

Horatio Alger Jr.

A Boy's Fortune



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Alger Horatio, Jr

A Boy's Fortune / Or, The Strange Adventures of Ben Baker

CHAPTER I.

Oliver Hitchcok's Lunch-Room

"Wake up there! This is no place to sleep."

The speaker was a policeman, the scene was City Hall Park, and the person addressed was a boy of perhaps sixteen, who was reclining on one of the park benches, with a bundle at his side.

The officer accompanied his admonition with a shaking which served to arouse the young sleeper.

"Is it morning?" asked the boy, drowsily, not yet realizing his situation.

"No, it isn't. Don't you know where you are?"

"I know now," said the boy, looking about him.

"Come, get up, Johnny! This is no place for you," said the officer, not unkindly, for he was a family man, and had a boy of his own not far from the age of the young wayfarer.

The boy got up, and looked about him undecidedly. Clearly he did not know where to go.

"Are you a stranger in the city?" asked the policeman.

"Yes, sir. I only got here this afternoon."

"Then you have no place to sleep?"

"No."

"Haven't you got money enough to go to a hotel? There is Leggett's Hotel, just down Park Row," pointing eastward.

"I have a little money, but I can't afford to go to a hotel."

"You can go to the Newsboys' Lodging House for six cents."

"Where is it?"

The officer told him.

"I feel hungry. I suppose there isn't any place where I can get supper so late as this?"

"Oh, yes! There's one close by. Do you see a light over there?"

The officer pointed to a basement opposite the post-office, at the corner of Beekman street and Park Row.

"Yes, I see it," answered the boy. "Is it a good place?"

"I should say so. Why, that's Oll Hitchcock's. You can't get a better cup of coffee or sandwich anywhere in New York. I often get lunch there myself, when I don't have time to go home."

"Thank you for telling me. I'll go over."

Ben Baker, for that is the name of our young hero, walked across the street, and descended the steps into the well-known restaurant or lunch-room of Oliver Hitchcock. Open by night as well as by day, there is hardly an hour of the twenty-four in which it is not fairly well patronized, while at times it is thronged. It is a favorite resort for men of all classes – printers, journalists, newsmen – who drop in in the early morning on their way to or from the offices of the great morning papers for their regular supplies – politicians and business men of all kinds.

More than once in Oliver Hitchcock's old saloon, farther up the same street, Horace Greeley, the elder Bennett, and Raymond, of the *Times*, could be found at the plain tables, unprovided with cloths, but bearing appetizing dishes.

When Ben entered the restaurant at half-past eleven he was surprised to find most of the tables occupied.

Coming from the country, where ten o'clock found nearly every one in bed, he was much surprised to find so many persons up and engaged in supping.

"People in New York seem to sit up all night," he thought.

He took a vacant seat, and the waiter soon coming up to him, stood in silent expectation of an order.

"Give me a cup of coffee and a sandwich," said Ben.

"What kind?"

"Ham."

The waiter sped on his errand, and soon set before our hero a cup of fragrant coffee, steaming hot, and a sandwich made of tender meat and fresh bread, which tasted delicious to the hungry boy – so delicious that he resolved to forego the intended piece of pie and ordered another.

While he was eating the second sandwich, he observed that a young man, sitting just opposite, was eyeing him attentively.

He was tall, dark-complexioned, slender, and had a kindly face.

"You seem to relish your supper, Johnny," he said.

"Yes, I do, but my name isn't Johnny."

The young man smiled.

"Excuse me," he said, "but in New York we call boys by that name, if we don't know their real names. I suppose you have not been here long?"

"No; I only arrived this afternoon."

"Come to make your fortune, eh?"

"Well, I don't know. I should like to, but if I can make a living it is all I expect. Besides, I have another object," added the boy, slowly.

"Were you ever here before?"

"No, sir."

"You are up rather late. You don't sit up so late in the country, do you?"

"Oh, no, I am in bed by nine o'clock generally."

"We don't go to bed early here. I myself haven't been in bed before midnight for three years."

"Do you like to sit up so late?" asked Ben.

"I didn't at first. Now I am used to it. My business keeps me up late."

Seeing that Ben looked curious, he added:

"I am a reporter on a morning paper."

"Do you like it?" asked Ben, doubtfully.

"Oh, yes. It isn't a bad business."

"What paper do you write for?" asked Ben, with considerable respect for a man who wrote for the papers.

"I used to work on the *Sun*. Now I'm on the *Herald*. It suits me very well while I am a young man, but I should like a different position when I am older."

"Is it hard work?"

"Sometimes. I am liable to be sent off at five minutes' notice to any part of the city. Then I am expected to keep my eyes open, and make note of anything that comes in my way. There was a big fire last night about one o'clock, up town. I heard of it as I was going up in the horse-cars, so I hurried to the spot, and instead of going to bed I got all the information I could, hurried back to the office and wrote it up. I got extra pay for it. Besides, it shows interest, and may help me to promotion."

"Have you got through for to-night?" asked Ben.

"Yes; I feel tired, being up so late last night. When I leave here I shall go home and to bed. By the way, where are you staying?"

"Nowhere," answered Ben, in some embarrassment.

"You are not going to sit up all night, are you?"

"No. I suppose I must go somewhere."

"There is a hotel close by – Leggett's."

"So a policeman told me, but I haven't much money, and I had better not go to a hotel. He said there was a Newsboys' Lodging House, where I could get lodging for six cents."

"I am afraid you couldn't get in at this late hour."

Ben looked perplexed. He felt sleepy, and needed rest.

"Then I suppose I shall have to go to the hotel," he answered. "Do you know how much they charge?"

"Not exactly. It depends on the room. I can direct you to a cheaper lodging even than you could get at the Newsboys' Lodging House."

"I wish you would," said Ben, looking up hopefully.

"Then come home with me. My room-mate is away for a few days, and I have room for you."

"Thank you, sir, if it won't inconvenience you."

"Not at all."

Ben had read of adventurers that lie in wait for unsuspecting travellers and "rope them in," but he entertained no suspicion of the young man who had so kindly offered him a bed. The mere fact that he was a newspaper man seemed to Ben a guarantee of respectability.

As Hugh Manton (the reporter) and he went up to the counter to pay the amount of their checks, a stout, handsomely-dressed man, of portly form and medium stature, entered the restaurant. As his eye fell upon Ben he started and muttered to himself:

"That boy in New York! What does he want here?"

CHAPTER II.

A Lodging in St. Mark's Place

Hugh Manton, whose calling had trained him to quick observation, did not fail to notice that the stout gentleman was in some way moved by the sight of his young companion. This surprised him not a little, for in the portly gentleman he recognized a wealthy retail merchant whose store was located on the upper part of Broadway.

"Can there be any connection between this country boy and the rich Mr. Walton?" he asked himself, curiously.

He resolved to take an early opportunity to question Ben.

When their bills were paid they went out of the restaurant. It was twelve o'clock by the clock on the City Hall when they emerged from the lunch-room. A Third Avenue horse-car was just passing.

"Follow me!" said the reporter, as he jumped aboard.

Ben did so.

"My room is on St. Mark's place," he said. "I suppose you don't know where that is?"

"No; I have never been in New York before."

"It must be nearly two miles from the City Hall Park. It is the eastern part of Eighth street."

