part of the night, and his face plainly showed the effects of his dissipation.

"Come, get at the books!" he growled. "The place is clean enough."

"I will just as soon as I have dusted the rear office," replied Hal.

"Do as I told you!" stormed Hardwick.

At that moment Mr. Sumner entered, and with a hasty good-morning passed to the back. Hal heard him at his safe, and then came a sharp cry.

"The safe has been robbed!"

"What's that?" asked Hardwick, walking to the rear, while Hal followed.

"The safe has been robbed!" gasped Mr. Sumner. "There are seventy-nine thousand dollars' worth of bonds missing."

"You are sure?" asked the book-keeper, while Hal's heart seemed to fairly stop beating.

"Yes, they are gone."

"When did you leave them?"

"Yesterday before I went out with Mr. Allen." Mr. Sumner gave a groan. "This will ruin me! Who could have robbed the safe?"

"Was it broken open?"

"No. Look for yourself."

Hardwick glanced toward the iron box. Then he turned and faced Hal.

"You were here alone yesterday afternoon," he said, sternly.

"Did you leave him here alone?" cried Mr. Sumner.

"I am sorry to say I did, but it was only for a few minutes," replied the book-keeper. "I called around to Mack & Heath's for that Rock Island circular."

Hal grew red in the face.

"Mr. Sumner," he began, "I hope you do not think – "

"I think that boy robbed the safe," interrupted Hardwick, pointing to Hal. "I thought it was a mistake to take such a stranger into the place."

At these words Hal's eyes flashed fire.

"That is a falsehood!" he cried, indignantly. "I never went near the safe, excepting to dust the outside."

Mr. Sumner clasped and unclasped his hands nervously. The ring in the youth's voice made him hesitate as to how to proceed.

"You robbed the safe," went on Hardwick. "You know you are guilty."

"I know no such thing," returned Hal, in a peculiar, strained tone of voice. "But there is one thing I do know."

"And what is that?" asked Mr. Sumner, eagerly.

"I know Mr. Hardwick contemplated robbing that safe, and I feel certain in my mind that he is the one who did it."

Hal had hardly spoken before the book-keeper sprang upon him, forcing him over backward against the safe door.

"I'm the thief, am I?" he cried in Hal's ear. "Take that back, or I'll make you!"

## CHAPTER IV.

### HAL STANDS UP FOR HIMSELF

Hal now found himself in a tight situation. Felix Hardwick had him by the throat, and was slowly but surely choking him.

"Don't! don't!" cried Mr. Sumner, in great alarm.

"The miserable tramp!" cried Hardwick. "I'll teach him to call a gentleman a thief."

He continued his choking process, paying no attention to his employer's efforts to haul him away.

But by this time Hal began to realize that Hardwick was in earnest. He began to kick, and presently landed a blow in the book-keeper's stomach that completely winded the man.

Hardwick relaxed his hold, and Hal sprang away.

"Stop! stop!" ordered Mr. Sumner. "I will not have such disgraceful scenes in this office."

"But he intimated I was a thief," said Hardwick, trying to catch his wind.

"And he said the same of me," retorted Hal.

"So you are!"

"I never stole a thing in my life, Mr. Sumner." Hal turned to the broker. "And I am not a tramp."

"Then supposing we make it a poor-house beggar," returned Hardwick, with a short laugh.

Hal turned red. The shot was a cruel one.

"Hush! Hardwick," cried Mr. Sumner. "There is no necessity for such language."

The broker turned to Hal.

"You just made a strange statement, Carson," he said. "How do you know Mr. Hardwick contemplated robbing the safe?"

"Because I do."

"That is no answer."

"I overheard him and Mr. Allen talking about the bonds being in the safe."

"When?"

"The evening I came to New York."

"What was said?"

"I can't repeat the words, but they said the bonds were worth nearly eighty thousand dollars, and that the safe was often left open during the day."

"It's an infamous story!" put in Hardwick, his face growing red. "Mr. Sumner, don't you believe the beggar."

"I am telling the truth," said Hal, as calmly as he could.

"Hush, Hardwick!"

"But, sir – " began the book-keeper.

"One story at a time. I will hear what you have to say later."

"Do you mean to say you would take that boy's word against mine?" demanded Hardwick, haughtily.

"I intend to listen to his story without further interruption from you," responded the broker, sternly. "So please keep silent until your turn comes."

Hardwick pulled at the ends of his mustache, but he did not dare to reply after this.

"Now go on, Carson," said Mr. Sumner to Hal.

"I haven't much to tell, sir," replied the youth.

And he related all he could remember of the fragment of a conversation which he had overheard.

The broker listened attentively, but his face fell when Hal had finished.

"And is that all?"

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Sumner shook his head, and then turned to Hardwick.

"Is his story true?" he asked.

"It is true we spoke of the bonds," replied the book-keeper. "But nothing was said about stealing them. Why, Mr. Sumner – why should your own partner and trusted book-keeper conspire to rob you? It is preposterous! I have an idea."

"What is this?"

"That he heard us speaking of your careless habit, and endeavored to form some scheme to get into the office and get hold of the bonds."

"Hardly. It was I told him to come here; he did not come of himself."

"Then he formed his plan after he got here."

"I know nothing of railroad bonds," put in Hal. "I wouldn't know what to do with them, if I had them."

At that moment Mr. Allen arrived. He saw that something unusual had taken place.

"What's up?" he asked.

"The tin box containing the Mason railroad bonds is missing," replied Mr. Sumner.

"Missing!" ejaculated Mr. Allen.

"Exactly."

"And all the bonds?"

"Yes."

"Phew!" Mr. Allen gave a low whistle. "How did it happen?"

Mr. Sumner related the particulars.

"And this boy means to say we concocted a scheme to steal them," added Hardwick, pointing to Hal.

"We steal them!" ejaculated Mr. Allen.

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Allen turned and caught Hal by the arm.

"Boy, are you crazy?" he demanded.

"That's what I would like to know," said Hardwick.

"No, I am not crazy," replied the youth, stoutly.

"He overheard part of our conversation on the ferry-boat the other night," went on the book-keeper, hastily, "and from that he judged we must be plotting to rob Mr. Sumner."

"Well, that's rich!" Mr. Allen broke into a laugh. "Excuse me, Sumner, but I can't help it. Of course, you don't think any such thing."

"No, I can't say that I do," replied the elderly broker, slowly. "But" – he turned to the safe – "the tin box is gone and I would like to know what has become of it."

"Better call in the police," suggested Hardwick. "And in the meantime keep an eye on this boy."

"And also on that man," added Hal, pointing to the book-keeper.

Mr. Sumner was in deep perplexity. He ran his hand through his hair.

"Let us talk this matter over first," he said. "You say, Hardwick, you left Carson alone in the office yesterday afternoon?"

"Yes, sir."

"How long?"

"Not more than ten minutes."

"When was this?"

"A few minutes after you and Mr. Allen went out."

"When you came back what was Carson doing?"

"He was at the desk, pretending to write."

"Was there anybody else here?"

"By Jove! yes," exclaimed Hardwick, suddenly.

"Ah! who?"

"I don't know, sir."

"A man?"

"Yes. Rather a common-looking fellow, about thirty-five years of age."

"What did he want?"

"He asked for Mr. Allen, and when I said he wouldn't be back during the rest of the day he went off."

Mr. Sumner turned to Hal. The youth stood staring at the wall.

"What have you to say about this stranger?"

"He came in directly after Mr. Hardwick went out," returned the youth.

"What was his business?"

"He wished to see Mr. Allen."

"Did he go back to the safe?"

"I – I don't think so."

"You are not sure?"

"Not positive, sir. I was busy writing, and did not notice him closely."

"Did the man give any name?"

"No, sir."

"I suppose you didn't know him?"

Hal shook his head. He was beginning to believe he had made a big mistake by not watching the stranger during the time he was in the office back of the railing.

"I believe I saw the man wink at this boy as he went out," put in Hardwick. "I am pretty certain the two knew each other."

"That is not true," burst out Hal.

For some reason, this insinuation made him think more than ever that the book-keeper was guilty.

"Which way did the man go?" went on the elderly broker.

"Toward Broadway," replied Hal.

"Did he have anything under his arm?"

"He had a small bundle, but he had that when he came in."

"About how large?"

Hal illustrated with his hands.

"Probably that was an empty box, or something of that sort," ventured Mr. Allen. "He placed the tin box into it."

"Quite likely," returned Mr. Sumner.

"And the only question in my mind," went on his partner, "is whether or not this boy here was in with the fellow. If you will take my advice, Sumner, you will have him arrested without delay."

## CHAPTER V. HAL DETERMINES TO ACT

As Mr. Allen spoke he caught Hal by the shoulder.