"Fare!" said the conductor.

Ben put his hand into his pocket.

"No," said his companion, "I have the change."

"Thank you!" said Ben, "but you ought not to pay for me."

"Oh, you shall take your turn some time."

They sat down in the car, and, both being tired, sat silent.

After riding fifteen to twenty minutes they came in sight of a large brown-colored building, set between Third and Fourth avenues, just beyond the termination of the Bowery.

"We will get out here," said Hugh Manton. "That building is the Cooper Institute. Of course you have heard of it? We turn to the right, and will soon reach my den."

Time was when St. Mark's place had some pretension to gentility, but now it is given up to lodging and boarding-houses. In front of a brick house, between Second and First avenues, the reporter paused.

"This is where I live," he said.

He opened the door with a latch-key, and they entered a dark hall, for at eleven o'clock the light was extinguished.

"Follow me," he said to Ben. "Take hold of the banister, and feel your way. I am generally the last in," he said, "unless some one of my fellow-lodgers is out having a good time. One more flight of stairs. So, here we are."

The rear room on the third floor was his. Opening a door, he quickly lighted a gas-jet on one side of the room.

"There, my young friend," said the reporter, "you can undress as soon as you please, and jump into that bed nearest the window. It isn't luxurious, but will serve your turn."

"Thank you," said Ben. "I feel very tired. I shan't lie awake long to consider what kind of a bed I am in. Do you get up early?"

"Sometimes I get up as early as nine o'clock."

Ben laughed.

"Do you call that early?" he said. "Six o'clock isn't extra early in the country."

"My young friend – by the way, what's your name?"

"Ben Baker."

"Well, Ben, let me tell you that nine o'clock is a very early hour for a reporter. We'll rise at nine, and go out to breakfast together."

"I think I can sleep till then," said Ben, "for I am as tired as I ever was after a hard day's work on the farm."

"Wake up, Ben."

It was the next morning and the words were spoken by Hugh Manton, as he gave a gentle shake to the still sleeping boy.

Ben opened his eyes and looked about him in a confused way. Finally recollection came to him.

"I thought I was in that park down town," he said, with a smile.

"Do you know where you are now?"

"Yes."

"Have you slept well, youngster?"

"I have had a bully sleep."

"And you feel ready for breakfast?"

"I think I can eat some."

The two new acquaintances dressed and went down stairs. Ben was about to take his bundle, but the reporter stopped him.

"Leave it here," he said, "for the present. Blodgett won't be back for three or four days, and you can stay here till he returns. You won't want to be lugging that bundle all over town."

"You are very kind," said Ben, gratefully.

"Why shouldn't I be? I came to the city myself a poor country youth, and I had a hard struggle as first till I reached my present pinnacle of wealth," he concluded, with a smile.

"Are reporters well paid?" asked Ben, innocently.

"That depends! Whatever they earn, it is seldom that one gets fifty dollars ahead. That is because, as a rule, they are improvident, and sometimes dissipated. I am not as well paid as some, but I make a little writing sketches for the weekly story papers. I pick up two or three hundred a year that way. Then I take better care of my money than some. I laid up five hundred dollars last year, and nearly as much the year before."

"You will soon be rich," said Ben, to whom five hundred dollars seemed a large sum of money.

The reporter smiled.

"It takes considerable money to make a man rich in New York," he said. "However, I know it makes me feel very comfortable to think I have a thousand dollars in the bank."

"I should think it would," said Ben, seriously.

"Here we are!" said the reporter, pausing in front of a restaurant on Ninth street, facing the side of the great retail store established by the late A. T. Stewart. "We can get a comfortable breakfast inside for a low price."

They entered, and sat down at one of the small tables. Hugh Manton ordered a beefsteak and a cup of coffee. This, with bread and butter, cost twenty cents. Ben duplicated the order. The meat was not of the best quality, but it was as good as could be afforded at the price, and Ben ate with the zest of a healthy boy of his age.

"By the way, Ben," said the reporter, with apparent carelessness, though he scanned the face of his young companion attentively as he spoke, "are you acquainted with a clothing merchant of this city named Nicholas Walton?"

Ben started in irrepressible astonishment.

"What makes you ask?" he said. "Did you know he was my uncle?"

It was Hugh Manton's turn to be astonished.

"Your uncle!" he exclaimed. "You don't mean to say Nicholas Walton is your uncle?"

"Yes, I do. My mother is his sister."

"Is it possible? He has the reputation of being very rich, while you – "

"While I am very poor. Yes, that is true."

"Are you going to call upon him?"

"Yes. I thought, being my uncle, he might give me a place in his store."

"Did you write him that you were coming?"

"No – that is, not lately. I wrote three months ago, and he wrote back that I had better stay where I was."

"What were you doing?"

"I was working on a farm. I was paid three dollars a week."

"Did you live on the farm?"

"No; I lived with my mother."

"She is living, then?"

"Yes," said Ben, and his face lighted up with love for his absent mother.

"I should think Mr. Walton would do something for his own sister."

"So he does. He sends her twenty-five dollars a month. She lives in a small house belonging to my grandfather. My uncle is part owner, but he lets mother live in it."

"I suppose you don't like the country, or you wouldn't have come to the city."

"I have a taste for business, and no taste for farming. My uncle came to New York a poor boy, and he has succeeded. I don't see why I can't."

"It doesn't always follow," said the reporter, thoughtfully. "Still I think you have it in you to succeed. You look bold, persevering and resolute."

"I mean to succeed!" said Ben, firmly. "I am not afraid of work."

"Shall you call on your uncle this morning?"

"Yes; I want to find out as soon as I can what I am to depend upon."

"Very well! Just make my room your home. I shall not be back myself till midnight, or later, but here is a latch-key which will admit you to my room whenever you like. I have Blodgett's with me, which I can use myself."

CHAPTER III. The Merchant's Secret

Five years before Ben's arrival in the city Nicholas Walton kept a moderate sized store on Grand street. He was doing a good business, but he was not satisfied. He wished to take a store on Broadway, and make his name prominent among business men. In this wish his wife entirely sympathized with him. She boasted aristocratic lineage, but when Mr. Walton married her she was living in genteel poverty, while her mother was forced, very much against her will, to take lodgers. It was a great piece of good luck for Theodosia Granville to marry a prosperous young merchant like Nicholas Walton, but she chose to consider that all the indebtedness was on the other side, and was fond of talking about the sacrifice she made in marrying a man of no family.

They had two children, Emiline and Clarence Plantagenet Walton, the latter about three months older than his cousin Ben. Both were haughty and arrogant in temper and disposition, and as a matter of course neither was a favorite with their young associates, though each had flatterers whose interest was served by subserviency.

At that time Ben's father was living and practicing as a physician in the little town of Sunderland, fifty miles distant in the country. There was comparatively little intercourse between the families, though there was not yet that difference in their worldly circumstances that afterward arose.

One day, just as the clerks were getting ready to close up, Nicholas Walton was surprised by the sudden appearance of his brother-in-law, Dr. Baker.

"What brings you to town, James?" he asked.

"Business of great importance," answered Baker.

"Indeed!" said Walton, curiously.

"I will tell you all about it, but not here."

"Do you go back to Sunderland to-night?"