"You had better own up, Carson," he said, harshly.

"Let go of me!" retorted Hal, trying to break away.

"Not much! Do you think I am going to give you the chance to slide out of the door?"

"I have nothing to own up to, and I don't intend to run away," panted the youth.

He broke away, and placed himself beside Mr. Sumner, who looked at him earnestly.

"I believe the boy speaks the truth," he said, firmly.

"You do?" cried Hardwick and Allen, in concert.

"I mean in so far as he says he is innocent," added the elderly broker, hastily. "Of course, I believe he is mistaken in supposing that either of you had anything to do with this robbery."

"Oh!" returned Mr. Allen.

"That's different," said Hardwick.

Both of them looked relieved.

"I wish he had watched this stranger."

"I wish that myself, Mr. Sumner," cried Hal. "If he stole the tin box, then I am mostly responsible, although I supposed the man was some business man around here, and was to be trusted."

"I don't understand one thing," said the elderly broker. "I am almost sure I locked the safe when I went away yesterday afternoon."

"So you did," said Mr. Allen. "I saw you do it."

"Then, how could the stranger have opened it?"

"Didn't Carson know the combination?" asked Hardwick, who seemed determined to convict Hal.

"I think not."

"Indeed I did not!" cried the youth. "I never worked a safe combination in my life."

"I saw him watching you open the door yesterday morning," went on the book-keeper. "Do you dare deny it?" he continued, turning to Hal.

"I certainly do deny it," retorted Hal. "I might have been looking that way, but I did not watch him, and I do not know how it was done."

"You did not notice if the door was open after I was gone, did you?" said Mr. Sumner, turning to the book-keeper.

"It was closed," replied Hardwick, promptly.

"You are certain?"

"Yes, sir. When I left Carson here alone I saw to it that both safes and the main desks were closed."

"Why did you do that?" put in Mr. Allen, knowing well what the answer would be.

"I saw no necessity for trusting Carson, who was totally unknown to us."

"That was right, Hardwick." Mr. Allen turned to his partner. "I believe, Sumner, you took in Carson without recommendations."

"I admit I did, Allen, but his face –"

"Faces are very deceitful, very. It was poor business policy, Sumner. It would never have happened while I was around."

"Well, I am the loser, not you," replied Mr. Sumner, rather sharply. He did not like the way Mr. Allen criticised his action.

"Yes, but still, it might have been –"

"But it was not," interrupted Mr. Sumner, dryly. "And as we are to separate on the first of the year, Allen, the least said on that score the better."

"Well, just as you say," returned Mr. Allen, stiffly. "I hope you get your bonds back, that's all."

"So do I," added Hardwick. "I don't want the least shadow hanging over my name."

Mr. Sumner began to walk up and down the office uneasily. He was in a terrible state of mind. The loss of the bonds might mean utter ruin.

He hesitated and looked at Hal. The youth noticed it, and springing forward, caught him by the arm.

"Mr. Sumner, tell me you do not believe me guilty," he cried, with a curious lump rising in his throat.

"Hal, I believe you innocent," returned the elderly broker.

In after years the man looked back at those words. What had led him to utter them? Let the reader wait, and perhaps he will be able to reason the matter out.

Mr. Allen sneered at the words, and Hardwick's lip curled.

The youth noticed neither of them. The tears stood in his eyes, as he replied:

"Thank you for saying that, Mr. Sumner," he returned, in a low voice. "I may be nothing but a poor-house boy, but I am honest, and will help you get back your bonds, and prove my innocence to the world."

Again Mr. Allen's sneer was heard, and Hardwick's lip curled, even more than before. Neither Mr. Sumner nor Hal paid any attention to either of them. The broker stepped to the telephone.

"Who are you going to summon?" asked Mr. Allen.

"The chief of the police department."

"That's right."

The proper connection was obtained, and a long conversation ensued over the wires. At length Mr. Sumner closed the instrument.

"A couple of detectives will be here in ten minutes," he said. "The chief says they are now with him and have nothing on hand to do."

Hal listened to this statement with interest. He had often heard of detectives, but had never seen such a personage.

Mr. Sumner continued to walk up and down. Hal watched him, the youth's heart beating rapidly.

The clock hands moved slowly, but at last twelve minutes had passed.

Then two young men entered. They were very ordinary looking individuals, and Hal was somewhat disappointed in their appearance.

"We were sent here by the chief," explained one as he entered. "My name is Harry Parker. This is Ralph Hamington."

"I am glad to see you," replied Mr. Sumner.

"You have been robbed?" questioned Harry Parker, coming at once to the point.

"Yes. A tin box, containing seventy-nine thousand dollars' worth of railroad bonds, has been stolen from that safe."

Both detectives elevated their eyebrows at this statement.

"Was the safe broken open?" continued Parker.

"No."

"Door left open?"

"I think not."

"When did you see the box last?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

"What time?"

"A little before two."

"You locked it up at that time?"

"I am under that impression."

"I see. When did you discover your loss?"

"Not over half an hour ago."

"Did any one beside yourself have the combination of the safe?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"No one in the office?"

"I know nothing of it," replied Allen.

"Who are you?"

"Caleb Allen, Mr. Sumner's partner."

"Oh!"

"Neither do I," added Hardwick. "I am the book-keeper," he explained.

"Who is this boy?"

"He belongs in the office," replied Mr. Sumner.

"I know nothing about the safe," said Hal, speaking up for himself. He began to believe detectives were very much like other men.

"Please give me a list of the people who might have got at the safe during your absence," continued Parker, while his companion prepared to write down the names.

"These gentlemen," began the elderly broker.

"Yes."

"The janitor of the building."

"What is his name?"

"Daniel McCabe."

Hal started and wondered if the janitor could be any relation to Jack McCabe, his acquaintance of the previous day.

"Go on," continued the detective.

"A strange man was in yesterday."

"Ah! tell us of him."

Mr. Sumner told what he knew. Parker turned to Hal.

"Would you know this fellow again, if you saw him?" he asked.

"I believe I would."

"Please describe him as closely as you can."

The youth started and gave a pretty accurate description of his visitor. Both detectives listened attentively.

"Perhaps it was Larkett," suggested Hamington, in an undertone.

"Did the fellow have a cast in his eye?" asked Parker.

"How would the boy know that?" asked Hardwick, nervously. "He says he hardly glanced at the man."

"Answer me," said Parker, paying no attention to the interruption.

Hal was doing his best to think. Had that fellow really had something the matter with his left eye?

"I – I can't really say," he returned, slowly. "Was it the left eye?"

"Yes."

"He might have had. It runs in my mind so, but I am not positive."

Parker exchanged glances with his companion.

"More than likely he was the guilty party," he said to Mr. Sumner. "If he is the man we imagine, he is an old offender, and it will not be a very difficult matter to run him down."

"If you recover the bonds I will give you five thousand dollars as a reward," said the elderly broker.

"We will do what we can, Mr. Sumner."

"The quicker you get to work the better it will suit me."

"We shall start on our hunt at once, eh, Hamington?"

"Certainly. But let us take a look around the office first. And, Mr. Sumner?"

"Well?"

"It might be just as well to keep this matter a secret for a few days. Of course, information will be sent out from headquarters, but the general public need not know of it."

"That will suit me," returned the elderly broker, with a groan. "If the word gets out it will all but ruin me. I only held the bonds in trust, and will be expected to make the loss good in case they are not recovered."

"You will give us a list of the paper?"

"Certainly." Mr. Sumner took out a memorandum book. "Here you are. Anything else?"

"We will take a look around the premises."

And the two detectives started on a tour of investigation, in which Hal took a lively interest.

The door to the safe was carefully examined. Not a mark was found upon it.

"Either left open or opened by some one who had the combination," said Parker.

He got down on his knees and examined the carpet.

"Anything?" asked Hamington, briefly.

Parker shook his head.

In the rear of the office was a window opening upon a narrow court. The two detectives glanced at the fastening of the window.

Suddenly Parker gave a cry.

"This fastening was forced not long ago."

"How do you know?" asked Mr. Sumner, while Hal pricked up his ears.

"Here are the marks made by a knife blade. They are quite fresh."

"Here are the marks of foot-prints upon the window-sill," added Hamington. "See, they lead toward that door yonder. Where does that door lead to?"

"An alley-way," replied Mr. Allen.

"Opening on the next street?"

"Yes."

"Then these marks add a new feature to the case," said Parker. "Has anybody been through the window to your knowledge?"

Every one shook his head.

"Queer," said Mr. Sumner. "If the thief came through the window how did he know the combination of the safe?"

"I have it," said Hamington. "You often opened the safe during the daytime, did you not?"