"No; I think of trespassing upon your hospitality."

"Certainly. I shall be glad to have you stay with me. My wife and children are out of town – visiting a sister of hers in Hartford – but the servants will see that we are comfortable."

"All the better. Of course I should have been glad to see Mrs. Walton and the children, but now you can give me more attention."

"I wonder whether he wants to borrow money," thought the merchant, with some uneasiness. "If he does, I shall refuse as civilly as I can. I don't propose to be a prey to impecunious relatives. I need all the money I can command to further my own schemes. In three or four years, if things go well, I shall be able to move to Broadway, and then our family can take a higher social position. My wife would like to have me move at once, but I don't choose to do anything rashly. The time has not yet come for so important a step."

"We will go now," said Mr. Walton. "The clerks will close up. If you will walk as far as the Bowery, we will board a Fourth avenue car."

"Do you still live on Twelfth street, Nicholas?"

"Yes. Mrs. Walton urges me to take a house on Madison avenue, but I must not go too fast."

"You are prospering, I take it, Nicholas?"

"He is feeling his way toward a loan, I am afraid," thought the merchant.

"Yes, I am making headway," he admitted, warily, "but I have to be very cautious. Oftentimes I am short of money, I assure you. In fact, I am hampered by my small capital."

"My neighbors in Sunderland would be surprised to hear that," said Dr. Baker, smiling. "They look upon you as one of the merchant princes of New York."

"Do they?" said Walton, looking gratified. "Some day I hope to be what they think I am now."

"You will be, if you are not too much in haste."

"So I hope. And you, I hope you are prospering?" said the merchant, guardedly.

"I have no cause for complaint," said his brother-in-law, "especially now."

"What does he mean by 'especially now?'" thought the merchant.

"I am glad to hear it," he said, aloud.

Arrived at the house in Twelfth street – it was a plain brick house of three stories – dinner was found to be awaiting, and as they sat down at once, there was no opportunity for a private conversation. When the cloth was removed, and they were left to themselves, Walton invited his brother-in-law's confidence by saying, suggestively:

"So business of importance brought you to New York, doctor?"

"Yes, business of great importance!"

"I suppose it seems great to him," thought Walton. "Well," he said aloud, "you have aroused my curiosity. It is only fair to gratify it."

"That is what I propose to do. Let me say, then, that this day has made a great change in me."

"I don't see any change," said Walton, puzzled.

"Yet it has; I awoke this morning a poor man. To-night I am rich."

"You – haven't been speculating?" said Walton, curiously.

"No; I had no money to speculate with. But to-day a fortune has come to me."

"A fortune! How much?"

"One hundred thousand dollars!" answered the physician.

"A hundred thousand dollars!" ejaculated Nicholas Walton, staring at his brother-in-law in amazement.

"Yes."

"Explain yourself – that is, if you are not joking."

"Fortunately it is not a joke. As to the explanation, here it is: Some years ago I was called, when a young practitioner in New York (I began here, you know), to attend a wealthy West Indian planter, boarding at the New York Hotel. He was critically sick, and required constant attention. I had little to do, and devoted myself to him. He was convinced that he owed his life to me. He paid me handsomely then, and requested me to keep him apprised of my whereabouts. I have done so. Yesterday I received a letter, requesting me to come to New York, and call at a certain room in the Fifth Avenue Hotel. I did so. I found a Cuban gentleman, who, first apprising me that my former patient was dead, added, to my amazement, that he had left me in his will one hundred thousand dollars. Furthermore, he had the amount with him in negotiable securities, and transferred them at once to my hands."

"And you have them with you?"

"Yes."

"It was strangely informal."

"True, but this gentleman was about to sail for Europe, to be absent five years – he sailed this afternoon – and he wished to be rid of his commission."

"It is like a romance," said the merchant, slowly.

"Yes, it's like a romance. I don't mind telling you," added the doctor, in a lower tone, "that it relieves me very much. Conscious, as I am, that my life hangs on a thread, it makes me easy about the future of my wife and child."

"Your life hangs on a thread? What do you mean?"

"I mean," said the physician, seriously, "that our family is subject to heart disease. My grandfather died at a minute's notice; so did my father; so, in all probability, shall I. No insurance company, knowing this, would insure me, and, till this windfall came, I was subject at times to great anxiety."

"Does your wife – my sister – know that you have received this money?" asked Walton, slowly.

"No; she merely knows that I received a letter from New York."

"And you are really liable to die suddenly?"

"Yes; I shall probably drop dead some day. My father died at my present age. Any sudden excitement – "

"Good heavens! what is the matter with you?" exclaimed Walton, springing to his feet, excitedly.

"What do you mean?" asked the physician, startled.

"Your face is livid; you look like a corpse. Great heavens! has your time come?"

Doctor Baker rose to his feet in terrible agitation; his face changed; he put his hand on his heart, swayed himself for a moment, and then fell lifeless.

Walton had supplied the sudden excitement, and brought upon him the family doom.

Nicholas Walton, half-terrified, half-triumphant, gazed at his victim. He knelt down, and tearing open the vest of his visitor, placed his hand upon his heart.

It had ceased to beat.

"Now for the securities!" he murmured hoarsely.

They were found. A brief examination showed that they were negotiable by bearer. He carefully locked them up in his desk, and then, ringing the bell hastily, summoned a physician. One came, but could afford no help.

"Now," he said to himself, with inward exultation, "this fortune is mine, and I can realize the dream of my life! No one will ever be the wiser."

CHAPTER IV. The Mock Philanthropist

Nicholas Walton, much sooner than he had anticipated, was able to realize the dream of his life. He engaged a larger store on Broadway, within three months of the death of his brother-in-law. The latter was supposed to have died a poor man. In settling up his estate it was found that he left only the modest cottage in which he had lived. Mrs. Baker's anxiety, however, was alleviated by the following letter from her brother Nicholas:

"My Dear Sister: – I sympathize with you sincerely in your sad and sudden loss. I am afraid my poor brother-in-law has not been able to leave you comfortably provided for. I cannot do as much as I would like, but I will send you a monthly sum of twenty-five dollars, which, as you have no rent to pay, will perhaps keep you comfortable. If I can at any time feel justified in so doing, I will increase this allowance."

"Nicholas is very kind," said Mrs. Baker, to her friends. "He has done this without any appeal from me."

She really felt grateful for his kindness, as she termed it, having no suspicion of the terrible secret that haunted her brother day and night, making him an unhappy man in spite of his outward prosperity. But he had no intention of making restitution; his remorse did not go so far as this.

"As to taking a hundred thousand dollars from my business," he said, in answer to conscience, "it would cripple me seriously. Besides, my sister doesn't want it; it would do her no good. She and her children can live comfortably on what I send her."

He tried to persuade himself that he was liberal in his provision for his sister; but even his effrontery could not go so far as this.

In reality, Mrs. Baker would have found great difficulty in keeping her expenses within three hundred dollars a year if Ben had not managed to pick up a dollar or two a week by working at odd jobs, running errands, or assisting some of the neighboring farmers. But the small town of Sunderland did not satisfy the ambitious boy. There was no kind of business which he could learn at home that offered him a satisfactory career.

"Mother," he said, about three months before my story begins, "don't you think my uncle would give me a place in his store?"