"Yes."

"Then the would-be thief watched you from the window. By looking from the left side he could easily see you work the combination without being seen himself. He watched you until he was sure he had the combination down fine, and last night he opened the window, stepped inside, opened the safe and took out the tin box, closed the door again, and escaped as he had come."

## CHAPTER VI. A BLOW IN THE DARK

Was Hamington's explanation the correct one?

"By Jove! I believe that's the straight of it!" exclaimed Hardwick.

"So do I," said Mr. Allen. "It is the only way to account for the marks on the window-frame and the sash."

Mr. Sumner said nothing. Indeed, to tell the truth, his loss had set his mind in a whirl.

Parker turned to Hal.

"Did you open the office this morning?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"You opened the window when you cleaned up?"

"Yes."

"Was it locked?"

Hal tried to think.

"I believe it was."

"You are not sure?"

"No, sir."

"He ought to be," broke in Mr. Allen. "I would know, if I was in his place."

"See, if you cannot think, Hal," said Mr. Sumner.

"If anything, I think the window was locked," said the youth, candidly.

"You do?" said Parker.

"Yes, for I believe I had some trouble to unfasten it."

The two detectives looked at each other.

"If that is so, it alters the case," said Hamington. "But I believe the boy is mistaken."

"So do I," added Hardwick, promptly.

Parker opened the window again, and leaping out, made his way to the alley. Hamington went after him. Then several customers came in, and Mr. Allen and Hardwick went forward to wait upon them.

It was a quarter of an hour before the detectives came back, and then they had very little to say, excepting that they would report the particulars at headquarters and endeavor to run down the criminal.

Mr. Sumner was broken down by his loss. He sat in his private office nearly all of the remainder of the day, his head resting in his hands. Mr. Allen went off on business, and Hardwick stuck to his books as if his life depended on it.

Hal resumed his duties with a heavy weight on his heart. For some reason he had expected to be discharged, but nothing was said about his leaving.

Hardwick scowled at the youth every time their eyes met, and kept piling the work upon Hal. The book-keeper was nervous, and the youth did not fail to notice this, and it set him to thinking.

If only he had listened more attentively to what had been said on the ferry-boat that night! Hal was sure if he had done this he would have known if Hardwick and Allen were guilty or not.

Then Hal began to speculate on the foot-marks on the window-sill. If the thief had entered the office that way, why were not some of the same marks visible on the carpet in front of the safe?

When Hardwick went out to lunch, Hal watched him from the office window. At the corner he saw the book-keeper joined by Dick Ferris, and the two seemed to be in earnest conversation as they walked along.

When Hardwick came back Hal was given a half hour. The boy put on his hat and coat and went out. He did not feel like eating, and he walked up to the corner and around to the back street, intending to pay a visit to the alley through which the robber was supposed to have escaped.

Just as he was about to turn into the narrow place, now piled high with snow, somebody caught him by the shoulder. Turning, he found himself confronted by Dick Ferris.

"Hullo, there!" said the tall boy.

"How are you?" returned Hal coldly.

"I hear you've got my place," went on Ferris.

"What if I have?" asked Hal, abruptly.

"I thought you were hanging around trying to do me out of it."

"I didn't try to do you out of it. Mr. Sumner asked me to call at his office and I went. Then he offered me the place and I took it."

"Did he know you?"

"May I ask what business that is of yours?"

"Shut up, you little street tramp, you!" retorted Ferris. "Do you know what I've a good mind to do?"

"I must admit I do not."

"Give you a mighty good thrashing."

"Two can play at that game," replied Hal, with a nervous little laugh.

"What, do you mean to say you can stand up against me?" demanded Ferris. "Maybe you don't know I am an athlete."

"And perhaps you are not aware that I am perfectly able to take care of myself," returned Hal.

"Take that!" cried Ferris.

He hauled off and aimed a wicked blow at the youth's nose. Had it struck Hal it would have injured him considerably.

But the youth dodged; and the next instant Dick Ferris received a crack fairly between the eyes that made him see stars, and caused him to stagger up against the side of a building.

"What – what – " he gasped.

"That for attacking me," replied Hal. "Don't you try any such game again."

"I'll fix you!" roared Ferris. He was boiling with rage. "You miserable street cur!"

He sprang at Hal and caught him by both arms, intending to trip the youth up.

But Hal stood his ground, and by a sudden twist freed himself.

"Let me alone, Ferris," he commanded.