"You don't want to leave home, Ben, do you?"

"I don't want to leave you, mother; but you know how it is. There is nothing to do in Sunderland."

"I am sure you pick up considerable money in the course of a year, Ben."

"But what does it all amount to, mother?"

"It is a great help to me," said Mrs. Baker.

"I don't mean that. It isn't getting me ahead. I can't do any more now than I could a year ago. If I learned my uncle's business I might get ahead, as he has."

"You may be right, Ben; but how could I spare you? I should feel so lonely."

"You have Alice, mother. She is ten years old, and is a good deal of company to you."

So the discussion continued. Finally, as might have been expected, Ben obtained from his mother a reluctant consent to his writing to his uncle. He did not have to wait long for the answer; but when it came, it was cold and unsatisfactory. It read thus:

"Nephew Benjamin: – Your letter has come to hand, asking me to give you a place in my store. I think you are much better off in the country. Besides that, I

do not think you ought to leave your mother. You say there is no chance for you in Sunderland; but you are mistaken. You can work for some farmer, and gradually acquire a knowledge of the business, and in time I may help you buy a farm, or at any rate hire one, if I am satisfied with your conduct. As to the city, you had better keep away from it. I am sure your mother will agree with me.

"Your uncle,

"Nicholas Walton."

"Your uncle seems to me to write very sensibly," said Mrs. Baker. "The city is full of temptations."

"If I go to the city I shall work too hard to be troubled in that way, mother."

"Your uncle makes a very kind offer, I think."

"It doesn't bind him to much," said Ben. "He says he may help me to buy or hire a farm, if I learn farming."

"That would be a gift worth having, Ben," said his mother, who thought chiefly of keeping Ben at home.

"I shall never make a farmer, mother; I don't like it well enough. It is a very useful and honorable business, I know, but I have a taste for business; and if Uncle Nicholas won't help me to a start, I must see what I can do for myself after a time."

Nicholas Walton congratulated himself when his letter to Ben remained unanswered.

"That will settle the matter," he said to himself. "I would rather keep the boy in the country. I couldn't have him in my establishment. I should never see him without thinking of his father's sudden death before my eyes," and the rich merchant shuddered in spite of himself. "Besides," and a shade of apprehension swept over his face, "I am in constant fear lest he should hear of the large sum of money which came into his father's hands just before his death. While he stays in Sunderland, there is little chance of any such knowledge coming to him; if he is in the city, there is a greater chance of it. Who knows; the man who paid Doctor Baker the money may turn up. It was his intention to go to Europe for five years. That period has nearly passed already. If this discovery should ever be made, I am ruined. I might even be accused of murdering him, though, happily, that could not be proved. But there would be a blot on my name, and my reputation would suffer."

For three months Ben made no sign, and his uncle concluded that he had given up his plan of coming to New York in search of employment.

But one evening – it was the one on which our story commenced – on his way back from a call upon some friends in Brooklyn, Nicholas Walton stepped into Hitchcock's lunch-room, knowing it well by reputation, and was startled by seeing the nephew whose appearance he so much dreaded.

It was his first impulse to speak to him, and harshly demand his reason for disobeying the positive command to remain at home; but this might be followed by an appeal for help (it was clear that Mr. Walton did not understand his nephew) and that might be awkward.

"No," thought the merchant; "I won't speak to him till he comes to the store, as no doubt he intends to. Then I will give him a piece of my mind."

We now come back to Ben and his new found friend, the reporter.

"If you don't object, I will walk down town with you, Mr. Manton," said Ben, as they left the restaurant where they had breakfasted.

"I shall be glad of your company, Ben," said Manton, cordially. "I will point out to you the chief landmarks, and places of interest, as we go along."

"I wish you would," said Ben. "I know very little of the city."

"That is a defect you will soon remedy," said his friend.

"By the way," said Ben, with a sudden thought, "how was it that you asked me if I knew Mr. Walton?"

"Because I saw that Mr. Walton knew you."

"You saw that he knew me?" repeated Ben, puzzled.

"Yes. Do you remember a stout gentleman who came into Hitchcock's just as we were going out?"

"No; I did not observe him."

"It was Nicholas Walton. When his glance first rested upon you he started and looked disturbed."

"He did not approve of my coming to New York," explained Ben. "Then you think he recognized me?"

"I am sure of it."

"I wonder he did not speak to me!" said Ben, thoughtfully.

"Probably for the reason you have assigned – because he did not approve of your coming. Do you expect to call upon him?"

"Yes; I am going to ask if he won't give me a place in his store. He employs a large number, I suppose?"

"Yes; not less than a hundred, I should think, in various ways inside the store, besides scores of seamstresses outside. He has a very large establishment, and is accounted a very rich man."

"So I have always heard," said Ben. "He wanted me to stay in Sunderland and become a farmer."

"And you don't fancy the advice?"

"No. I should never make a farmer. If I had any taste for it, I might have followed my uncle's advice."

"Have you ever seen Mr. Walton's store?" asked the reporter, presently.

"No."

"Here it is," and he pointed to a spacious store, with great plate-glass windows, in which was displayed suits of clothes in profusion.

"Then, Mr. Manton, I believe I will leave you and go in. I want to find out as soon as possible whether my uncle will help me, or whether I must depend upon myself."

"Good luck to you, Ben, then! I will expect to see you to-night."

And Hugh Manton kept on his way down town, to see what work had been laid out for him at the office.

CHAPTER V. A Young Dude

Ben entered the great store, gazing not without admiration at the long counters loaded with piles of clothing.

"My uncle must be a very rich man," he said to himself. "Surely he can find a place for me in so large a store."

"Do you wish to buy a suit?" asked a spruce young man, coming forward to meet our hero.

"No; I would like to see Mr. Walton," answered Ben.

The young man surveyed Ben's country garb with a smile of depreciation. He was apt to judge others by their clothes, being conscious, perhaps, that they were his own chief claim to consideration.

"I don't think Mr. Walton will see you, youngster," he said.

"Why not?" demanded Ben, looking him calmly in the eye.

"His time is of too much value to waste on country kids."

"Mr. Walton is my uncle," said Ben, quietly.

"Your uncle!" repeated the clerk, in considerable surprise. "Oh, well, that alters the case. Just go through the store and you will find Mr. Walton in his office."

Ben followed directions, and found the office without further inquiry.

Through the open door he saw a short man, of fifty or thereabouts, sitting at a desk. There was another person in the office – a boy, somewhere near his own age – dressed in the fashion, with a gold watch-chain across his vest, a showy pin in his scarf, and the air of a young coxcomb.

This was Clarence Plantagenet Walton, the only son of the merchant, and of course Ben's cousin. The two, however, had not met since both were very young boys, and neither would have recognized the other.

Ben overheard a fragment of the conversation between his uncle and cousin.

"You spend too much money, Plantagenet. It is less than a week since I gave you ten dollars."

"The fellows I go with are all rich, and spend plenty of money. You wouldn't want them to look upon me as mean, pa?"

"The boys of the present day are altogether too extravagant," said his father, frowning. "Why, when I was a boy, I didn't spend ten dollars in three months."

"You were not in fashionable society like me, pa," said Clarence Plantagenet, consequentially.

"Much good it does you!" muttered Mr. Walton. "What do you want money for particularly to-day?"

"I am going with Percy Van Dyke to a base-ball match this afternoon. Percy lives in a splendid house on Fifth avenue, and his family is one of the first. I suppose we shall get home late, and I want to give him a little supper at Delmonico's."

"The Van Dykes stand very high," said Mr. Walton, complacently. "I am very glad to have you associate with such a high-toned family. I suppose I must let you have the money."

He drew out a ten-dollar bill and tendered it to Clarence.

"Five dollars more, if you please, pa," said the elegant youth. "Suppers at Delmonico's are expensive, and I don't want to economize with such a fellow as Percy."

"Very well; here are five dollars more, but don't be foolishly extravagant."

Clarence was about to leave the office, well satisfied, when he espied Ben.

"Who do you want to see, boy?" he demanded, curtly.

"I should like to speak with my uncle," answered Ben.

"Then don't hang around my father's office. If your uncle is employed in this establishment, you can ask one of the floor-walkers to point him out."

Ben eyed the arrogant boy in some amusement, and answered, demurely:

"My uncle is Mr. Nicholas Walton, and you, I suppose, are my cousin Clarence."

Clarence Plantagenet recoiled in disgust.

"I don't understand you," he said. "You must be crazy."

Ben was not obliged to vindicate his sanity, for his uncle, who had hitherto remained silent, now spoke.

"You can come in, if you are Benjamin Baker, of Sunderland."

"Thank you, Uncle Nicholas," said Ben.

"Is he my cousin?" asked Plantagenet of his father, in evident discomposure.

"Yes, I presume so. His mother is my sister."

"Did you send for him, pa?"

"No."

"Then why is he here?"

"I expect him to explain that to me," said Mr. Walton, coldly. "Benjamin, what brings you to New York?"

"I want to get a position here, so that I may learn business. I thought you might find me a place in your store, Uncle Nicholas."

"Did I not write you to stay in Sunderland?" asked Mr. Walton, coldly.

"Yes."

"Then why have you disobeyed me?" continued the merchant, with a frown.

"Because I have no taste for farming, and there is no other employment there."

"A boy like you is not qualified to judge what is best for him," said Mr. Walton, harshly. "Did I not promise, if you learned farming, that when you got older I would set you up on a farm of your own?"

"I never should succeed as a farmer, for I don't like it," answered Ben.

"What fault have you to find with it?" demanded the merchant, testily.

"None whatever, uncle, except that I am not suited for it."

"You don't look to me suited for anything else," said Clarence Plantagenet, insolently.

"I don't think you know me well enough to judge what I am fit for," answered Ben, calmly.

"You might make a good blacksmith, perhaps," continued Clarence, in the same offensive tone. "Isn't there any opening in that line in the country?"

"There might be. The business is not to my taste, though it may be to yours."

"To my taste!" ejaculated the horrified Plantagenet. "What have I to do with such a dirty business as that?"

"Stop this foolish discussion, Plantagenet," said his father. "You had better go to meet your friend, Van Dyke, and I will settle matters with your cousin here."

"Pack him back to the country, pa!" said Clarence. "That is the best place for him."

So saying, the young "dude" sauntered out of the office and left the store, several of the clerks who wished to stand well with their employer bowing deferentially to him. Plantagenet barely acknowledged their bows by a supercilious nod. He did not look upon them as his social equals.

"I am inclined to agree with my son," said the merchant, after Plantagenet had left the office. "I think the country is the best place for you."

"Then, Uncle Nicholas, you won't give me a place in your store?" asked Ben, his face showing his disappointment.

"I will do nothing to encourage you in a step which I consider so ill-advised as coming to the city."

"Then I must bid you good-morning," said Ben, soberly.

"Stay!" said his uncle. "I am willing to make up to you the expense of your trip to the city, on condition that you go back to-day."

He put his hand into his pocket as he spoke.

"Thank you, Uncle Nicholas," said Ben. "I thank you for your offer, but I won't accept it; I shall not go back to Sunderland."

"You won't go back!" gasped the merchant. "What will you do, then?"

"Look elsewhere for a place," said Ben.

"You are a foolish, headstrong boy. I wash my hands of you. You need not expect any help from me. You must make your own way."

"I mean to," answered Ben, quietly, as he bowed and walked out of the office.

"This is very annoying," said Mr. Walton to himself. "He is an obstinate boy. However, his eyes will soon be opened to his folly, and he will have to go back, after all. Perhaps it is as well for him to try, and fail. He will be more manageable afterward."

CHAPTER VI. Ben Gets Into Trouble

Ben went out of his uncle's store in a serious frame of mind. He knew that his uncle was opposed to his leaving his country home and coming to New York, but he had hoped that he would nevertheless be willing to extend to him a helping hand, especially as it would cost him so little.

He found himself now in a critical position. He had in his pocket a dollar and twenty-seven cents, and this constituted his entire worldly capital. It was enough to carry him back to Sunderland, but, if he had been willing to do that, it would have been for his interest to accept his uncle's offer to refund to him what his trip would cost.

But Ben was not easily discouraged. His motto was:

"If at first you don't succeed,
Try, try again!"

"I won't go back to Sunderland unless I am obliged to," he said to himself. "There are other stores besides my uncle's in this large city, and more ways of making a living than one. I won't give up till I have tried my best."

So he walked along Broadway in a leisurely way, keeping his eyes wide open, and interested, in spite of his critical circumstances, in the crowds and bustle of that brilliant thoroughfare.

Presently he came to a shop window on which was posted the notice —

"Boy Wanted."

"Here's a chance for me," he thought, hopefully. "I'll apply for the place. I can't be any more than refused."

He entered. It was a store appropriated to "Gentlemen's Furnishing Goods."

A tall young man, with his auburn hair parted in the middle, glanced at him languidly.

"I see you want a boy," said Ben, plunging at once into business.

"Humph! Are you the boy?"

"I am a boy, and would like a place," answered Ben.

The clerk picked his teeth languidly with a wooden toothpick which he had brought from the cheap restaurant where he had taken his breakfast.

"Are you from the country?"

"Yes, sir."

"How long have you been in the city?"

"I arrived yesterday."

"Then you don't know your way round New York?"

"No; but I would soon learn."

"That wouldn't suit us. Besides, you don't live with your parents."

"My father is dead; my mother lives in the country."

"You won't suit us, then. However, you can go back and speak to Mr. Talbot. There he is, in the rear of the store."

Ben had at first supposed that the young man with whom he was speaking was the proprietor. He did not dream that he was a clerk, working for nine dollars a week. He made application to Mr. Talbot, a middle-aged gentleman, not half so consequential as his clerk, but was asked essentially the same questions as before.

"I am afraid I must refuse you," said Mr. Talbot, kindly. "We require a boy who is used to the city streets, and we prefer that he should live with his parents. I am sorry for your disappointment."

"Thank you, sir," said Ben; but it was in rather a subdued tone. His prospects did not seem quite so good as a little while before.

Coming out into the street, Ben saw quite a crowd of boys and young men, who were following a tall lady, just in advance, and showing signs of amusement. It only took a glance to discover the cause of their mirth.

The lady wore a sack, evidently just purchased, on which was a card, bearing in large, distinct characters, the words:

"Cheap for Cash."