"Oh, of course I will!" replied the tall boy, sarcastically.

"If you don't, you'll regret it."

"Will I? Take that, and that!"

Ferris struck out twice. Hal parried the first blow, but the second just grazed his lip, causing that member to bleed slightly.

"Told you I'd fix you!" roared Ferris.

He had hardly spoken the words before Hal pulled himself together and went at him. The youth's arms shot out right and left, and before he was aware of what was taking place, Ferris received a stinging blow on the forehead, and then came one on the chin that sent him rolling over in the snow.

"Dat's right, give it ter him!" shouted a newsboy who stood by, grinning from ear to ear. "Do him up in one round!"

Ferris got upon his feet slowly. His head felt dizzy from the shock he had received.

"Want any more?" demanded Hal, facing him with clenched fists.

"Cheese it! here comes der cops!" put in the newsboy.

Hal looked up, and saw a policeman bearing toward the spot. Ferris also gave a glance, and he muttered something under his breath.

"What did you say?" demanded Hal.

"I'll settle with you another time," replied Ferris.

And picking up his hat, which had landed in a near-by drift, he placed it on his head, and sneaked down the street at a rapid gait.

In a minute the policeman arrived at the spot.

"What is the trouble here?" he demanded.

"A fellow attacked me," replied Hal.

"I see your lip's cut. Why did he do it?"

"I got a job he used to have, and he's angry over it."

"Oh!" The policeman tossed his head. "Did you hit back?"

"I defended myself," replied Hal, briefly.

He was half afraid he might be called on to make some sort of a charge, a thing he did not wish to do now the encounter was over.

"He did der feller fer keeps!" put in the newsboy.

"Go on with you!" cried the policeman, and the newsboy ran off, while Hal started on his way back to the office.

"What's the matter with your lip?" inquired Hardwick, as the youth entered.

"I cut it," replied Hal.

The book-keeper turned and smiled to himself.

"I guess Ferris kept his word," he muttered. "He said he was going to fix the boy. I wish he had killed the tramp."

That afternoon dragged heavily, but at last it was time to close up. Mr. Sumner hardly spoke to either when they bade him good-evening.

Hardwick walked up Wall Street, and then turned into Nassau, instead of continuing to Broadway.

Suddenly an idea entered Hal's head to follow Hardwick.

Despite all the evidence pointing in other directions, the youth thought Hardwick either guilty of the robbery or else that the book-keeper knew much concerning it.

Hardwick continued up Nassau Street until he reached Park Row.

Hal kept out of sight behind the man, and presently Hardwick continued up Park Row until he came to one of the side streets just beyond the entrance to the Brooklyn Bridge.

He turned into this street, piled high on either side with dirty snow, and then entered one of the worst thoroughfares in New York City.

By this time it was quite dark, and Hal had to keep close, for fear of losing sight of his man. He was now thoroughly interested, for he knew Hardwick boarded somewhere uptown, and it must be some special business that would bring the book-keeper to this part of the city on such a disagreeable evening.

At length Hardwick paused and glanced behind him. As soon as he saw the movement the boy stepped behind a bill-board out of sight.

Presently Hardwick continued on his way, walking faster than ever. The youth increased his speed.

"Hi! look sharp there!"

Hal was just about to cross a street when he almost ran into a heavy truck. He stepped back, and allowed the truck to pass. When he reached the opposite curb Hardwick had disappeared.

"He must have gone on straight ahead," thought the youth. "I will soon catch up to him again."

But though he continued onward for more than a block, he saw nothing of the book-keeper.

He looked up and down the side streets, and tried to peep into the curtained windows of several saloons that were close at hand.

"He must have gone in somewhere, that's certain," said Hal to himself. "I wonder if he discovered that I was following him?"

This last thought disturbed the youth not a little. His experience with Hardwick in the office had convinced him that the book-keeper was an evil man when aroused.

Slowly he retraced his steps, not certain if he could find his way back to Park Row, a spot he had got to know fairly well since his coming to the metropolis.

He was just passing a place where a new building was in the course of construction when a peculiar noise to one side of him attracted his attention. By instinct he jumped toward the gutter. The next instant a mass of bricks came tumbling down. One struck him on the head, and this knocked him insensible.

## CHAPTER VII. HAL DETERMINES TO INVESTIGATE

When Hal came to his senses he found himself in the arms of a boy slightly taller than himself, who was doing all in his power to restore consciousness by the application of snow to Hal's forehead.