This it was that had excited the amusement of the crowd.

Ben was also amused, but he sympathized with the lady; and, stepping forward promptly, touched her on the arm.

She looked back in surprise, and then for the first time became aware of the crowd that was following her. She was a lady probably nearing forty, and had a shrewd, kindly look.

"What does it all mean?" she asked.

"There is something on your sack, madam. Allow me to remove it."

And Ben plucked off the ticket, which he handed to the lady.

"I am not surprised at the amusement of the boys," said the lady, smiling. "The ticket should have been removed. I am very much obliged to you, my young friend."

"You are quite welcome," said Ben, bowing and falling back.

The lady smiled, and passed on. She would have remained had she known that by his act of kindness her young acquaintance had involved himself in trouble.

No sooner had the lady disappeared than the disappointed young ruffians who had been making sport of her turned angrily upon our hero.

"Ain't you smart?" sneered one.

"You're a little too fresh, country!" said another.

Ben turned from one to another in surprise. He didn't understand in what way he had offended.

"What is the matter?" he asked. "What have I done?"

"What made you tell the lady what she had on her back?" demanded a third.

"I thought she ought to know," answered Ben.

"Oh, you did!" sneered the first. "What you wanted was a reward. I'm glad she didn't give you a cent."

"You judge me by yourself," said Ben, provoked. "I can be polite without being paid for it."

"Say that again!" said Mike Rafferty, a freckle-faced young rowdy, squaring off in a scientific manner.

"All right; I do say it again!" returned Ben, angrily.

"Take that, then!" said the fellow, as he struck at Ben.

Our hero dodged, and returned the compliment.

At that moment a policeman came round the corner, just in time to see Ben's demonstration.

"So you're fightin' agin, you young rascal!" exclaimed the valiant officer. "I've got ye this time!" and he seized Ben by the shoulder.

Ben turned, and, it must be confessed, was startled to find himself, for the first time in his life, in the hands of the law.

"That boy attacked me, sir," he said.

"It's a lie!" exclaimed Mike Rafferty. "Isn't it b'yes?"

"Yes, it's a lie!" chimed in his companions, whose sympathies, of course, were with Mike.

"Jist what I thought meself," said the astute officer.

"Say, cop, ye didn't see me hit him?" said Mike.

"Don't ye call me cop!" said the policeman, with insulted dignity.

"I mean captain," amended Mike, craftily.

"What's all the fuss about?" interrogated the officer.

"I axed him was he from the country, and he got mad and hit me," said Mike. "Say, b'yes, ain't it so?"

"Yes, that's so," answered the boys, in chorus.

"Then you must come with me, you young rascal!" said the officer.

"Where?" asked Ben, with sinking heart.

"To the station-house. I'll tache ye to fight in the streets. You must go along, too, and make complaint," he added, addressing Mike Rafferty.

"All right, captain. Come along, b'yes," said Mike, with a wink of enjoyment at his companions.

Ben felt not a little humiliated at walking along Broadway in the clutch of a policeman. He felt bewildered, too, it had come upon him so quickly. It really seemed as if misfortunes were crowding upon him. First, his uncle had practically disowned him, he had been rebuffed in his attempt to obtain employment, and now he was arrested, and on his way to the station-house, charged with fighting and disorderly conduct in the streets.

To make matters worse and heighten his humiliation, as he was walking along, shrinking from observation, he met his cousin, Clarence Plantagenet, in company with another boy, somewhat older, dressed also in the height of the fashion.

Clarence regarded Ben in amazement, and turned away his head in a disgust which he did not attempt to conceal.

"He will tell Uncle Nicholas," thought our unfortunate hero, "and he will think I have been doing something disgraceful."

"Come along, ye young rascal!" said the policeman, roughly, "I'll soon attend to your case."

CHAPTER VII. A Strange Adventure

Under different circumstances Ben might have been interested in his first view of a police station. But, standing before the bar in the custody of a policeman, he felt too much troubled in mind to notice his surroundings. As another prisoner was under examination, fifteen minutes elapsed before Ben's turn came.

"What is the charge against this boy?" asked the sergeant.

"I caught him fightin' in the streets," said the officer. "He was hittin' that b'ye yonder," indicating Mike Rafferty.

Mike, who looked emphatically like a hard case, tried to appear like a respectable, well-behaved boy, who had been set upon by a young ruffian.

"What's your name?" asked the sergeant, addressing Mike.

"Mike Rafferty, yer honor," answered Mike, thinking it best to be as respectable as possible.

"Did this boy strike you?"

"Yes, and he did, your honor, and if you don't believe me just ax any of them b'yes," indicating his companions. "Tommy Burke, didn't you see him hit me?"

"That will do. What did he hit you for?"

"Faith, and I don't know," said Mike, shrugging his shoulders.

"Did you hit him first?"

"No, I didn't do nothing to him," answered Mike, virtuously.

"I think you have been here before," said the sergeant, whose memory was good.

"I don't remember it," said Mike, cautiously, not thinking it politic to contradict the sergeant.

"Officer, do you know anything of the boy you have brought in?"

"Oh, yes, I've known him a long time. He's wan of the gang," answered the policeman, glibly.

Just then a gentleman came forward, whom, much to Ben's delight, he remembered as the keeper of a dry-goods store in Sunderland. Bowing to the sergeant, he said, respectfully:

"I know this boy, and I know that the policeman is under a great mistake. Will you allow me to say what I know about him?"

"Go on, sir."

"So far from his being a member of any city gang, he lives in the country, and it is extremely doubtful if the policeman ever saw him before. He only came to the city yesterday."

"He's wan of the gang," persisted the officer, sullenly. "I've seen him ivery day for the last three months."

"Mr. Sergeant," said the former speaker, "this officer is guilty of willful falsehood. I know the boy as well as I know my own son, and I know that he has passed the last three months in the country."

"The boy is discharged," said the officer. He added, sharply: "Officer Flynn, I expect the truth from you in future. The boy you have arrested is much more respectable in appearance than his accuser, and, under the circumstances, I cannot attach any credit to your charge against him. Be more careful in future."

With sullen reluctance, the officer, who is a type of a considerable number on the force, but not of all, released Ben.

Our hero walked up to the gentleman whose testimony had been of so much value to him, and warmly thanked him.

"I was in a bad scrape," he said, "and I don't know how I would have come out of it if you had not spoken for me."

"I chanced to see you in charge, and followed as soon as I could," said Mr. Woodbury. "What luck are you meeting with in New York, Ben?"

"Not much, yet; but don't say anything to mother about your meeting me here, or she may be worried. I shall make every effort to get something to do here. If I can't, I may be obliged to go home."

"Well, Ben, I wish you good luck. I must now leave you, as I have several business calls to make."

Ben emerged from the station-house feeling that he had made a lucky escape. The boys who had followed him (Mike and his friends) had vanished, on finding that things did not turn out as they expected, fearing that they might get into trouble themselves.

"I see," said Ben to himself, "that I must keep my eyes wide open in New York. I used to think that an innocent person need not fear the police, but I don't find it exactly so."

He strolled back to Broadway, and mingled once more with the busy crowds. The same thought came to him, as to so many in his position, "Everybody seems to have something to do except me. Why am I alone idle?"

When Ben reached the Metropolitan Hotel he paused for a moment at the entrance. As he stood there a gentleman passed out hurriedly. As his eyes fell upon Ben his face lighted up, and a sudden plan presented itself to his mind.

"Boy," he said, "do you live in New York?"

"I expect to, if I can find anything to do."

"Where do you come from?"

"Sunderland."

"Where is that?"

"In Connecticut."

"How far away is it?"

"About forty miles."

"What relatives have you living?"

"A mother and sister in the country."

As the gentleman did not inquire whether he had relatives in New York, Ben did not see fit to volunteer information, particularly as he did not care to claim relationship with an uncle and cousin who were evidently ashamed of him.

"You are in search of a position, are you?" asked the gentleman.

"Yes, sir."

"And you are not particular what you do?"

"No, sir, as long as it is honest."

"Yes, I think he will do," soliloquized the gentleman, regarding Ben intently. "He is the same size and shape, and has a similar expression. It will be easy to mistake him for Philip."

Ben only caught part of this soliloquy, and of course he did not understand it.

"Of course, of course," said the gentleman, hastily, answering Ben's words after a while.

"Well, I think I can give you something to do. Do you write a fair hand?"

"Yes, sir, pretty fair."

"Come up stairs with me," said the gentleman, abruptly. "I am staying at this hotel."

"Is it safe?" thought Ben; but the thought that he was a poor boy, and was little likely to attract the attention of adventurers, reassured him, and without hesitation he followed his new, and, as it appeared, rather eccentric acquaintance.

They took the elevator and got out at the fourth landing.

His new friend nodded, and Ben followed him along the hall.

The gentleman drew a key from his pocket and opened the door of a room near at hand.

"Come in," he said.

The room was a double one, consisting of a parlor and bedchamber. There were two trunks in the bedroom.

"Sit down," said the gentleman.

Ben seated himself.

"What is your name?"

"Benjamin Baker."

"I engage you as my private secretary."

"Do you think I will suit?" asked Ben, considerably amazed.

"You won't have much to do," was the answer. "You are also to pass for my nephew."

"I wonder whether I am awake or dreaming," he asked himself.

"I shall call you Philip Grafton," continued the stranger.

"Why can't I keep my own name?" asked Ben, uneasily.

"It is unnecessary to state. My secretary must be Philip Grafton," said the gentleman, firmly. "Don't you like the name?"

"Yes, sir; it is a good name. Many would prefer it to mine, but I don't like to sail under false colors."

"It is a whim of mine," said the gentleman, "but I don't think you will be sorry for acceding to it. Now, as to compensation, I propose to pay you fifty dollars a month and board – that is, of course, you will live with me."

"Fifty dollars a month!" repeated Ben, opening his eyes in amazement.

"Yes; isn't it satisfactory?"

"I don't see how I can possibly earn fifty dollars a month."

"That is my lookout. As long as I am satisfied, you needn't worry about that."

"I am afraid you will be disappointed in me, sir."

"I hope not. Do as I tell you, and I shall be satisfied."

"When am I to go to work?" asked Ben.

"You will enter upon your duties at once. I suppose you have no objection?"

"Am I to live at the hotel with you, sir?"

"Yes."

"Then I will go and get my clothes."

"Ah, yes; I didn't think of that. You won't need to get them."

"Won't need to get my clothes?" repeated Ben in amazement.

He began to think his employer was out of his head.

"I have clothes for you here – in that trunk. This key fits it. Open it."

Wondering much, Ben took the key, and, fitting it in the lock of the smaller trunk, lifted the lid. He found it full of shirts, under-garments, handkerchiefs, etc., of fine texture.

"You will find underneath two suits of clothes," said his employer. "Take them out."

Ben followed directions.

"Now take off your own clothes – all of them – and dress yourself from the contents of the trunk."

Ben hesitated. He could not at all understand what was happening to him.

"Of course," said the gentleman, "your present clothing won't do for my private secretary. The contents of this trunk are yours, if the clothes fit you."

Ben proceeded to remove his clothing, and in a few minutes he was newly rigged from top to toe. Every article fitted admirably.

"Now look at yourself in the mirror," said the gentleman, evidently pleased with the transformation.

Ben looked in the mirror, and was delighted with the change in his appearance. His outer suit was of fine French cloth, all his under-garments were of costly fabric, and he found himself

transformed from a country boy in badly-cut garments of coarse cloth to a finely-dressed young gentleman.

"How do you like it?" asked the gentleman, smiling.

"Very much," said Ben, sincerely.

"So do I," answered the gentleman.

"Where shall I put my old clothes?" asked Ben.

"Make a bundle of them and give them to some poor boy. You won't need them."

Ben resolved, instead, to send them home by express. They might come in use some time.

"Now," said the gentleman, "there is one thing more. Have you a pocket-book?"

"Yes, sir."

"Here is a little money in advance. You will need to carry some about with you."

He took from his own pocket-book fifteen dollars in bills and handed them to Ben.

"I wonder if I am dreaming," thought our hero. "This may be like the fairy gold I have read of."

As a matter of fact, however, they were bank-notes on the Park Bank of New York, and Ben soon had occasion to test their genuineness.

"We will go down to lunch now," said Richard Grafton, for that was the name of the gentleman, as Ben discovered.

Ben entered the large dining-room and took a seat next his employer. Though new to hotel life he copied what he saw other guests do, and no one suspected that the handsomely-dressed boy had not all his life been used to luxury.

When the meal was over, Mr. Grafton said:

"You can go where you please this afternoon, but be on hand at six o'clock. We shall go to some theatre this evening."

Mr. Grafton left the hotel. Ben took an opportunity to examine the hotel register soon after. He discovered that Mr. Grafton had arrived the day before.

This was the entry:

"Richard Grafton, London, England."

Underneath, to his amazement, he read another name:

"Master Philip Grafton, London, England."

"I suppose that means me," he said to himself. "What does it all mean? How did Mr. Grafton know that I would be here? He had never seen me. And how did he find clothes to fit me so exactly?"

There was certainly a mystery, but it was fraught with so much to the advantage of our hero that he resolved to cease asking questions and accept the gifts of fortune.

CHAPTER VIII.

An Unexpected Meeting at the Grand Opera House

When Clarence Plantagenet saw his poor country cousin marching up Broadway escorted by a policeman he was very much surprised, but on the whole he was not displeased.

"Do you know that boy?" asked his companion.

"No, certainly not," answered Clarence, coloring.

"I thought you looked as if you did."

"He looks like a boy I met in the country last summer," was the evasive answer.

"Poor devil! I wonder what he has been doing."

"Stealing, very likely," said Clarence, shrugging his shoulders.

"He doesn't look like a thief."

"Appearances are deceitful," said Clarence, oracularly.

At the supper-table, where Clarence met his father for the first time since he had called at his office, he said:

"Oh, papa, what do you think? That country boy I saw in your office has got into trouble."

"Do you mean your cousin Benjamin?"

"I suppose he is my cousin," said Clarence, reluctantly, "but I don't care about knowing him for a relation. I saw him on Broadway in charge of a policeman."

"Are you sure of this?" said Mr. Walton, much surprised.

"Yes; I knew him well enough by his clothes."

Clarence then gave an account of his meeting Ben.

"Did you speak to him?" asked his father.