"What – what – " he began.

"Good! yer come around at last, have yer?" cried the boy. "Blessed if I didn't think yer was a goner."

Hal put his hand up to his head.

"Where am I?" he asked, faintly.

"Yer all right; don't worry," replied the tall boy. "Don't yer remember me?"

Hal pulled himself together, and looked at the speaker.

"Jack McCabe!" he cried.

"Yer struck it fust clip. Say, wot was der matter wid yer? Yer couldn't have been froze, coz it wasn't cold enough."

"I was struck on the head."

"Gee crickety! Who struck yer?"

"I – I – nobody, I think. It was some bricks from that building."

"Oh, dat's it. How do yer feel now?"

"Awfully light-headed," responded Hal, telling the exact truth.

"Kin yer walk about a block? I only live jest around dat corner."

Hal started at these words.

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Tell me, is your father janitor of a building down in Wall Street?"

"O' course not. Didn't I tell yer we lived here?"

Hal looked relieved.

"What has that got to do with it?" he asked, curiously.

"Why, dem janitors all lives in der buildin's da takes care of," explained Jack.

"The reason I ask is because there is a Daniel McCabe janitor of the building I work in."

"I t'ink dat's me uncle. Better now?"

Hal took a deep breath and straightened up.

"Yes, a good deal better."

"Yer got a lump on yer forehead as big as an egg."

"It feels twice that size to me," laughed Hal. "Jack, you have done me a good turn I won't forget in a hurry."

The street boy blushed.

"Ah! go on, dat wasn't nuthin'," he replied. "I kinder like you, tell der truth."

"And I like you, Jack," replied Hal, giving his hand a tight squeeze.

"Did yer git dat job?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"What do you mean?"

"Wot do da pay yer!"

"Seven dollars a week."

Jack McCabe's eyes opened like saucers.

"Yer foolin'."

"It's true, Jack."

"Gee crickety! but yer struck a snap. Say, if dere's enny more o' dem jobs layin' around put in a word fer me, will yer."

"I certainly shall," replied Hal.

"I only git t'ree dollars where I am, an' have ter work like a horse. I've jest been home ter grub, an' now I've got ter go back an' work till nine o'clock."

"Then don't let me keep you," returned Hal, "or you may be late."

"I've got ten minutes yet."

"By the way, how long were you with me before I came to?"

"About ten minutes. I dragged yer inter der buildin', an' I was jest gittin' ready ter call der cop an' have yer tuk to der hospital when yer give a gulp an' opened yer eyes."

"While you were sitting here did you notice anybody leave the building?"

Jack scratched his head.

"I t'ink I did."

"What kind of a person was it?"

"A man."

"Heavy sort of a chap?"

"I t'ink he was. I didn't pay much attention ter him on account o' havin' you on my hands."

"Where did the man come from?"

"Der back o' der building."

"You didn't notice which way he went?"

"Up toward der East River."

"That way?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. Don't let me keep you any longer. Maybe I'll be up to see you soon."

"Glad ter have yer, 'specially if ye git dat seven dollar job fer me."

And with a broad laugh Jack McCabe hurried on.

Hal turned into the building, and walked toward the rear. A ladder stood lashed to the back wall. The youth hesitated, and then mounted to the floor above.

A near-by electric light cast its rays full into the open front. Over the beams were placed a number of loose boards, and on these the snow, which had been swept in by the wind, lay to the depth of several inches.

Taking care that he should not slip through an opening, Hal examined the surface of the snow with great care.

It was not long before he came to a number of foot-prints leading to a pile of bricks close to the front.

The foot-prints was fresh, and looked as if they had been made by a man's boot.

The last of them were at a spot that commanded a good view of the sidewalk below. Hal looked down, and then shuddered.

Was it possible that Hardwick had pushed those bricks down upon him?

"It looked so," murmured Hal to himself. "I must be more cautious in the future. He must have seen me when I started to hide behind the bill-board."

Hal descended the ladder, and was soon upon the street once more.

He thought over the situation, and then started for his boarding-house, satisfied that it would do no good to search farther for the book-keeper that night.

As has been mentioned, the boarding-house was up in Tenth Street. Hal soon walked the distance, and, getting out his night-key, he let himself in.

He was about to ascend to his room, and wash up a bit before going to supper, when the sounds of voices broke upon his ear, coming from the parlor.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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