"Mercy, no! Percy Van Dyke was with me. I wouldn't for a hundred dollars have him know that I had a cousin arrested, and such a countryfied-looking cousin, too."

"I think Benjamin would be a good-looking boy if he were well dressed," said Mr. Walton.

"I don't," said Clarence, decidedly.

"I am sorry to hear he has got into trouble," said Mr. Walton, who was not so mean as his son. "I think I ought to do something to help him."

"Better leave him to his fate, pa. No doubt he is a bad boy."

"I can't understand why he should be. My sister is poor but an excellent woman, and his father was an exemplary man."

"I don't think we have any call to trouble ourselves about this boy," said Clarence. "He has disgraced us, and we couldn't do anything without having it all come out."

"By the way, Clarence, I have two tickets to the Grand Opera House this evening; would you like to go?"

"Just the thing, pa; I was wondering what we should do to pass the time."

"Edwin Booth is to appear as Cardinal Richelieu. It is one of his best characters. It will be a rare treat."

"Percy Van Dyke is to be there with his sister," said Clarence. "That is the reason why he wouldn't take supper with me at Delmonico's this evening."

"You will have a chance to see your friends between the acts," said Mr. Walton. "I am perfectly willing you should become intimate with the Van Dykes. By the way, bring your friend around and introduce him to me."

"Yes, pa."

Mr. Walton had been the architect of his own fortune, while the Van Dykes were descended from an old Dutch family, and had held for over a century a high social position. Now that the merchant had money, he thirsted for social recognition – something money will not always buy.

Eight o'clock found father and son in choice orchestra seats in the Grand Opera House, and they began to look about them.

Suddenly Mr. Walton said, sharply:

"What was all that rubbish you were telling me about your cousin being arrested?"

"It was perfectly true, pa," answered Clarence, looking at his father in surprise.

"What do you say to that, then?"

Following the direction of his father's finger, Clarence's eyes rested upon his despised country cousin, elegantly dressed, sitting two rows to the front, and a little to the right, with his eyes fixed upon the curtain, which was then rising.

"That looks very much as if your cousin had been arrested!" said his father, with a sneer.

"I can't understand it," ejaculated Clarence. "It can't be my cousin. It must be some other boy that looks like him."

Just then Ben chanced to turn round. Observing his uncle's eyes fixed upon him, he bowed politely and turned once more to the stage.

CHAPTER IX. Clarence Is Puzzled

Clarence Plantagenet was so puzzled by the appearance of his cousin at a fashionable theatre at a time when he supposed him to be enjoying the hospitality of the police authorities that he paid little attention to the stage performance. He had a large share of curiosity, and resolved to gratify it, even if it were necessary to speak to Ben himself.

At the end of the second act, Ben, feeling thirsty, and having noticed that ice-water could be obtained in the lobby, left his seat and walked up the aisle.

Clarence, observing this, rose also, and followed him.

He came to the water-fount just as Ben had quenched his thirst. He was surprised anew when he observed how elegantly his cousin was dressed. He was fastidious as to his own dress, but was obliged to confess that Ben surpassed him in this respect.

Ben was conscious of the same thing, and, under the circumstances, it gratified him.

Another thing also was evident to Clarence, though he admitted it with reluctance, that Ben was a strikingly handsome boy. He had appeared somewhat to disadvantage in his country-made suit, but all signs of rusticity had now disappeared.

"Good evening," said Clarence, with a good deal more politeness than he had displayed at the office.

"Good evening," said Ben, politely.

"I am surprised to see you here," continued Clarence.

"Yes," answered Ben. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"Oh, I come here often. I thought you would spend the evening in an entirely different place," said Clarence, significantly.

"You are kind to think of me at all," said Ben, smiling.

Clarence was puzzled. He began to think that he must have been mistaken in the person when he supposed he saw Ben in the custody of an officer. Now he came to think of it, the boy under arrest had shown no signs of recognition. We know that it was because Ben was far from wishing to attract the attention of any one who knew him.

"Have you passed the day pleasantly?" inquired Clarence, thinking he might lead up to the subject on which he desired light.

"Quite pleasantly," answered Ben. "New York is a beautiful city."

"I was afraid you had got into a scrape," said Clarence. "As I was walking along Broadway, soon after you left father's office, I saw a boy just like you in charge of a policeman."

"Poor fellow! I hope he got off. Did you stop and speak to him?"

"No; I was so surprised that I stood still and stared till it was too late."

"I am not at all anxious to make the acquaintance of the police," said Ben, not sorry to have put his cousin off the scent.

"You have changed your dress," said Clarence, wishing to satisfy his curiosity in another direction.

"Yes," answered Ben, with studied indifference.

"You have a good seat to-night."

"Yes; I have an excellent view of the play."

"The orchestra seats are high-priced. I thought you were short of money."

"I was, but I am earning a good income now, and –"

"You haven't got a place, have you?" ejaculated his cousin, in surprise.

"Yes, I have."

"Is it in a store?"

"No; I am private secretary to a gentleman living at the Metropolitan Hotel."

"Private secretary!" exclaimed Clarence, in continued surprise. "You can't be fit for such a position. How did you get it?"

"I am not sure whether I shall suit," said Ben, "but the gentleman applied to me, and I accepted."

"I never heard of anything so strange. How much pay do you get?"

"Fifty dollars a month and board."

"It can't be possible!"

"That is what I say to myself," responded Ben, good-naturedly. "I am afraid that my employer will find out that he is paying me too much money."

"Are you staying at the Metropolitan, too?"

"Yes, for the present."

"I will call on you before long."

"Thank you."

"My aristocratic cousin seems disposed to be very polite to me now," thought Ben. "I am glad I put him off the track about the arrest."

"Excuse me," he said. "I believe the curtain is rising."

"Who is that fine-looking boy you were just speaking to?" asked Percy Van Dyke, who came up at this moment.

"It is a cousin of mine," answered Clarence, not unwillingly.

"I should like to know what tailor he employs. He is finely dressed, and a handsome fellow, besides."

"Of course, being a cousin of mine," said Clarence, with a smirk.

"How does it happen I have never met your cousin before?"

"He has only recently come to the city. He is staying at the Metropolitan just at present."

Wonders will never cease. Here was Clarence Plantagenet Walton, the son of a wealthy merchant, actually acknowledging with complacency his relationship to a country cousin whom earlier in the day he had snubbed.

He did not have another chance to speak to Ben that evening, as his cousin remained in his seat till the close of the performance, and in the throng at the close he lost sight of him.

As he and his father were walking home, Clarence said:

"I saw Ben in the lobby, between the acts."

"What did he say?" asked the merchant, who was himself not without curiosity.

"I must have been mistaken about his being in charge of a policeman," said Clarence.

"I thought you were."

"But the boy I saw looked precisely like Ben."

"What did your cousin say?"

"He has had a stroke of good luck. He has been engaged as private secretary to a gentleman staying at the Metropolitan Hotel."

"Is this true, Clarence?"

"So Ben says; and he says, also, that he is to receive fifty dollars a month."

"He can't be fitted for any such position with his country education."

"So I told him."

"And what did he say?"

"He agreed with me. He said he was afraid his employer would find out that he was paying him too much."

"The boy is candid. If all this is true, he is strangely lucky."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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